Enchanting Crystal

by Spartacus Lives

Summary

Part 2 of 4, of my 'How I think Merlin should have ended series.' Part 1 is Alchemy. This is set canon era, from the beginning of season 3, Uther is lost without Morgana and is being more repressive than ever towards magical people. Arthur is being forced to do all the dirty work, which is causing a radical shift in his thinking. Morgause offers a truce, lift the ban on magic and Uther's loving ward will be returned to him. Uther is not interested in peace, but Arthur is. Can Morgana change Arthur's stance on magic? Will Uther's true character be revealed to Arthur? Can it all have turned out differently? Has Morgana joined Morgause's cause or is she genuinely trying to help Arthur?

Sympathetic to the oppressed.
FEMSLASH, Morgana/ Morgause, Arthur/ Morgana, some abusive Uther/ Morgana.
There is also a fleshing out of what the Old Religion actually is.
Mostly Morgana or Arthur POV.
Actually I do recommend people read Alchemy (Part 1), it helps set up part 2. The last chapter is the beginning of the divergence. The notes at the end of this chapter will tell you everything vital from Alchemy that you need to know to read Part 2.
Part 3 is mostly completed and Part 4 is plotted, but if anyone does have complaints/suggestions I can be responsive. I've tried to write the show realistically, but I also wanted to make it more adult/put in the sex that the show leaves out.
Disclaimer: I don't own BBC's Merlin, if I did I would have made it more left-wing :)
Rating: M
Warnings: Major character death (rhymes with Luthor), some of the potential incest to be resolved in this part, and warnings for rape non-con.
Pairings: Morgana/ Morgause, Uther/ Morgana (abusive), Morgana/ Arthur, Arthur/ Gwen, little bit of Merlin/ Arthur.
Spoilers: Anything up to the end of Season 2, I have borrowed some of the ideas (like the mandrake root) and characters from later seasons, like Mithian, Queen Annis, Cenred… imagine them to look the same, though I've changed their personalities a little where it suited my needs. Agravaine is in my story, but he is completely different, including in physical appearance.  
I always appreciate feedback, good or bad.

See the end of the work for more notes.
"Where is Morgause hiding?" Sir Balder asked an elderly woman.

He was one of Arthur's newly made knights. They were out the front of The Rosey Apple Inn on the northern most border of Camelot. The wrinkled woman with the scarf covering her hair remained stoic, despite Arthur's contingent of twenty knights all heavily armed. Arthur had led an attack on these resistant villagers who refused to let their community be searched for sorcerers.

"Have you seen the Lady Morgana?" Arthur held another man by the arm, he had black hair and was in his mid-thirties and had blood gushing from a broken nose. He wheezed blood but was otherwise silent.

Sir Hilden stood over a bunch of children, "Do you know where the sorcerers hide in this village?"

They were too scared to speak.

Sir Aldro addressed the inn keeper, who had taken a sword to the gut, he was lying against a tree, bleeding, "Have you given refuge to a sorcerer?"

The inn keeper wasn't quiet though, he was in pain from his grievous wound and spoke with disdain, "I am no sorcerer, I don't know any sorcerers, and I've nothing to do with the Lady Morgana's disappearance."

"Prove it," Arthur let go of the man he had been sharply questioning and came over to the fallen inn keep, "Let us search your tavern."

His face was getting pale from the blood loss, "I offer beds for coin, I don't interrogate my guests."

Merlin guessed the tavern owner was in his early thirties. He had brown hair and eyes, and was stocky with a kind way about him, or he had been, before the knights of Camelot had come upon him. Word was that Alvarr had stayed here for a night.

Uther had lost all common sense since Morgana's abduction. He had extended the fight against sorcery to all those who aided sorcerers in anyway, unbeknowst to them or not. This was a story, like so many others. Merlin was beginning to lose count, and yet they haunted him at night.

The inn keeper made a point of spitting blood on the ground near Arthur, "I spit on King Uther, and his son, and his son's sons," He tried to get up, but his wound was too bad, he was going to die soon. "You came in here, and you killed us, we're peaceful folk who never did nothin' to no one."

Arthur repeated his official mission, "You are charged with giving respite to a sorcerer."

"Well, you know what, Arthur Pendragon," The inn keeper managed, his voice a mixture of contempt and anger, "You see those three boys there, not a one over ten years old, you'd better kill them too."

Arthur looked shocked and dismayed at such a statement.

"We are not here to kill children," Arthur objected, uncomfortably.

An elderly woman with wearing a hooded cloak interjected, "That's not what I hear. I hear you've been killing plenty of kids, mothers, fathers..."
"All because the king's upset he lost his pretty young woman," A skinny, hunched, old man in tattered clothes interrupted her.

"Well, now we've all lost people thanks to Uther," Came the angry tone of a stern faced, poor young woman holding a baby. Then she hesitated a moment, as if she had shocked herself by speaking up.

"Yeah" and "Truth" Could be heard from other villagers standing around watching this latest display of force. There were maybe 50 villagers in all, but since Arthur's forces were armored no one dared do more than agree though.

A blonde, middle aged man stepped up to the older woman, placing a hand on her shoulder in solidarity, "Is my grief any less than his? You killed my brother for nothing, my wife was hung in front of me, for what? Giving a man ale."

Arthur corrected him sternly, "Not a man, a sorcerer, Alvarr, who has sworn to bring down your king."

"And now you've done for me for trying to protect myself, shame on you!" The inn keeper pointed shakily with his remaining strength, his clothes were blood soaked and now the ground around him too, "You better kill my boys too," Then he addressed his children, "Because boys here's my final words, you are to find this Morgause person," He had to stop to catch his breath, "Swear her your allegiance, and grow to be big strong men who can wield a sword, and one day, no matter how long it takes, you will... avenge your father's death."

The three boys were silent, maybe because they were in the presence of the prince. The oldest was crying, the second one was afraid and shaking, but the youngest one had a steely resolve.

Merlin thought, That kid will grow up and do it. They probably all will. Merlin wondered if he had seen his father cut down, wrongly accused, and he had asked him to do the same if he would have? Probably. It will never end.

The inn keeper died soon after from the blood loss. The search of Garnham Village was performed with the resistance now subdued. The seething hatred from the common people was palpable. Late afternoon the knights left to trudge back to the castle. It was a few day's ride still, so they made camp for the evening. Arthur was forced to do the dirty work, the ambushes, the 'questioning' of those who might know of Morgause's whereabouts. Even attacking peaceful druid camps, where they had no weapons or knowledge of why they were suddenly being hunted. And then there were children, some died trying to save parents found guilty, some tried to attack Arthur's knights to defend their loved ones, making them guilty of treason. It was gut wrenching.

Merlin believed because Arthur felt guilty and culpable for not protecting Morgana better, he had carried out Uther's orders, no matter how he felt about them himself. But so much had gone on since then. Uther had ordered they kill anyone who had protected a sorcerer, which more often than not meant killing family members who hadn't known the truth. Arthur was angry all the time and constantly snapping at Merlin over nothing, as the strain of it all was getting to him. His prince was having nightmares, not that his pride would allow him to admit it.

Merlin was the most torn he had been since he had poisoned Morgana nearly a year ago. If he had known that Morgause was only planning to kill Uther, he wouldn't have done it. You trusted a lying dragon, Idiot! Merlin believed Morgana was alive, otherwise Morgause would have wanted his head.
Uther's reign was beyond harsh. Every suspected magical person would pay for Uther's distress. He spared no one, he required no proof. A peasant had accused a neighbor of sorcery, simply to take his adjacent plot of land. Even Gaius, one of Uther's long time, staunchest supporters, was expressing reservations. No one said more than a few polite words of advice to the king though, for fear of finding oneself in a dungeon. People who could remember that time said Uther was as despondent as he was after Igraine's death.

An uneasiness pervaded all of Camelot now. Villagers barely looked one another in the eye, lest an enemy accuse them of sorcery. Fear was everywhere. Camelot's guards were everywhere, watching, no one was above suspicion. Searches occurred all the time. Uther believed if 'you weren't doing anything wrong, then you had nothing to worry about.' Many other illegal activities had been uncovered by chance this way, but most people were simply being harassed repeatedly. Merlin had tried to help those he could, but there was so much spying going on that he wasn't safe to do so, he had hardly been practicing any magic at all himself.

Gwen was no longer Morgana's maid, but had been given other castle duties by Arthur. Merlin suspected Arthur was simply trying to keep her around. Arthur's affections for Gwen continued to grow, though little had actually happened between them. Arthur was shut down, in some ways because of Morgana's disappearance, and because of the toll being away on witch hunting duties was taking on him.

Merlin was standing in the throne room for the first sitting of court since they had returned from Garnham village, the image of the dying inn keeper and three little boys still fresh in his mind. Uther sat impatiently, flexing his fingers on the armrests of his throne. The court was filling up. A boy no older than eight was marched into the throne room, right before the session was to begin. He appeared scared and clutched a scroll in both hands.

Sir Leon addressed the king, "The boy claims to have a message from Morgause."

Uther's head snapped up at that name, now supremely interested. The quiet chat of the courtiers and nobles in attendance came to a dramatic halt. Arthur was on his feet and pacing down the middle isle before Uther could rise.

Arthur took the scroll and came before his father and read the message aloud, "To King Uther of Camelot. You kill my kind with no regard to harm caused, nor whether a person has hurt anyone or is responsible for the Lady Morgana's disappearance."

Uther's face pulled taut, he fidgeted on his throne, barely able to contain his rage.

Arthur's voice rang out across the now silent hall, "Your ward, the Lady Morgana, true born daughter of Duke Gorlois of Cornwall and Duchess Vivienne is at present my honored guest. I propose a truce. Lift Camelot's ban on magic and you shall have your beloved ward returned to you. Decline and you shall have war. My people will never stop trying to end your reign as you give us no choice to live in peace."

Uther stood up now, which caused a nervous rumble to go through the court.

Arthur read the final passage, "You have a moon's turn. Make your response public, I shall hear soon enough. Signed Morgause, Priestess of the Old Religion, and trueborn daughter of the Duke of Cornwall and the Lady Elaine."

Uther's anger seethed out of him, "That woman! That sorcerer! Dares to threaten me and
my... ward! How dare she!"

Not a peep came from the crowded room.

Uther pointed from his throne, "Seize that boy, I want him questioned."

Sir Leon gulped uncomfortably, "I already... umm, he doesn't know Morgause, he's a peasant's child who was sent to town, and encountered a woman matching Morgause's description and asked to deliver the message, she paid him two gold coins. He knows nothing else."

Uther's expression was for a moment concerned and hopeful, "Did he see Morgana, can he confirm that she's..." Uther's voice trailed off.

Leon shook his head.

"So, we take him at his word?" Uther raged, "He could be one of her followers for all you know."

Arthur was uneasy, "Sire, perhaps we clear the court, to discuss the matter in private."

"Very well," Uther snapped.

There was a mass exodus, as courtiers and nobles struggled to leave the agitated king as fast as possible, lest he turn his wrath on them. Merlin remained.

"Father," Arthur attempted to reason, "I think we should consider this offer."

Uther was silent for a long moment, he took a long gulp of wine from his ever-present goblet. He had been drinking more heavily since Morgana went missing as well.

"Don't be ridiculous, Arthur. That so-called 'peace' isn't worth the parchment it's written on," Uther dismissed. "You would trust the word of a known sorcerer who has a history of lying to you."

The ease with which Uther deceived made Merlin anxious, Arthur had been convinced Morgause was lying about his mother, but Merlin knew it was true.

"Father," Arthur tried to defend his position... "What I meant was..."

Uther's anger was palpable, "You would make peace with the sorcerer who stole Morgana? Who came into this very castle to murder us while we slept."

Uther slammed his gloved fist on his armrest, "What proof does she even offer that Morgana is unharmed?"

Arthur countered, "It's been a year, we're no closer to finding Morgana, Morgause is a powerful sorcerer, she could have her anywhere, using magic to hide from us."

"And if the ban on magic is lifted, what then?" Uther challenged, "It wouldn't be safe to walk the streets."

"It isn't very safe right now either," Arthur tried in vain to explain, "I mean, the people are terrified of all this... force. Their every move is watched, they fear being suspected of sorcery all the time."

*Arthur is the only person could say such a thing to Uther. Without losing a head, anyway, Merlin observed the interaction quietly, hoping not to be noticed.*

The vein on Uther's forehead bulged.
"We've just spent a year killing them, you think a pact with Morgause will make us safe?" Uther fumed, "They would bide their time until they could kill you."

Arthur's expression turned quizzical, "Is that really an argument? We can't stop killing because everyone wants to kill us." Arthur reasoned, "But the more people we kill, the more people want revenge... where does it end?"

"It ends," Uther seethed, "When I get Morgana back and Morgause burns in hell!"

Arthur shook his head and lowered his tone, "No one we've killed in the past year had anything to do with Morgana's abduction."

"How dare you!" Uther exploded.

Arthur audibly exhaled his frustration, "It has to end somewhere, Father."

"I make no peace with Morgana's abductors," Uther vowed, "I shall kill every last one of them. We have the finest knights in all Albion."

"I just think you should consider..." Arthur knew it was hopeless.

Uther stood up and swung his arm through the air in a motion that silenced all further comment, "I'll hear no more of this."

The disagreement between Arthur and Uther escalated the tensions in the whole castle. Arthur was more obnoxious and demanding than usual. And Uther drank and became more erratic. Merlin was hopeful for the first time since all this craziness began, that Arthur was considering a peace and lifting the ban.

Lila had been an excellent find, Morgause reflected. She had sneaked into Camelot, glamoured as an old woman, with Mordred dressed as a peasant girl, and he had listened to the thoughts of all the passing guards, servants, maids, stable boys and cooks until they found Lila. She was a laudry maid whose father had been killed for sorcery. She resented the king and the ban on magic. Morgause had approached her, still disguised and asked her to help the cause of the resistance. It hadn't taken as much convincing as she might have thought, Lila's only real concern was her safety at undertaking such a risk. Morgause kept her own loyal people watching out for the maid to ease her mind. Unfortunately, Lila didn't have chambers like Morgana, and couldn't read so they couldn't send messages via the crow, which meant meetings had to occur face to face. It was lucky Morgause had more loyal recruits of late. There was a chain of meetings that would occur. Messages were slow to reach The Isle but it was the best she could do without more people strong in magic.

Morgause had an ever-increasing spy network so she knew where Arthur's forces were headed. The Resistance would warn sorcerers where they could. Morgana herself was not only invaluable because of her talent as a seer, but the Mage Stone she had come with was helping convert lead to gold, which funded informers as well, though no one was trusted without attesting themselves committed to the cause.

Lila was proving herself to be a gold mine of information. She wasn't privy to Uther's thoughts, but she did listen to gossip, and Arthur would often vent his frustrations to Merlin in his chambers, and Lila had found a good spot from which to listen in.

Arthur was troubled. It was the first court session since Morgause's offer had been made. His king
was reviewing the seemingly never ending 'reports of magical activity' occurring all over Camelot.

Court was not full today, but again the courtiers and nobles were silent.

Father spoke absently as he poured over the scroll he'd received, "I've received word that there's the remnants of the druid camp that were hiding in the Wolf Forrest are now on the northern edge of the Darkling Woods."

More silence.

"Arthur, take your best knights, and ensure there are no more remnants of druids to reform for their magical purpose ever again."

Arthur had been sitting silently.

Druid camps are the absolute worst. Father would have no one spared, and they were the kind of people who wouldn't kill a bird, let alone pose a physical threat to anyone. Last time, some of the druids formed a prayer circle and were chanting as Arthur's knights approached to take them back to Camelot to stand trial for sorcery.

"No," Arthur shocked himself by speaking up.

His king was already onto the more specific instructions, "Leave by… what?"

"You heard me. No!" Arthur's tone was defiant. But he didn't care how it looked anymore, he couldn't go on like this.

Father's voice became low and threatening, "Have you lost your mind, Arthur? You are speaking to your king."

Arthur kept on in the same vain, "I won't lead any more searches for sorcerers, or Morgana, I'm done. No more."

"The king gave you an order," His sire didn't back off an inch either.

Arthur stood and spoke resentfully, "If you want peaceful druids and their child apprentices killed, you can do it yourself, you really wouldn't have to worry about your safety, Sire, since they don't even fight back."

The king's face was a mixture of sudden shock and rage, he went red. He was so worked up, he only managed to choke out his next words, "Clear the court."

Once they were alone with only the guards Father gave the instruction Arthur was pretty much expecting, "Guards, seize my son."

Arthur stood between two men armed with spears.

"Now," Father began again, "Are you going to follow my orders or am I going to throw you in a dungeon?"

"I'm done, Father, this is madness, and I won't be a part of it any longer," He paused a moment, hesitant, "Morgana would never have wanted this."

"Don't you dare say her name," The king was livid, "When you are giving up!"

"She always stood up to you," Arthur wasn't angry just sad and reflective, "That's what I should
have done… a lot sooner."

Father's eyes seemed crazed for a moment, his voice tried to contain his anger coming out low and threatening, "Very well, I'll have Sir Leon lead the raid, you are confined to your chambers."

"Fine," Arthur realized he was relieved rather than scared.

"Until I say different!" His father yelled petulantly to Arthur's back as he was being escorted away.

Arthur heard his king's wine goblet crash against the wall, he must have thrown it in anger.

Arthur had been confined to his chambers for two days now. He was starting to understand why Morgana had seemed so frazzled and jumpy when Father had done the same to her. He never did learn what that fight was about, she had promised to say. She had said looking out the window was her only solace. Arthur had been doing the same, gazing upon the sun getting low in the sky when a raven landed on his window sill. It squawked at him and didn't appear afraid. *Very unusual.* Then Arthur noticed there was a scroll attached to the bird's claw. He removed it, and the raven was unfazed. It flew past him to his table and began to eat the scraps from his dinner plate.

Arthur opened the parchment.

*I can take you to Morgana. Meet me at Avalon Lake at dusk. Tell no one. Come alone.*

*Caellan.*

That was it. This was almost certainly a trap. The only people who knew how to train animals like this raven had been trained were sorcerers of the Old Religion, or so Arthur had heard from Gaius once upon a time.

*But still. What if it is genuine? What if there was a dissenter in Morgause's ranks. What if…*

With the time it took to saddle a horse, Arthur barely had enough time to get there.

*Merlin doesn't really count, I'll be basically going alone.*

Arthur would never be sure if it was his desire for it all to be over that was the main driving force in his decision to go, against logic and his better judgement.

*This Caellan fellow didn't say anything about coming unarmed.*

"Merlin," Arthur bellowed from his room.

His servant looked more twitchy than usual.

"Get me a rope, now."

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Merlin was stubbornly against this secret mission.

*Unsurprisingly. He's such coward, he gets spooked by his own shadow.*

They only rode together the first part of the way. Merlin was to play the look-out for the actual parley. Arthur arrived a little late. His servant really was a terrible rider, he would need to give the weedy fool a hard time about it on the way back. Arthur was ready to pull his sword at the first
sign of ambush. He waited for what seemed a long time.

Arthur saw a woman emerge seemingly from behind the waterfall in a little boat. At first he thought it was Morgana. But she wasn't, she was too tall, too lithe. On closer inspection there where two rowers as well. The woman was striking in a dark robe. Twilight was fading into darkness while the moon was rising. Otherwise he wouldn't have been able to see anything.

Arthur waited.

*Was this Caellan?*

*Would she take him to Caellan?*

Arthur didn't feel in danger.

The woman, who on closer inspection was maybe thirty. She wore her hair in fine braids that reminded Arthur of Sofia. She wore silver jewelry with stones inside the fine metal work. She looked distinctly not of Camelot. She stepped out of the boat. The two men pulled up their oars and made no attempt to move.

"I'm glad you have come, Arthur Pendragon," She said.

Arthur was impatient, "Where's Morgana?"

"Come," She gestured the boat, "I'll take you to her."

Arthur was suspicious, "How do I know this isn't some trap set by Morgause?"

The young woman's face gave nothing away, "I guess you don't."

"Are you Caellan?"

"Yes," She was mater-of-fact, "Are you coming?"

Arthur delayed, "Where are we going?"

Caellan answered immediately, "The Isle of Mists."

Arthur felt like laughing at her, but restrained himself, "That's a mythic place, in fairy tales my wet nurse used to tell me about."

He felt annoyed at her for wasting his time rather than the slightest concern for his safety.

"It is very real I assure you, it just isn't… open to people who aren't of the Old Ways."

Arthur pondered that strange statement, "I see."

She waited, tapping a foot.

"Morgana is there?" Arthur asked.

"Yes," Caellan said, "You can't bring your friend."

"My what?" Arthur was genuinely confused for a moment.

"The man hiding behind those trees with both horses," She gestured to exactly where Merlin was.
For the life of him Arthur didn't know how his manservant had been seen, he certainly couldn't see Merlin.

She repeated, "Tall, thin, brown hair, he must remain."

Arthur got in the boat and off they went. They rowed right through the waterfall, he was wet for a moment and then they were somewhere else entirely. Arthur had been behind that waterfall before, there was only a shallow cave. *Maybe I'm not where I think I am?* But he was. He knew this lake very well.

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Morgana had been on the Isle of Mists since Morgause had saved her from hemlock poisoning. She had died, she was sure of it, then somehow, Morgause's hands had wrapped around her form as she floated towards her father's outstretched arms and pulled her back. Physically Morgana had recovered quickly, but the nightmares of Merlin poisoning her, and her trust being shaken that a friend could do that to her, that was another story. Morgana was extremely grateful to her mentor for giving her life back to her, in every way possible. Morgana no longer lived in fear, she wasn't alone, and she felt loved and cherished in a way she never had before, well not since her father had died.

What she felt for Morgause could not be easily described. Morgause was her lover, her teacher, her most loyal friend and her sister. Morgana didn't know such connection was possible. She could look at her love and know exactly what she was thinking, what she wanted, what she would want Morgana to say at any given moment. She felt alive.

Morgana learned swordplay and battle strategy from Morgause the way she had dreamed since she was six years old. Alvarr taught her about ambush, and reading your opponent and how to find their weakness. Morgana was also learning to use her gifts. She could control her ability to move objects, set fire or strong wind with her mind. It took concentration, but she was getting stronger all the time. She developed her magic from Ninianne's instruction, who was her mother's aunt. Ninianne was the High Priestess, the most authoritative position here on The Isle. She was part of and advised by the Wise Council, who decided the collective actions of those who swore their allegiance to The Isle of Mists. Morgana had taken a loyalty oath herself once she was well. The Isle had healers, who learned particular types of spells and magic that could cure ailments that medical knowledge could not dream of. Morgana learned these arts herself. There were also priestess' in training, and a fighting force. Mordred taught her magic too; his skills were amazing. Morgana took it upon herself to be a mother to him, as well, since he had no family.

Every few days more people arrived seeking refuge on The Isle. Morgause encouraged Ninianne, to take them all, magical or not. They were escaping Camelot, more specifically Uther's vendetta against magic. Morgana had been trying not to think about it, but it couldn't be ignored. Uther's paranoia over losing her had led him to a rampage against anyone he even suspected of any type of magical inclination. Massacres were occurring, peaceful people's such as the druids were being forced to flee or die.

Morgana remembered back nearly three years ago to a conversation with Uther, after he executed a man for sorcery, "You know the more brutal you are, the more enemies you'll make."

Uther's chickens appeared to be coming home to roost.

The people arriving had been recruited by Morgause's sworn fighters, like Alvarr. He would travel around in the wake of the destruction brought by Uther and find survivors who hated the king. Alvarr's unique skills at reading people made him singularly adept to the task. But Morgause, ever careful, would have Mordred read their minds before they were shown The Isle and allowed to
pledge fealty. The new recruits would commit to bring down Uther for what had been done to their friends and loved ones. Those with magic were nurtured by the more experienced sorcerers, while those who weren't were being trained as a fighting force. Their number in no way rivaled Camelot though, not even close. And most of those arriving were no match for Arthur's knights. Still, the resistance was coming together and was very committed to the cause.

Morgana had come up with the plan to return herself and say she had "escaped" from Morgause to put a stop to Uther's madness. Her sister was opposed for now, until there was a more definite way to ensure the most gain for the Old Religion. Meaning, that Arthur's intentions once king were too uncertain, she wouldn't risk him continuing on where Uther left off. Morgana herself was unsure of Arthur's inclinations. While most of the current killing while ordered by Uther, was being carried out by Arthur.
Merlin was too worried for Arthur's safety to remain on the bank at Avalon Lake. He understood that Arthur felt responsible for Morgana, but this plan was insane. It wasn't even a plan, it was so obviously a trap. But would they want to kill Arthur? Probably, he'd just spent a year killing them. Maybe Morgause would abduct Arthur to force Uther to end his killing spree? Or even insist the king lift the ban. Surely, they would know though, that once Arthur was returned, Uther would just resume his witch hunt. Probably with more vengeance.

Merlin lost sight of Arthur and the boat when it went through the waterfall. He desperately tried to think of a spell. He needed super speed and a way to follow them. Merlin remembered a spell where he could create fireflies and send them after Arthur, that way they could light his path. He thought of the words in his mind, felt that burst of energy and then he saw the little glowing balls flying over the lake.

Now, how to follow them?

He didn't know any spells for producing a boat out of thin air. But he had recently seen a spell in Gaius' book for a flying broomstick.

What were the words?

"Gereminay Escourtier."

"No, wait, Gereminoste Escourtiae."

The broomstick materialized in front of Merlin's eyes. He put a leg over the wooden shaft, and off he went. To make it fly where he wanted, he just had to concentrate on that space and the broomstick did the rest.

Merlin went through the waterfall and hit the back wall of the cave a few short yards inside. He fell and landed hard. Where did they go?

He used magic to light up the area, but it was a dead end.

How?

He flew over the cave and the waterfall and looked for any signs of a continuation of the lake or river. The fireflies seemed to have disappeared, meaning they had managed to keep following. Merlin found their greenish glow eventually and saw the small row boat way up ahead. He stayed at a comfortable distance and disappeared the glowing insects. It was nearly dawn before and the waters got very misty, Merlin stopped being able to see and then he lost sight of Arthur. He kept going back and forth all the way through the mist in every direction. The boat didn't come out again, it appeared to have vanished.

Merlin tried in vain to follow for a long time, he felt panicked, what if Arthur is in danger? But Merlin eventually had to give up. He flew back to the banks of Avalon Lake and waited with the horses.

I'm sorry Arthur.
Arthur stopped trying to make sense of it. He was completely at Morgause's mercy now. Caellan sat very still like one of those sirens carved into the hull of a ship to ward off death at sea. He found her unsettling. The two men moved the oars methodically in perfect synchronicity. They were silent and didn't even pay the prince so much as a glance. Arthur didn't know how long this journey was to be, but he did not intend silence the whole way.

"How do you know where Morgana is?"

"I live on The Isle," She replied.

Too obvious.

"Is Morgana well, is she being treated… decently?"

"She's fine, but you should ask her yourself."

The rest of the journey seemed to take forever. They reached a point on the river where there was no more land in sight, and the mist coming off the water was too thick, Arthur couldn't see a stone's throw in front of him.

"We're here," Caellan suddenly spoke after so long sitting silently.

Arthur flinched in surprise, then he felt embarrassed. No one paid his reaction the least mind, though. Caellan stood with her arms outstretched. She spoke a couple of foreign words before a golden ring flashed in her eyes. The mists dissipated, then the rowers continued. The land revealed was very lush, with apple trees and willow trees lining the banks. Arthur turned back to see if any landmark might allow him to find this spot again, all he could see was grey mist, there was the pink light indicating dawn, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Morgause was waiting on the bank with an older woman, they were both unarmed. Morgause was in plain clothes for physical activity, a shirt and breeches. The older woman had long grey braids like Caellan and a wooden staff and many layers of animal skins to cover her body. She must be important to be here with Morgause, Arthur deduced.

Caellan stepped out of the boat first. She took the older woman's hands in hers, a custom of greeting Arthur suspected, as she repeated the gesture with Morgause and promptly left. The rowers were already pulling away from the bank as Arthur's foot hit mud.

"Prince Arthur of Camelot," Morgause announced speaking to the older woman.

"Morgause," Arthur greeted the blonde enchantress stiffly.

Morgause made the introduction, "This is Ninianne, High Priestess of Religion of the Triple Goddess and the Lady of the Lake."

Arthur wasn't sure what the custom was.

Ninianne spoke, "I welcome you to The Isle of Mists, Arthur Pendragon."

Arthur was in no mood for pleasantries, "Where is Morgana?"

"We are here to make a pact with you…" Morgause began.

"You lied to me about my mother, and you abducted Morgana, why on earth would I make a deal with you?" Arthur conveyed his annoyance.
"Don't you want it to end?" Morgause began, "All the senseless killing."

Arthur stopped, *I do want that*, but he didn't trust Morgause.

"I need to speak to Morgana," he said firmly.

Morgause was resigned, "As you wish."

She gestured to the willow trees behind her, and Morgana came walking towards him.

Arthur couldn't really believe it was that easy. Morgana was walking casually, she was wearing a long figure hugging plain white dress, her hair was out and flowing over her shoulders. She was smiling. She looked completely fine. At least Morgause didn't appear to be lying about her treatment.

Arthur ran towards her, arms extended. He pulled her into a hug, swung her in a circle, then realized he was crushing her too tight against his mail, and put her down, feeling silly. Arthur kept hold of her shoulders, to ward off his disbelief that Morgana was actually here, and she wasn't going to disappear before his eyes. Morgana smiled.

"I've missed you," Morgana kissed him on the cheek.

*She probably doesn't know all that had been going on while she's been here.*

Arthur felt the weight of all the horrors of the past year lifting off his back. Morgana was safe and well and he would bring her back and end all this madness once and for all.

Arthur needed to express the guilt he'd been living with daily for the past year, "I am so sorry, Morgana."

"For what?" Morgana wondered.

"I let this happen to you, I should have done more to protect you, I was so worried about Father, I didn't think…"

"I'm alright Arthur."

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm being treated as an honored guest Arthur, Morgause and I are sisters after all," Morgana explained, gesturing to Morgause.

Arthur's relief was profound. He hadn't given any thought to Morgana's familial connection to Morgause.

Morgause and Ninianne said they would give them some time alone, and slowly began to walk away.

"I never understood what happened to you. Merlin said you collapsed," Arthur tried to make sense of it, "And then Morgause was whisking you away, and people were waking up, I never knew what to think."

Morgana paused momentarily, "I barely know what happened myself, I was dying and Morgause saved my life, I know that."

Arthur couldn't disguise his shock, "Saved you?"
"Morgause isn't a bad person, Arthur, she's just had her life ruined by the ban on magic."

"Don't say that to Father, whatever you do."

Morgana, ever defiant didn't care, "Why? It's the truth."

Arthur shook his head, "Our king has become… more steadfast in his resolve to destroy all things sorcery, shall we say."

Morgana looked upset, "I've been hearing, disturbing… things."

Arthur looked away in shame, then found his voice, "It ends today. I'll bring you back and Father will stop."

Morgana appeared genuinely alarmed. "I don't want to go back."

Arthur was stunned, he was not prepared for that answer.

"What?"

"I like it here, I feel safe."

"Morgana, you don't understand, you have to come back. My Father has lost his mind."

Morgana snapped, "You're just realizing that!"

Arthur countered with an argument she would care about, "The king is on the verge of war with Morgause."

Morgana's discomfort played across her face, "He doesn't know where she is."

"Everyone else is paying for that, trust me."

Morgana continued her insubordination, "And who's fault is that?"

Arthur remained silent.

"I won't lie," Morgana reasserted, "I chose to stay here."

"Father will be so happy just to have you back. I doubt he would want to hear the details of your mistreatment."

Morgana followed that statement through, "So that he can keep plotting bloody vengeance against my sister."

Arthur was annoyed she was defending Morgause at all, "Did you join her cause while you were here?"

Morgana didn't back down, "I've always been against Uther where sorcery is concerned. You know that."

"Even now?"

"Especially now."

Arthur became glib, "Well, I guess you're the person he's least likely to throw in a dungeon!"
Morgana looked bitter, and her voice became low and quiet, "He already threw me in a dungeon, or have you forgotten?"

He had, actually. But, Arthur had remembered her month of being confined to her chambers.

Arthur took Morgana's hand and led her to the water's edge.

He proudly proclaimed, "I stood up to him."

Morgana was pleasantly surprised, "When?"

"In court in front of a hundred people, I refused to go on any more sorcerer hunts."

Morgana smiled, "Good for you."

Arthur realized he wanted to tell Morgana, because he wanted her approval.

"He confined me to my chambers."

"It's torture by boredom," Morgana spoke knowingly.

He smiled, she was right.

Arthur sat down by the edge of the water and motioned for Morgana to do the same.

He became serious, "What is the price of your safe return?"

Morgana smiled only on one side, she was expecting this question.

"Morgause means exactly what she said, promise peace, lift the ban."

"I'm not the king, I can't make such an agreement."

Morgana seemed to expect his answer and countered, "You can vow to do it, when you are king."

Arthur paused a moment, "I can't, I've seen too much, no one should mess with dark forces."

"The darkest force in Camelot is Uther's hatred of sorcery, Arthur, trust me," Morgana had a determination to her words.

Arthur thought about the past year a long while.

"If I've learned anything, it's that all this killing isn't making anyone safer," Arthur was straightforward, "It's just making the common people hate us."

Morgana's tone changed, "I'm so glad to hear you say that."

*She looks so relieved and happy.*

"If you come back with me, there will be no more need for any more hunts for sorcerers. And I think I can get Father to stop preparing for war with Morgause," Arthur spoke truthfully.

She was disappointed, she wanted more out of him.

"But, as I said, I'm not the king, my father will make no such pact," He warned, "He's not going anywhere, and he still hates sorcery. I hope you know that."
Morgana looked uncomfortable. She wouldn't look him in the eye.

He demanded, "What is it?"

"I don't know how to say this Arthur…"

"Tell me."

She remained reluctant.

"Morgana!"

"There are magical people here, seers," Morgana eyed him for disapproval as she spoke, "They know things, that haven't happened yet."

Arthur knew he was pulling his disbelief face and tried to stop himself, "Like fortune tellers?"

_Seeers. What next? Talking dragons? Morgana has always gone in for this intangible, feelings stuff._

"What's that got to do with…" He stopped mid-sentence, perplexed.

"Uther," Morgana said quietly, "They think his end will be… soon."

_She really has been here entirely too long. Next she'll want the old woman to read my palm._

Morgana looked scared, she checked his reaction and seemed to take his silence as a cue to continue, "There is disagreement about how it will happen, some think sudden illness, a lone assassin, one person said he will die in battle… I don't know who to believe, but all agree, it will be soon."

"Well, thanks for the warning, when they have something more specific, perhaps I'll get worried," It was kinder than laughing in her face.

Morgana was genuinely worried about Arthur and looked as if she wanted to cry great tears of sympathy for him, "I'm sorry, Arthur."

"Don't worry about it, I'm not going to," Arthur was nonchalant.

Morgana nodded her head sadly, she knew he wouldn't allow any further discussion of this topic.

Morgause and Ninianne were walking back towards them.

"Well, Arthur," Ninianne said, "You know the truce Morgause offered, what say you?"

"Lady of…" He had forgotten her title.

Arthur explained he couldn't lift the ban on magic, just as he had told Morgana moments earlier, but offered a new agreement, that if Morgana came back to Camelot with him he would ensure the end to the sorcerer hunts and Uther's preparations for war against Morgause. Which was all that was within his power to promise.

Morgause was unimpressed, "It is within your power to swear to lift the ban when you become king," She pointed out.

Ninianne touched Morgause's arm to gain her attention, they walked a few steps away to whisper among themselves. It was a short conversation that ended abruptly when Morgause stormed off.
Only Ninianne returned, accepting the offer provided Arthur swore those words in front of the 'Wise Council' whomever they were.

Arthur didn't care who they wanted him to make the oath to, "I will. But, peace means peace," Arthur reiterated, "As of now, the hunt for Morgana will cease, but there are to be no more attempts on my father's life, or the deal is off."

The High Priestess missed a beat, "I swear no one from The Isle will attempt to kill Uther," She cautioned though, "There are many people who now want vengeance, we do not control what lone individuals with magic or seeking revenge might chose to do. I can only speak for the people of The Isle of Mists."

Arthur considered a moment, most of the would-be assassins who had come at Uther had not been from The Isle. Or had they? How would he really know? But what they said was true enough, they didn't speak for every person in Camelot who might be a sorcerer.

"Fair enough," Arthur said firmly.

While they waited on the Wise Council Arthur asked Morgana what she been doing all this time. He was surprised to learn that Morgause, the number one enemy of Camelot, had been teaching Morgana swordplay. He tried not to grimace when he remembered back to when Morgause had bested him in front of everyone.

*After a year of nightmare, could it really be this easy?*

"You really do seem happy," He observed.

Morgana replied, "I really am happy."

"That's all?"

He somewhat expected her to say she was in love, she had a dreamy look in her eye, and was beaming all over, like how Father was when he was enchanted by that troll. Maybe she felt shy because they were in front of company, maybe on the boat ride back he would get details.

The first people of The Isle began to come out from behind the trees. They lined up in front of Arthur. Caellan and some other young women in the long black robes and braids came from one side, there were maybe 15. A group of about 12 or so came from the other side, they were all in white, like Morgana, they had a calm still presence about them. Arthur thought he might memorize faces, but this would clearly be impossible. Morgause led the largest group back, maybe 25 people of varying ages, men and women, wearing the animal furs, they almost seemed to camouflage into the landscape. No one spoke. Some were very old, older than anyone Arthur had ever seen, they made Gaius look middle aged.

"This is the Wise Council?" He asked.

"Yes, and our healers, and priestesses-in-training."

*Father will hate what I'm about to do. But he'll love having Morgana back. What will I tell him of all this?*

Ninianne spoke once everyone was assembled, "This is Prince Arthur of Camelot."

Arthur noted that many people of the group were either stone-faced, or even looked angry. Morgause gestured to Arthur that now was his turn. He stepped out from behind Morgana. He
pulled his sword, which momentarily caused a ripple of surprise among the crowd. Arthur placed
the sword on the ground and took a knee.

He made himself speak clearly and slowly, projecting his voice so that those at the back could hear
him, "People of the Isle of Mists, to the Wise Council, I, Prince Arthur, son of King Uther
Pendragon and the Lady Igraine, do so solemnly swear to cease Camelot's hunt for sorcerers and to
stop my father from further preparations for war with Morgause."

There was a long silence, before Arthur began to notice a low buzz, whispered words, slight
movements.

"I have made this pact freely with Ninianne because I want to see peace. I have concerns about
how magic is used, magic can be used for sinister purposes, so I am not vowing to lift the ban. But
I don't want us to be sworn enemies either," He added.

More rumbling. Some seemed unimpressed with him, others hopeful.

"Lastly, this oath isn't just with Ninianne, but with all of you, I am prepared to give you something,
but you must be willing to do the same, my father is the king, some of you do not like his reign, but
it is his reign while he lives, swear to me that no one from The Isle will make any attempts on the
life of King Uther of Camelot, or the pact is broken."

Now there was silence. Some people looked at Morgause, more at Ninianne, the older people were
stone faced and seemed to look right through him.

"I swear this to all of you, as witnesses, under the Old Gods and the New, if I forswear myself may
God strike me down."

Ninianne took over from him, she motioned for the group to swear Arthur's last stipulation. No one
visibly had any weapons, and no one knelt. They held hands and repeated the words after their
High Priestess. No one walked away at any point, which Arthur had almost expected from those
with a seething hatred of Uther.

Arthur addressed Ninianne once more, "I will see you again someday, I appreciate that you have
treated Morgana gently."

He held out his hand then didn't know what to do.

She took both his hands in hers and squeezed momentarily.

"Ability over birth, you are a wise king indeed, Arthur," Ninianne said, "That is your legacy."

Arthur had no idea what she meant, and stopped himself from correcting her, that he wasn't the
king. The boat arrived back with the same two rowers. Arthur helped Morgana step into the middle
and got in behind her. They pushed out from the bank. The people were still standing in their rows,
which was disquieting. Ninianne lifted her arms and Arthur once again saw the flash of gold in her
eye, and the mists parted, enough for the boat to find its way through. He glanced back a minute
later and could only see grey cloud over the water. Arthur seemed to remember that he'd seen that
golden flash occur before.

So that's what it looks like when someone is using magic. He'd need to remember that.

Morgana had remained silent throughout, which was unlike her. She laid back against his chest,
and he wrapped his arms protectively around her. Once they were out of the mist and could see the
sun now high in the sky, and he could faintly make out land in the far distance, he felt comfortable
to speak again.

Arthur said, "I'm not sure what I am going to tell Father."

Morgana said nothing.

Arthur grazed her cheek lightly with the back of his hand, because he thought she might have fallen asleep, it was wet. She's crying.

"You really didn't want to leave, did you?" Arthur observed.

"No, I didn't," Her voice cracked.

"It'll be okay, Father will come to his senses now," Arthur knew he sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Morgana wiped the stubborn tears off her cheeks, quickly. They were silent a long interval.

"Do you know how they actually practice their religion?"

Morgana thought for a while, "A lot of it is based on the elements of fire, earth, wind and water, how everything is made up of these things to some degree, nature has its own rhythms, like seasonal changes, the moon cycle, which determines the tides, animal life cycles, and how to yield food…"

"Worshiping trees doesn't make them grow any better," Arthur knew he was being insulting.

"Understanding what they need does," She countered, unimpressed with his superior tone.

"How does that link with magic?"

"There's a lot more science to magic than you might think, understanding the properties that naturally exist in all sorts of herbs and flowers, even animal venom, it's amazing, it can be used for healing."

"Did you see that gold flash go through Ninianne's eyes?"

Morgana hesitated, "I did."

"She didn't need a potion or anything."

"You're right, some people are just… naturally tuned into the rhythms of the earth, so they don't have to boil bark, or crush garlic."

"What is it about them?"

"I don't entirely understand it myself, but I listened to the stories of lots of people there," Morgana sounded entirely wise, "And the thing they had in common was that they just were magical."

"How do you mean?"

"Nothing happened to them to make them that way, sometimes they knew from when they were young children, others didn't know until they were adults, but they didn't make a conscious choice, magic chose them," Morgana explained.

"I see," Arthur said stiffly, "But some are better, or more powerful than others… yes?"
"Yes, like Ninianne," Morgana agreed.

"Then doesn't that mean that you can learn to be better, from practice or spell books or whatever?" Arthur inferred.

"Not exactly, you have what you have, but with concentration, training, strength of belief, you can learn to hone and control what you have better," Morgana seemed to worry she had said something wrong, she quickly added, "Well, that's how Morgause explained it to me anyway."

Arthur wondered out loud, "Are all of those people magical?"

"All."

Arthur had had enough education on that topic for now.

"So?" He turned playful, "Meet anyone special?"

Morgana stopped still, then turned her head to check his face, "Why?" She looked worried.

Arthur smiled playfully, "I don't know, you just seem… a bit… in love?"

Morgana blushed.

"Out with it, who is he?" He teased.

She visibly tensed.

"Come on," Arthur pried further.

"It doesn't matter now," She said sadly.

"You're right, my father wouldn't allow you to marry a sorcerer anyway."

"I'll marry who I choose," Morgana said with venom.

Father has missed having a good argument with someone who isn't afraid of him.

After a while Morgana inquired if anything had changed on that front for him.

"No," He admitted somewhat sadly.

"Really?" She was surprised, "You and Gwen… never?"

"No."

Morgana was curious, "I'm sorry to hear that. Did your feelings change?"

"It's not that," Arthur was definitive, "But, with your… disappearance, there's just been a lot on my mind."

"Well, there's still time," Morgana added, "Gwen is a sweet and patient woman."

"Father will string both of us up," Arthur smiled wryly, "You and me, side by side."

Morgana was silent too long before saying, "You know, on The Isle people discuss out conflict as equals, they don't resort to force as the first option all the time, it's not all about royalty and nobility before the peasants and commons. Everyone has a voice."
"That sounds…"

"Wonderful." Morgana supplied.

"Unworkable," Arthur finished.

They were silent again for a while.

"We are going to need to come up with something to tell my father when we get back."

Morgana was concerned now, "You won't tell him about your oath, right?"

Arthur wasn't sure what to do about that, "What if he finds out?"

"No one there will tell him." Morgana counselled, "If you tell him he won't stop until you relent, you just went against everything he believes in."

"I didn't promise to lift the ban, just stop doing what I will have no need to do now that you're back."

"How do you plan to stop his war on Morgause?" She inquired.

"Father has no idea where she is, his preparations were never going to be more than that."

Morgana was annoyed, "So, basically, you made an empty oath."

"I will do what I said," Arthur knew he sounded defensive, "I just don't have to do much. I'm mostly hoping Father won't care now that you're back."

They both dozed off at some point. Arthur was woken by a soft poke to his ribs. He cracked one eye open to see the oarsmen's paddle, they were back at the lake. He cursed himself for not seeing the journey better this time, now that it was daylight. Merlin was still at the bank with both horses like the faithful retriever that he was. Arthur could actually see his ears wiggle out of shock upon seeing Morgana.

Merlin didn't believe the King's Ward had been held against her will. Morgause had proven that day that she cared for Morgana more than she hated Uther. Merlin had become aware through Gaius that Morgana and Morgause were half-sisters, Gorlois having fathered both of them. Morgause must have known, hence the loyalty. But Merlin still feared, while Morgana might not have been the threat to Arthur and Camelot he believed she was a year ago, she was well aware that he poisoned her. There was no telling what that might have done to her. If she wasn't already committed to Morgause's cause then, Morgana certainly would be now.

Morgana looked at Merlin, he saw her face stretch tight in anger.

*Because you poisoned her. You think she's forgotten!*

Merlin was polite, "I'm glad you're back."

Her expression indicated she doubted the sincerity of his words. Morgana dismissed him, saying nothing. Arthur didn't seem to notice. Merlin wasn't sure what else to say. He was stunned Arthur was unharmed, and Morgana appeared completely fine. He knew Morgause was very powerful, but the King's Ward was basically dead the last time he saw her.

Arthur got up on his stallion, and Merlin helped Morgana get on in front of him. Merlin rode
behind them, not sure what he should do. He was so sure it had all been a trap.

What if she tells Uther what I did? I'm dead.

Arthur was smiling, sunny even. He hadn't looked this happy since before she went missing. Merlin wondered if he should just run. But he couldn't protect Arthur if he did that. He suddenly felt exceedingly nervous about Morgana's return.

As they got closer to the city's walls they began to pass other travelers. The first couple of riders, open mouthed and silent but had clearly recognized Morgana. A peasant in a field, fell to his knees and crossed himself at the sight of the King's Ward returned. The effect was more astounding in the city where more people knew the Lady by sight. The hub of activity that was always buzzing along, came to a sudden stand still. Most people were silent, gaping in their disbelief.

Others praised or saluted Arthur, rightly seeing that Uther's repressive measures would now be loosened. Many knelt as if praying, and otherwise indicated that they thanked God for the Lady Morgana's safe return. It wasn't that the commons loved Morgana for herself, though she did have the reputation as being concerned with the plight of commoners, but because they believed their lives would get better now, that the king would be happy again. Things could return to how they were before.

Cries of, "Prince Arthur," Could be heard echoing all day around the markets and taverns.

It was a surreal experience and one of the first glimpses of just how forgiving and accepting the people could be of Arthur, and how he might even be a beloved king one day.

Merlin had a million questions, the first being, how could it have been so easy?

What is Morgause up to?

Can Morgana be trusted?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Since I am too lazy to go with actual description, here’s how Ninianne looks: Gemma Jones (The Cailleach from 4x01 and 4x02 (episode with the dorocha), but without the makeup to make her look zombie-ish).
And here’s how Caellan looks: Go to A Wiki of Ice and Fire, the Ashara Dayne page, the third picture of Ashara by Bella Bergolts is what Caellan looks like (but Caellan’s eyes are blue not violet).
Morgana embraced Gwen, it was good to see her friend again after so long, she had been sorely missed. Gwen seemed to have forgotten her reluctance around Morgana since the kiss. Perhaps enough time had passed?

Gaius came to see her and asked questions about how she had been healed. Morgana was vague with her replies. She had truly lost all respect for Gaius. He knew so much and did so little. He had known she had magic, people on The Isle said he used to dabble himself. His solution had been lies and numbing her with potions, lest she know the truth. She had a right to know about her own body and given the situation it had been exceedingly dangerous not to tell her.

Seeing Merlin for the first time was hard. She thought she'd feel afraid, but when she had first laid eyes on him, now that he knew that she knew what he'd done, standing on the bank with the two horses, Morgana felt her muscles pull taut. She wanted to hit him, to yell. She comprehended immediately that Merlin had said nothing of poisoning her, which meant she had leverage against him, well two significant pieces of information anyway, but she wouldn't be telling Arthur anything yet.

Morgana had a bath, she soaked for as long as she could stand. She was conscious of the fact that she was stringing it out to delay her first interaction with Uther. She'd had a long time to prepare for this moment though, she just had to get through it.

This will be the last time.

Morgana had been practicing clearing her mind, concentration and ways to reinforce thoughts that calmed her. Ninianne had been teaching her for the past half a year. The High Priestess had told Morgana very early in her time on The Isle that her rage tended to blind her. That she would need to learn how to conceal what she felt. To think through her actions with the consideration of what would take the cause forward. Morgana had her moments when she forgot herself and reacted rashly on instinct. But, she was getting better. She never could have even attempted this before.

Morgana turned her thoughts to her last day of freedom. She had a tear-filled good bye with Mordred last evening. It was the first time she'd seen him cry. She kissed him and held him and made promises that they would be together again soon. And she fully intended to realize those promises, she knew what she had to do. Morgana and Mordred were incredibly close. His own short life had been so tragic. He had no memory of his mother or father. He had grown up with a stern old man who was raising him begrudgingly. When the old man died suddenly, Mordred was only six. He had tried his best to fend for himself. A druid man came to collect him, saying that he
had been told to foster Mordred, and teach him to use his magic. Mordred didn't know how they knew, but the druids were right. He had liked living at the druid commune. Everyone was kind, and wise, and taught him many important things. But again, they had lived with the constant threat of discovery and he was never anyone's child, just an apprentice. When he had first told Morgana, she had held him to her chest, and cried for him, for what he'd been through. Mordred didn't cry though, he'd never known anything else. Morgana had resolved to show him a parent's love from that moment on, and she had been. Mordred seemed happier, more carefree. With her looking out for him meant he didn't always have to be so guarded and grown up all the time. Since The Isle was an island, they would go riding in any direction and end up at the water's edge, then spend most of a day talking, skimming rocks, looking at birds, whatever he wanted. Mordred never stopped amazing her with his abilities. Morgause and Alvarr were teaching him swordplay, battle tactics, archery. Morgana taught him riding, since that was her most expert skill.

Mordred said a strange thing to her in parting, "Don't tell Merlin I'm on The Isle with you, or that you've seen me at all."

"If you would like," She answered without consideration before adding, "But why does it matter?"

Mordred was calm as he explained, "Merlin believes there's a prophecy that an alliance between you and I will bring down Arthur, and Merlin always acts to protect Arthur."

Useful to know. Where on earth did Merlin hear that prophecy? She had just spent a year on The Isle with the best seers in the land. No one on The Isle had ever uttered a word of that to her. As much as Arthur made her so mad sometimes, she truly believed he was better than Uther.

Mordred also warned her not to underestimate Merlin. Morgana remembered how he had poisoned her, she wasn't likely to forget. She wondered just how powerful a sorcerer he could really be though? With no proper training for his gifts? Ninianne had studied her whole life and she was over sixty, surely, he would be no match for even Morgause. But she had promised to be weary. And Morgana kept her promises.

It was Arthur she was worried about. He'd given so little, it was disappointing. And then that question about her being in love, she hadn't seen that coming. She couldn't decide what Arthur would think was worse, her being in love with a sorcerer, her own sibling or a woman?

She chose her most innocent looking dress. Uther liked her in white, hair out. And then her handkerchief, she couldn't forget that.

Uther was in his room writing at his desk. Arthur entered.

"I thought I told you to stay in your chambers until I…"

"I rescued Morgana," Arthur lied before pausing to allow the enormity of his words sink in, "She is here and safe, Father."

Uther stopped what he was doing and looked at his son intently, for signs this was true and serious.

Uther couldn't believe it, "Where is she? I want to see her."

"She's with Gaius, give her a chance to rest."

Father was impatient, "But she's… unharmed?" He was afraid to hear the answer.

"She's completely fine."
"How?"

Arthur had rehearsed the tale in his head, "There was a dissenter in Morgause's camp who told me where to find them, I crept in unnoticed in and rescued Morgana without alerting anyone, we got away without a fight."

"Unbelievable!" Uther was shocked.

Yes, it is unbelievable!

Arthur hated to deceive anyone, especially his father, but this lie was kindness.

"There will be no need for any more searches, the law regarding aiding sorcerers must be abolished, and let's forget about preparations for war against Morgause."

"Are you mad?" Uther asked, "You know where her camp is, we should send the knights this instant!"

"They will already have moved on by now Father. We have Morgana back. Let it go."

"You are speaking to your king," Father reminded him.

Arthur was ready, "You are speaking to the person who saved Morgana, be satisfied."

Arthur walked out, despite Uther wanting to ask more questions.

Merlin had managed to get as many details out of Arthur as possible. He relayed the information to Gaius as they ate lunch at the wooden table in their shared chambers.

Merlin explained, "Basically, there's a whole island in the middle of those mists that can't be reached without magic."

"The Isle of Mists," Gaius nodded, "I heard about it, but I've never been there."

Merlin recounted his disbelief, "I went up and down in every direction, it was just air."

"Highly secret magics are used to keep The Isle away from the realms of men," Gaius said, "It can't be breached without the spell, and few know it."

"How powerful are they?"

Gaius didn't know. He was more intrigued by the content of the deal, "And all they wanted was for Arthur to swear to lift the ban on magic when he becomes king?"

Merlin confirmed.

Gaius continued to imply his surprise, "But Arthur didn't even promise that, and Morgana was allowed to return with him?"

Merlin shrugged, "That's what he said. What are they up to?"

Gaius seemed nervous, "I've got no idea, Merlin."

Uther was on the throne listening to Sir Leon read, what by the looks of it, must have been a boring
report. She began walking towards them. Then he spotted her. The king looked positively giddy. He was out of his chair and striding over. She picked up the pace too, lest Morgana not look eager enough. They embraced. Her cheek up against his, he held her too tightly and for a long while, his hands roamed her back. He pulled back to gaze on her face as he liked to do. He had tears in his eyes. She was ready and dabbed the moisture off his cheeks with her handkerchief.

He held both her hands in his, "I... I... there are no words," He shook his head, his smile was as overjoyed as she'd ever seen him. He held her in close again, pulling her bosom into his chest. She could feel the bulge in his breeches as it pressed into her hip. He caressed her cheek. Morgana feigned her longing to be in his arms again.

*How does anyone think I am just his ward at this point?*

"Out! Everyone out!" Uther suddenly ordered.

The room was mostly empty anyway, the benches had already been moved out as court wasn't to be held today. Knights, guards, maids, all kept their eyes low and moved swiftly to the end doors.

Now, they were completely alone. *This* was what Morgana had been dreading.

No sooner had the lone escape route been barred by the guards from the outside, Uther couldn't control himself any longer.

"I've missed you."

His hand that had been caressing her cheek, brought her face to his. He had so much pent up sexual desire. His tongue was savaging her mouth. His arms surrounded her waist and hoisted her up. Morgana wrapped her legs around his hips. He carried her over to the throne continuing to maul her as he went. He let her regain her footing, next to the ugly wooden chair. Morgana wasn't entirely sure what he had planned for her. His hands bunched the dress up from her waist until he could reach the hem. He raised the material up until she was bottom-half naked. He took a moment to look upon her form with that hungry, wild look that he got. Then Uther spun her around, she was facing the side of the throne and he bent her over. His sudden actions were quite a shock. She steadied herself by holding onto the throne's armrest.

Now Morgana couldn't even see what was happening. It was more distressing than even she had imagined, and she'd been picturing many varied and horrible scenarios. Her stomach was churning as she waited in anticipation of the pain. She felt Uther pressed up against her bare cheeks and could hear him unlacing his breeches. He took her as a hound takes a bitch. He buried himself in her to the hilt. Her flesh felt the burn of being penetrated when unprepared.

*Get control of your anger.*

Ninianne must have schooled her hundreds of times. Ninianne had Morgana focus on a scenario that helped to make her calm. She preferred to visualize her stabbing Uther repeatedly.

*See how you like it!* It did help.

Uther was thrusting so hard, tears came to her eyes and Morgana felt she might pass out. He couldn't control himself, he exploded into her only a short time later. She was grateful that his 'welcome home' was over quickly, at least. Uther seemed to regain some semblance of humanity after that. As if he'd forgotten she was an actual person and not just a sheath for his sword. He placed his hands on her shoulders in order to turn her to face him. He was now looking at the floor.

Once he had caught his breath he said, "I didn't mean to be so rough, you're just so... and I was..."
terrified I would never see you again…”

Morgana didn't say anything to that. But extended her hand to caress his cheek lightly. Morgana had learned from Ninianne that her voice tended to betray her when angry. Uther was so relieved by that simple gesture. Which only made her hate him more. He lifted her arms up and then peeled the dress off over her head. He took the time to admire her bust before beginning to squeeze her breasts with too much pressure for her liking. She did nothing. Then Uther sat down on his throne and patted his lap for her to come and sit. Which she did. One hand went between her legs, and she felt two fingers enter her. She was still sore. The other hand pinched her nipple. He kissed her neck.

"I've missed you so much," He spoke between kisses, "Morgause will burn for this, I promise you."

Morgana tensed. "Morgause didn't harm me," She decided to admit, "I was almost dead, she took me away to heal me."

"What happened?" Uther asked.

_Merlin poisoned me!_

"I don't know, I couldn't breathe, then I collapsed."

"Morgause used her sorcery to make you ill," Uther stated with confidence, "Then convinced you she saved your life," Uther summarized the version of events he was most comfortable with.

"No…” Morgana wanted to further defend her lover but was cut off by Uther's mouth swallowing her words.

Once it was on his terms again, he said, "Let's not disagree, I'm so glad you are home and safe."

He was now being gentle and comforting or as much as Uther was capable. She feigned her enjoyment at his touch.

He was done with her eventually. She thanked him, repeated that she had also missed him and was glad to be back. He kissed her good bye and she had gone back to her chambers. Morgana didn't think her performance was that convincing she was stiff from holding in all her rage, but Uther was so besotted with her, he saw nothing.

There was to be a banquet in her honor tomorrow night. She had a planned meeting with Morgause tonight.

_The worst is behind me now._

She requested another bath. If Gwen thought her demanding for requesting two baths on the same day, she said nothing. Morgana wouldn't need to go to Gaius for more moon tea anymore since she knew how it make it herself.

Morgana began to remember the night before, when she was back on The Isle and safe. After Mordred had fallen asleep with her in her room in the healers' house, she had slipped out to see Morgause. They had stayed up almost all-night making love.

Everything between her and Morgause was so different to what she experienced with Uther. Morgause could be rough when she wanted to be, demanding, sometimes she would whisper the dirtiest things Morgana had ever heard into her ear while they were going at it. But Morgana always knew that a single word from her that she didn't like what they were doing, and she knew
for a certainty that Morgause would stop. Trust made their love better, because it allowed Morgana to relax, to truly enjoy herself and let go.

Morgause had been the first person Morgana had told about her secret, voluntarily. Mordred had read her mind. It was a few weeks after Morgana had been let out of her sick bed. She had been having terrible nightmares, linked to anxiety and Merlin and being poisoned, not prophetic visions. She and Morgause had resumed kissing and learning about one another but hadn't made love again yet. Morgana was eager to learn how to please Morgause the way she had pleased her. They ended up talking about their first time together in the woods.

Morgana had made an off-hand remark, "I never knew sex could feel so good, until I met you."

Morgause smirked, "Well, tell… whoever you used to be with, how to do it so it feels good!"

Morgana knew she sounded bitter, "Trust me, he never listened."

Maybe it was how Morgana said it, or maybe her face gave too much away, but Morgause looked troubled, "Who've you been having relations with?"

And Morgana fell silent, she was scared to reveal the truth of what Uther had done to her.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Morgause immediately became sincere and comforting, "But, I hope no one made you do anything you didn't want to."

The way Morgause looked at her, a combination of pity and curiosity. Morgana pressed her lips together in a way that made them disappear and her eyes fixed on the ground. She felt ashamed. Morgause would have killed Uther if he had done that to her. She wouldn't have just put up with it. Morgause didn't push, for which Morgana was eternally grateful. Her sister just let Morgana know that whenever she did want to talk, she would be there, and she wouldn't judge, no matter what.

Morgana told Morgause that she loved her that night and they had relations for the first time since the woods. Morgana finally saw Morgause naked and got to touch her body in a way that excited her. Morgana had envisaged their first time in her mind so many times now, which helped her try to emulate what Morgause had done to her. The gentle kisses, the slow touching, the teasing, the way she had set her nerves on fire, how Morgause had stimulated her most sensitive places which had been overwhelming. It was still all new to Morgana, and so had it had its moments of awkwardness, and shyness on her part, but overall Morgause was pleased and returned the favor and they had slept all night in one another's arms.

It was another moon turn before Morgana had opened up. It was afternoon and Morgause had come from training future fighters and was wearing mail and her sword belt. Morgause liked to play games or make believe sometimes to keep their lovemaking exciting. Sometimes she would pretend to be a big strong knight who had saved a princess, and they would make love in character. They were alone along the bank, being given privacy by a circle of willow trees. They liked to come to this spot because of the beautiful nature and seclusion. Morgause had unsheathed her sword and thrust it into the ground. She was putting on a very demanding, manly persona and wanted Morgana to pleasure her, which Morgana had done from her knees. Once Morgause had been satisfied she had suddenly pushed Morgana flat on her back and aggressively pinned her to the ground by straddling her and pulling up her dress in a hurry to penetrate her with some hard object. The handle of a dagger? Morgana couldn't remember exactly. Morgause wasn't usually rough like this but Morgana was still working out what she, herself, liked. The whole scenario was off putting to Morgana, though she couldn't place why. She had smelled Morgause's sweat, which had led to her moving her face to the side in avoidance where she caught sight of the sword sticking out of the earth and it all came back to her. Her father's cairn, Tauren's death, Uther's
promises, him forcing himself on her, the sword in the ground, his sword penetrating her.

Morgana screamed "Stop!" the way she repeatedly wished she had done that day.

Morgause didn't know what had gone wrong, but complied quickly, getting off her. Morgana sat up to catch her breath and then she just started to cry, uncontrollable sobs. Morgause waited before very slowly approaching her offering a hug. Morgana accepted the comfort and kept bawling into Morgause's mailed shoulder.

She finally talked about that first time Uther forced himself on her. The shock of it all, how much it hurt, the shame, the forced secrecy. Worrying about pregnancy, what it meant, if he would do it again. It poured out of her. The visions of fucking Uther that repulsed her when awake but aroused her in sleep in a way that was very confusing. Morgana elected to leave out that she had come to understand that she was seeing her mother's memories. She didn't want to tarnish Vivienne in Morgause's eyes. She didn't want to lie, but Vivienne was the closest thing her sister had ever had to a mother, and there was no reason to mention it.

Morgana told of how she had run off to the druids when she realized she had magic and how Uther had come to her the night she had returned. After Uther had married a troll and had the castle laughing at him, he came to her every night for a week to prove himself manly. How when she had stood up to him and he had locked her in her chambers for a month. She told the truth of how she had gone to Uther when Gwen was abducted to force him to send more men to rescue her, how she had deliberately sexually manipulated him. Though, Morgana didn't explain that the fight was over the affair or that she had tried to glamour Vivienne.

Morgana explicated between bouts of weeping that she had never felt safe. That Uther had begun to describe his attraction to her as Morgana's fault. That she had bewitched him. He couldn't live without her. He was ashamed to want her like he did.

Morgause listened in silence as she often did and had comforted Morgana. Morgause said that Uther had abused her, he had been a guardian to her since she was ten and should never have taken advantage of her in this way. That he was singularly responsible for his actions. That the power imbalance between them was inexcusable. He was a king and she, his dependent, and terrified due to her having magic. Morgana had never really processed just how much she had been through. At the time it had just been a matter of survival each and every day, of her doing whatever she could to protect herself.

Morgause's mind worked so wonderfully differently to Morgana's. Her sister encouraged Morgana to speak of her ordeal to Ninianne in a private meeting with only the three of them. What Morgause had seen instantly was useful information about Uther, specifically his weaknesses. How he could be outwitted, all in the service of plotting to bring him down.

Morgana struggled in the immediate aftermath, her desire for sex, even with Morgause whom she loved, had dissipated. It would be months before they would touch each other again in that way. Morgause remained her best friend and confidante who supported her through all of it though. Morgana did eventually begin to feel lighter.

Morgana was able to leave the castle undetected at midnight. It was a risk, but Uther was unlikely to want more again so soon. She wore her purple velvet cloak that covered her and concealed her face easily. Mordred and Morgause had already figured out what routes the guards walked and when so there wouldn't be too many surprises. Lila had slipped out around the same time and saddled Moonlight for her. Morgana needed to get to a cave north west of Camelot, it was a good two-hour ride and she would be making the journey at night. All of which gave her little time to get
back before the castle servants were up and at their duties. Morgause said the location was important though so there was nothing to be done.

She made better time than she expected guided by the silver half-moon in the sky. There were two of The Isle's sworn protectors at the mouth of the cavern. Morgana knew both of them by sight and they let her pass. Her sister was standing over a bubbling cauldron.

"Sister," Morgause was pleased, they kissed in greeting.

It had only been a day, and yet Morgana's feelings of helplessness and constant anxiety were back. She didn't want to live like that, and had to keep reminding herself it was only temporary.

Morgause got straight down to the purpose, "How has your sudden return been received?"

"Uther didn't care too much where I've been," Morgana had an air of indifference, "Arthur lied to him about the circumstances."

"That's good," Morgause always thinking, always plotting, worked out their next steps, "The more Arthur moves from Uther the better."

Morgana reported, "There's tension in their relationship but nowhere near enough rebellion from Arthur."

"Does Arthur trust you?" This was Morgause's very important question.

"I think so."

Morgause was processing everything, "Did he say much after the visit to The Isle?"

"He wanted to know more about how magic works and exactly what the religion is, which I guess is progress," Morgana mocked, "But he didn't understand much, I tried to explain."

Morgause nodded, "His mind is rather closed, for now anyway."

Morgana displayed her vexation, "I tried to warn him that Uther's time was near, he practically laughed in my face."

Morgause was thoughtful, "Maybe it is better this way, when you are proven right, it might shock him into… a grudging respect shall we say?" She had a devious look on her face now.

Morgause had her cauldron bubbling and had prepared everything else in advance. She just needed the handkerchief with Uther's tears on it, which Morgana happily supplied.

Morgana didn't know much of this spell. Morgause explained that the mandrake root has many special properties and only grows on this mountain, the fresher it is when put into the memory release potion, the more effective it is.

The substance in the cauldron was thick and almost black. When the mandrake root was dropped in it sank immediately and Morgana winced as she heard a scream in her ears. Morgause was impressed, hearing the cries of the mandrake root, her sister informed her, was a sign of magic. The root needed to simmer awhile so they kept talking. Morgana reported Uther's idea of welcoming her back. Morgause looked so positively enraged, Morgana realized she shouldn't have gone into so much detail.

Morgause knew what she was thinking, "Never hide the truth from me. Don't carry this burden
alone."

Morgana had smiled sadly and nodded.

Morgause squeezed Morgana's arm to soothe her, "It just motivates me more to see him fall."

Morgana thought back to what Mordred had said.

"If magical people can hear the cry of the mandrake root, won't Merlin be a problem?"

Morgause had forgotten that, and thought for a while before nodding, "He could ruin all of our plans." She began to tap her side absently, "Could you kill him?"

"I'm not sure how powerful he is," Morgana didn't hate that idea, Merlin had poisoned her after all. "He's one of us though."

Morgause turned cold, "That boy is not one of us!" She was adamant, "When he could have let Uther die, he chose to kill you instead, and he knew you have magic."

"So, he's a traitor?"

Morgause's nostrils flared as she spoke, "He's not one of us, make no mistake, Morgana."

Morgana wasn't decided on her feelings towards Merlin, he had helped her a number of times. He seemed like he cared and was just trying to do what he thought was best. Mordred said he protected Arthur, and had saved his life numerous times, that had to be worth something. He had also concealed that he had magic when she felt desperately alone and terrified.

Morgana wasn't ready for that drastic a shift from the plan, "But anyway, he's Arthur's puppy."

Morgause conceded, "And we don't want Arthur to lose his loyal dog, not right now, anyway," She waved her hand to show an end to the discussion, "Leave it with me for now."

"The mandrake root is like none other," Morgause proclaimed proudly, "It reveals the truth, the deep dark secrets that people conceal, that they try to hide or lock away in their minds out of guilt or shame, the mandrake unlocks all, brings it to the surface with a vengeance."

"I thought Uther would lose his mind?" Morgana inquired.

"It depends on how bad King Uther feels when confronted with what he has done," Morgause smirked, self satisfied, "As to how much the truth will haunt him."

The blonde began to chant over the cauldron in a language Morgana was still only learning, she understood some of the words.

Morgause used a special stick to remove the mandrake from the thick oozing substance and it was dripping everywhere.

"I think I will be leaving a trail from here to Camelot," Morgana's spoke as if in jest, but her concern was real.

Morgause was unimpressed, "A little respect, Sister, it's not my first time!" Morgause produced a wine skin to put the root in.

Morgana smiled sheepishly, "I'm sorry I doubted you."
"You're forgiven," Morgause grinned.

Morgana looked longingly at Morgause, wishing she had more time to spend with her, but duty called. Morgana turned to leave but felt Morgause tug on her arm. Morgana turned and Morgause captured her lips, expressing a hunger and desperation she was feeling. Morgana noted how unlike Morgause it was, who was usually so restrained and collected. Morgana knew that while it couldn't be helped, this plan put her at risk, and that Morgause hated being unable to be by Morgana's side to protect her.

Morgana surprised herself by clinging to her sister's form so tightly she felt she'd never let go. She knew she had to break herself away or the sunrise would beat her back to Camelot. Morgause eventually put an end to the kiss by retreating, holding Morgana in front of her a moment to fix her hair and straighten her hood.

"Best be off," Was all Morgause said in parting and turned abruptly to resume her work.

Morgana rode back swiftly and made it before first light. Lila met her at the only unguarded gate to get Moonlight back to the stables without anyone knowing. Morgana crept into Uther's chambers and hung the root under his bed. He looked so peaceful as he slept blissfully ignorant of so much. She finally slipped back into her own bed just as dawn was breaking. She slept soundly until midday with dreams of Uther's downfall.
The banquet hall was packed. Much good food, drink and cheer was being shared. Uther was drunk on happiness and wine. Morgana sat at Uther’s left, Arthur to his right. Uther almost struggled to stand, he banged a fist on the table to draw the room’s attention to him. The jesting and chatter died away.

"I see so many happy faces," The king began with unsteady motions of his arms.

"It feels almost like a dream," Uther's was uncharacteristically emotional, "I can tell you, I haven't felt like this in a long time."


Uther in mock annoyance, turned to chide him, "Drunk with happiness."

Uther's focus turned back to Morgana, who smiled at him obligingly.

Uther swayed slightly on his feet, goblet in hand, eyes on her, "I would have searched the seas, skies, stars, for that smile."

Morgana smiled enough to pretend to be flattered.

He values me for my appearance. Yes, I'm just his ward, and he's just my guardian. Are you all blind?

"Having it stolen from me was like a blade to my heart, Morgana, you mean more to me than you will ever know," Uther sounded ready to cry, almost losing his footing from intoxication.

You never cared about my actual happiness, that might have involved listening to me.

Uther raised his goblet and the whole room followed, "To the Lady Morgana."

Morgana was up to hug him making a show for everyone else. The king squeezed her very tight, more tears in his eyes, burying his face in her neck momentarily and holding on longer than was appropriate. Morgana saw the diners at the long table, where royalty and nobles sat, begin to look away in embarrassment. She felt his manhood pressed up against her belly. Contempt flashed across her face, before he pulled back and she matched him with a smile to his face.

Oh, I know how much you care for me, Uther.

***

Uther excused himself saying he needed to go out for some air.

Uther could scarcely draw breath. Morgana had that effect on him. It wasn't fitting for a king. He'd had too much wine, but he was so euphoric, he couldn't stop himself. Morgana was home safe and unharmed. Stopping the preparations for war with Morgause angered him, but it was a small price to pay to have his love back.

He stepped over the paved stone towards the well. It was a cool night, and the marketplace was deserted. He glanced down at his reflection. When did I get so old? He took a few breaths to
compose himself. He turned to go back in.

_Igraine._

His heart momentarily seized in his chest.

It was really her, standing in front of him in the gold and white dress she wore a lot. Her blue eyes and porcelain skin, her golden hair that he adored so much.

Uther shook his head in disbelief, "Igraine? My darling? How?"

Igraine was still, angry perhaps, "Why didn't you tell me you used magic?"

Uther gasped in horror, _How did she find out?_ 

He dropped to his knees, begging for mercy, "I, I never meant…"

Her tone was accusatory, "She told you, only death may pay for life."

"It was… it.. my death, it should have been me," Uther couldn't bare his wife's judgement, on the biggest regret of his life.

Igraine didn't soften, she stood over him, her anger evident, "She told you, you do not decide which life will be sacrificed, only that the price is always high."

Uther was panicked, he stammered "I, I didn't mean… I never… Nimueh lied!"

"You played with powerful magic, Uther," Igraine scolded him like a disappointed parent, "You are responsible for my death. Not magic. Not Nimueh. You!"

The desperation was evident in his voice, he pleaded, "I needed an heir. I… I… never meant to…"

Igraine forgave him nothing, "You knew the price was death."

Uther was shaking his head and sobbing, "I'm so sorry, My Love, please forgive me." Tears rolled down his cheeks, he was stripped of all his defenses. He blamed pathetically, "Nimueh… she tricked me."

Igraine was unrelenting and unforgiving, "No she didn't, you didn't listen. You thought because you are king, that you could control everything, you tried to be God, Uther!"

Her expression was colder than any Uther ever remembered in life. All the walls he'd built to protect him from this reality came crashing down and he was just a shell of a man, drowning in his guilt.

***

Gwen was keeping an eye on Uther since his own servant was busy serving more wine to the many guests. The dining hall was full, extra tables and chairs had needed to be found.

She had given him a minute, before quietly following him outside since he had stepped out alone into the street in front of the castle at night. Anyone could be out there, and the king had many enemies.

She kept her distance, deciding only to render assistance if needed, he would not like an intrusion, but he was very drunk, and she worried he might stumble and hit his head. Gwen didn't care much
for Uther since he's tried to burn her and had had her father killed. But she cared for Arthur, and Arthur cared for Uther. So, she did this for him.

Gwen saw the king kneeling, arms outstretched and crying, to no one she could see. It was disturbing.

***

"Forgive me, Igraine," Uther pleaded.

Igraine was unmoved by his outpouring of shame, "There can be no forgiveness until you admit what you did."

"I sought out the sorcerer Nimueh to give us a child using magic," Uther cried, "She said only death could pay for life, I said I will die for my son to be born." He had to stop, while he steadied himself, he needed to brace himself with his hands to keep from falling into the stone-lined street.

Uther could hardly breath now, he felt hot, and couldn't catch his breath, "She said it didn't work that way, I would not get to choose, the price would be heavy. I'm so sorry, Igraine, forgive me."

Uther kept huffing for air, but he was suffocating. He panicked.

Igraine made no acknowledgement of the scene before her, her tone was stern, "And you did it anyway."

Uther nodded, and managed to pant out, "I did it anyway."

Igraine stood before him, without speaking, her judgement of his sinfulness written all over her face. A trickle of blood could be seen on the inside of her foot, where the dress ended.

"You're bleeding," He spoke absently.

The trickle became a stream of blood, the dress began to turn red. A puddle of blood began to form on the stone.

No words. No forgiveness. Nothing.

"Stop, please, Igraine!"

Igraine's lithe form collapsed on the ground. Covered in blood. Uther rushed forward, and tried to carry her. Igraine's whole body dissolved into the blood. But he became covered in blood. There was nothing for him to carry. Just blood everywhere, he was drowning in it. Now he was in the well, but it wasn't full of water, it was full of Igraine's blood.

***

"No!" Uther cried in pain, "Nnnnooooooooooo!"

He curled up like an infant, clutching his knees to his body. And kept sobbing until he could scarcely catch his breath.

Gwen had heard enough and had gone to fetch the guards. She didn't know what was wrong, but Uther was having a hallucination of Igraine that much was sure, and it was distressing him.

Arthur arrived only moments after the four guards had hoisted Uther up, and were now carrying him back to his chambers.
By the time they got Uther onto his bed, Gaius, Merlin and Morgana were all waiting and concerned.

Gwen could see Arthur was worried and stressed. He was short with Gaius and demanded answers, "What could have caused this?"

Morgana began to attend to Uther's needs. She put the covers over him, kissing his hand, and running her hand protectively over him. Her genuine apprehension evident.

Gaius signaled for Arthur to talk out in the hall.

The moment Morgana was alone with Uther, she dropped the act and his arm, letting him flop on the bed.

Hurts, doesn't it, when you have to face the people you've wronged. On any normal person their conscience would get the better of them all the time, but not you, Uther, you need a magical plant to unlock that vault where you left your humanity. I hope you like the taste of guilt!

Morgana pulled out another handkerchief and dabbed Uther's face. She didn't hear everything, but Uther had been distressed about Igraine's death, she gathered that much from Gwen.

If Uther confesses the truth about Arthur's birth, his son will learn Uther is a liar and responsible for Igraine's death, that magic isn't to blame. And, it will drive a huge wedge between father and son.

Which would be the best thing for the cause.

"Stress," Gaius listed as a possible cause of Uther's outburst, "Fever, sickness of some kind."

They were in the hall outside Uther's chambers and therefore spoke in hushed tones. Merlin looked as jumpy as ever, his eyes darting all over the place.

Arthur was frustrated with the lack of a clear course of action to take, "He's the king Gaius, half the nobles in Camelot just saw him carried to his chambers raving like a madman."

"I'll keep monitoring him, and hopefully we'll know more soon," Was all Gaius could offer.

Merlin trailed after the old physician.

Gwen had waited quietly off to the side until they had finished.

"Thank you, Guinevere, your diligence is always much appreciated."

Gwen blushed meekly, which highlighted her lovely features.

"Arthur, I didn't hear everything, but the king appeared to be imagining your mother. He said some… disturbing things."

Arthur was interested but also worried

"What things?"

"I think it was about your birth Arthur," Guinevere seemed reluctant, "Uther admitted he sought out Nimueh to use magic to give him an heir."
Arthur was listening intently, but he knew he looked tense. He said nothing though.

Gwen went on, "He admitted, as if to confessing to Igraine herself, that he knew for you to live, that a life would be sacrificed, but he did it anyway."

"Are you sure."

Gwen thought a moment, "Yes, that's what he said. "He was crying, he was on his knees and shaking, but those were his words."

Arthur wasn't sure what to make of that yet, "He's delirious, he could be talking nonsense."

Gwen inclined her head meekly, "Maybe," but her tone suggested she didn't agree, but was too polite to say more.

She curtsied and left.

Arthur had very troubled sleep. He wanted to believe his father was telling the truth and Morgause lying, but this latest outburst threw more doubt on Father's version of events.

Merlin entered carrying his breakfast tray while Arthur was still in bed. Arthur told his servant abruptly to leave it and go, then thought better of it. Merlin was a good sounding board if nothing else.

"Remember when Morgause set me that challenge, and Father and I fought..." He began.

Merlin looked more twitchy than normal.

Arthur was curious, "Why were you so sure Morgause was lying?"

"I guess..." Merlin rushed through possible answers in his mind, "Well, she's a sorcerer, with a grudge against Uther, right?"

"That doesn't automatically make her a liar," Arthur countered.

"No, but," Merlin tried to think of something. "She could make you see whatever she wanted, maybe who we saw, wasn't even Igraine."

"You're wrong," Arthur insisted, "That was what my mother looked like, I know that much."

Arthur was steadfast, "I saw a painting of my mother that my Uncle Agravaine keeps in his castle, that was her," Arthur's hand stroked his jaw in contemplation, "Now, whether Morgause conjured her to tell me whatever she wanted, I don't know."

Merlin felt scared, "I just think you should be careful."

Arthur was unimpressed at Merlin's obvious caution. The real problem though was that he wasn't sure. And a gnawing doubt about his father's honestly was creeping in.

Arthur entered without knocking, an unconscious habit he seemed to have developed since her return, Morgana noted.

Morgana was seated at her table with the mirror, but she wasn't looking at her reflection, she was actually penning a letter to Morgause. Arthur was unlikely to take any notice and was too far away to read the words, unless she acted suspiciously.
Arthur skipped pleasantries, "You know more about Morgause than anyone,"

"I know her very well," Morgana replied, nonchalant. You have no idea just how well.

Arthur nodded absently at Morgana's reply, "She's an enchantress."

Morgana raised an eyebrow, coyly she said, "You know what that means?"

Arthur answered as if reading off a tutor's assigned lesson, "A sorcerer capable of making people do what they want."

Morgana had no illusions of the weight of all conversations she had with Arthur now, the fate of The Isle might rest on her ability to be able to sway Arthur, manipulate him more seriously when required.

Morgana was steadfast, she made sure Arthur met her eyes through the reflection in the mirror, "Morgause didn't lie to you about your mother's death."

"How?" Arthur was stunned, she had answered a question he hadn't even asked yet. "I never told you about that."

"Morgause told me."

Arthur nodded slowly in acceptance, it would not bode well if he knew she'd been there. He stopped pacing and flopped onto Morgana's bed now, she turned in her chair to look him in the eye.

Morgana made clear, "Gwen told me what she heard Uther say."

"How can you be sure?"

Arthur, you can be such an oblivious fool and a sulky child when faced with a truth you don't like.

"Come on Arthur, think about it, what makes sense?" Morgana spoke with a surety and confidence that had eluded her prior to her time at The Isle, "The purge began soon after Igraine's death, Uther holds extreme prejudice against anyone he suspects of magic, why would he after years as king, suddenly blame magic for every evil in the world?"

Arthur was trying to digest everything, but was finding it difficult to swallow, "You think he lied?"

Morgana derided Uther, "I think he lies to himself, because he feels so guilty about your mother's death."

Arthur was cagey, "Morgause hates the king. She would do anything to destroy him."

Morgana arched her eyebrow even more, "Is it unreasonable for the persecuted to hate their tormentor?" She held Arthur with an intense gaze for longer than normal.

Arthur shook his head, "He's my father and my king, I must believe him."

Morgana knew where the weak points were though, and was ready for him, "Don't you believe Gwen? This is what she says Uther said," Morgana paused for emphasis before adding, "When he wasn't able to lie."

Arthur considered her words a while.

"He's sick or has a fever, he's half mad," Arthur explained away, "He could have been talking
nonsense."

Morgana allowed her skepticism to show, "Very specific nonsense that keeps coming up, and supports what Morgause said all along, about things Uther feels guilt about" Again she let her words sink in, "That nonsense, you mean?" She arched her brow for emphasis.

Arthur had no come back. He pondered silently a long time.

Morgana finally spoke, "What will you do?"

"Wait until father gets over this, fever, or sickness," Arthur was convincing himself as much as her, "Then confront him."

Morgana's frustration and cynicism got the better of her, "He'll just lie, Arthur."

Arthur was scared, but in him it expressed itself as anger, "What would you do?" He snapped.

"Stop him," Morgana had to resist the urge to stress how obvious she thought the point was.

Arthur was stone faced and silent. He left in a state of internal torment.

"I'm here, anytime you want to talk," She called to Arthur's retreating form.
Reveal

Court was full today. Uther seemed to have recovered from his outburst, but Gaius had encouraged him to take it easy. It was agreed that Uther would open the session and declare it ended, but otherwise just sit. So far everything was fine. A weaver swore to have seen Alvarr near the castle wall last night. That name made Morgana sit up straighter and pay attention. She was not aware of any plans involving him, perhaps Morgause had sent him to check on her or track guard movements?

Arthur was questioning him, "How did you know it was Alvarr and not some other man?"

"I seen him before," The older man insisted. "He had me make him a cape, a while back."

"I see," Said Arthur sounding unconvinced.

Morgana was wearing her dark blue dress and smelled like lilies. Uther had been yet to even notice her.

Morgana watched Uther closely. He looked bored. He began to look at the tapestry on the back wall. It was minutes before he so much as glanced in her direction. But once he did, Uther reacted as if shocked to see her, leaping back in his chair.

"No!" He shouted.

The weaver cut himself off mid-sentence, unsure if he should go on now. Arthur wasn't sure either, he was waiting to see what Uther would do next. Morgana feigned concern, but she was curious as to what Uther was responding to in his mind.

Uther was looking right at Morgana, "It can't be… Vivienne?"

She had to refrain from smirking, it had long been her hope that the affair would be revealed to Arthur somehow. To sew further dissent between father and son.

Uther got off his throne and approached Morgana, he fell to his knees and took both her hands in his, pleading, "I'm so sorry, I never meant to…"

Arthur realized the situation was becoming worse, "I think we shall resume on the morrow," He decided.

Uther had no sense of the court session, all he saw was Vivienne in Morgana.

In front of the throne room full of courtiers and nobles, knights and guards, the King of Camelot, cried as he crawled on the stone floor, shaking in front of his ward, whom he called by her mother's name.

The king's guilt got the better of him as he apologized between hysterical sobs, "I know it was my fault, it was never meant to happen like that…"

"What wasn't?" Morgana asked hoping Uther would say something incriminating.

"I killed you!" Uther exclaimed, then began to wail.

Morgana was still for a long time.
My mother died of a sudden illness she caught from one of the sick people she was treating.

My father told me that.

She did.

Uther was kissing her hand while continuing to whimper, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to!"

Morgana retched her hand away violently.

_Uther killed my mother!_

_How could he!_

Morgana stood up, there was rage and denial and hatred all seething out of her at once, "No. NNNOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Morgana's fury went right through her. Then out of her. She set the throne room curtains on fire in front of a full court sitting. In front of Arthur, who saw everything.

Morgana was too angry to care, "How could you!" She screamed at Uther, "I thought you loved her!"

Everyone was still for a moment, Uther was too caught up in his confession to notice Morgana's magical outburst or the resulting fire. Arthur was stunned and still processing what had just happened. Merlin acted quickly grabbing Uther's cape from around his shoulders and using it to smoother the flames.

The people of the court were collectively holding their breath waiting for their prince's response.

She heard a cry of 'sorcery' come from the benches closer to the door. Lots of low rumbling, "Witch!"

Arthur was looking at her. Morgana could see the emotions playing out on his face, clarity, betrayal and finally disgust.

_Oh no. What have I done!_

Then Arthur seemed to find his voice, "Seize her," Arthur commanded, then was unsure about what to do next.

Morgana began to cry as burly guards each took her by the arm, "No, stop! Please…"

Arthur was unmoved.

Uther was now on the ground crying, "I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, Vivienne, I never intended for that to happen!"

Morgana pleaded, "Arthur, don't do this, please."

"Take her to... her chambers," Arthur again seemed to ponder for far too long, "Morgana is to see no one without my leave."

"You don't have to do this," Morgana wailed, as she was dragged from the throne room, "Arthur."

Morgana had lived with the fear of being found out for so long, and now was the moment of truth.
She felt sick.

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The tension in the room was unbearable. Low level whispering and fidgeting. Hostility, shock. The court was excitable but also scared.

Arthur took control of the situation, "Leon, take the king back to his chambers."

To everyone else he said, "Court is ended for the day, we'll resume another day."

"Now, Leon," He snapped at the knight who wasn't performing damage control at a pace that fit the situation.

Arthur bolstered Uther under the arm and Leon followed suit, and they half walked, half carried the king to his chambers.

Arthur's head was spinning. As soon as Father was settled on his bed, Gaius was there and volunteered to stay with him.

Arthur immediately retreated to his chambers.

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Arthur was not expecting to deal with so much so soon. He was still on edge from Uther's last breakdown, Arthur knew Morgause's version of events was the one that made the most sense right now, but without being able to properly talk to or confront his father over the issue of his mother's death, he couldn't be sure.

Arthur allowed himself to fall face first onto his bed, with the maximum amount of rebound when he hit the mattress. And there he remained.


I know her as well as anyone. How could she have kept this a secret so long? How did she even learn magic?

The question became, what would the king do? Arthur wasn't sure.

Father loved Morgana more than anyone alive, he believed maybe more than his father loved him. The king's reaction to her disappearance had been one of profound loss and grief. This latest revelation explained why the king doted on Morgana so much and allowed her to get away with anything. Father felt guilty because he had killed her mother? Was it for sorcery?

Morgana. A sorcerer.

Is that why she has always steadfastly defended those accused of magic? Morgana is a liar, she lied about having magic.

But wouldn't you lie in her position? Would you want to live in Camelot if you had magic? Or do you choose to have magic? Morgana implied you just have it.

Arthur wasn't entirely sure how it was passed on. He heard Merlin enter and start to scurry about, which made him feel annoyed. Merlin was pretending to rearrange his shirts, but really, he was just prying.
"Just stop," Arthur commanded, "Sit."

Arthur patted the bed. Then he sat up on his elbows, "Merlin, what should I do? They are *clearly* both liars."

Merlin had that pensive look he got when he thought Arthur wasn't going to like the honest answer, he wiggled his ears, before glancing at the floor, "Well, lying about having magic just means you want to live, Arthur."

*A reasonable point.*

"Lying to Morgana for years about her mother's death, and then raising her as if she's your own daughter… seems well…” Merlin paused to select the right words and apparently couldn't find one.

"Awful?" Arthur supplied, "Cruel… disgraceful."

"Dishonorable," Merlin kept his eyes fixed on the stone pattern, afraid of Arthur's reaction.

Arthur summarized, "So, you would forgive her, not him?"

Merlin remained taciturn. Arthur wanted to be alone to contemplate this latest turn of events.

"Just go," Arthur waved his servant away.

He was in no mood for Merlin's general jumpy, clumsiness.
There was a soft knock on the door.

"May I come in, Sire?"

Arthur was still lying on his bed. He knew immediately that it was Gaius.

"How's my father?"

"He's sleeping for now, Gwen is taking care of him," Gaius didn't sound too concerned, he then held up a dripping black root of some sort, "I found this under the king's bed."

"What is that?" Arthur asked the obvious.

Merlin ducked down suddenly, covering his ears, as if someone had struck him.

"Merlin, what are you doing?" Arthur queried, "Oh, never mind, continue Gaius."

There really is something wrong with him.

The physician knew his craft well, "It's a mandrake root. It has been known to be used for magical purposes."

"What does it do?" Inquired Merlin.

"On the intended subject, it unlocks the mind, bringing back their greatest moments of guilt and shame," Gaius recounted, "In short, it acts to haunt them."

Now it all made sense.

Arthur reasoned, "A sorcerer did this on purpose to make my father lose his mind."

"It was done intentionally, Sire, for sure," Gaius spoke with authority, "But Uther is not crazy, so much as traumatized by the memories of his past actions."

"So, what he's been… confessing," Arthur talked it through, "Those confessions are not gibberish, it's the truth?"

"I've heard it said that one cannot lie under the influence of the mandrake root," Gaius said nothing else specific to Uther.

Father went to a sorcerer and used magic. And he knew the consequences and he did it anyway!

Father killed my mother.

Arthur felt his jaw lock in anger.

He lied right to my face when I confronted him. I cannot trust him, he is a liar, a murderer and dishonorable!

Arthur couldn't deal with this right now, he needed to be a king.

Merlin chimed in, "How do we make it stop?"
"I'll destroy this mandrake root," Gaius said, "Now that's it's been found, Uther will stop reliving his past, and he should recover."

Arthur asked, "How long?"

"It depends on how much his past is weighing on him," Gaius was cautious, "And how well he manages to cope with it."

"A few days perhaps?"

"Likely," Gaius swallowed hard, "I guess the next question is who put it there?"

Arthur knew exactly why the old man was being reticent, Morgana was the likely culprit, but old physician was afraid to accuse her directly.

Would she really do that?

She's a sorcerer, you have no idea what she's capable of, she just set a room on fire!

Arthur had begun to suspect Morgana had been won over in her time with Morgause.

This root would be the truth of that.

Arthur insisted, "I need to speak to Morgana."

"As you wish," Gaius nodded and went to leave, before stopping. "Arthur."

Arthur provided the old man his full attention.

Gaius shifted his weight uncomfortably and kept his eyes downcast, "I know what happened to Morgana's mother, I think I need to speak to you both, alone."

Arthur craved solitude to think on all these sudden revelations, and he didn't feel ready for any of this, he supposed that was the burden of ruling. His father was indisposed, he was all there was.

"Okay, come with me," He signaled the physician, before turning to his servant, "Merlin, mop this floor, it's ridiculously dirty!"

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Arthur wasn't sure what he should do when confronting a sorcerer. Morgana had set drapes on fire with her mind, there was no telling what else she might be able to do. He took six guards and four knights with him to her chambers.

"Is this really necessary, Sire?" Gaius questioned, before meekly dropping the subject.

The door that had been locked from the outside with two guards standing at attention. Arthur's first impression as he went into the room, it was strange, it was as if he were coming into these chambers for the first time now, he felt the need to note how everything was arranged and what Morgana's expression was. Morgana was lying on her bed, crying. Her blotchy red eyes were filled with pain. Morgana's gifts from Father were all in a conspicuous pile on the floor. Had they been breakable he expected they would have been in pieces.

Arthur's heart sank. This is Morgana, she isn't going to hurt me. She's my friend, almost family. Arthur left his reinforcements at the door before coming over to stand in front of Morgana's bed.
"How could he?" Morgana wept, "My mother… I thought he…" Morgana stopped herself.

Arthur stood uncomfortably in front of her, making no move to say anything, he wanted to comfort her but reminded himself to be kingly.

Morgana was despondent, "My father was Uther's best friend, right up until his death," She wouldn't allow herself to believe it, "He would never have done that if he'd known Uther killed his wife."

Gaius made his presence known.

"Uther didn't kill Vivienne, but he feels responsible for her death," The physician began.

Morgana's brows crinkled, "What?" She shook her head, "What does that even mean?"

Gaius looked between both Arthur and Morgana.

The purge started soon after Arthur's birth, but it went on for a couple of years. At that time the prejudice against anyone even accused of sorcery was… extreme."

Gaius paused temporarily as if to work himself up to the rest of his story, "Our king killed many people, including children, some hadn't hurt anyone, some were falsely accused."

"My mother wasn't a sorcerer," Morgana insisted angrily, "She was a healer."

"That's true," Gaius agreed, "Vivienne's mother, your grandmother, was a powerful sorcerer," Gaius spoke to Morgana, "Your grandmother passed her down a silver necklace upon her death, it was… I forget, but it possessed a symbol of the old religion."

"Interlocking crescent moons," Morgana supplied.

"Yes, I think that's right," Gaius smiled sadly at her, "Vivienne always wore it to remind her of her mother. She was well known because she was such an outstanding healer, and many people knew she wore the symbol. There were rumours for many years that she cured those who were incurable so many people thought she must have used magic."

"But she didn't," Arthur confirmed.

"I never knew her to use magic," Gaius reassured Arthur, "When the purge happened, Uther's vendetta against magic was a cause that others began to take seriously too."

Morgana looked as if she could bear no more, "Gaius, what happened!"

"Vivienne saved the life of a peasant woman having twins, where one of the babies was coming out feet first," The old man said, he seemed in awe of her, "It was miraculous, mother and both boys survived. She was celebrated as the most amazing midwife in all Albion."

Gaius turned the chair from Morgana's vanity and sat facing them both. He sighed as if a heavy weight were upon him, "The very next week she examined a prominent lord for a headache and he died soon after. No one knows the truth, but it's likely there was nothing your mother could have done, such are the limitations of medical knowledge…"

"Gaius, what happened!" Morgana looked ready to vomit.

"The lord's sons accused Vivienne of sorcery, and they…" The physician trailed off.
Morgana covered her mouth, afraid of what Gaius' next words were to be.

Arthur was getting impatient with his evasions, "They what?"

"Burned her," Gaius said quietly.

Morgana began to sob. Arthur could take no more and sat on the end of her bed and pulled Morgana into a hug. She could scarcely draw breath she was so upset.

Morgana began to choke out, "My father… told me… she died of sickness… she caught from a patient."

Morgana then went back to incomprehensible cries of pain.

Gaius reiterated, "Uther didn't kill her, but he always blamed himself, the Lord's sons insisted they were only carrying out what Uther himself would have done."

Arthur pulled Morgana onto his lap, so she could rest her head against his shoulder. He tried to soothe her by rubbing her back with his hand. He could imagine what she was going through, after what Morgause had told him, he'd nearly killed his father.

"Her mother was a Duchess," Arthur pointed out, "How could…"

"It was done before anyone could do anything," Gaius explained, "Later," Gaius turned to Arthur, "Your father had the Lord's sons hung for taking the law into their own hands, that only the king should have been the one to pass judgement," Before adding with a tinge of sadness, "That was little solace to Gorlois."

Gaius came to say what he knew, and now begged Arthur's leave to return to Father. Morgana continued to weep in his arms for a long while.

Morgana didn't know about her mother before now. If she did plant the mandrake root, it was because of Morgause's cause.

She sat up and began wiping the tears from her eyes moving away from him, remembering that Arthur was about to decide her fate. Arthur realized there was no point in questioning her now, she was too distraught about her mother's death. He would need to come back later.
He knew. He felt guilty. And that's why he wanted me, because I look like my mother. But he didn't have to feel guilty when he was with me, because I had no idea what he'd done to her.

Despicable man!

Morgana wanted to lie in bed and never get up again. It was too much. Every time she thought of her mother she would cry again. She was so mad at Uther. All her concentration training counted for nothing, it was a struggle to control her emotions not to cause her chambers to crumble with the sheer hatred her mind now possessed.

Merlin considered all the recent events carefully. Arthur hadn't put her in a dungeon, which was a good sign, and Morgana was not set to burn either. Perhaps there was an opportunity here? Uther loved Morgana as much as anyone. If he couldn't kill her for sorcery, then how could he justify killing anyone else? Especially since her sorcery was beyond any doubt.

Gaius told Merlin what he'd told Arthur and Morgana about Vivienne's death. Merlin felt awful for Morgana, to find out something so horrible had happened to your loved one. Merlin felt torn about Morgana's situation. He still didn't trust her, but he felt sorry for any magical person in her position.

Arthur returned to Morgana's chambers alone at sunset. Only the two guards on the door remained. Arthur observed her lying on her bed from the doorway.

He tried to say something consoling, "I know it is little comfort right now, but I am very sorry for what happened to your mother. You have my deepest sympathies."

Morgana looked drained from grief, she nodded weakly in acknowledgement.

"What are you planning to do to me?" She asked sitting up, in expectation that Arthur had some kind of notion about what he would do.

Arthur shook his head, "I honestly don't know."

Morgana looked panicked, "I didn't mean to, I was shocked…"

Arthur didn't understand, "Does that mean, you can't control it? It just… happens?"

Morgana paused to observe Arthur's face, "Not usually, only if I get really upset or mad."

Arthur was still trying to make sense of everything, "Have you always had magic? All this time?"

"No, I…" Morgana struggled to find the words, "My nightmares were trying to tell me the future, but I didn't understand before…"

Arthur was further stunned by that revelation, "You can see the future?"

Morgana nodded, "Sometimes."

Arthur tried not to convey the level of his disbelief he was feeling.
"And the setting fires with your mind…" He prodded, "How long have you been able to do that?"

"Not long, maybe two years."

Arthur pondered this new information, trying to make sense of things that had happened. He was silent for a while, taking everything in, going over what didn't make sense.

He wanted answers, "Before the druids abducted you, your chambers were set on fire and the windows blown out from the inside, Father blamed the druids."

"It was me," Morgana admitted without hesitation, "I had a nightmare, I was upset, it just happened, that was when it started, I didn't know what to do. I didn't know I had magic then."

She spoke quickly as if panicked, but he believed her.

"So, you went to the druids of your own free will?" Arthur gathered. At least that makes sense.

"Yes."

Arthur continued his interrogation, "What did they do?"

"They told me the truth, that I had magic," Morgana described, "I was terrified, I wanted to stay there, I worried about Uther finding out and killing me every day, Arthur."

Arthur could see the genuine pain and fear in her eyes as she spoke. He didn't doubt her words.

Arthur tried to surprise her with the question to check her reaction, "Did you put a mandrake root under my father's bed?"

Morgana looked dumbfounded, "I don't even know what that is? What are you talking about?"

Arthur kept his tone stern, "It's used for sorcery, to haunt a person with their past."

Morgana looked him in the eye, "I swear, Arthur, I didn't,"

He believed her.

"Alright," He said, getting up.

"What's going to happen?" She called after him.

Arthur sounded dismayed, "I honestly don't know."

"Arthur," Morgana looked terrified, "I need to tell you something."

"What?" His knew he sounded annoyed.

Morgana gulped, as if what she had to say was very difficult. Her hesitation further irritated him.

Morgana finally said, "There's to be a Saxon invasion on the Cornish coast."

Arthur paused to take in those words. He had to repeat her sentences a few times in his head. It was just words, but it took time to be able to assign them meaning.

"What?" Arthur had no idea what Morgana was saying. "What are you talking about!"

Morgana insisted, speaking quickly, "The Saxons are coming, they have ships, many ships, they
are well armed, they are planning to catch Albion unprepared."

Arthur was dumbfounded, "How could you possibly know that?"

"I…" then she stopped.

Arthur knew he sounded dismissive, "You saw it in a dream, didn't you?"

She looked at the floor but nodded.

He turned mocking, "Well, I'll just get the other seven kingdoms to prepare for war then, based on Morgana's vision."

Morgana was still completely serious, "It's going to happen, Arthur. You need to prepare for war. They're going to attack the Cornish coast in a quarter moon turn, my home!"

"I'd be the laughing stock of all Albion."

"At least there'll still be an Albion," She retorted stubbornly.

That last jibe of hers stuck with him.

Morgana knew she couldn't tell him about the mandrake root. Arthur would accept no deliberate ill-will towards Uther. Her strategy was to throw herself at his mercy, because the more helpless she appeared, the more Arthur might act as her ally to convince Uther not to sentence her to death.

Her mind was swirling with a myriad of emotions there was just so much to deal with. Morgana finally decided to write a note to Morgause explaining what had happened. But, how to have it reach her sister? Arthur wasn't letting anyone attend, beyond Gwen delivering her supper. Gwen was too risky, she would give the note to Arthur. She needed to get it to Lila somehow. And it was too risky to just hide it in her dirty clothes in the hopes Lila was the one to wash them and find it.

It was out of her control. Just sitting and waiting was torture. Morgana needed time. Uther would likely be recovered in a day or two, and then she could expect a dungeon and a stake within a day. Morgana burned three candles on her window sill that night, in the hopes that by the time there was a response she would still be alive.

It wasn't so much that Arthur thought she was lying, but he had a hard time believing anyone could really see the future in their dreams. And what if Morgana saw was just a regular dream, not a vision? The price of her being mistaken was so high. But the price of him ignoring her, if it was indeed a warning was even higher.

What would Father do?

He would ignore her, if he wasn't too busy preparing to execute her.

Father is a liar. And a dishonorable man... and a bad king!

That was the first time Arthur had allowed himself to articulate that exact thought.


He could use some amusement.
"Quite an exciting court session earlier," Merlin looked more sheepish than usual, which on Merlin meant he was practically sprouting wool.

Arthur wanted to know, "What is it?"

"The whole castle's talking about… umm…"

"Out with it," Arthur demanded.

"That your… that the king has… lost his mind," Merlin relayed, as if ready to scurry under a table if the prince took the news badly.

"You don't have to look so worried, Merlin," Arthur assured him, "Do you really think I'm going to hurt you if I don't like the message you are bearing?"

Merlin wiggled his ears, he really did think that.

"Come now Merlin, I won't hurt you," Arthur pretended to reassure his servant, "I just need you to scrub the stairs, because they are very dirty."

"Which stairs?" The skinny boy asked.

"All of them," Arthur watched his servant's reaction, as the enormity of the task sunk in.

"All?" He repeated, as if he were simple.

Arthur allowed himself a slow, satisfying smile, "In the whole castle."

Merlin being Merlin had to protest, "But it's night time."

"You can start tomorrow, at first light," Arthur graciously agreed, "So long as you don't forget to make my favorite breakfast."

Merlin looked less happy than Arthur.

*Now, that's better!*

Arthur decided to be serious, "What would you do, if someone you trust, told you they can see the future,"

Merlin was thrown by the change in discussion, then seemed unsure how to answer, then remained silent.

Arthur realized why, "Assume, for a moment, that sorcery isn't banned, and you wouldn't be obligated to tell me. Would you believe them?"

Merlin thought for a while, he remained standing at the foot of the bed.

"How convincing is their prediction?" Merlin then clarified, "I mean, did they predict that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow morning, or that when I go to the market today a horse will kick me in the head and I'll die."

Arthur marveled momentarily at the mess that must have been the inside of Merlin's brain, He conveyed his disturbance at Merlin's answer, "More the second scenario, something specific."

"Well, I guess I would avoid the market today," Merlin shrugged as if it were nothing.
Arthur was surprised, "So, you'd believe them?"

Merlin countered quickly, "Not necessarily, but what do I really lose by avoiding the market for one day?" Merlin reasoned, "If they are right, I might die, I don't need turnips that badly."

Arthur nodded his head absently, still considering.

Merlin was now curious, "What's this to do with?"

Arthur discounted his question, "What if you won't be able to know if they are or aren't right, before you go out on a limb and tell everyone to prepare for something you don't know will absolutely happen?"

"Well, I guess I would want to be convinced," Merlin was nonchalant, before adding, "How bad are the consequences if you don't warn anyone and don't prepare?"

"Dire."

"There's your answer then," Merlin was confident, in a way he rarely was, "Is this about Morgana?"

Arthur was annoyed he was so transparent, "What makes you say…"

"Who else around here would be bold enough to tell you they can see the future?" Merlin smirked, "In the real world, where magic is banned?"

Arthur used his splayed hand to push Merlin's annoying face away from him.

Merlin wouldn't be dissuaded, "What is the thing Morgana said is going to happen that will have dire consequences?"

Arthur told him about her warning of the Saxon invasion.

"Arthur," Merlin's tone became serious, "I think you should be careful at just trusting Morgana at her word."

"Why so?"

"Her loyalty is uncertain," Merlin pointed out, "You said yourself, you think she's too sympathetic to Morgause's cause."

Merlin took Arthur's silence as a sign he was listening, "What if she wants you to run off to Cornwall, leaving Uther, in the state he's in. The castle will be undefended."

That scenario bothered Arthur. And it bothered him more he hadn't even contemplated that possibility.

"I'll leave a sufficient force to hold the citadel if it comes to it, they would only need to hold out half a moon turn at most, before I could be back with the bulk of my forces if need be."

Arthur added as an afterthought, "If Morgana's lying, we'll know soon enough."

Merlin was out of possible worst-case scenarios.

Arthur was uncertain.
This is not goodbye

Morgause had had a bad feeling all day. That's why she came to meet Lila herself, glamoured as an old woman. They were not too far from the castle wall. The priestess, ever cautious, circled around first to ensure she wasn't being followed and had seen the candles shining from Morgana's window.

Lila was late, and breathless. She wasn't yet 20, with a round freckled face that didn't match the rest of her scrawny body. Lila had a nice smile with dimples on both cheeks, that made up for her crooked teeth. Her hair was the color of dirty straw.

"The king admitted in court he killed Morgana's mother," The laundry maid exclaimed.

"What?" Morgause was shocked, "Uther didn't kill Morgana's mother, he and Gorlois were on campaign in Gaul when she died."

"Morgana obviously didn't know that!" Lila replied, "She was so shocked she set the room on fire, Arthur has arrested her for sorcery!"

_Oh no!_

Morgause thought through the possibilities.

"Is she set to burn at dawn?" _I need time to save her!_

"No, with Uther gone mad, Arthur is only acting king," Lila explained, "He's going to wait until Uther is better."

_That's good. More time is good._

Lila tended to miss what information was important in recounting her narrative, "Some magical thing was found in the king's room, far as I heard. There's talk all over the castle that Morgana must have put it there."

_The mandrake's been found. Uther deciding Morgana's fate is bad. He'll kill her. Or will he?_

Morgause wasn't sure, but she wasn't willing to take that chance.

"So, Morgana's in a dungeon?"

"No, Arthur locked her in her chambers."

"I can prepare another mandrake root," Morgause thought on her feet, "But you need to get Uther's tears on a handkerchief or cloth of some sort."

"How do I do that?" Lila looked as if Morgause had asked her to fly on a dragon's back.

Morgause reconsidered, "Morgana should already have the next handkerchief ready by now."

_What if she wasn't able to?_

*I'll have to prepare another root, it takes too long, I won't have it ready for a day. I'll ride it back here._

Morgause knew it was safer to send Lila, but she wanted to see Morgana for herself.
Morgause was already hatching the new plan, "Can you make up an excuse to go to the market first thing not tomorrow, but the next day?"

Lila thought for a moment, "I could steal all the soap, then say I need to go out and buy some more?"

"Perfect."

"I'll meet you at the soap cart."

Morgause was stressed, but trying to hold it in, "Go now, and be careful, this is of the utmost importance."

"Yes, Ma'am." Lila turned to go, "Uther blubbered on the floor in court, I'm only sorry I was scrubbing clothes and missed it."

Morgause smiled.

"The whole castle's talkin' about how he's crazy as a loon!" The young maid was so cheerful as she made her way back.

Morgause immediately crept to the castle in the shadows until she stood outside beneath Morgana's chambers on the paved stone. She threw pebbles at Morgana's open window, knocking over one of the candles. Morgana came to look out soon after and saw her. Morgause could see the relief wash over her lover's face. They couldn't speak. Morgause pulled out her own clean handkerchief to show it to her sister above who nodded. She came back to the window a short time later, and dropped a small bundle tied in a ribbon. Morgause caught it and hid it in her clothes. She caught the lover's eye and blew her a kiss and Morgana smiled.

Morgause began to walk calmly in the shadows back to the well concealed place she had tied up her horse.

"Who goes there?" Called a guard about 50 yards away.

Morgause stopped and calmly waited for him to approach her, spear extended to her chest.

"Young man," She said, "I'm looking for the court physician, I have a terrible pain in my tummy, I was told I could find him here."

"Are you mad, old woman?" He was irritated, "It's the middle of the night."

"But my belly aches so bad, I can't wait," Morgause replied, clutching her stomach to sell the lie.

"How did you even get in here?"

She disregarded his question, "I need medicine."

"Come back in the morning, be off with you," He scolded.

Morgause turned and exaggerated her hobble of pain, he watched her until she was out the gate.

*That was close.*

)))

Morgause opened Morgana's gift once she was a safe distance from the castle.
There was a note, a hair clasp Morgana must have used to weigh the parcel down, and it was all wrapped in the handkerchief and tied up with a hair ribbon.

My Darling Morgause,

The plan has gone awry. Uther admitted last night that he was responsible for Igraine's death. Arthur trying to dismiss as talking nonsense. In court today, Uther admitted he killed my mother. I had set the room on fire before I got control of myself. I'm so sorry. Arthur has confined me to my chambers. Going to let Uther decide my fate when he is well. Mandrake root found. I know it wasn't our plan, but I told Arthur there will be a Saxon invasion. I hope this will convince him to intervene or keep me alive. He doesn't believe me yet.

Whatever happens, I regret nothing, our cause is just. I look forward to the day when we can walk in the light, even if I'm not around to see it.

Sister, you saved me in every possible way. Life wasn't worth living before you. I hope you know I love you.

Morgana

To Mordred, my dear boy, my son, please be brave, I love you. I couldn't be prouder of you. In my absence please listen to Morgause, Alvarr and Ninianne.

Morgause teared up as she read the words. This note had been written by someone who fully expected to die.

Morgause would send Harwyn's crow first thing in the morning. She rode for broke now to the Green Mountain, knowing that every second counted.

Morgana, my love, I'm coming.

Arthur couldn't sleep. Between checking on his Father who was raving like a madman in his bed and the conversation he'd had with Merlin a few hours earlier about how sure he needed to be in order to heed Morgana's warning, he was tormented.

Father killed my mother then lied about it when I confronted him.

Morgana lied about having magic and may have put that root thing under Father's bed to make him crazy or haunt him or whatever.

Father didn't kill Morgana's mother but is somewhat responsible for her death.

Morgana claims she can see the future and warned me that a Saxon invasion will occur soon from the east. But she also lied, and her loyalty is uncertain, it could be a trap.

At least Father would be himself soon enough now that that root thing had been destroyed. Then this whole mess would be his problem.

Morgana will be his problem.

But what if he sentences her to...

I can't let her die, even if she is a sorcerer. It was an accident and she didn't hurt anyone.

I should let her escape.
Of everything that was going on, the Saxon invasion was the most troubling, if true.

Arthur got up and paced his room.

But with no proof, no one would believe him. And what if he called up all of Camelot's fighting forces, and told the other kingdoms to prepare for war, only to find out Morgana is mistaken or lying?

But, if it's true, and you do nothing, Cornwall will fall first, Morgana's home. Dareah must be warned too. Mercia in the north, and King Olaf in the south. Thousands will die if they are unprepared.

He knew what he must do.

))))))

Arthur burst into her chambers.

Morgana was in bed, but not sleeping either.

Arthur didn't bother to be polite, he didn't even care that Morgana wasn't dressed decently as far as courtly manners were concerned, "I need to you to prove to me that you really can see the future."

Morgana sat up, repelled by his abrupt intrusion, but she dared not complain.

She thought for a moment, "Do you remember Sofia?"

"What about her?" Arthur wasn't expecting mention of her.

"Do you remember that I tried to warn you about her?"

Arthur remained unconvinced, "You didn't say anything specific."

"How could I without being accused of sorcery?" Morgana rebuked him.

Arthur accepted the logic of that, "What… convinced you she was a threat to me?"

Morgana was serious now, "I had a dream the night before she arrived in Camelot,"

"And?"

Morgana recalled, "She was standing over you while you slowly drowned. I saw her face very clearly, and I'd never seen her before. You were at Avalon Lake."

_How do I know this is true? She could be saying anything now that her life depends on it._

"I told Gaius about it," Morgana tried to provide her own defense, "He advised me it was nothing, just a dream, but I knew it wasn't."

_It wasn't nearly enough_, not for him to do what she was asking, "Anything else?"

Morgana didn't want to tell him of the affair between Uther and her mother.

The first vision Morgana remembered getting was when she was ten years old and dreamed of her father dying in battle, when Uther left him without reinforcements. Days later she was sent word of her father's death. She could never prove it, but she knew it was true. Since her time on The Isle,
she had only strengthened her belief in her abilities.

Morgana became expressive as the recounted another incident, "I tried to warn you about the Questing beast, do you remember? I came running out of my chambers in my sleeping clothes, just before you were to ride off."

Arthur nodded, remembering, "And I dismissed you for being silly."

"And you almost died," She harked back.

"Anything else?"

"I had a dream a moon turn ago about Saxons, on ships landing on the Cornish coast. I grew up there, so I know that land very well, I recognized the beach," Morgana began to describe, "It's a misty morning. At the beginning of the vision it was still dark though and I saw the moon, it was a waning gibbous, two nights after the full moon ends this moon turn. The Isle taught me about the stars, Arthur, the date is a quarter turn from now."

Arthur didn't know what to say to any of this.

Morgana asserted, "I know they are Saxons by their weapons, their dress and their ships. They're well-armed and experienced."

Arthur conveyed his dissatisfaction, "That's all you saw?"

Morgana stressed the importance of her words, "I see it every time I sleep, it's a warning."

"How can you be sure it's a premonition and not just a regular dream."

"It's not!" Morgana insisted, "They feel different."

"They feel different," Arthur repeated, drawing out the words, annoyed, "That's all you're giving me!"

"I'm not mistaken," Morgana didn't back down.

"I'm not saying I believe you, but if you are..." Arthur was flabbergasted, "If you have guessed correctly that there will be an invasion soon, what do you expect me to do about it?"

"My father's cousin, Urwaine, holds Tintagel in my name." Morgana had already thought it through, "You must warn him, at the very least. You need to send all the troops you have."

It was mid-morning now, Morgana waited by her window in her chambers. She wasn't able to speak to Morgause last night, but she was certain her sister would send her the bird this morning. Morgause's visit had thankfully been a little before Arthur's sudden intrusion into her chambers late last night. The crow came eventually. Morgana was ready to feed it her leftover breakfast meat. She gently patted the bird's back with her hand and took the scroll.

Morgana,

Suspicion will be thrown off you when Uther suddenly takes a turn for the worst. I cannot plant a new mandrake root until tomorrow, please hold on. This will buy you some time to work on Arthur. It is paramount that Arthur maintains his trust in you.

While it wasn't our original plan, I understand why you told Arthur what you did. I think I can still
make a version of the plan work. Keep me abreast of the situation there as best you can. I'll send the bird every morning without fail.

I am formulating a rescue plan if Uther wakes and sentences you. You are by no means alone in all of this. This is not good bye.

I love you,

Morgause.

Morgana felt tears come to her eyes, whether it was the love and concern she felt off the scroll or just the idea of respite, she couldn't say.
Uther had eaten his breakfast and seemed to be much better this morning. He was on edge, probably because of all the disturbing memories coming back to him. The king hadn't been informed about Morgana's incarceration for sorcery, Arthur wanted to wait until he was less delicate, or so he said. Merlin believed Arthur was just stalling because he was worried about her fate.

Merlin watched silently as Gaius explained to Uther that a sorcerer must have planted the mandrake root in his room. Uther demanded to know if the sorcerer had been found. When Gaius said no, Uther had flown into a rage. He wanted the whole castle turned upside down, all of the servants, guards, maids questioned. Everyone.

After lunch Uther had requested to see Arthur. But he was told that Arthur had gone to Cornwall and wouldn't be back until the next day.

"Then bring me Morgana," Uther demanded.

"The Lady is unavailable right now," Gaius said.

"What? What does that mean?" Uther knitted his brows, he knew Gaius was withholding information, "Gaius, what aren't you telling me?" Uther asked, before changing his tone to threatening, "If you are not telling me everything, there will be repercussions."

Gaius looked uncomfortable, and Merlin felt his ears wiggling, but he was powerless to intervene.

Gaius managed to say, "Sire, under the influence of the mandrake root, you confessed some disturbing things."

"Where is the Lady Morgana?" Uther demanded he was not in the mood for a guessing game.

Gaius remained calm, "Prince Arthur had her confined to her chambers…"

"Why?" Uther snapped, clearly irate.

"For sorcery," Gaius bowed his head.

"What!" Uther was shocked, "Don't be ridiculous, Morgana's not a sorcerer, I'd know if she was."

Gaius was silent a long time, "As you say, Sire."

Merlin's mentor patiently waited for permission to leave.

Uther was silent a while, before finally asking the burning question, "Why has Morgana been accused of sorcery?"
"She set the throne room on fire in front of the entire court, Sire," Gaius supplied, "With her mind."

Uther was stunned into silence. He eventually asked, "I take it there are witnesses?"

Gaius maintained his nerve, "Yes Sire, about 100 people, including myself and Prince Arthur all saw."

"So, her guilt cannot be denied?" Uther seemed very concerned.

"No, Sire."

Uther was livid, "Bring her here, at once!"

Gaius knew there was no further appeal, "As you will, Sire."

Morgana was dragged from her chambers by four guards who told her the king wanted to speak to her. This was it, the confrontation Morgana had been dreading one way or another for so long. Morgana felt her stomach drop out. She could hardly put on foot in front of the other. The guards, half escorted, half dragged her in the end.

Morgana noted the look on Uther's face when he saw her. Anger, betrayal, hatred.

Morgana stood in his doorway, still.

"Leave us," The king ordered the guards.

Uther was in front of his bed.

He launched into his tirade, "How could you?"

Morgana expected to cry, and plead mercy, but now that she was here and had nothing left, except her life, which she fully expected was forfeit, she wasn't sure why, but she didn't want to beg his forgiveness. Morgana wanted to give him a piece of her mind.

"How could I what?" She asked almost innocently, before suddenly exceeding his fury, "Kill your father? Kill your mother? Force myself on you, repeatedly?" Morgana then turned sarcastic, "Yes, please tell me about what I've done to you!

Uther was momentarily lost for words, "I... I didn't kill your mother, I was in Gaul when she died."

"No, they were just carrying out what you would have done," Morgana hissed.

"I would never have harmed her, I..."

"Loved her?" Morgana finished for him, "I'm not sure you're capable of love. Not anymore."

Uther retreated as if wounded, "That's not true."

Morgana saw no more reason to conceal the truth, "I've known I had magic for two years, do you know what it was like? Being afraid, unable to control it, watching helplessly everyday while you executed people just like me, because we are born the way we are!"

Uther's anger flared, "You bewitched me with your... your sorcery. Enchantress!"

"You just want it to be my fault," Morgana shot back, "I've never wanted you. You're the one who
can't control themselves."

Uther needed to blame her, "Only because you enchanted me!"

*He's the king, he can do as he pleases. Why is he so intent on finding a reason for desiring me? What does he have to prove?*

It probably wasn't smart, but Morgana couldn't help herself, "Do you really wonder why so many want you dead, you tyrant!" She yelled at the king.

Uther didn't seem to hear her last jibe, he was too caught up in his need to find her responsible, "I always knew… it was unnatural, my attraction to you, I knew it was a sin."

Morgana didn't really know what he meant here.

"I did nothing to you! You just want me because I look like my mother."

*That struck a blow.* Uther recoiled.

He was overcome with disbelief, "How could I have produced…" He cut himself off immediately.

*Wait what?*

*How could he have produced a what? A sorcerer?*

*Affair with my mother.*

*Unnatural attraction.*

*Goddess, No!*

"No! No, it can't be!" Morgana kept stepping back until she backed into a wall and couldn't physically escape farther away, "You can't be!"

She couldn't control her anger and felt flashes coming out of her again. The walls began to shake. His mirror and windows shattered.

Uther stepped back from her a mixture of fear and abhorrence. Fully convinced now.

"You made me fall in love with you, you unscrupulous, vile creature," Uther expressed a fury in a low growl.

"You can't be my… no, no. Say it isn't true!" Morgana tried not to cry.

Uther ignored her, while continuing to blame Morgana, "You cast a spell on me! You… witch!"

Morgana sank to her knees and began to dry heave.

When she regained control of her body she managed to articulate her revulsion, "How could you… when you knew!"

Uther calmed himself before speaking in a low tone full of venom, "I can only hope that when you burn, your hold over me will end."

Morgana looked at the hatred in his face, and realized he meant it. There was no appeal, no point in pleading.
He really does hate magic more than he loves me.

His lover.

His daughter.

Uther banged on the door, and the guards opened it and were in the room in moments grabbing Morgana up from the floor.

"Take her to the dungeons, I want her chained up, there's no telling what she's capable of!"

Morgana put up little resistance, she was too weighed down by the emotion of everything that had happened.

Arthur had set off before dawn to meet Gorlois' cousin, at Cornwall. Urwaine was holding the castle. All Arthur knew of him was that he had once requested of Father to allow him to marry Morgana, to formalize his claim on Tintagel. Father had refused, and not even told Morgana of the offer.

Urwaine was not what he was expecting. He was an oaf of a man, nearly 40, six and a half feet tall, and had a huge ale gut and mane of wild blonde hair. While he had a fierce reputation as a fighter, he had little knowledge of battle tactics or commanding an army.

Arthur allowed himself a wry smile, God, Morgana would have hated being married to him.

Luckily, Urwaine seemed to have found a suitable maid and now had two healthy boys of his own. Arthur spoke to him, repeating the lie that a Saxon dissenter had told him of the impending invasion, and that he needed to call up all his men of fighting age, and start arming and training them as best he could. The problem had not been convincing the castellan of Tintagel of the importance of preparing for war, he believed Arthur's word implicitly, but Arthur soon realized Urwaine wasn't capable, and Arthur would have to make the arrangements himself, and use his knights to train the locals. Arthur had left six of his best and most experienced knights in Cornwall to begin doing just that. They had brought some weapons and supplies but not nearly enough. Arthur himself needed to get back to Camelot to make further preparations.
For some reason Morgana seemed to be the only person ever confined to this particular cell. It was large compared to the others, had white stone walls, two thick stone pillars, a single window, and a heavy wooden door with a small barred peep hole. Once Morgana had cried every tear she had, she felt exhausted beyond belief.

_Blood doesn't make a father._

And she was far from convinced it was true. Uther might just think he is. The truth died with her mother. Gorlois had taught her, guided her, read to her, loved her, he was her father. Nothing could change that.

She had fallen asleep. Uncomfortable as it was on the foul-smelling straw, with her wrists bound too tightly. She couldn't stay asleep though, it was too painful. She hoped naively that Morgause would have heard by now and would be working on a rescue mission, but she wasn't holding her breath.

Morgana had powers, but chained up like this made it difficult, she couldn't extend her arm. Her ability to set fire wasn't enough to melt the chains. She was fairly sure Uther would come to visit her. He'd want one last chance to take her body, he'd be aroused at her incarceration and forced submission. Morgana felt the only course of action left open to her was to kill him, and that's what she resolved to do.

_It won't save me, but so what? Some things are worth dying for._

Morgana was startled by the sound of the prison door being unlocked. It was hours later she guessed, the window indicated it was now dark. She opened her eyes to see Uther. She felt jittery, her heart pounded in her neck, and she was suddenly sucking in air, because she couldn't get enough. They both stared, remaining still for a moment. She glared at him with indignation.

"Leave us," He instructed the guards on the door.

Morgana got to her feet, ready for a fight. If he thought he was going to violate her, he was in for a shock. Uther raised an arm to try to calm her. Calm was the last thing she felt.

"Get away from me!" She warned.

Uther slowly came towards her, exhibiting an extreme caution. His eyes were different to earlier, fear, remorse, concern.

_That's right, get a few yards from the wall_, Morgana was pretty sure she could use her powers to...
blow him back with enough force to fracture his skull. *A little closer now, almost there.*

Uther moved off to the side, momentarily.

*Almost...*

He disappeared behind one of the stone pillars. Beyond her reach.

*Damn it!*

"I'm not going to hurt you," He said.

Morgana scoffed, "It's a little late for that!"

Uther walked on the edge of the room, around behind her. The chains wouldn't allow her to turn so she lost sight of him. She felt him coming up behind her slowly. She felt the heat of his body bristle the hairs on the back of her neck as he got closer. His hot breath on her ear.

"I can't kill you," He whispered, "I lost the woman I loved, and then the only other woman who came close."

His bare hands clutched her waist, his lips gently grazed her neck.

"Until you," Uther breathed. "I thought I had no more lust left, no more feelings of that kind."

Morgana couldn't hurt him from this position, so decided to let this play out.

Uther's mouth broke contact with her tender flesh momentarily, "I can't kill you, I know that much," Uther spoke as a man demoralized.

One hand began to comb her now messy hair. His touch was gentler than it had ever been. His feelings of disbelief, anger and betrayal seemed to have left him now, and all that remained was regret and longing.

"Unchain me," She boldly requested.

"I love you," Uther whispered into her ear, "That doesn't mean I trust you, I still know what you are."

One of Uther's hands came over her shoulder and took a handful of her breast covered in shamrock green silk.

Morgana's heart beat so fast. She pulled on the chains, but they were far too strong. *It is the helplessness.* Her whole interaction with Uther for so long now had been everything on his terms, her always submissive, him taking whatever he wanted, and not caring how she felt.

If Morgana had any tears left, perhaps she would be crying. But they wouldn't come. She felt hard, like stone.

*Sister, what should I do?*

Morgause was a unique individual who was so powerful, physically and magically but also with her mind, she possessed a cunning and a wisdom to know which skill set was needed in any given situation to turn it to her advantage. It was a rare talent indeed.

"You've made me weak," Uther accused her, "I made the law. Sorcery is punishable by death. And,
yet I can't."

He had yanked her dress up now and a hand was moving up her thigh. Morgana gasped. Since her
time with Morgause, she knew what it really sounded like when you were actually enjoying
yourself, not just pretending to. Uther ran his fingers along her lower lips from behind her. She let
him know that she liked it. One finger journeyed inside, before pulling back. The next finger joined
the first. She pretended to struggle to contain her breath, as if she didn't want to like it, but was
aroused despite herself.

*That excites him.*

Morgana loved it when Morgause did this, but Uther made it uncomfortable. Everything he did was
too hard when she wasn't ready, not to mention that with him she always knew there was no choice.
Uther's other hand moved under her dress to grasp her breast. His rough fingers applied too much
pressure, but Morgana allowed herself to moan her encouragement. Closing her eyes and allowing
her head to fall back.

All sensations stopped for a few moments. When she opened her eyes again, Uther was standing in
front of her. His eyes were full of love. Not lust this time, he wasn't about to be forceful. He gently
caressed her cheek with his hand.

"Show me how you like it," He requested, moving his lips close to hers, but not initiating touch.

*Sometimes the best weapon is a sword. Sometimes it isn't,* Her sister had told Morgana during one
of their lessons in fighting.

Heeding that advice, Morgana leaned over, allowing her lips to come over the top of Uther's. He
opened his mouth, but her response was just to suck his lower lip between hers. Uther wanted to
use his tongue, but was refraining from imposing his will upon her, so he followed her lead. That's
all she did for a while, just lips, no tongue. He always tasted like red wine. Morgause had a way of
teasing the top of Morgana's mouth with her tongue when they joined their mouths, the tickling
excited her and made her loins dull ache with the desire for more, just from kissing. She now did
the same with her tongue on the roof of his mouth. He clearly liked her attention. After a minute
Uther had to pull himself away, he couldn't take anymore.

He was breathless, he exhaled a few times before he was able to ask, "Who taught you that?"

He was amazed rather than jealous. She shrugged.

"What do you want me to do?" He asked, earnestly.

*Unchain me and let me out so I can get the hell away from you!*

*That answer is not acceptable,* Morgana reminded herself sharply.

"Kneel," She commanded.

Uther obeyed. He humbled himself in front of her on the dirty straw. He had unfastened his
breeches, his erection was on full display. His knees were together, so she had to spread her legs
bringing a knee either side of his hip. Her dress covered him up. For the first time, he didn't force
himself into her, she lowered herself onto his sword, she took her time, backing off when it was too
much, Uther remained uncharacteristically still.

*This is so wrong! Don't think that.*
Morgause had taught her to repeat to herself, *I am not to blame for what I must do to survive.*

He closed his eyes, perhaps to focus on touch? He began to kiss her mouth, nicely for once, just lips at first, until she responded and opened her mouth to let him in. Morgana leaned back, changing the angle of friction between his engorged member and her fissure. She slowly angled her hips and gyrated in a way that gave her some pleasure while Uther remained still. Her motions were much slower and not punishing the way his thrusts felt to her the other times.

Just as she started to feel the pressure really begin to build inside and could see from his face that Uther was well into his own enjoyment, she stopped all her motions, and withdrew her body from him.

Morgana protested, "I can't, it hurts too much… the chains."

Uther seemed annoyed to be pulled out of his gratification. The king paused to consider a moment before reacting. He pulled down her dress, and straightened Morgana's hair, before attending to himself. Once Uther had decided they looked decent he yelled to the guards on the outside of the solid door.

"Unchain her, then leave us, I'll yell if I need you."

They did as he asked, no one looked either of them in the eye.

It was such relief to have her arms free. Morgana dropped them to her sides, to allow her muscles some relief.

The second the door clanged shut. Uther's mouth was back covering hers. His tongue now deliberately tracing circles on the roof of her mouth just how she liked.

*At least he's trying.*

*Asking me what I like does seem to be an apology of sorts, like he had never considered that I didn't want what he was doing to me.*

He broke the contact, to pull at her dress. She took it off over her head, and he did the same with her shift. She laid her dress over the filthy hay. Uther began to untie his pants again and positioned his knees on the silk now. His hands tugged on her hips to resume the same position as before, and Morgana indulged him. It didn't take long for her to find the same angle and rhythm. Uther was the one moaning now. She could see him closing his eyes, concentrating on how what she was doing would make him feel tiny pinpricks all over his body.

*This needs to be the performance of your life.*

Morgana began to visualize the best night of passion she had ever had with Morgause. It began as a regular evening. They had both been sword fighting all day, and Morgana who wasn't used to so much exertion was very tired and her muscles ached. Morgause had come upon her lying flat on her back on her bed in the healer's cottage, too exhausted to move. Her blonde beauty had known exactly what to do. She bent down and kissed Morgana's face, little pecks all over, before rolling her onto her stomach. She began to rub Morgana's back with her hands. At first the touch made Morgana flinch and she worried that it would only increase her soreness, but Morgause ever skillful knew how to ease her pain. She touched until the muscle that had ached loosened and became numb. Morgana felt her whole body begin to relax eventually. Morgause soon reached under her clothes and began to remove them as she went. By the time her sister requested Morgana roll over again she was completely naked. She complied and now looked her lover in the eye, "I love you,"
Was all Morgana had said. Morgause kissed her passionately, before touching her body all over in a way that was familiar. Her brown-eyed Goddess had both hands between her thighs, intensely gazing into Morgana's eyes as she gave her pleasure. Her blonde warrior's calloused hands tickled her entrance, and teased her sensitive nub. Morgana was getting close to her moment of bliss, which she let her lover know by her sighs, then Morgause had suddenly backed off what she was doing. Her touch receded to Morgana's thighs again, then her feet. Morgana didn't understand why Morgause would do that, deny her. She breathlessly asked her lover to repeat what she was doing before and don't stop. Her mentor continued to rub her feet, then moved to her hands. She used her fingertips to delicately trace Morgana's fingers, then interlock their hands. It was frustratingly slow before her lover brought her fingers back to Morgana's mound and lower lips, and began her ministrations again. Morgana felt the heat, the throbbing and just when the waves were ready to crash around her. Nothing. Morgause stopped all her motions once again. Morgana got annoyed now and demanded satisfaction or at least explanation. Her sister only smiled wickedly, in that way she had.

"It makes it better," Was all her lover said by way of justification.

Morgause began at Morgana's head now, she sprayed her fingers and retracted the tips repeatedly, which was surprisingly arousing. Leisurely, the blonde beauty came down her neck to her collarbone, her armpits and finally her breasts. It seemed an eternity before she returned to Morgana's most sensitive places. Morgana literally begged Morgause to finish her off this time, and her lover obliged. Her mouth and hands all worked in unison. All the gentle caressing all over her body first had now made Morgana's body ultra-responsive to every little sensation. Her whole body shook. She released a guttural cry. The result was an explosion. Morgana didn't know a body could respond like that, so intense was her spasm. Morgause had received liquid squirted into her face. That had only made her laugh in delight. Before resuming a very self satisfied smile as she curled up next to her lover like a cat. Morgana had been unable to move or speak or even think coherent thoughts for a long time afterwards. But in a strange way made her feel more alive. It made her feel that Morgause was the embodiment of the Goddess, whom should be worshiped.

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Morgana heard Uther grunt. She returned to the present, she was still leaning back, but bracing herself with her arms now. Uther was also helping to hold her body with his arms propping up her back, his mouth was suckling one of her nipples. He was trying to resist the urge to buck, because he was getting close.

Her memory of sensual ecstasy was helping Morgana's body to respond in the way she needed it to. She felt throbbing all over, she kept up her movements, she didn't change her pace or depth, only the angle slightly so that her internal bundle of nerves was grinding against Uther's sword.

Morgause had always been good at enhancing the experience by telling Morgana what she was going to do to her, to pique her anticipation, or acting out some fantasy by talking a particular way. Would that be to Uther's liking? Her gut said it was. It was risky, but Morgana decided to go for it.

Morgana put on a childlike voice, "I'm sorry I was bad, Daddy."

She looked down at Uther, with wide, innocent eyes. He stared back, dropping her breast, mouth still open. His face gave nothing away.

She maintained the act, "I didn't mean to make you disappointed in me, Daddy."

Uther was still for a few long moments, but his breathing betrayed him, it increased.
"I understand, you need to punish me, Daddy, because I was bad."

For Uther it made him want to reassert his dominance. He suddenly leaned forward, pushing her flat on her back. He parted her thighs and resumed his favorite position on top of her. He penetrated her again and began to thrust with his deep, strong motions she knew so well. It hurt.

"Oh, Daddy, that feels so good."

He gripped both her wrists, bringing them above her head, so she was completely pinned. Which thrilled him more. She hated feeling subdued in this way.

"Ow, that's so hard, it hurts, Daddy, no stop!"

That drove Uther even more wild, evident by his renewed cries of pleasure.

"You're too big, Daddy, please stop!"

He increased his pace to frantic. Tears came to Morgana's eyes, whether due to the force or the stress of what she was doing, who could say.

"Daddy, no, no, nnnoooo!"

That did it.

Uther had an intense screaming orgasm, she felt him contract and release before he couldn't hold himself up any longer, crumpling on top of her. The rising and falling of his chest was his only movement. He didn't notice the tears rolling down her cheeks.

Ninianne had had a private talk with Morgana before Arthur came to get her. She had said a few things that didn't mean anything to her at the time. The first was, 'what we must do in service to our Goddess and our cause isn't always pretty, it can make us feel ashamed, but if we are striving for a common goal of liberation, it still makes our actions right. Even when they don't feel that way.' Morgana had thought Ninianne was referring to violence. The second thing about Arthur made even less sense. Morgana had nodded at the time, but hadn't dwelled on it. Morgana was glad there was no mirror in here, because she couldn't have borne to look at herself.

I am the victim. He has all the power. I am not to blame for what I must do to survive.

Uther had returned to himself now and caressed her face. He resumed kissing her slowly, nicely. After a few parting kisses, he went to get up. The king was trying to pull himself away from her, but every time he pulled back, Morgana would capture his lips again and pull him into her with her hands framing his face. She needed to convince him of her hunger and her desire.

He was back to dismayed, shaking his head as he managed to escape her hold on him eventually, "What am I going to do with you?"

Morgana remained silent, but stared back at him, with her best innocent child expression. He looked away. Uther put his gloves back on. He got to the door before turning to her.

"I'm not your father," He stated clearly, confidently.

Thank the Goddess!

Morgana couldn't hide her relief.
Uther spoke somewhat unimpressed, "If you want to get my attention," Uther offered, "Act like your mother."

_She died when I was five, I don't know how._

_Thanks to you!_

When the door was opened Uther began to bark orders, "Get her out of there, it stinks. I want her bathed and set up in the empty tower. She's to have her clothes, and her bed, and her meals delivered there. But, she sees no one without word from me."

Morgana exhaled the breath she had been holding. In the back of her mind, she thought no matter how much she satisfied him, Uther was still going to insist on her execution at dawn.

_I am not to blame for what I must do to survive._
The last chapter begins with Morgana deliberating over whether Uther is her father. She decides that regardless, Gorlois raised her, and taught her, he is her father. Therefore, blood doesn't matter. Uther visited Morgana in the dungeon. She planned to kill him. He regretted his earlier outburst and admitted he loves her and can't kill her. Dungeon rape ensued, at the end Uther said he isn't Morgana's father, which has made Morgana feel relieved. Uther then had Morgana moved into the Abandoned Tower. There are no further plans for her execution at the moment.

Morgause had the mandrake root in a wine skin ready to hand it off to Lila. She had been slowly going around the stalls in the market keeping an eye on the trader who sold soap. Morgause was conscious to avoid mirrored surfaces where her true face would be revealed behind the old woman glamour. The priestess had taken extra precautions this time. Find this one, Merlin!

Lila arrived late, the young woman had a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. She went and purchased soap to keep up appearances. The apparently frail old woman walked up behind her, touching her arm to get her attention.

"Can I interest you in some wine?"

Lila said yes, and they walked to a more secluded spot momentarily. They spoke in hushed tones.

Morgause instructed, "You must hide this root extremely well in Uther's bedroom."

"I don't go into Uther's chambers," Lila responded frankly.

Morgause questioned the young maid, "Who delivers his clothes, his linens?"

"His man servant."

The priestess thought a moment, "Sew the root into a pillow, then put the pillow with Uther's piles of clothes, and his servant will do the rest."

Lila peaked in the bag, "Won't I get black stuff everywhere?"

"Leave it in the skin if you like," Then Morgause realized she needed to explain better, Lila wasn't versed in magic, "The pillow must still feel like a pillow though, make sure feathers surround it on every side."

The young maid nodded, "Anything else?"
"Is there any more word on Morgana?" She felt her breath catch as she said the words.

Lila's expression fell, "Uther is back to being… himself, he had her thrown in a dungeon last I heard."

Morgause felt her stomach roil. She then forced herself to clarify, "But has there been a formal execution announced?"

Lila didn't know. That didn't ease the priestess' mind.

Morgause felt panicked, "Will Arthur intervene on Morgana's behalf?"

Lila shrugged. "He ran off to Cornwall yesterday, who knows when he'll be back."

Morgause was too stressed to concentrate. She couldn't leave the square until she was sure no execution was about to take place. Putting out the pyre wouldn't be the problem, but escaping with Morgana in a crowd of people… That would be very difficult.

Morgause wasn't always good at expressing her gratitude, "Lila, thank you, you're doing an excellent service to us all."

The maid smiled shyly, she gently reached out and patted the seemingly old woman's shoulder to indicate empathy for Morgana's situation, before she nodded and left.

Arthur was back in Camelot before midday, he'd only stayed at Tintagel the one night. He was met upon his return by Gaius who informed him that Father had imprisoned Morgana in one of the dungeons, and had now moved her to the empty tower. He immediately felt incredibly guilty. Father could have executed her! What was I thinking! I should have ensured she would be safe until my return. He thought he'd have more time. The king was fully recovered and demanded Arthur's presence in his chambers to 'explain himself' as Gaius relayed. Arthur, ever dutiful came at once. Uther was now out of bed, sitting at his desk.

Father sounded stressed, "What is the truth of the allegations that Morgana is a sorcerer?"

"Ummm," Arthur had decided to be honest, "She set the throne room on fire with just her mind, in front of myself and an entire court full of people."

He watched his father's face fall, "So, her guilt cannot be denied?"

"No," Arthur didn't lie, but he defended Morgana, "But, she didn't hurt anyone, and it was unintentional."

That particular distinction has never mattered to Father.

Arthur asked the question he was dreading the answer to, "What are you going to do with her?"

Father seemed incredibly torn, "I don't know," He was totally dejected, "Her guilt cannot be denied."

Arthur eventually articulated his concern, "If you would burn the woman you've practically raised as your daughter, then who in this kingdom will feel safe?"

"Only sorcerers need feel worried about my reign, not good law-abiding people," The king retorted.
Arthur felt a tightening in his chest as he tried to hold in his own feelings of rage.

"You hypocrite," Arthur pointed an accusing finger, "You confessed, Father! You consorted with a sorcerer to bring about my birth, don't bother denying it!"

"I was half mad Arthur," Father dismissed it all out of hand.

"Liar!" Arthur screamed, his own fury startled him, "Morgause told me the truth, and when I confronted you, you lied right to my face!"

"I didn't know what I was saying," Uther spoke louder, as if the problem was volume and not content.

Arthur wouldn't be dissuaded so easily, "According to Gaius the mandrake root only helps reveal the truth."

"I told you, I didn't know what I was saying," Father repeated himself, his tone threatening now.

"I don't believe you!" Arthur dared, "You knew someone would have to die to make my life possible. You are responsible for my mother's death!"

His father jerked back as if Arthur had slapped him.

Arthur challenged, "Should we also fit you for a stake next to Morgana!"

His king struck him in the mouth. Not really hard, but enough to draw blood. Arthur's hand instinctively dabbed his lips.

_Afraid of me speaking the truth, Father._

The king was silent for too long, before growling, "Morgana is found to have been a sorcerer all this time, deceiving us every day, while we have trusted and loved her, and you call me a liar!" The king was livid, "What if she put that thing... under my bed!"

Arthur noted that Father hadn't denied any of his damning accusations, which further alarmed him.

Arthur backed her, "Lying about having magic just meant she wanted to live, Father," Before adding, "And we don't know who planted the root thing under your bed."

Father seemed willing to believe it might not have been Morgana, "You will find who put that... mandrake root under my bed..."

Arthur interrupted the king, "If you want the sorcerer found, you can do it yourself, I want no part. I don't trust you anymore!" Arthur stormed out without looking back.

It was hard to realize that your hero wasn't who you thought they were. But perhaps that was a lesson he had needed to learn.

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Arthur had his knights putting together Camelot's fighting force. He had made his final preparations in Camelot, the rest he could coordinate from Cornwall. He was determined to leave for Cornwall tomorrow morning alongside Morgana, with or without the king's permission.

Sir Leon reported on his efforts to gather all the men of fighting age to defend Cornwall. Arthur had been listening to similar reports all afternoon from his knights who'd been sent all over
Camelot's lands. Their success was mixed. In some places people were eager to do all they could, in others, their recent skirmishes with Arthur's knights over sorcerer hunts had left a bitter taste in their mouths, and men seemed to disappear, depleting the numbers. It couldn't be helped now, there was no time.

Then Arthur had heard reports from the various smiths and armorerers about how many weapons, horse shoes, shields they were still short. Arthur was irresponsibly dipping into Camelot's grain stores as well, but there was nothing to be done, armies must be fed. They'd have to make do for now and continue to make more weapons here and in Cornwall. And have them sent by wagon.

It was getting very late, and Arthur was very tired. Leon informed him of a petitioner.

"We aren't holding court today, this is war preparations only," Arthur knew Leon knew this, he didn't understand why his trusted knight would even be considering this person an audience.

"She says she's from 'The Isle'?” Leon said, being unfamiliar with the place. "She said it concerns the Saxon Invasion."

No point in wasting breath about how she knows about the invasion. He wondered who The Isle had sent. Arthur's mind changed immediately, "Send her in."

It was Caellan, in her robes, with her braids, she was practically wearing a sign that said 'sorcerer'. Arthur was impressed with her audacity and a little surprised she had made it to the castle without being attacked. She was escorted in by six palace guards, all looking at her suspiciously.

"I bare a message from Morgause," She announced, dispensing with the usual pleasantries, for which Arthur was grateful.

He signaled for her to give him the scroll. She stridently approached the throne.

Arthur read aloud, "Morgause offers me the best trained fighting force The Isle has to offer, 250 warriors, trained with sword, bow, mace and morning star, disciplined, and some are blooded."

Caellan stood still except to nod.

Arthur considered a moment, "That is impressive."

He read further, and Caellan spoke the words as he was seeing them, "This offer is made on the condition that if The Isle helps defend these lands from invasion, that we be granted the same rights you all enjoy, to worship as we chose, to practice our religion freely, without fear of persecution."

Arthur cut to the chase, "You would have me lift the ban on sorcery."

She bowed, "Yes, King Arthur."

"I'm Prince Arthur," He corrected her, "The actual king, my father, hates your kind."

"Which is why The Isle makes this offer to you," Caellan reminded him.

Father is wrong about so much.

Arthur thought on it for a long moment. 250 well-trained and disciplined men could make all the difference... And yet he hesitated.

Arthur concluded suddenly, "I can't lead men I don't trust."
Caellan was as unmoved as ever, "Is that your final answer?"

Who knows if there will be thousands of Saxons? Or any Saxons.

"I can't," Arthur repeated, "I can't go into battle worrying about the loyalty of my own troops. The offer is declined."

Caellan bowed and left, "As you wish, King Arthur."

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Arthur retired to his chambers, it was late by the time it was all done. His father was waiting for him, pacing the room in agitation.

Father launched into an interrogation, "What's this I hear about a Saxon Invasion?"

Arthur had prepared his story in advance, "A dissenter from the Saxon camp told us when and where it will occur, I have every reason to believe he speaks the truth."

The king was unconvinced, "I'd like to question this dissenter."

Arthur had an excuse for that too, "He only spoke to me in secret, and has now left."

Uther smelled a rat, "This is nonsense, it's clearly a trap."

"I don't believe so, Father."

"Tell the Cornish coast to prepare in the unlikely event of a Saxon invasion," The king commanded, "And that they shall have the support of Camelot if there is a need for it."

"It's going to be a sudden attack, by sea, Father," Arthur informed him, "Cornwall lacks the ability to defend itself, and Cornwall is part of Camelot's lands. If we don't come until the invaders arrive, the battle will be lost before we get there."

Uther felt the need to remind Arthur of his authority, "I am recovered, you are no longer in charge," The king ordered, "I will lead Camelot's army, if and only if, there is a proven need for it, not on the say so of some lying Saxon!"

"I'll take full responsibility for the mission, I'll lead it," Arthur was steadfast, "I'll leave for Cornish coast at first light tomorrow."

"I am the king!" Father was stern, "I decide, not you."

Arthur was unyielding, "I will not leave the coast undefended, and I'm taking Morgana with me."

For some reason the idea of Morgana going with Arthur to Cornwall made Father even more livid, even though Arthur still didn't believe Father planned to execute her.

"Guards!" Uther commanded, "Lock my son up in the dungeon!"

The four guards looked at Arthur and hesitated.

Arthur kept his composure and reassured the guards, all of whom knew him, "Father, still hasn't regained his senses since his recent illness, I'm still in charge," Arthur looked at the highest-ranking guard, whose name was Philip, "Get Gaius, the king clearly still needs his assistance."
They stopped a moment, before the ranking guard moved to obey Arthur.

Uther yelled, "I'm the king! I'll have you all executed, I've given you an order, carry it out!"

Fortunately, Father's outburst made him look crazier. So, the guards disobeyed their king and sought out the physician.

Arthur stared down Uther to prevent him from trying to intimidate the guards who wouldn't dare lay a hand on the king even if they believed he had lost his mind.

"How dare you! This is treason," The King of Camelot fumed.

Arthur responded, more peevishly than he should have, "You are confined to your chambers, behave or I shall make it a dungeon."

Arthur intercepted Gaius on the way. After a brief discussion they agreed that sedation was the best course of action. Gaius offered a potion that he would say would help recover Uther from the mandrake root's effects, when really it would make him sleep.

This was a huge risk. Father was well now, and not likely to forget Arthur's insolence. But Arthur had come this far, he had to defend Camelot. If he was wrong about the invasion, Arthur could live with people laughing at him, he couldn't live with himself if he did nothing when he knew better and thousands of people were killed.
Morgana is the worst woman at needlepoint in all Albion!

Merlin didn't trust Morgana. He was sure she and Morgause were plotting something. He was certain she had planted the mandrake root. He was sure the Saxon invasion 'prophecy' was a lie to get Arthur out of the way so Morgause could kill Uther and take over.

The thing he couldn't decide on, was Morgana's fate. She was now in the same position he had been in, or nearly been in. Merlin was unsure of what Uther would do, but he was certain that Arthur wouldn't let her burn. But if Morgana really had joined the dark side, perhaps it was safer for Arthur if she did die.

It was out of Merlin's hands. But he thought if he could prove Morgana was behind the mandrake root, at least Arthur wouldn't be so quick to trust her. Merlin had been hovering around Uther all day in the hopes of finding evidence of some kind. Uther had been screaming like a madman until Gaius had given him something that made him sleep the afternoon away. He awoke hungry for supper though. The king ate dinner alone in his chambers. Merlin came in to take away the empty dinner plates. Once completed he came back to see if the king needed anything else.

Uther looked at Merlin as if he'd seen a ghost, "No, no, you can't be, you're dead!"

Merlin wasn't sure what Uther meant, but he was very curious, Uther's revelations were showing his true colors to Arthur in a way that was beneficial.

"Gorlois, you know don't you!" Uther was terrified, as if Merlin were here to kill him.

The opportunity to learn more of Uther's deep dark secrets could not be passed up.

Merlin stood tall with authority, "I know everything, Uther. I know what you did!"

Uther began to own up, "With Vivienne it just happened, she was lonely, you were away."

*That sounded like a confession to an affair with Morgana's mother.*

"How could you!" Merlin demanded, angrily.

"I was weak, she's very beautiful," Uther pleaded in his own defense.

"She's *my* wife!" Merlin reminded the king sternly.

"I should have stayed away," Uther admitted, "But Igraine and I had been trying for many years, I was sure the problem lay with me, I didn't want to acknowledge…" Uther let his voice trail off.

"Acknowledge what?" Merlin probed.

Uther looked so ashamed, before looking away, "That I was… inadequate."

"And?" Merlin continued to prod. *Who knows what he'll say next.*

"You were my best friend, I should never have…" Uther was now struggling to speak, "I should have gone elsewhere… but… Vivienne was just so…" His chest began to heave, and his words were no longer intelligible.
Wait a minute

Merlin made a realization, "Are you saying you are Morgana's father?"

"I'm so sorry!" Uther pleaded, trying to clutch Merlin's hand to his chest.

Merlin summoned his most stern persona, "Uther, do you know for sure you are Morgana's father?"

"I was weak," Uther admitted, "I knew I shouldn't have."

"You were my best friend," Merlin tried to sound dismayed.

"I'm so sorry!" Uther cried, "I know Vivienne confessed to you she had an affair, but she never told you it was with me!"

"Tell me the truth!" Merlin demanded, "Is Morgana your daughter?"

Uther was crying inconsolably now and was therefore unable to give a straight answer.

"When did the affair occur? What year?" Merlin grabbed the king's arm and almost shook him, "Tell me!" He demanded.

"I'm so sorry!" Uther managed to say, "I knew, I knew, and I did it anyway. I loved her, and I just wanted her with me."

Merlin knew there had to be another mandrake root, but he couldn't hear the screams now. Gaius had told him later that only those with magic could hear its cries.

No wonder Arthur reacted as if I was crazy.

Merlin looked everywhere he could think of, he was making a mess of the room, but he didn't care. The room was already a mess, the mirror and windows were cracked. He soon realized, that he hadn't searched in the bed, because the king was in it. He slowly rolled the crying man over. Uther barely noticed he was so caught up in his personal torment. Merlin lifted the bottom sheet to look for holes in the mattress. No luck. He rolled Uther the other side and did the same. Where else? Pillows? One was heavier than the others.

Merlin called Gaius who cut a hole and pulled out a second mandrake root.

"Why can't we hear anything?"

"I don't know, Merlin," Gaius responded, shrugging.

Arthur was summoned.

"So, the sorcerer has not been caught?" The prince concluded.

Merlin still believed Morgana was responsible, "Maybe two mandrakes were always planted, and Uther seemed better once one was destroyed?"

Arthur disagreed, "No, he was getting better, completely better, and now he's suddenly worse." Arthur was sure of himself, "Someone crept in and hid this second one, it must have been yesterday or this morning."

Arthur turned to Sir Leon, "Find out everyone who has access to my father's chambers."
Merlin insisted, "Morgana still could…"

"Enough Merlin! I didn't know you despised her so much," Arthur raised a hand to end further argument.

Arthur picked up the pillow. He examined it closely.

"Ha!" Arthur had a sudden outburst, "Definitely not Morgana!"

He held up the seam of the pillow triumphantly. A hole had been made and resewn with slightly different colored thread.

Merlin didn't understand, "What am I looking at?"

"Proof Morgana had nothing to do with it," Arthur couldn't contain his gleefulness.

He trusts her and doesn't want to believe anything bad about her.

"Have you ever seen Morgana sew?" Arthur grinned, "She's the worst woman at needlepoint in all Albion!"

He handed the pillow to Merlin, who did have to admit, somewhat begrudgingly, that the stitching was very neat.

Merlin wondered if he should tell Arthur about the latest development.

If Arthur learns Morgana might be his sister, he will love and trust her more implicitly than he already does. And if Morgana finds out? She will probably kill Uther with her bare hands.

Merlin decided to say nothing for now.

Of the whole castle, Morgana hated the abandoned tower the most. A family was said to have perished in here a hundred years ago, and she could feel them still. It was dusty and smelled like mold everywhere. The chambers were very sparse, Morgana was sitting on the window sill, since there was no chair, peering out at the night sky at the moon three quarters full.

There were two guards at the staircase at the bottom, and two more at the top, where Morgana's new prison was located. She heard Arthur having a loud argument with the guards just outside the door, as they insisted he needed permission from the king to enter and Arthur was having none of it.

She heard him say, "Well, the king's not feeling well again, so I'm in charge."

Arthur ignored them, and neither dared strike the prince, so Arthur came bursting into her new cell.

"I believe you!" He exclaimed, "We leave first thing tomorrow for the Cornish Coast."

Morgana knew how impatient Arthur got when stressed. She was surprised and very grateful to be getting away from Uther and Camelot.

She wanted him feeling confident, "You're doing the right thing."

Arthur informed her of his plans, "I've sent envoys to the other kingdoms to request they send as many knights and men of fighting age as they can to help."
"What convinced you?" She asked in earnest.

"Nothing," Arthur said honestly, "But the consequences of not listening go you, far outweigh my embarrassment if you are wrong."

Morgana nodded her head slowly.

Arthur did at least look exceedingly guilty and ashamed of himself, "I shouldn't have left you here, I really didn't think Father was going to…"

"Have me executed?" She supplied.

Arthur was forlorn, "I heard he was going to and then couldn't."

"How lucky am I?" Morgana spat, unable to control her anger at him.

Arthur announced, "I'm taking you to the battle."

She smiled her relief, Away from Uther. Away from this castle. I'm going home.

Morgana wanted to know whether the king was mandrake affected again, or if Arthur was simply defying him, "What about your father?"

"He took a little turn for the worst, but he should be getting better now," Arthur paused before adding, "I'm sorry I accused you of planting the mandrake root, I don't believe it was you."

Morgana was curious, "What changed your mind?"

Arthur considered for a moment before he smirked, "Honestly, your inability to sew."

That meant nothing to her. He didn't bother to explain better. Morgana didn't care enough to pursue it.

She changed tact, "Uther supports you in this?"

"He can stay here, or he can help, we don't know that only Cornwall will be attacked," Arthur's frustration was noticeable, "I'll leave him sufficient men. I don't care what he does."

She liked Arthur when he got like this.

"Arthur," Morgana called to him, "I must return to my chambers, I hate it in here."

Arthur hadn't even considered her discomfort, "Yes, of course, I don't know why he moved you in here," Arthur was straightforward.

So, he can keep raping me in private.

Morgana picked up what she could carry, she didn't want to spend another moment in this room.

Arthur added regretfully, "I'm sorry he threw you in a dungeon, I've been out making preparations I didn't hear until it was already done, Father shouldn't have done that."

He shouldn't have done a lot of things.

At least now she could warn Morgause what was happening in the morning. Between this tower and the dungeon Morgana's communication lines had been cut.
Before the dawn

Gaius had to remain with Father. And Gwen was attending to Uther extra since his bout of ill health. Arthur was leading a march of about a thousand people on foot. An additional 200 men had horses, less than 30 of them knights. The journey that was usually a solid half day ride, was now an all-day crawl. Morgana was beaming as she rode next to him. She wore armor and carried her sword, not that Arthur intended for her to fight. At least Morgana can wield a sword, which is more than can be said for a certain manservant. Merlin could barely squire since he hardly knew which end of a sword one should hold. And he is so clumsy!

The men in the ranks were singing with the excitement of it all. Ballads of heroic battles and fair maidens. Arthur, truth be told hadn't fought in a real battle either. But he was eager to prove himself.

*Discipline is key. Men who will obey are worth more than skilled fighters in a situation like this.*

They arrived as night fell. And Tintagel had prepared a huge feast. They could only fit 300 people in the dining hall, but tents had been pitched outside so that the fighting men, mostly, peasants and commoners could also enjoy roast boar and mead.

The next morning Arthur briefed his knights who set up and ran drills designed to improve basic technique with spears, and teamwork and discipline among the men. Later they began fitting everyone with body protection.

Arthur took Morgana down to the beach. He wanted to know exactly where she saw the ships land. It took a few hours, but Morgana told him she located the point where the invasion would occur. It was the flattest part of the beach, and vastly wide. The location was well chosen for an invading army. Arthur set his best scouts to looking for any natural formations from which they could hide, or set up archers, high points, places from which to charge down, where horses could run if need be.

Arthur sent word back for more food, weapons, horses, armor, but whether Father would heed any of his calls was uncertain.

It was the last night of the full moon tonight. Arthur had been in Cornwall for three evenings so far. King Bayard had arrived at midday. He was said to be a fierce commander, who kept a well-disciplined force. He appeared to have 800 men, nearly 300 horse. They settled in, pitched their tents, ate more food provided by the Cornish host. Then set about their own drills.

Arthur met with Bayard. The King of Mercia was grey haired, clean shaven, in his late fifties and tough. He seemed well prepared given the short notice, and willing to listen, though he would command his own. Arthur was very careful to show him the respect his station deserved.

The villagers from nearby started to head to Tintagel seeking refuge within the castle walls. Urwaine was letting them all in, and the place was almost bursting.

Sir Hilden returned from Amata on the south eastern coast where he'd been sent as an envoy to
King Olaf. He was alone. He said the king did not believe in the eminence of a Saxon Invasion and would post sentries but do no more until he saw any reason too. The knight relayed the king's words, Cornwall was nothing to him, Camelot can defend its own lands. Hilden hung his head in shame at having failed to secure the alliance. Arthur patted his shoulder.

"Some men won't lift a finger if they aren't the one threatened," Arthur spoke wisely, "I'm sure you did all you could."

King Odin unsurprisingly had declined to help. Frankly, Odin had tried to assassinate Arthur once before, so he was probably better off without him. The bad blood was over Arthur's killing of his son in single combat. Nothing was going to reconcile their kingdoms any time soon. *You can't use men you don't trust.* King Alined and Cenred had not responded to the call, which pretty much meant they could not be relied upon either.

By midday Queen Annis of Camlann arrived, she was said to despise Father, so her showing up, with a force of 600, no less, was a good sign. Perhaps because Arthur was leading, she was willing to put aside their differences.

Camelot's defenses were looking better. Catapults were being built from felled trees. Morgana accurately described the ships to him on the ride to Cornwall. If she was correct, the boulders they intended to fling might be able to sink a few. The clang of practice fights, and armorers' hammers rang out day and night. By late afternoon, the only remaining kingdom to answer the call arrived, King Rodor of Nemeth. Arthur knew little of him, so mostly observed and listened. He appeared to have 500 men, a quarter of whom were mounted.

The camp sprawled for leagues in every direction. You couldn't move without running into someone. The food stores were diminishing at an alarming rate. Arthur had had sufficient livestock herded from Camelot a few short days ago but they were almost all eaten now.

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It was the night before Morgana's predicted invasion, the moon was almost full, waning, in the sky. Arthur kept pacing the camp, talking to the respective kings, discussing strategies. He was allowing each to command their own as they saw fit.

A few thoughts kept gnawing at him, *What if Morgana is wrong? What if it was all for nothing?*

Arthur didn't think he should be the only one stressed out, since Morgana was the cause of his present state he decided to pay her a visit. Arthur had insisted Morgana's tent be next to his. If she had any more visions, he wanted to know about it straight away. She wasn't sleeping either, she looked terrified and kept fidgeting.

"You'd better not be having second thoughts," He said.

"No, I just..." She struggled to articulate her thoughts, "I wish... I had more accurate information for you, how they are going to fight. I'm not even positive if this is the only place they will strike."

"So long as they do strike, at dawn tomorrow," Arthur said, "I feel able to cope with whatever else they throw at us."

Morgana looked uneasy, which was making him feel less confident by the moment.

"Have you eaten?" He asked.
She indicated not, "Can't, I'm going to be sick as it is."

"We don't have enough physicians," Arthur informed her, "We need your healing skills tomorrow."

"What?" Morgana pouted, "I'm gonna fight."

_Father is the only one who gets to put you in harm's way. _"I'm definitely not letting you fight!"

They had argued about it for a while. It was almost comforting. Arthur realized that's why he'd come in here.

"Do you want some wine?" He asked.

She declined, "No, I dream clearer without it."

They sat together in silence a long while. It wasn't awkward, it was heartening. They were leaning their heads against one another, temple to temple, before Arthur jabbed her playfully in the ribs.

"Just so you know, if there is no invasion and I look like a fool, not just to every fighting man in Camelot, but to every fighting man in four of Albion's eight kingdoms, I will punish you... severely," Arthur was only being mock serious.

Morgana continued in that vein, cocking a wicked eyebrow at him, "Sentence me to a lifetime of needlepoint?"

Arthur smiled, "Don't tempt me!"

Morgana suddenly turned serious, "Be careful, out there tomorrow."

"I'm not convinced there is going to be any threat," Arthur said, "Let alone a battle tomorrow."

"If there is," Morgana started to say, "Will you believe me?"

Arthur remained silent a while. None of this sat well with him.

He patted her shoulder and got up, "Good night, sleep well."
The camp had been woken hours before dawn. The cooks even earlier. They were making the largest pots of porridge Arthur had ever seen. Last minute dramas over poorly-fitting armor, ill-tempered horses, broken spears, missing men… it was chaos. The forces did get to the beach though, in well-hidden locations, Arthur had scouted with the kings and queen. They had their reserves farther back. The vanguard had been chosen. Arthur was to lead it. The mounted horse was to be kept back for the first day until a full assessment of the enemy could be made. The two working catapults would be tried though.

Morgana was by Arthur's side, he wanted her everywhere he was, until the invasion started. He had four picked men to guard The Lady with strict instructions to get her to safety if anything went horribly wrong. She hated it, and fought him on it, saying she could look after herself. But Arthur had refused Morgana this. Arthur was more concerned that men with their blood up from battle could lose their heads. He included men on his side in that.

It was a misty morning. It should have been dawn, but the sun couldn't be seen behind the cloud cover. Early morning came and went. And they waited. Everyone on edge. Remaining silent. That gnawing feeling he had had last night was back. Every sound had Arthur ready to launch into action, only to have it thwarted. Morgana was getting more nervous by the second.

Arthur was getting frustrated, "You said dawn."

"I did, but with the grey sky, who can tell, when the sun will break through," Morgana despaired.

Arthur's annoyance was seeping into his words, "So, it might not have been dawn?"

Morgana was becoming more despondent, "I don't know, I saw the moon, almost full."

"So, you might be a day off?" Arthur inquired, "Or a year off?"

"I could be a day off," Morgana conceded, "It's hard to tell exactly how almost full the moon was."

"Morgana, if you are wrong, so help me God!" He began to threaten.

He fumed in silence and they waited. It was almost midday.

"Ship!" Arthur heard a man call.

The call was repeated down the lines.

It was a few minutes before Arthur could see it for himself, but it was correct, there was a ship, and it wasn't a vessel from Albion. More ships came into view, sails, large wooden. War ships. Each might carry a hundred fighting men.

Arthur grabbed Morgana and held her to him.
"Thank you," He whispered into her ear. He kissed her cheek.

Morgana was too nervous to gloat the way she would otherwise have liked to. "You believe me now?"

Yes. But what he said out loud was, "I'm still not sure how I feel about this… prediction stuff, but for this… I thank you!"

Arthur then ordered her guards to take her behind the lines.

Morgana pushed them off, to come back, "You take care of yourself out there today," She seemed genuinely scared for him, "Make sure you come back!" Pulling him into a desperate hug of worry.

Reminding him of his own mortality was the last thing Arthur liked before combat, "Did you dream I die today?" He asked lightly.

Morgana looked taken aback, "No."

Arthur became flippant, "Then I'll be fine."

She shook her head as she was escorted away.

Albion's forces numbered around 3,000. But the burden was always on the invading force. Their element of disguise had been taken from them. And they would still have to attack up the beach. Albion had the high ground, and coming under attack while still in the water, would kill plenty of men too. Arthur had the best archers ready to pick them off before they even set foot on the sand.

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There looked to be nearly 50 ships in total. About one in ten of the Saxon ships had been sunk by the catapults, which was impressive given how hard it was to hit the target. Rocks and debris from the broken ships were being used by Saxons to form a barrier on the beach. Those that didn't drown with their ships were being pierced by the seemingly endless stream of arrows coming from the cliff side. Enough broke through that the vanguard led by Arthur did charge.

Arthur felt alive. His blood was pumping, everything was happening so fast, and yet it was as if the Saxons were coming at him in slow motion, but he could move and parry and block faster than ever. He cut down a man with a single blow, took a full strike of an ax on his shield, before recovering, faking right then spearing the ax-wielding Saxon through the throat. *Merlin of course is nowhere to be seen!* Arthur didn't have time to even think of an insult. The next man was on him.

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By late afternoon Albion's forces sounded an end to the day's fighting. Arthur had sentries on many locations each with torches and horns to signal any movement from the makeshift Saxon camp. The Albion men in the camp pitched tents all along the cliffs and lit fires and began to drink ale and roast up whatever had been hunted.

Urwaine came up to clap a meaty hand on Arthur's shoulder, "You've saved us all, Arthur Pendragon, I've never seen so many Saxons, on so many ships in all me life. We'd 'ave been done for without you!"

*It's Morgana who deserves the praise, not me.*
But Arthur smiled and accepted the gratitude of the Cornish men in particular. Losses on this first day had been minimal. The Saxons had lost maybe five to every one man of Albion. Which had to continue, since the Saxons had twice as many men.

And we have Morgana, our secret weapon.

Arthur drank a few ales with the men, went around the camp and shook hands, held the hands of those seriously wounded and dying. There were only six physicians, and their apprentices in total among their forces. Morgana said she'd learned healing on The Isle and had been helping, so at least the fighting men weren't being left to rot.

It was very late by the time he returned to his tent. Kings Rodor, Bayard and Queen Annis all met up with Arthur and Urwaine to discuss strategy for the following day, now that they had a better idea of what they were up against.

Arthur listened to all their suggestions, before speaking himself. Arthur was aware of the need to be accommodating and diplomatic to a point, since he was only a prince, and dealing with much more experienced rulers.

They decided to bring out the heavy horse tomorrow to trample the Saxons who were on foot. It was near midnight once Arthur was finally alone in his tent.

Morgana.

Morgana was right. She saved us all. She really can see the future.

Magic can be used for good.

Arthur was let through immediately by the four guards protecting Morgana. She was still in her armor, lying on the ground in her tent, exhausted. She was covered in blood, but she wasn't wounded, it was from the injured she'd attended to.

Arthur announced his presence, "Long day?"

She opened her eyes, "Very. Who knew a body could have so much blood in it." Then she remembered he fought in the battle, getting up suddenly, "Are you hurt?"

Morgana had him sit on one of the wooden crates, while she slowly stripped his armor off, checking every scratch and bruise meticulously. He had been grazed by an arrow that had narrowly missed his plate piercing his chainmail on his arm. Morgana placed her hand over the spot, said some words in a foreign language, and Arthur was amazed to feel a sort of hot buzzing on his skin. The pain dissipated, and he looked at where the wound had been. No longer even a scratch remained.

"Thank you," He said sincerely.

"It would have been fine," She said, "It's just faster this way."

"No," Arthur wanted to make clear, "I mean, all of this… without you, the east coast would have fallen today."

Morgana looked down at him and smiled sadly.

Arthur shook his head, "All the men out there, they love me, they are praising and congratulating me for saving them."
Arthur surprised himself when he reached out to cup her cheek in a very personal gesture. "But I don't deserve their praise, you do, you saved us all."

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Arthur's thumb traced her cheek bone. Morgana was surprised but tried not to react too startled.

Ninianne had whispered in her ear as she was about to leave The Isle with Arthur that 'much would be asked of her now, to give Arthur whatever he wanted from her', which she thought was strange at the time, since Arthur rarely asked her for anything. Their relationship had always involved her pushing him to reluctantly disobey Uther.

Morgana knew enough to let him make the first move, but she needed to show him she welcomed his attention. She smiled shyly, and blushed, moving slightly closer to his body. Arthur leaned in slowly and brushed her lips with his, innocently. He drew back to gauge her reaction. Morgana smiled. And responded by kissing him back with her lips slightly open, to see if Arthur would take the invitation. He did, and she felt his tongue very tentatively discover her mouth. She allowed her tongue to massage his without pushing for too much, Arthur would want to be in control, even though he felt uncertain. His fingers held her back firmly. And she gripped his shoulders. It wasn't passionate, but it was very intimate, slow, an exploration of sorts. Arthur was seeking comfort. And Morgana knew how to give it to him.

She pulled back slightly, "I, I look a wreck, I'm covered in…"

"You look beautiful, no matter what," Arthur reassured her meaning every word while using his hand to brush a lock of hair that had come loose behind her ear, then resumed their kissing.

Maybe he sensed her hesitancy, "I'll get Merlin to bring us some hot water, so we can at least wash."

His use of the word 'we' regarding washing wasn't lost on her.

Arthur left for a minute before returning. He hugged her again and asked if he could help her out of her armor, which Morgana agreed to. She turned, to allow him to unclasp her body plate. Once it was removed Arthur placed it on the ground. She could easily have taken her fine chainmail off, but Arthur insisted, peeling it off her, revealing only a white camisole underneath.

Arthur kept looking at her chest, while trying not to look like he was staring at her breasts. Morgana initiated the kiss this time, and Arthur eagerly responded. He was salivating too much and trying to suck her mouth which lead to slurping noises. Morgana wanted to laugh at how awkward he was. But she realized it was endearing more than anything else. He wasn't at all like Uther in this regard. He was shy, and lost, and wouldn't take from her and force himself upon her because he felt he was entitled.

Morgana tried to seem lost and nervous too. Arthur, for better or worse, liked to chase, he liked the idea of chaste women, and he would want to be the one to decide how this went. And he could be jealous, not that he'd ever admit to it.

"You've done this before," He observed between kisses.

"A little," Morgana replied, shrugging before eyeing him for a reaction.

He seemed to accept that.

He was being playful, "Did your sorcerer boyfriend teach you?"
"Maybe," She smiled coyly.

Arthur resumed their lip lock.

Merlin called from outside that he had the water as requested. Arthur got up and came back with two pails of water and two rags. Morgana had been feeling anxious about how far Arthur wanted to take this. She really wanted more time to think about it. What she'd had to do was one thing, but this now felt like betraying Morgause.

It wasn't that she didn't have feelings for Arthur, she did, but so much of what she felt for him was so bound up in his other actions, or inaction as was often the problem with him, that made her wild with rage and it was hard to separate that out from his physically sculpted body, and nice eyes. But none of it changed the fact that she didn't like men putting their swords anywhere near her. And since Morgause, Morgana had truly known she never wanted to go back.

Arthur took his undershirt off, revealing his well-defined chest and flat stomach. He took the first rag and dipped it in the water and began to wipe his face. He dipped again and washed his chest, his hands and armpits. Morgana watched, trying to look absorbed rather than tentative.

Arthur turned then and asked her to wash his back, which she did. She made her motions slow, as if she were savoring every moment. She leaned in close, so he could feel her hot breath on his neck. She pecked his skin, delicately, just once, before stopping. He turned back around.

Now he dipped the second rag in the next pail and began to wash her face. He insisted that he could see where all the dirt and blood was. He ran the wet cloth slowly along her cheeks, gazing into her eyes as he went, which made the whole experience more intense. He took his time on her hands, which were filthy. Morgana remained still looking at him to see just how bold the prince was feeling. He stopped there and turned around. Morgana let go of the breath she'd been holding. Morgana also turned her back, she took her camisole off and washed her chest and dirt off her shoulders as best she could. She felt Arthur right behind her. He took the cloth and slowly made long wiping motions down her spine. Morgana's nerves at the anticipation of bottom half nakedness led her to hold her breath. Once Arthur had finished with her back, she felt him wrap a towel around her shoulders. He was still in the tent, but he must have taken his breeches off now and was washing himself. She didn't dare look. She heard further rustling of clothes as he dressed himself in clean clothes Merlin must have provided. He handed her a clean shirt, that was his. She put it on, and it was more of a dress on her. It covered her halfway down her thighs, affording her privacy from prying eyes, so she pulled off her pants and boots, and washed herself. Arthur pretended to be fixing the sleeping mat, but he was stealing glances at her.

When Morgana was finished, she looked up and Arthur was lying on his side on her mat. He patted the small space in front of him, for her to join him.

"Sleeping only, I promise," He said, "On my honor as a knight."

Morgana finally allowed herself to relax.

You are just full of surprises Arthur Pendragon.

She laid down against his chest, but facing away, and Arthur patted her hair a few times before allowing his arm to drape loosely over her waist. He was warm. And it was nice to sleep like this again. It made her homesick for Morgause.
Morgana knew she was on the south eastern coast, because she could see Pembroke Castle in the distance. She was on the beach about a league away to the north. Maybe ten Saxon ships arrived at day break. The flat alcove of the beach looked completely deserted as they ran along the sand, axes glistening in the morning light.

Then Morgana was back on the beach in Cornwall. Albion was stronger and was coming over the top of the Saxons who were now more coordinated in their efforts. Arthur's sword was in the air, and he turned, it was all happening in slow motion with the chaos of battle continuing all around him, Morgana saw him from above as she sailed through the air, down, down, closer right towards Arthur until impact.

Morgana woke screaming his name. Arthur was there and trying to calm her.
"You're alright, Morgana, I'm here," He soothed her with his hand on her back.
"Don't fight today," She warned, "You'll die."

Arthur was taken aback. "I have to fight, I'm leading the battle."
"Please don't," She begged.

Morgana explained what she had dreamed as best she could. Arthur listened and asked a few questions. But he would not be dissuaded from commanding the vanguard.
"Did you see anything else?" He asked seriously.

Morgana had forgotten the first part because of the vision of Arthur, now she recounted, "There's to be a second invasion in Amata, about a league north of Pembroke Castle, this morning."
"Are you sure?" He asked.

Morgana nodded, "King Olaf had invited Father and I to dine there a number of times I know what that castle looks like, I'm sure."

Arthur sighed and thought for a moment, "King Olaf ignored our call, he's refused to marshal his forces."

Morgana thought back to any detail she saw that might help, "There's less ships, maybe ten or twelve?"

"They will be completely unprepared, 600 Saxons will be plenty to burn villages," Arthur observed.
"What will you do?"

He thought a moment, "Olaf, only has look-outs stationed along his coastline to warn him if any ships come," Arthur was discouraged, "By the time they see, it will be far too late. Are you sure it will be sunrise today?"
Morgana confirmed, "I'm sure, there was the same almost full moon as tonight disappearing right before the ships hit the shore."

Arthur sprang into action, getting up and pacing the tent, fully awake, "I'll send a messenger to Olaf, saying one of the Saxons we captured admitted an invasion of his lands will occur," Arthur started to work out a new plan, "That means they should hit the beach at Amata in about four hours," Arthur considered his options for a moment, "We'll send them… a third of our forces, if Bayard marches with his men, they should just make it, if they start marching soon."

Arthur continued to formulate his plan, "It won't be enough," Arthur said impatiently as he struggled to find a course of action, "I'll send another messenger to Father, to bring the remaining forces himself. I've invited Uncle Agravaine, to Camelot, he can hold the castle in Father's absence."

"They won't get there in time," Morgana pointed out.

"No, they won't, Father won't arrive before the afternoon, if he leaves soon after being told of the invasion," Arthur shrugged, "It can't be helped."

Arthur ran a hand along her shoulder, "I better go wake up the camp."

_I better get word to Morgause._

Merlin wasn't sure what was going on between Arthur and Morgana, but their sudden inseparability annoyed him. He didn't trust her, he was sure Morgana was working with Morgause to undermine Camelot.

Arthur left her tent, and not long after Merlin watched as a young man approached. The guards attempted to stop him, but Morgana had him waved through and they hugged, they then walked off together, trailed by the guards at too far a distance to hear their words. Morgana and her mystery man had an in-depth conversation. He opened his cloak and showed her something. Morgana asked a few more questions. He grasped her arm and said something that surprised her. The young man remained, Morgana went back to her tent, then into Arthur's tent and finally disappeared coming back with her own horse. She handed the young man a few items, one might have been a scroll, and he rode her beloved mare, Moonlight, out of the camp headed towards Camelot.

_Very strange._

No one else noticed anything. There was so much going on in the camp now, word was that King Bayard would lead his forces south to deal with a second invasion.

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Merlin relayed what he'd seen Morgana do to Arthur, which was very difficult because his prince was running all over the camp delegating and barking orders. When Arthur finally found a moment to listen he wasn't in the least concerned.

"So, basically, Morgana showed some initiative, and did things on her own without running them by me," He clarified, "That's what you're taking issue with?"

"No," Merlin was unsure of how to proceed, "She met up with some guy, who may be loyal to Morgause, gave him a note and her horse."

"Why do you think he's loyal to Morgause?" Arthur asked pointedly.
It was the right question, and Merlin had no proof.

"I just think…"

"Based on what Merlin?" Arthur repeated, "Your gut doesn't count."

You believed Morgana based on what she said happened in her dream.

He knows Morgana has magic and he trusts her. He doesn't know you have magic!

Arthur wasn't listening though, "If only more of my people could do more things for themselves, without wasting my time." He playfully, punched Merlin's shoulder, then proceeded to mock Merlin, "Yes, how dare, Morgana!" Pulling a face and rolling his eyes.

You are such a clot pole!

The uneasy feeling that pervaded Merlin's entire being wouldn't let up though.

Arthur came back to his tent a while before dawn to prepare himself for the day's fighting. Morgana insisted on helping him into his armor. She had finally found one of the recruits who was a tailor by trade. Arthur kept trying to kiss her as she went, but she was actually trying to concentrate. Morgana eventually had to say that she would oblige him before he put the helmet on. Morgana crouched down and began to fasten Arthur's greaves.

"In the vision I had last night…" Morgana began, "I don't know what it's called, but the Saxons were in groups of maybe ten, and the front four would attack brazenly, while those behind could hide behind a rock, or trench."

"I've heard of that, it's called an organized press," Arthur elucidated, "The enemy does it to gain ground until they have a place of protection from which to arrange a proper assault."

Morgana continued to recall what she had seen, "The nearby groups would shoot arrows to protect the front warriors who were charging."

Arthur, "Okay, that's useful to know."

Once she had painstakingly checked every buckle, clasp, gorget and rivet and was satisfied everything was correct. Morgana now fastened Arthur's shoulder protection with precision, bringing them eye to eye.

"What will you do?" She wondered.

He gripped her hand to stop her fidgeting. "Ensure we win, so I will come back to you."

He kissed her, slowly, purposefully. He asked for her favor to wear so he could fight for her. Morgana almost laughed at that request, she was herself dressed in armor, not like a damsel. She responded that she had no trinket of her affection to give him. He insisted. In the end Morgana cut a lock of her hair and fastened it with excess thread, that Arthur placed inside his plate. He kissed her again and almost couldn't pull himself away.

"Be careful," She said, with her stomach still roiling. Morgana knew she wouldn't feel better until the danger had passed.

He kissed her again, "I'm going to be fine, I have a sorcerer who can tell the future looking out for me."
She smiled at his retreating form.

"Helmet," She called, throwing it at him when he turned.
Where the heart is

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hetero sex, little bit of underage sexual contact.

Arthur was exhausted beyond belief. How many had he personally killed? It felt like a hundred Saxons, but that was probably an exaggeration. Bodies of Saxons were littered all over the beach. Some Albions as well.

Morgana's warning about the attacking press, had led to Arthur setting up his forces differently than how he'd originally planned. They'd dug fox holes and hidden the best archers on the high ground, ready to pick off the front runners, with huge success. She was right, again. The Saxons had barely gained any ground at all. Which was a relief because Albion's numbers were now much less than the invaders even after yesterday's casualties. Arthur hoped King Bayard's force that he had sent south had reached the beach in Amata near Pembroke before dawn, but it was out of his hands now.

The Saxons blew a distant horn, a sound of retreat for the day. It was late afternoon and overcast and starting to rain heavily. Arthur caught sight of Merlin. He is the world's worst squire, when he isn't on his bottom or with his eyes closed, he is never where he needs to be!

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Merlin was on the ground having narrowly missed being chopped in half by an ax. Arthur was at the front leading the vanguard. A final group of 20 Saxons made a charge. An ax narrowly missed Arthur's helm. The largest man Merlin had ever seen came at Arthur swinging an ax in either hand, Arthur blocked the first cut with his shield that cleaved the heavy oak in two. The prince quickly slid the straps off his arm and left it, putting both hands on his sword in time to block a killing blow aimed at his head. The giant Saxon used a meaty foot planted on his chest plate to kick Arthur backwards with such force the prince lost his helm.

Before Arthur could regain his footing the giant was on him once again, now holding the ax directly above him, Merlin focused on making the giant Saxon trip, and felt the familiar jolt go through him. The Saxon fell backwards allowing Arthur to stand and finish him with a strong strike to the chest.

Then another Saxon with a morning star swung at Merlin, whom had to jump out of the way. He landed awkwardly in the sand. Before the spiked whirling ball could crush Merlin's skull Merlin focused on the chain in his mind and he felt the charge go through him and a moment later the metal chain snapped, and the ball went flying behind the Saxon warrior, hitting another Saxon ten yards back. Merlin had no time to savor the moment though, because an ax was falling right above him, another flash and the axe was spinning backwards and took out another Saxon. Merlin only had a sword and no armor though, the now ax-less Saxon went to punch him with a balled fist. Wind, thought Merlin and sand blew into his attacker's eyes so the mailed hand missed Merlin...
and caused the Saxon to lose his balance. Merlin managed to hit him with the flat of the sword, and before he had to do any more, another fighter from Camelot ran the Saxon through with his sword.

Merlin caught sight of Arthur again, still without his helm. The Saxons were retreating, the horn had been blown by the invading forces, signalling the day's fighting was done.

Arthur turned his back on the enemy now, looking back at Albion's forces. He raised his sword signifying victory, "For the love of Camelot!"

Some cries for 'Camelot', 'Camlann', 'Nemeth', 'Cornwall' went up, more were for 'Prince Arthur.'

Arthur turned back to take a final glance at the scurrying Saxons when an arrow, came out of nowhere, and pierced him right through chain mail narrowly missing his metal chest plate.

Merlin saw it too late to react. Now everything around him stopped, all the sound and chaos, all he saw was his prince in slow motion going down with an arrow through his heart.

"No!" Merlin heard himself yell, as if he weren't controlling his body.

He ran to his prince, as Arthur fell to his knees, and then slowly began to fall forwards. Merlin caught his love before Arthur's face hit the sand. He did his best to turn Arthur onto his back. Now, others were there. Everyone stood still, no one wanted to be the one to pronounce their leader dead.

"Why is there no blood?"

Arthur remained still. Then he opened his eyes.

"Help a knight up would you," Arthur said to Merlin, raising his mailed hand.

Merlin had tears streaming down his face. He didn't understand.

Raif of Cornwall aided the prince to sitting position. Arthur pulled the arrow that looked to be buried inches deep into his heart out in a single tug. The blonde warrior pulled off the chest plate and chainmail to reveal an additional piece of armor, the size of a shoulder guard sewn into a leather pouch with straps that had stitched the protective guard onto his body. The arrow hadn't been able to pierce the metal. Merlin was overcome, Arthur never worn that additional protection before.

Arthur shook his head, "Morgana insisted, she said I'd die today without it," Arthur smiled, "Now, I'm going to have to tell her she was right, do have any idea, when I am going to hear the end of this!" He was faux irritated.

No one else had caught up to his light mood though.

"Morgana made that?" Merlin inquired.

"Don't be ridiculous, Merlin!" Arthur was mock annoyed, rather than annoyed, annoyed, "I told you she can't sew."

Arthur continued to explain, "Morgana actually had one of our volunteers, who's a tailor by trade, sew it onto me this morning, hence all the straps," Arthur showed the now sizable crowd standing all around him. "Anyone got a dagger, I need to cut it off."

Among the camp stories began to spread; that Morgana was a seer and a sorcerer. Others whispered that Arthur couldn't be killed. Either way, they both took on an aura of not being
entirely human, *God-like perhaps*. Men fell to their knees crossing themselves. Morgana gained a kind of grudging respect from people scared of magic or those who felt a hatred toward her kind, but no one dared cross her. Men stepped aside when they saw her coming. Others flocked to her with their injuries believing she was the only one who could help. Her training at The Isle certainly made her better than most, but her skills didn't even rival Gaius.

Arthur was carried back to the camp, even though he was perfectly fine. He sat around a fire and chugged some ale. Victory songs and stories filled the air. A boar had been slaughtered and began to be roasted on a spit. Before it got quite dark, Arthur conspicuously excused himself, saying he needed to do something. The men protested, wanting to keep spending time with this man who was now their hero. Once Arthur was out of sight, the camp talk and gossip got going.

"If a woman had saved my life like that, I know where I'd be going…" One man said.

"To put a baby in her!" A knight from Cornwall finished.

"Wouldn't mind having a poke at the Lady Morgana myself!" Another said.

"Those eyes," Observed a squire from Camlann.

"Is she really a sorcerer?" A knight of Nemeth inquired.

A different knight from Cornwall interjected, "Whatever she is, she saved Arthur's life."

"Like father, like son," One of the men smiled knowingly, taking a large gulp of ale.

"What does that mean," Merlin asked, he recognized the man as a palace guard.

The palace guard replied, "King Uther can't keep his hands of the Lady Morgana, and I guess Arthur has the same taste in women!"

"No way!" Commented someone else, "Morgana's more like the king's daughter, he dotes on her."

Another Camelot soldier agreed, "The Lady's lived with Uther since she was little more than a babe! Don't be gross!"

The palace guard shook his head, "When Arthur ran off to rescue Morgana's maid from those outlaws, the king called us into his chambers in the middle of the night to go after the prince. The king was naked and the Lady Morgana was in his bed!" He looked up, and proclaimed, "As God is my witness."

"He's been her guardian since she was ten!" One of the knights from Cornwall spoke conveying his distaste.

Raif was Urwaine's second in command. Merlin had observed him to be a serious and honorable person.

Raif declared resolutely, ending all the other comments, "God himself decided that Arthur can't die, to Prince Arthur of Camelot," He raised his wine skin.

Others followed suit, wine skins were raised, ale drank from trenchers.

Merlin remained quiet, but taking it all in. Morgana really had saved Arthur's life. He also had to admit she wasn't lying about the Saxon invasion either. Merlin wasn't sure what to make of her new-found goodness. She really was a seer, unless The Isle had struck some kind of bargain with
the Saxons? Or had some other way of knowing about the planned attack?

*Could that really be true about Uther and Morgana?* Merlin had heard a rumor that they were lovers before being repeated by two palace guards, a long time back, around when Merlin had helped Morgana escape to the druid camp. But he'd thought it was so absurd at the time, he'd dismissed it immediately. Uther did look at her and touch her sometimes in ways that didn't seem familial, but Merlin had never thought much of it. *Morgana is very attractive, and the king thinks so.* He never imagined that something was actually going on.

As for the other gossip about how Arthur and Morgana felt about one another, he'd never seen that kind of attraction there. But these men didn't know them personally. Arthur only had eyes for Gwen, and Merlin had no idea who Morgana had eyes for, but he didn't really think it was Arthur, while they cared about each other, they had a healthy dose of sibling rivalry.

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Morgana was pouring a foamy white mixture down the throat of a screaming man who'd had a foot amputated. "This will help with the pain," She said, as she patted his arm.

*That will be little consolation when he's starving a month from now because he won't be able to work due to not having a foot.*

She took a breath to calm herself and kept going. She turned to grab strips of cloth to stem the blood only to see Arthur staring at her from the opening of the tent. He had a look on his face that she only knew how to describe as 'sex'.

Then she remembered her dream with the arrow piercing Arthur through the heart. Arthur dangled from his fingers the additional chest armor Morgana had made for him and sewn on his body by that tailor just before the battle. She stepped forward examining it more closely until she saw the dent where the arrow had splintered on impact. Morgana lifted up Arthur's undershirt for the corresponding spot. Not even a scratch.

"You were right," He said no longer joking, "I owe you my life."

"I'm just glad you're okay, I was so worried," Morgana hugged him around his waist, resting her head on his chest as she spoke.

Arthur looked like he wanted to say something very important, but was self-conscious. At that moment one of the physician's assistants arrived and Morgana asked him to take over. Arthur grabbed her hand and led her away from the main bonfire near his tent, but he didn't really know where to go. They were both still covered with blood and dirt, so Morgana suggested a pond she knew not far away.

Morgana had a roiling in her stomach. *This is going to happen. Sister, I'm so sorry.*

They were finally alone. Arthur had waved off her four-guard tail, they were away from the sprawling tents of the makeshift camp in every direction. Morgana found the location, a circle of hawthorn trees and the still, shallow pool.

"Before… anything else happens," Arthur looked uncomfortable beyond belief, "I want you to be the first to know," He said, looking to grab his sword, realizing he'd taken it all off. He still had his dagger, so he unsheathed it and laid it at his feet.

Morgana thought he was going to propose, but that didn't require an oath so she was totally perplexed.
"I, Arthur Pendragon, trueborn son of King Uther Pendragon and the Lady Igraine do solemnly swear that when I become King of Camelot that I will lift the ban on sorcery."

It took a moment for Morgana to weigh up the implication of his words.

_We're free!_

_Oh, Arthur!_

"I swear by all…" He got no further.

Because Morgana grabbed him and pulled his face down to her, and hungrily began to devour his mouth. She was pushing Arthur down onto the ground and straddling him. He seemed startled at first, but decided he liked that she was being so forceful. She pulled his undershirt off and cast it aside. Arthur reached behind her to find the buckles on her body armor.

Arthur's mouth fitted into hers, her lips caressing over his like gentle waves. He was so warm it spread from him into her. She felt it radiating out from where their bodies were pressed up against one another. Her hands squeezed the muscles on his bare chest. Arthur's own attempts to touch her were fumbled. He kept trying in vain to unbuckle her chest plate but couldn't. She had to turn around in the end and hold her braid out of the way, so Arthur could see what he was doing. Once he peeled it off her, he also pulled the camisole out of her pants, and lifted it up revealing Morgana's bosom.

Morgana remained still. Allowing him to enjoy the sight of her. He took handfuls of her bountiful breasts and squeezed them between spread fingers.

"This makes me think of that day…" Arthur said eventually, without lifting his gaze, "You know, by the stream, we went swimming and the horses ran off."

Last night had made Morgana think of it too. The only memorable thing about it was that she and Arthur had kissed. Her first kiss, and probably his first kiss too.

"I remember," Morgana replied.

Arthur's hands went to her hair, he wanted to untie it, "Please," Was all he said, begging, as if he expected her to say 'no'. Morgana turned her head, and Arthur unfastened and unwound her locks until they were cascading down over her shoulders. He combed his fingers through her silky dark tresses.

Someone needed to make the first move now towards bottom-half nakedness. It was becoming a dance of sorts.

He hesitated, "We should stop. Remember…"

Morgana silenced his mouth with her lips. She lifted a leg over, then stood up. She let him watch while she very deliberately unlaced her boots and kicked them off, then her pants, bending forward, leisurely peeling them down her shapely legs. Morgana's remaining small clothes fell on the pile, and she immediately vanished into the water. If Arthur was expecting to thoroughly examine her naked body he only caught a glimpse. She went under for a few moments before splashing him.

Arthur disrobed as fast as he could before diving in after her. As soon he surfaced they resumed kissing.
Arthur was clearly nervous and excited, but his honor kept getting in the way, "We shouldn't, we're not married yet."

Yet.

Arthur's going to marry me.

I'm going to be Queen.

Morgana's hands roamed lower down his muscular stomach, she felt his hair and finally she touched his desire. She grasped the length of him.

"Father won't let me..." Arthur jerked at the sensation

He quickly used his own hand to break her contact with his body. Morgana checked his eyes, Arthur didn't want to stop, he just didn't need further stimulation. He delicately allowed his hands to glide down the sensitive skin of her back, over her rump to the back of her thighs, pulling her up so she was encircling his waist. Morgana's arms were interlocked, around his neck pressing her forehead to his so she could kiss him.

Arthur was anxious and fumbling in deciding what to do next, which increased his embarrassment. She moved her hips, and positioned herself over him, before gently easing herself down onto his sword. She let her warmth engulf him, just enough to feel her body's reaction to him, to feel the physical ache of her desire. Morgana eased off, pressing with her thighs to lift herself up slightly. He didn't want to lose the contact between their bodies. Arthur bucked, a little harder than she liked, pressing his stomach right up against hers, she tensed gasping audibly.

He's not like Uther in this regard, thank the Goddess! Otherwise she wouldn't have been able to stand it!

Arthur stopped, she could tell by the look on his face, he was wondering if he was hurting her. He's not like Uther in this regard, thank the Goddess! Otherwise she wouldn't have been able to stand it! She reassured him by kissing him. She lowered herself down again. Her body was hugging him, immersing him. He was getting close to the pleasure moment. Morgana pushed up again ever so slightly, moving away from him, this time his hands pulled her hips down as he thrust up to return to the sensation a moment earlier. It was uncomfortable, but not bad. He exaggerated his hip motions now and a cry escaped his lips.

Arthur looked at her with curiosity. Morgana began to make noises of pleasure. She started to move her hips rhythmically, not fast, she would tilt her pelvis so that his body would rub against hers. Her breasts would bounce as she did, he stared, mesmerized.

An awkward sounding grunt graced his lips, his whole body shook, and he went stiff all over like a board. She felt him relax after that. They remained intertwined, joined at the mouth and groin, still in the water. Morgana could tell he felt self-conscious and wanted to flee. Morgana held him to her.

"Thank you," She said, and kissed his cheek delicately.

Arthur looked surprised, as if he thought she was teasing him, she made sure to convey she was being genuine. Her hands gently traced circles on his back. He moved to get out of the water but she held him to her.

"Stay," Morgana requested.

She saw relief cross his features. Morgana was sure Arthur had never done this before. After the day they kissed in the water and lost the horses, Arthur had become obsessed with chivalry. They had been riding and come across a stream by chance, Morgana had announced she wanted to swim. Morgana mostly led him around by the nose back then, she had breasts and Arthur badly wanted to
touch them. Arthur went in bare-chested, she had left her shift on, but it went see-thru once wet. Arthur had gaped at the outline of her bosom. He had pushed her head under the water and held her down, she had fought back, and they had begun to wrestle. A moon turn before then they'd had a similar roughhousing in a barn and Arthur appeared as if he were going to kiss her, but backed out suddenly. Morgana remembered the water, and her body being pressed up against his, Arthur was a little taller than her then, but still growing. One moment she was tensing her muscles as hard as she could and the next, Arthur's tongue was in her mouth like a slippery eel. Morgana had liked it, even if neither of them really knew what they were doing. Arthur wanted to lay hands on her breasts and she had let him, through the wet cloth. It was more about the sensations created by touching each other, than coming from any genuinely romantic feeling of love. She had fingered the muscles on his chest, he'd laughed and said it wasn't the same thing. Morgana had grown to womanhood a few years earlier and hadn't paid him much attention, but Arthur was starting to catch up by then. Morgana had wanted to lie together naked, but Arthur changed his mind, saying he would be besmirching her honor and it was against the Knight's Code.

"You're not a knight," She had pointed out.

He had responded solemnly, "But I want to be, so I need to behave in a chivalrous manner."

He begged her forgiveness and asked that she never speak of it again to anyone. Morgana thought the Knight's Code was stupid from that moment on.

Neither one of them had brought it up again. Morgana had been hurt over his rejection and had hated herself for carrying a flame for Arthur for far too long after that. Arthur's response had been shame and he avoided her for over a year. She had felt it was a major overreaction to a little awkward teat fondling, but Arthur was funny where his pride was concerned, he liked to think he was too noble to shit.

He found her mouth again, which reoriented Morgana back to the still pool in the grove in Cornwall. He slowly began to touch her lips between his, how she liked it. She responded and soon it was deeper and more sensual. Morgana tickled the roof of his mouth now, and she felt his lips tremble.

Arthur is going to lift the ban on magic! Morgana kept repeating it to herself, allowing the enormity of his vow to sink in. She couldn't wait to tell Morgause.

Morgause.

Sister, My Love, I'm so sorry, please forgive me, she silently apologized.

When Arthur had come into the tent with that look in his eye, she knew they were going to taste each other's body's this evening. Morgana had tried to appear confident, but had felt uneasy. Morgana had already resolved that if giving her body to Arthur was the price of freedom for magical people, then he could have her, but she would never stop loving Morgause.

And then he had made that vow. Perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised, but she was.

She had found herself wanting to. She had grabbed him, she had mounted him, Morgana had shocked herself by how bold she had been. There was love and genuine feeling between them, and gratitude and trust and comfort. It wasn't what she felt for Morgause, but it wasn't pretend either.

A half-moon turn ago, Arthur thought sorcery a genuine evil, his father a wise and just king, and Morgana being held against her will by an enchantress. And now, he was being everything she had always hoped he could be. He had defied his king when it mattered, he had trusted her when she
could provide no proof, and now, because of his love and faith in her, Arthur was willing to give all magical people the benefit of the doubt. *None of us will have to live in fear in the shadows any longer.* Morgana could hardly believe it was real.

She wanted his first time to be pleasurable, and for Arthur to feel safe and loved. Not painful, forced and distressing. Sex is beautiful, and enjoyable and natural, she'd learned that on The Isle. Morgause had shown her just how good it could feel, she wanted to give that to him. She could do this.

Morgana threaded her fingers between Arthur's and just held him close. She felt him relax into her. Arthur had received so little comfort from women in any way his whole life, that even little gestures from her impacted him greatly. It was getting dark now, and she was starting to feel the cold water.

"We should return," She finally said.

They didn't behave affectionately where anyone could see. Gossip was already abounding about Morgana being a sorcerer, it wasn't a good idea to flaunt what they were doing to a hostile crowd. Morgana changed clothes and returned to the main bonfire, sitting a fair way from Arthur. He was being celebrated, and they ate and drank a great feast.

Morgana retired to her tent early. Arthur woke her later, he wasn't drunk, but he wanted her to sleep with him in his tent, which she did. They kissed and hugged a little before they fell asleep.

Morgana dreamed of a whole different world that would now be possible.
The Righteous Day

Morgana awoke in the prince's tent in Cornwall to Arthur snuggling into her.

"You are very beautiful," He yawned while sitting up on an elbow.

She smiled, rolling onto her back, "My Prince."

"I love you," Arthur said, looking down into Morgana's eyes with devotion.

Morgana froze. *I love Morgause.* Then Morgana remembered Ninianne's instruction, *Do whatever he asks of you.*

"I love you, too." *It isn't really a lie.*

He became serious a moment, "I want to marry you," He wasn't asking, it was a statement of truth.

Arthur would never have relations with a woman unless he was prepared to take that step, she'd known that yesterday. Morgana smiled sleepily back at him, she cupped his cheek and kissed his lips.

Arthur brought his face close to hers, interlinking their fingers as he soulfully gazed at her becoming serious, "I didn't ask last night because I was going to get Father's permission first, but I've changed my mind, your consent is all I need," Arthur looked genuinely hopeful, but also scared, and a bit... boyish, "Morgana, will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

*My Dear Sweet King.*

"Yes, Arthur," She kissed him again.

He looked so relieved and happy, then giddy. He rained kisses down all over her face.

"Yes, I'll marry you," She repeated as his wet lips touched her nose, her forehead, her ear.

*You are finally who I've always needed you to be.*

Their relations last night were contrary to Arthur's usual knightly ethics, but Morgana knew exactly what had happened. His Father, whom had always claimed to follow the Knight's Code to the letter, was revealed to be a liar. It had shaken Arthur to his core. And then, he'd almost died yesterday. She had saved him, Arthur had finally found a way to share his burdens with another person, of having so much rest on his shoulders all the time.

"Do you want to wait?" Arthur was serious and concerned, "Until we're married?"

*What silly rules these Christians have!*

Morgana made sure to gaze at him intensely, before wickedly cocking an eyebrow and shaking her head slowly. Her mischievous side brought out his playfulness as well. He was on top of her and pulling off his shirt. He dispensed with her gown and nuzzled his face into Morgana's breasts. She squealed her delight. He suckled her nipples and his fingers touched and groped and squeezed everything on her body. Last evening, he hadn't seen her naked sex, this morning was a thorough exploration.

She laid back and parted her legs, closing her eyes so Arthur would feel free to take in her naked
Uther would never have consented.

Arthur was going to marry me anyway, against his father's objection.

He seemed to be still a while, she cracked an eye open to see him naked, touching himself while he looked at her. There was an intense moment of Morgana, looking at him looking at her, while he pleasured himself, that got her feelings flowing. While he still watched, Morgana slowly trailed her own hand down to her mound and began to rub her little fold above her opening. Arthur stared at her wide-eyed. He had no idea what she was doing, this was all new territory for him. His breath became ragged and his hand worked itself up and down his length faster than before. She brought her second hand to her opening and allowed him to see as she slipped a finger inside. Arthur's mounting curiosity got the better of him. He stopped holding himself and his hand displaced her own on her pink swollen nub.

"Gently," She instructed him.

Arthur, ever dutiful, obeyed. It felt nice. Morgana let her head fall back, as she arched her spine and a sigh escaped her throat. She felt his fingers enter her sacred cave, she relaxed into it, and he worked them in and out of her entrance. She let him know his actions were very welcome.

I can teach him how to do this so it feels good.

Arthur moved his body to cover hers, positioning his arousal at her opening. His face was so close to hers now. Morgana smiled and he seized her mouth again. She put her hands on his hips to guide him inside. Once his head was inserted, she pushed him back out. Then after a few moments, she pulled him towards her again, until he implanted himself in farther.

The Isle aren't forcing me. I am choosing this. I do this for The Isle. Their cause is my cause.

"We fit together," Arthur said suddenly, "Like you were made for me."

She smiled and kissed him. He flushed red. Arthur always got embarrassed whenever he said anything that sounded poetic, or laced with feelings, quickly trying to distance himself from it.

Morgana began to move her hips in sideways circles. Arthur was unsure but copied her, they moved as one. She crossed her ankles around his waist. Morgana smiled at him, she could see in his face that Arthur was thankful.

Yesterday was passion and urgency and desire, this was more thoughtful, patient and loving. Arthur's mouth remained open, as if expecting pain or pleasure at any moment, every sensation new and to be savored. She watched his muscles ripple, as his breathing became rapid, and his motions sharper. Morgana matched him, and sucked his throat, danced her tongue along his jawline, she felt his body begin to shake and stiffen above her. Morgana used her fingertips to squeeze his muscular ass cheeks right as he was getting close. Arthur's release seemed to come out of his shock at her boldness and the affect her actions produced within his body.

"You feel amazing," He finally managed to say, still out of air.

Arthur laid spent in her arms for a long time. Morgana played with his hair, draping it all to one side, then the other. He was sweaty and smelled of salt.

You will be a wise and just king, beloved of the commons and The Isle. And I will guide you to make it so. You were always a better man than your father, now you can prove it to Camelot, My
King.

She could get used to this.

Arthur spoke eventually, "I have to go command the battle," He sounded as if it was an inconvenience when he'd rather stay here with her.

She kissed his forehead, "My Prince."

"My Princess," He replied, happily.

She gently whispered in his ear, "Make sure you come back in one piece," Before kissing his ear.

He looked smug, "Did you foresee I die today?"

"No."

He smiled, nonchalant, "Then I'll be fine."

))))))

The last day of battle was over by midday. The Saxons had lost so many men and were being routed no matter what tactic they tried. Their strategy had been to catch Albion unprepared, but since they had been denied that, they were finding themselves no match for a waiting high ground defense. Only 30 of their ships remained afloat, and men scurried to get aboard and sail away.

Arthur was unharmed and emerged, sitting on the shoulders of King Rodor and Urwaine, sword in the air. Surrounded by so many adoring men. Morgana couldn't help but smile. She still had many wounded to attend to. It would be hours before she could join him.

Urwaine had promised a great feast at Tintagel for everyone who fought. The men were in high spirits to celebrate. This war with the Saxons was one of the most resounding victories Albion had ever won.

))))))

Morgana was doing her best to use her powers to heal a shoulder opened by the swipe of an ax. But, using her powers like this for hours, seriously drained her. The man was gripping her arm and screaming for mercy. She had to keep her emotions under control, there were so many men with gaping wounds, and blood and pus, and endless cries of pain. Some had volunteered seeking glory, all the stories and songs of battles past made it sound as if combat were just and honorable. Many others simply thought it their duty to defend their land from invasion. The blood and horror tended to be skipped over. What a lesson they were all getting, herself included.

Suddenly, Morgana got a strange feeling of cold going through her, then she saw Uther's face in front of her, floating. He looked sad, his lips moved, he seemed to be mouthing her name.

She knew he was dead.
Morgana stopped. *Isn't this what you wanted?*

Her eyes welled with tears, whether relief or sadness, probably both.

*It's over.*

))))))

A messenger from the south arrived at the start of the feast with the announcement that the Saxons had been defeated there under the leadership of King Uther Pendragon. A roar went up from the room, and Arthur looked relieved. Morgana felt bad for him. Once the cheering died down, the messenger relayed the rest of the information. Heavy losses had been sustained by King Bayard, whom had managed to hold out until help arrived yesterday afternoon. Uther had managed a force of 250 men on short notice and had fought valiantly. King Olaf had rallied a mere 150 men, whose training was doubtful. Camelot had driven out the remaining Saxons that morning. Uther had a force of less than 60 men still fit to fight. They were on their way to Tintagel to join in the celebrations.

Arthur was being congratulated by the various nobles, kings from other lands, princes whom all agreed, that Arthur was the best battle commander that ever lived, the bravest knight and the most ferocious fighter that ever swung a sword.

*I did that for him, and at least he knows it. It would be nice if they knew it too, at the very least so they'd stop calling me 'witch' behind my back.*

Arthur raised his wine goblet, "To the Castellan of Tintagel, who's faith in me has been unwavering from the start, King Rodor and Queen Annis, who came to the aid of lands that were not their own, Camelot thanks you."

Arthur drank his toast and the hall followed.

"To Bayard's brave forces who have sacrificed so much, and to my father, King Uther Pendragon, for aiding another king, King Olaf, in his time of greatest need, Camelot gives its thanks."

More cheers and guzzling of wine, mead or ale.

"And lastly, to the Lady Morgana," Arthur raised his goblet, and looked around the room for her.

Morgana stood, she was now dressed in silk as befit a Duchess. Arthur saw her and motioned for her to come to his side. She slowly made her way. She saw the sideways glances, the sneers, the open-mouthed stares, but no one dared to display their disdain for her more openly now.

"Morgana, you have saved my life, and helped me in every way possible, I thank you, everyone here owes you a debt, even if they don't know it, I know it. I won't ever forget it," He went on, the room became very quiet now. He hugged her very warmly, their bodies being pressed up against each other for longer than was normal, before slowly placing a kiss on her cheek. A low rumble of shock went through the room. Arthur didn't appear to care. He held her hand and presented her to the room. Raif begun to clap loudly, and others soon followed, until most of the room were now applauding her.

Arthur and Morgana had discussed briefly earlier, that tonight was about the victory over the Saxons. Arthur would tell Uther out of courtesy, but he would announce their intention to marry tomorrow night in front of all these kingdoms, and those kings that would have joined them by then that fought in Amata.
Arthur instructed Merlin to make room for Morgana at the high table along the front where the royalty and battle commanders sat. She sat at his left hand, and they feasted and drank. Urwaine and Raif made an effort to speak kindly to her, complementing her efforts with the wounded.

Music played loudly, the feast was extravagant and the men in fine spirits. Dancing on tables, spilling ale, drinking contests and bellowing laughter rang out across the hall.

Old King Bayard arrived during the festivities with his remaining force of 200 men that were still fit to fight. The injured had remained at Pembroke. They told tales of the valor of Albion's fighters. Bayard's expertise as a battle commander had been vital, since there were 1200 Saxons already in the bay before Mercia's forces even arrived, and Olaf hardly had his men armed and set up when the attack began. Bayard had waited patiently until the Saxons committed with a charge to bring out his heavy horse armed with pointed lances to break their lines and trample as many men as possible.

Bayard spoke of Uther's gallantry. His forces had arrived in time, before Bayard's and Olaf's forces had been overwhelmed. Uther had fought and commanded such that he had turned the tide of battle, and so a toast was raised to him in his absence. Arthur inquired where his father was, was he coming to the feast? Bayard informed her prince that Uther had left for Cornwall after his forces, his father had remained to discuss issues with Olaf regards fortifications, and arrangements for the dead and wounded, but expected he wouldn't be far behind. Arthur looked relieved, and Morgana's heart hurt for him.

Another two rounds of drinks passed. Pudding and cream was served. More contests to prove manliness and bravery were performed by men far too drunk to attempt what they were attempting. It seemed a shame to Morgana for a man to survive a battle unharmed only to lose fingers to a drunken knife game. The evening was almost over, when Harwyn entered the hall dressed as a Camelot soldier. Morgana watched him intently. His face was forlorn. Arthur gestured for him to come to the front and tell his story.

"I was with King Uther in Amata near Castle Pembroke," Harwyn's voice rang out across the crowded hall, "We defeated the Saxons there, and were traveling to Cornwall…" He then paused as if he were too distressed to go on.

Arthur's face changed, he looked scared to receive the rest of the message, he remained still, holding his breath.

Harwyn looked so sad, "Saxons fell upon us, our numbers were greatly depleted, we weren't sure from where…"

The young soldier stopped and looked at Arthur, his face full of sympathy, "King Uther Pendragon is dead."

All eyes in the room went to Arthur, who was silent and still. All the smiles in the room died.

"He died a great and honorable king," Harwyn announced, "With a sword in his hand, bravely defending this land from invaders," The young warg took a knee and bowed his head.

Urwaine questioned the validity of the claims, "That cannot be, we had a report during this feast, that Camelot defeated the Saxons on the south eastern coast."

"Of all of our remaining forces, I was the only one who managed to escape." Harwyn hung his head in shame.
It was all too much for Arthur, "Are you certain? Could my father have fled? Did you see him... are you sure he is..." His voice trailed off.

Harwyn nodded sadly, "I'm sorry, My King, I saw King Uther on the ground... not moving... he was definitely..." He shook his head.

Raif who was next to Morgana, stood, drawing his sword, "Long live King Arthur of Camelot."

The rest of the room followed suit. The scraping of metal, the shouting of oaths.

Arthur seemed to go numb, like he was dazed and couldn't see straight. Morgana remembered a time when they had been play fighting and she'd hit him hard in the head. Arthur had spoken slowly and kept asking the same questions again and again as if he were simple minded, he seemed like that now.

He stood up and retreated to the balcony. Morgana followed him out. He would want her comfort. Arthur was looking upon the night sky. He wasn't crying, the reality of it all hadn't sunk in yet. Morgana put her arm around his back. He did nothing. She tried to draw him in closer to her but he pushed her away.

He grabbed at his chainmail and violently ripped it off, then threw it on the ground. Then his sword belt. He pulled the sword out and began to swing wildly at the stone pillars on the balcony. The sound was loud clanging, the ricochet alone should have been enough to make him stop after the first strike, but Arthur was frenzied. He had always expressed his emotions physically like this, she knew to let him. He smacked and slashed, he made a few marks, but mostly he just exhausted himself until he couldn't lift his arms up any longer his muscles were so tired, then he sunk to his knees gasping for breath. The sword fell to the ground, and that's when Morgana held his face to her chest. At first it seemed as if Arthur couldn't fill his lungs from so much intense movement so suddenly, but at some point, it became sobbing. Maybe it was out here with her, where he didn't have to put on a brave face anymore, Arthur broke down. Morgana soothed him as best she could. She kissed his forehead and dabbed his cheeks. Which only made Arthur cry more.

Arthur struggled to speak, "I, I, the last time we spoke, we fought, I defied him..."

"That proved to him you are the leader you need to be, Arthur," Morgana spoke knowingly.

"I, I, I'm not ready, I don't know how..." He cried, overwhelmed.

"Yes, you do. You'll find a way, Arthur."

Arthur was lost, "I can't go back in there."

"Let it out," She encouraged, "Then you need to go back in, and accept your kingship, say a few words about your father."

Arthur was so dejected, "How are you so calm?"

Morgana couldn't tell him the truth. She'd known since afternoon, she felt it, she'd seen Uther's face flash before her when it happened. Her feelings were far more ambivalent than she had expected. She'd cried, and felt relief, and guilt, and then safe and happy. The complexity of her relationship with her guardian couldn't be easily explained to Arthur though.

"I am trying to be strong for you," She finally said, but allowed tears to well in her eyes to show him she was hurting.
Arthur held onto her to get to his feet. She took him by the hand to the nearest wash room. She knew her way around this castle very well, they went through the servants' backstairs and hallways so he wouldn't be seen by the noble guests. She washed his face herself, and once he didn't look so red and puffy anymore, she led the king back to the dining hall, arm in arm.

The room fell silent, an inherent acknowledgement of Arthur's authority.

"My father..." Arthur began, "Would thank all of you for your bravery, to those who fought... some didn't make it to be here, but we will remember our fallen heroes and their sacrifice for us, and for all the people of Camelot, Cornwall and Amata who are safe because of all of our efforts."

Arthur rallied valiantly to keep his composure, "My Father," He paused, unsure of what to say next, his feelings towards his sire had been in flux, "Was a strong king and a brave man, who made decisions based on what he thought was best for Camelot. My Father won his kingdom, he had nothing handed to him, he ruled as he saw fit, I can only hope I will find as much... **conviction** to rule as I see fit."

His eyes found Morgana when he spoke those last few words.

He means **lifting the ban on magic.**

Arthur was now set to excuse himself and retire early, and no one was going to stop him. King Bayard of Mercia and Queen Annis of Camlann both rose.

Bayard spoke first, "Without King Arthur of Camelot, the Saxons would have taken the east and southern coasts of Albion. King Arthur saved us all. Our Kingdoms were totally unprepared. I know no greater warrior, battle commander, and wiser King. I declare, King Arthur, my High King, to rule over Mercia and Camelot. I, King Bayard of Mercia, swear to King Arthur of Camelot my loyalty and service."

Queen Annis, clearly in agreement made a similar oath, "Camlann accepts King Arthur of Camelot as our High King, to rule over us henceforth from Camelot."

Queen Annis made the same oath of fealty as Bayard.

King Rodor whether feeling the pressure to comply or genuinely moved by the other two oaths from the other land's rulers, took a knee and vowed the same, that Arthur would be henceforth recognized as the High King of Nemeth.

Arthur was stunned, he didn't know what to say to such a proposal.

**Arthur has just been put in control of four of Albion's eight kingdoms.**

**Arthur is going to allow magic.**

**He must accept.**

Morgana whispered into his ear, "You need to accept their offer, make a vow to rule wisely and justly."

Arthur was too overcome with emotion to think clearly. He stood and repeated her words nearly exactly as she had spoken them.

Arthur wasn't able to appreciate the enormity of what had just happened, not yet, "This is very sudden, and I need some time for myself to grieve my father and my king's loss. I will retire early,
but I hope you will all enjoy this celebration so kindly provided by Urwaine of Cornwall."

He raised his glass in a final toast, praising the fighting men and his father's memory and everyone drank.

"Long live King Arthur," Was the main call being echoed off the stone walls.

Arthur left the feast with Morgana a step behind. He quickly got lost in Tintagel's rabbit warren of hallways. Morgana had been told she could occupy her childhood chambers for the remainder of their stay, that's where she led him. Once she had closed the door, he lost his composure again.

Through the tears he finally said, "Just make it stop."

She stood next to the bed and hugged Arthur as tight as she could. There they remained a long while.

His mouth became restless and sort hers, pulling her up to his lips. His tongue was demanding. Arthur backed her up against the wall before unlacing his breeches not even bothering to take them off. There would be no patient preparation this time, Morgana knew. She held up her skirts and Arthur hoisted her up against him, her thighs clung to his waist and he entered her pushing deep. He slammed their bodies repeatedly against the wall, using one hand on the stone to steady himself, the other underneath her thigh to hold her to him. He was being rough, getting out his frustration and hurt.

She didn't like it, but Morgana would endure a lot for him. She hugged Arthur's chest to hers and pressed her cheek against his and held on, accepting her punishment. She had killed Uther as much as anyone, she was the cause of Arthur's current distress. His thrusting became frantic, the pressure was too much. Just as Morgana was about to beg him to stop, Arthur pushed himself firmly up against her and the wall and held, crying out as he let himself go. His sounds became cries of pain soon afterwards. The life seemed to leave him, his legs buckled, they slumped onto the floor as a tangle of limbs. Morgana didn't try to move, she just held him to her in that position. Her hands gently rubbed his back. She pressed her lips to his wet cheeks.

"I just wish…" He began to say trying so hard just to form the words, "The last time we spoke, I hadn't been yelling at him… and calling him a liar."

"Arthur, he knows you love him," Morgana reassured him as best she could, "He is so proud of you."

She kept soothing him by rubbing his back. Arthur eventually fell asleep after that.
Morgana awoke to Arthur seeking further comfort. They must have moved to the narrow child's bed at some stage. It seemed much bigger the last time she had slept here over a decade ago. He was kissing her neck and squeezing her bust through the silk while she was still in a morning haze. Her dress from the night before was still clutching her, but Arthur was rapidly finding his way under her skirts. She laid back and let him do as he wished. His frenzied lovemaking continued. This time made her think of Uther the night she had been brought back from the druid camp. The king had come to her, delicately removed her night gown and had his way with her as if Morgana wasn't even there. She had acted the lifeless doll for all the good it did her. At least with Arthur it was coming from a place of genuine pain and wouldn't last.

This is grief, she kept reminding herself.

Morgana couldn't help but think about the future and how this would be her life now, when they got married. Being Queen would come with sacrifices, Morgause. But she had known cruelty, and force, but also love and sensual bliss. She had to restrain her need to weep.

Merlin had waited in the guest chambers that Arthur had been assigned to sleep in. The warlock eventually decided to look elsewhere. After a thorough search Arthur was found in chambers allotted for Morgana's use. Merlin was starting to wonder about those rumors now. Death could make people do all sorts of things that seemed unlike them.

Merlin had been so busy tending the wounded after the battle each day, and cleaning armor, and brushing out horses, and fetching and carrying water, supplies, the injured, he simply hadn't been able to keep an eye on Arthur the way he normally would. Merlin had heard whispers that Morgana had slept in Arthur's tent the night before last, he hadn't been able to confirm or deny it. Arthur had been in an unusually good mood before the start of the fighting yesterday, but Merlin had thought it was because his prince smelled victory.

"Where have you been?" Merlin was testy, "The whole castle has been looking for you."

Arthur snapped back, "I needed some time to myself, Merlin, my father just died."

Merlin was a touch accusatory as well, "Were you with Morgana? No one can find her either."

Arthur was petulant, "None of your bees wax, Merlin, I'm the prince, I don't have to answer to you!"

As soon as it was out of his mouth, Arthur realized his mistake.

You're not the prince any longer, you're the king.

Merlin noted that Arthur didn't answer the question.

Arthur ordered him around, deliberately reminding Merlin of his place, "Start packing, we leave for Olaf's castle as soon as possible."

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Merlin watched Arthur and Morgana from behind as Camelot's forces that we able enough walked or rode slowly to Amata. Arthur was chatting to her easily. He had been keeping Merlin out of his
plans and deferring to Morgana all the time now.

Because he knows Morgana has magic and has used it to save him.

I've saved him a hundred times, but Arthur doesn't know it.

He thinks she's beautiful, and he doesn't think of me that way.

Arthur had that look, the one that said he wanted her. That he thought everything she did was wonderful.

She might be your sister.

Oh no! I should have told you, what have I done!

I have to tell him. What proof can I offer?

He won't believe me. If I say Uther confessed, he'll ask why I didn't tell him days ago. And what will I say then? 'I didn't tell you because I was worried you would care for Morgana more than you already do?'

It bothered Merlin that the messenger who came to inform Tintagel about Uther's death seemed to be the same one he saw talking to Morgana, the one she gave her horse to. And now, Morgana was back riding her white palfrey mare. Merlin was sure that wasn't a coincidence.

What if Morgana told Morgause where Uther was going to be.

How to prove that now? Do you even want to prove that now? Arthur knows Morgana has magic and he isn't afraid, he's embracing her. Any loss of belief by Arthur in Morgana's goodness will be detrimental for people with magic.

But if she did help kill Uther, doesn't Arthur have a right to know?

They reached Pembroke on the coast by mid-afternoon. King Olaf was a most gracious host and welcomed Arthur cordially. He wasn't in the mood for another feast. He wanted to see his father. Olaf explained Father's body had been found only last evening, and that the Saxons had been most cruel. The king had been stabbed many times. His men all killed.

Arthur asked impatiently, "Are you sure it was Saxons?"

"Yes," Olaf nodded sadly, "The Albion men around your father's body were killed with axes, we found a few bodies of Saxons."

"What became of the force that defeated him?" He needed answers, "Have they been caught? Killed? Retreated?"

Olaf's grey-haired physician explained the rest, "We believe they were in the act of retreating when they came across your father's forces moving north to meet up with you in Cornwall."

Arthur nodded absently.

The old man shook his head despondently, "A bloody battle ensued, and we believe the remaining Saxons, having heard about the defeats in the south and north in Cornwall, must have decided to set sail."
"I see," said Arthur, somewhat unsatisfied with that answer, not because it didn't make sense, but because he would have liked to have dealt with them himself.

"He's in the chapel, I laid him out myself," The physician said.

Arthur entered and immediately saw the man's body lying on a thick slab of stone, still, sword lying length-ways on his chest. He didn't look like Father, not until he got closer. He looked so pale, and smaller than Arthur remembered.

Uther had been changed into fine purple velvet clothes, that weren't his own, nothing in truth that Father would have worn. That's when Arthur noticed the wounds. Stab wounds, many of them. His throat, his chest, even on his face.

How dare they! He's a king!

Arthur punched the nearest solid object. His hand gave him blind agony.

Morgana came up behind him and gripped his shoulders. Then she noticed what he had just seen.

Her hand moved to cover her mouth, "Oh, my!"

The solid object Arthur had hit was a stone pillar holding up a bust of a Roman Emperor, long dead. And he had broken a bone in his hand for sure.

Arthur shook his head, "I should have accepted Morgause's offer, The Isle offered me 250 trained fighters to help, but I refused, because I didn't want to disappoint Father. They could have made all the difference, he might still be alive right now."

His wrist was limp, he couldn't move it. Morgana offered to heal it for him, but he wanted the throbbing pain instead. She didn't say he was wrong. Arthur knew she would have accepted the offer.

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A victory feast was held in Arthur's honor. Though the mood was more somber because of Uther's passing. He had to attend, if only briefly as not to insult King Olaf. Arthur came, made a toast, spoke of his father's bravery, raising his glass.

King Olaf kneeled in front of his sword, "I am indebted the King Uther for his help, and his son, King Arthur, and King Bayard, who came to Amata, to our aid, even after I had refused to come to Camelot's defense when you asked. It will not be forgotten, I know the only reason I am still standing here is their bravery. King Uther's sacrifice for us will be honored, which is why I pledge my fealty to his son, King Arthur of Camelot, to henceforth be High King to rule over Amata."

It was the same oath Bayard, Annis and Rodor swore in Cornwall. Arthur realized he now ruled five of Albion's eight kingdoms. It was too much. He wanted Morgana. He accepted, and spoke kindly of his gracious host and of their gallant fight to achieve victory over the Saxon invaders. He spoke fondly of his father's fighting prowess, his bravery and sacrifice and how he would rule as a wise and just king. But Arthur retreated as soon as possible.

Olaf set Arthur up in the fanciest guest chambers he had, which was very finely decorated. Merlin followed his king down the hallway towards his temporary abode.

Merlin politely spoke to Arthur, "Um, Sire, the other honored guests are beginning to talk… about
"We're engaged, Merlin," Arthur blurted out, "There, I told you. We'll be married before the new moon and then all the talk will die."

*Oh no! It's worse than I thought!*

"Is it wise to marry a sorcerer?" Merlin hated himself a little for making that argument.

Arthur was sure of himself, "I don't care, let them talk."

Merlin tried a different angle, "She's practically your sister." He really wanted to yell 'Your father had an affair with her mother, she really probably *is* your sister!'

Arthur grabbed the front of Merlin's shirt and pulled his face in close, "Merlin, don't ever say that to me again. *Ever!*" Arthur let go but gave him a little shove to emphasize how irate that comment made him.

*I'm not saying anything you haven't already said yourself. Many times!*

*How can I prove it now? Everyone who knows the truth is dead. There must be a way!*

Merlin had followed Arthur into his chambers. He couldn't contain his shock upon seeing Morgana was sitting at the vanity brushing her hair.

"Merlin," Arthur snapped, "Out!" The king pushed his servant's face backwards with his hand.

If they weren't having sex already, they certainly intended to tonight. Arthur was always so shy and cautious when it came to his heart. His sudden attachment to Morgana showed him to be impulsive and carefree. He didn't seem bothered that he was besmirching her honor.

*And what of Arthur's long-standing feelings for Gwen? Have they suddenly disappeared? Has Morgana worked some magic on him?*

Merlin waited outside thinking he should do... *something*. Morgana's sudden hold over Arthur seemed to be partly because of his grief, and her sexual allure. Merlin felt it beneath him, but he looked through the key hole. Arthur already had his shirt off, and his arms around Morgana from behind, as she sat. He kissed her neck, making it impossible for her to keep grooming herself.

She smiled at him through the reflection in the mirror and he whispered something in her ear. She stood and turned, they passionately joined their mouths now. Arthur walked her backwards to the foot of the bed without breaking the kiss.

The hallway was dark, no one was likely to notice him, Merlin felt bad, but he deemed it imperative that he watch.

*What does Arthur see in her anyway?* Merlin's critical voice in his head began to reel off; *Her beautiful green eyes, her unblemished skin, her full lips, her shiny ebony hair, her perfect white teeth, her curvy bust, her sculpted hips, her shapely behind, her noble birth... need I go on!*

Merlin saw the desire in Arthur's eyes. Her silk dress fell to the ground, his breeches, her shift. They rolled naked on the bed. Merlin got a look at Arthur's whole body naked, only from behind though, his perfect shoulders, contoured back, his faultless round backside. Morgana's hand squeezed a cheek. Arthur found it amusing. Merlin felt himself becoming engorged.
Arthur knelt on the bed, his body full frontal naked and ready for copulation, Merlin slid his hand into his breeches. Arthur was so chiseled, from his jaw to his well-defined stomach, the hair between his legs was as golden as that on his head. Arthur's large dagger was ready for action, and his fleshy sack hung down gently swaying. Merlin committed it all to memory, next time he relieved himself he would have more details for his fantasy. Merlin licked his lips, feeling his heart race, and his own blood rush to his groin.

Merlin remembered the spell. A man's arousal was fire. Wind thought Merlin as he took the wind out of Arthur's sails so to speak. One minute, Arthur was on top of Morgana about to plough her like a field and then, he couldn't maintain his arousal. Arthur looked positively horrified. He got off the bed and turned his back. He didn't want his woman to see that his readiness had deserted him.

Morgana waited patiently. Arthur was using his hand to try to bring his snake back to life to no avail. Morgana sensed something was wrong, enough that she silently approached him from behind and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her chin on his shoulder. He tried to retreat, but she held him.

"It's grief, Arthur," She said knowingly.

Arthur was beyond mortified. She took both his hands and guided him back to the bed, encouraging him under the blankets with her. They both lay on their sides facing one another.

"Feel, however you feel," She encouraged, kissing him gently, full of love and care.

*She will protect him.*

Arthur was upset, embarrassed and angry though, he wanted to push her away but she persisted. Morgana had a couple of wine skins near the bed. She took a long swallow from one and handed it to the king.

"We can remember your father the way he was," Morgana encouraged, "Not the official version that will be lies told by people whom barely knew him to be repeated by everyone, but how he really was, the good and the bad," She reached her hand out to him, her fingers brushing his hair, "Trust me, it helps."

Arthur looked at her, he was hopeful, but uncertain.

Morgana took a long swallow of wine and said, "*God,* I hated him, when I first came to Camelot, he was so stern, and I was so angry about losing my…" She sipped some more wine, "I gave him such a hard time, but Uther… He kept persisting with me."

Arthur smiled sadly, "I remember."

She handed him her skin and he did the same.

Now Arthur said, "I remember when I was about five and he begun to teach me sword play, and rather than everyone else's fathers' who would let them win…" Arthur took another gulp, "Not Father, he would knock me down all day. 'You are too weak, and too slow,' He would tell me, *Repeatedly.*"

"Do you remember when he gave me Moonlight?" She asked.

"For your birthday," Arthur added.

"Yeah, first one, without my Dad," Morgana felt nostalgic, "He used the excuse of riding lessons to
get to know me, he was a sly one."

"You were determined not to like him," Arthur recalled.

"Complete determined," Morgana agreed smiling at the memory, "But he chipped away at me."

"I remember you two fighting at dinner a lot, I believe you hurled a…" Arthur sounded amused now, "What was it? A roasted pheasant at him?"

"I think I threw lots of stuff in the beginning!" Morgana could laugh about it now.

Arthur kept remembering, "I'd never seen anyone even yell at Father, I mean he was the king, and no one dared," Arthur chuckled, "But not you, ten years old, skinny, wearing breeches!"

"You were all of eight if I recall," Morgana smiled warmly.

"I couldn't believe he wouldn't punish you more severely either, for all your bad behavior," Arthur turned a little sad, "I thought it was most unfair."

Morgana took the skin from him and took a long swallow of wine before handing it back.

"I realize now, that Father could see you were grieving," Arthur admitted sadly. "Because you had just lost your…" He didn't say it, he brought the skin back up to his mouth as he couldn't even form the word.

Arthur went back to the funny stories, "Do you remember that time Father made you learn etiquette from that… who was she?"

"Oh, I hated her!" Morgana recalled fondly.

"What was it, Father said?" Arthur tried to concentrate hard now to remember, "She's to make you into a lady," Arthur pulled a face, "'Good luck!' Was all I thought," Arthur drank more.

The stories of Uther and childhood and innocence continued on into the night.

Merlin watched it all. He realized they really were in love and that their bond was much stronger than he had realized.

What am I going to do?

Merlin had no idea.

Morgana was finding this talk therapeutic, she hoped Arthur would find it so as well. But it was hard, because it was making her remember some good things about Uther. As they got drunker the conversation turned a bit.

"So, tell me about this sorcerer boyfriend of yours?" Arthur slurred.

Morgana stiffened every time he tried to broach this topic. He wasn't going to let it go, he was curious who she had been with, if they had made love and how much she cared for 'him'.

Morgana tried to lighten the mood by shaking her head in dismay, "I'm engaged, to the King of Camelot no less, do you accuse me of disloyalty?"

Arthur corrected himself, "Former sorcerer boyfriend."
"And now you question my chastity?" She was mock pouting now.

Arthur snorted, and wine just about came out his nostrils, "My sincerest apologies, fair maiden,"
Arthur teased.

He had a knowing look on his face.

"I never stopped thinking about you after that..." He slurred.

"I'm cutting you off, the tavern is closing," Morgana made light as she pulled the skin from his hands.

"I felt so guilty," Arthur kept reminiscing, "I was sure Father would find out and be so disappointed in me."

Doubtful, if only you knew half of what your father has really gotten up to, you might realize he isn't the man you've always aspired to.

But what Morgana said was, "I think you've punished yourself enough, you follow the Knight's Code to a fault, Arthur."

"I've tried to," Arthur nodded absently, "Ever since then, so I'd never have to feel so guilty again."

Morgana wasn't sure what he meant, but she decided to let it drop. He had a faraway look on his face as he finished the last of the wine. Morgana laid on her side facing him and indicated for him to do the same. She stroked his cheek repeatedly with her hand as they snuggled down together. It wasn't long before he was snoring.
The sun was an hour off dusk when Arthur led Camelot's forces back in through the gates. The travel had been even slower on the way back, a day and a half. The carts that had supplies when they had set off, now held wounded men, who couldn't walk the journey. Some had to remain in Cornwall and Amata because they were too injured to be moved. Arthur seemed lighter since that talk with Morgana. Merlin was tired from watching them closely to ensure no more potential baby-making happened.

Merlin was relieved to see Gaius again. Gaius had gone to the southern coast, but had not traveled with Uther's men towards Cornwall, because he was needed at Pembroke to attend the wounded. He had observed the bodies of Uther and his men once they had been discovered. Merlin was very interested in the particulars. They were in the physician's quarters at the wooden table sitting opposite one another eating soup.

"It was as it appeared to be Merlin," Gaius said, unconcerned, "Uther and his men came upon some Saxons, they fought, about 30 Saxons were killed, and all of Uther's men, and Uther was stabbed many times, perhaps because he was in command or because they knew he was the king?"

Merlin remained unconvinced, "Was there anything strange about it?"

"Strange how?" Gaius was getting short, "There were axes nearby, the wounds appeared to come mostly from axes."

"Uther was stabbed with a number of different daggers," Merlin recalled.

"Why so suspicious, Merlin?" Gaius was amused.

"I don't trust Morgana," Merlin said, "She has a hold over Arthur."

"Wasn't she in Cornwall?" Gaius queried, surprised.

Merlin tried to voice his concerns, "I think she may have told Morgause where Uther was going to be."

Gaius thought on that, his expression turned grave, "That would be serious treason, if indeed true."

"I don't have any proof," Merlin explained, "But, Morgana spoke to the man who arrived in Cornwall to announce Uther's death. He was in the camp before the battle on the second day, but he isn't from Mercia, and Arthur only sent Bayard's men south."

"I see," Gaius said, but his tone suggested he didn't see at all.

"Morgana gave him her horse, he left the camp before the others, and then he was the only survivor who reported Uther's death to us at Tintagel, and now Morgana has her horse back."

Gaius was skeptical, "That isn't proof of anything. Who's the young man?"
"I've been asking around," Merlin answered, "Harwyn, he's not from Camelot, he supposedly came from the woods and just volunteered to fight, no one knows him well. The guards that Arthur assigned to Morgana's protection all said he's her cousin."

"If Morgana says the man is kin, and let him take her horse," Gaius pontificated, "Then this, Harwyn, says the horse is the reason he escaped and no one else."

"It's not enough?" Merlin realized.

"It's not nearly enough," Gaius emphasized.

"What are these rumors I've been hearing about Arthur and Morgana," Gaius asked, "I heard they… shared a bed a number of times during the campaign."

"It's true, believe me," Merlin said, conveying his distaste at the news, "I didn't know at first, but I saw enough at Pembroke to know it's definitely true."

"That behavior is unlike Arthur," Gaius shook his head, "If he feels that way about Morgana, he would marry her first."

Merlin noticed a discrepancy in Gaius' statement, "Not like Arthur, but it is like Morgana?"

Gaius fell silent.

"Do you know something?" Merlin still hadn't decided what he thought of what that guard had said around the fire a few days ago.

Surely, that pointed to Uther knowing he wasn't Morgana's father, if true, but frankly, the idea of it made Merlin queasy.

Gaius shook his head, "I know Morgana has requested moon tea, a number of times in the year before Morgause abducted her."

"So, she was seeing someone," Merlin extrapolated, "Do you know who?"

Gaius shook his head.

Merlin let it drop for now. "Arthur intends to marry her, as soon as decently possible, after the tragic death of his father."

"Well, she wouldn't be my choice of queen," Gaius said, "But if Arthur loves her, does that mean he is softening his stance on magic?"

Merlin wasn't sure, Arthur hadn't explicitly said, but it certainly looked good.

"That's not the problem," Merlin admitted, "When I was attending to Uther when he was still affected by the mandrake root, he admitted he had an affair with Morgana's mother."

"What?" Gaius was shocked.

"I know," Merlin was flabbergasted.

"When was this?" Gaius wondered, "I've never heard so much as a word from anyone that they were lovers?"

"I don't know, all Uther said was that he and Igraine had been trying for years, so before Igraine
died?” Merlin admitted, "I tried to get details, but Uther was too distressed."

"Goodness, are you going to tell Arthur?” Gaius asked concerned before adding, "It seems unnecessary to further tarnish his father in Arthur's eyes now, Merlin."

Merlin was shocked the old healer hadn't made the connection he had, "What if Uther is Morgana's father?"

Gaius was stunned, and didn't say anything for a long time, "Did Uther admit he is?"

"Not exactly, he seemed to think I was Gorlois, and he seemed very guilty, though."

Gaius considered this new information, "That would explain his devotion to her, the year-long search… but I never…"

"I know it's a sin according to the church, but is there a more…” Merlin struggled to find the right words, "Serious reason that they can't marry, if they are brother and sister?"

"Yes, Merlin, it's very serious," Gaius frowned.

Merlin was interested, "So there is a reason, apart from people thinking its… gross."

Gaius explained, "The children of such unions are more likely to have health problems."

"But not necessarily?" Merlin derived from Gaius' words.

"No, some are fine, but there's no way to tell that," Gaius admitted, before emphasizing his main point, "So it's not a good idea. You must tell him before he marries his sister and gets her pregnant."

"Potential half-sister," Merlin corrected.

"Still too closely related," Gaius reiterated.

Merlin was thinking it through too, "Everyone who knew the truth is dead. Is there a way to know for sure?"

Gaius began to think. "Sounds like you need to speak to the dead."

Morgana was almost ready to turn in for the night. She had been craving sleep in her own bed for too long. She lit the candles in the window sill to communicate with Morgause. So much had happened, and she couldn't wait to tell her sister about it.

Gwen was there to attend to her, but Morgana politely asked to be alone.

Her feelings for Uther could not be easily categorized. She was surprised how ambivalent she felt. She wished that the last time he had taken her body in the dungeon had been all force, then she could just hate him. But he had wanted to please her, he had wanted her to enjoy herself, she believed he did love her in his own twisted way, and that was tearing her up inside. Morgana was still his prisoner, so he was by no means gallant, but he had his moments. Seeing his body, stabbed the way it had been was also an image she couldn't get out of her mind.

Then she would remember all that he had done to those with magic. She knew the people Morgause had trained, she knew their stories, what they had been through because of Uther, and then she couldn't feel sorry for him. And then Morgana would wish she'd been there to stab him.
repeatedly herself.

The Isle was counting on her to bring Arthur into closer political alignment with the Religion of the Triple Goddess and continue on a more enlightened path. He loved her. He would marry her, and soon she would have his child.

Comforting Arthur through his grief was taking its toll on her too. He kept doubting himself, and his abilities which wasn't like Arthur, he just needed to find his feet. Arthur came to see her later that evening. He no longer seemed to want sex, he wanted her comfort. He curled up in her arms in her bed with her, while she held him. Some nights they kissed, and she would feel his body becoming excited, but then nothing would happen between his legs. Morgana was no expert about men, but she knew they were very funny when it came to their swords, so she had best not push him.

Morgana had begun to wonder if Arthur was associating their lovemaking with sin. He had broken the Knight's Code when he bedded her before marriage, and the very next day his father had been killed. Was Arthur was somehow blaming himself, which was thwarting his desire? Or was it simply grief made worse because they were on bad terms at the time of Uther's passing?

His face was so peaceful and beautiful as he slept.

My beautiful king, who will lift the ban on magic and free us all! I love you. I love the king you will be! Nothing like Uther!

))))))

The bird arrived in the morning after Arthur had gone back to his chambers. The note from Morgause read,

Sister,

What is our new king's reaction to the untimely death of his father?

Do you have any knowledge if Arthur has softened his stance towards magic?

Gossip is abounding that you are the king's lover. Is this true?

What are Arthur's plans for his coronation?

I will meet up with you in person at midnight tonight if you would like.

Large Birch tree at the Western wall.

Morgause.

This letter was cooler than her usual tone Morgana noted. Morgause wouldn't have been happy to hear that Arthur and her were lovers.

But Morgana was still happy that she had so much positive news to report.

My Love, Morgause,

So much has happened. Arthur vowed privately to me that he will lift the ban on magic once he is crowned. He regrets not accepting help from The Isle regards the recent invasion. Arthur's regard for me turned romantic. Arthur made a marriage proposal to me and I have accepted. My heart forever belongs to you.
I would very much like to meet face to face tonight, for I have missed you so much.

I love you,

Morgana.

Morgana sent the bird off once she gave her some nice food and a good cuddle. Knowing the crow was Harwyn's made her happy. Harwyn was recruited by Morgause three years ago. He had been ostracized from a young age because he said he could talk to animals. He grew older and learned he was able to enter the mind of his crow. He had lived a secluded life in the woods, for fear of execution and was all too happy to offer his services to The Isle. He had volunteered in Camelot's fighting force at Morgause's request and Morgana had noticed him on the ride to Cornwall, but they hadn't spoken until he approached her tent in the middle of the night. Morgana had told her annoying four guard tail that he was her cousin, so they had given her a respectable level of privacy in which they could talk. Morgana had told him where Uther would be regarding the southern Saxon invasion and given him her horse so he could alert Morgause. When Morgana had spoken to Harwyn briefly in Cornwall, he implied he had seen her chambers. She wasn't entirely sure if cuddling the bird, felt to Harwyn like being embraced or not, but she wanted to be extra nice to his precious feathered friend regardless.

It must have been the second day back in Camelot when Gwen came to see Merlin in the Physician's Quarters.

She asked how the battle went. And Merlin relayed the basics that she probably already knew anyway. Gwen then mustered up the courage to ask Merlin about the gossip she'd been hearing about Arthur and Morgana... being lovers.

"They slept in the same room once or twice," Merlin very reluctantly admitted, "But I think it was about comfort, they were both hit hard by Uther's sudden passing."

"They aren't... together... romantically?" Gwen struggled to ask, blushing sweetly.

"I don't think so," He lied, "I've never noticed those kinds of feelings between them before."

Gwen nodded her head, a little unsure, but otherwise placated by his words. Merlin felt bad afterwards. He was avoiding conflict by not telling Gwen what he knew. Either Merlin would discover they were related and find a way to separate them, in which case Gwen didn't need to know, or they weren't related and would announce their engagement soon enough.

Strictly speaking, they weren't lovers right now, so Merlin wasn't exactly lying. He was doing his best to ensure no more hank-panky was taking place, not until he had a definitive answer. Gaius had suggested he find the Crystal Cave, it was said to hold all the answers to the past, present and future, though none of the books seemed to know where it was exactly.

Merlin had managed to convince Arthur to announce his marriage plans at his coronation, saying that a joyous event should not be announced during a period of mourning. Arthur's crowning would be a fortnight after Uther's burial, giving him some.

Morgana spent the rest of the day waiting for her meeting with Morgause. She took her time doing her hair and picking out the gown her lover liked on her the most. She told Arthur she wasn't feeling well, to prevent him from making a late-night visit to her chambers. Morgana slipped out of the castle near midnight, wearing her purple velvet hooded overcoat. Hair out, Morgause likes my
Morgause was dressed like a Camelot guard which threw her at first. They met at the wall, then walked deeper into the woods. As soon as they were a safe distance from the castle Morgana threw her arms around her lover and began to kiss her, hungrily. Morgause was stiff and reserved, holding her off at first. Morgana felt ready to cry, pushing herself more forcefully to Morgause's lips, and her mouth would not be denied. Morgause relented. Morgana demonstrated how much she had missed her Golden Beauty through her actions. She felt out of control. Morgana pulled up Morgause's mail, and then her undershirt. She untied her breeches.

"Slow down," Morgause instructed, "It's not safe to do this here, not naked."

Morgause laid down and allowed Morgana to put her hand down her pants. Morgana wanted her badly and was willing to push some boundaries. She pulled at her sister's disguise just enough that she could get her face between her sister's thighs to lap at Morgause's pleasure center. Morgana had missed the very taste of her.

Morgana felt her sister's hand on the back of her head, combing her hair with her fingers. Her fingers supplemented her tongue and soon Morgause was expressing her delight. Morgana felt the need to prove her love, her touch expressed a longing for Morgause's body, by being more forceful than she usually was, this is what it is to be overcome with desire. Not that she would hurt her lover.

Morgause's took a fist full of dark hair and she struggled to contain the blissful sensations Morgana was creating in her. Morgana thrust her fingers roughly into Morgause's crevasse, stiffening and shaking her whole arm, causing her sister's body to jerk at the pressure. Morgana made her paramour succumb and enjoyed the feel of Morgause pulsing around her unable to contain her sexual release. Morgana cried out, but slammed her own hand over her mouth to mute the sounds.

Morgana smiled in a self-satisfied manner as she watched her lover recover from her overload of sensory output.

"You did miss me," Morgause commented, flabbergasted, once she could speak again.

"So much," Morgana conveyed how earnestly that was true, licking the fluid off her lover's thighs.

Morgause pulled up and straightened her disguise except for the helmet.

"You look very beautiful," The blonde commented as if it was simply a fact.

Morgana felt warm and fuzzy, It's all for you.

Morgause ran a hand over Morgana's hip, before unbuttoning the cloak.

Morgause's favorite of her dresses was the green satin with gold trimmings, she didn't fail to notice. Unfortunately, since the dungeon, this dress now made Morgana think of Uther, Damn him! Her sister's hand glided down the length of Morgana's leg as she lay on her side until she found bare skin. Morgause pulled the hem up and her hand disappeared underneath. Morgana rolled onto her back and looked up at the stars. The moon was a thin crescent. Morgause softly kissed her neck. Everything she did felt better than anyone else. There was so much feeling behind their actions for each other. Morgause moved her fingers differently, always one to change things up, she was touching Morgana with more pressure and faster motions. Morgana let her lover know that she wanted more.

"Do you like that?" The blonde asked coyly.
"Yes," Morgana managed, but she could hardly speak, she was trying so hard to hold on. Morgause always knew just where to fondle at any given moment.

"Do you like this better with me, or with our new king?" Morgause asked suddenly, pointedly.

"You," Morgana said breathlessly.

Morgause clearly was not okay with the latest romantic development between Morgana and Arthur. Morgana had been led to believe she was fully committed to The Isle's cause. Perhaps she didn't know what was being asked of Morgana and had felt betrayed at the reports.

Morgause picked up the pace and added her other hand now.

Morgause continued her interrogation, "Does he know how to please you?"

Morgana bit her lip, her Golden Beauty was more dynamic with her fingers inside as well. Her face started to feel cold, her mouth fell open, and she felt her muscles jolt momentarily, because it felt so good.

"Does he make you feel like this?" The blonde questioned pointedly.

Morgana shook her head. But, Morgause's jealousy that she had been with Arthur kept surfacing.

Morgause was in her strict tutor persona, "I didn't hear you,"

"No," Morgana managed to breath between clenched teeth.

Her sister kept her hands moving in her adept manner but refused to touch Morgana's nub to deny her the pleasure moment, keeping her on the edge but not allowing her to topple over.

"Please," Morgana begged.

Morgana moved to put her own fingers on her mound, but Morgause swatted her hand away.

"Please, Morgause," Morgana repeated, gripping her sister's forearm, staring at her with weak submission.

"Are you sure you don't prefer our noble king to me?" Morgause continued her interrogation as if she wasn't torturing Morgana by her withholding.

"I'm sure," Morgana breathlessly stated.

Morgause must have accepted the truth in Morgana's face, because she moved her fingers back to the center of her longing and began to caress rhythmically. She didn't need to apply pressure for very long. She had been near bursting already the return of sensation caused an intense muscle spasm. Morgana practically yelled as she climaxed.

Morgause grinned smugly. Morgana laid flat trying to recover.

"I love you," Morgana added once she found her voice.

Morgause kissed her again.

They lay side by side hugging. Some time passed before they began to speak of the latest developments.
"So much news, sister," Morgause said, sounding excited.

"Yes," Morgana felt proud to report on the current state of affairs.

Morgause was far more interested in the political implications, "Arthur promised you he will lift the ban on magic."

"Yes, he vowed, he didn't have a sword at the time," Morgana explained, "He knelt in front of his favorite dagger, though."

Morgause ever cautious, didn't celebrate the news yet, "He won't change his mind? Harwyn said Arthur has been made high king of four of the eight kingdoms, what is the truth of this claim?"

Morgana nodded, "It's true. Well, it's five kingdoms now, Olaf has also made Arthur his high king too."

Her sister wasn't convinced, "He'll be under more pressure now that he's high king. You don't think he'll back out?"

Morgana didn't think so, "No, the only thing that would sink the pact at this point would be if he found out how Uther really came to die, he believes it was Saxons and that his refusal of your fighting force could have changed things," Morgana relayed, "Trust me, he won't break his word."

Morgause was as giddy as Morgana had ever seen her. A beautiful smile crossed her features, her eyes became slits as her cheeks rose, positively beaming, and her teeth were displayed.

Morgause traced Morgana's jawline with her hand, "I knew when I met you, you were the key to all of this, you are amazing, Morgana," Morgause spoke as she rarely did.

She didn't often complement in this way or discuss her previous plans.

Morgana smiled and felt a little shy, but returned her affection, "You did this. For years, you kept the cause going, you cohered all these people, you and Ninianne, and the others."

Morgana leaned in and kissed Morgause again to express the feeling contained in her words.

"I must confess something," Morgause turned serious.

Morgana felt her heart stop in her chest. You just pretended to love me because you needed me to convince Arthur. By the Goddess, no!

"I know it is good for the cause," Morgause admitted, "But I don't want you to marry Arthur."

Morgana exhaled.

"I want you all to myself," Morgause said finding her lips again.

Why do you jump to the worst! Morgana chastised herself, Morgause has never done anything like that to you. Why can't you believe she genuinely cares about you!

"This news is very advantageous to The Isle," Morgause continued, "I'll need to discuss it with Ninianne, but there are many things you should begin to work on him to do."

"I will," Morgana promised.

There was a brief silence.
"You haven't asked about Uther," Morgause observed.

Morgana was slow to respond, "I'm ashamed to admit, his passing hit me harder than I expected. I thought I would laugh and drink a toast, but I feel, I don't know, at odds with myself."

"Do you want the details?" Morgause seemed unsure how to handle this now.

"I saw his body at Pembroke," Morgana relayed, "I know you all stabbed him many times."

"Harwyn's crow found them from above, and led us straight to Uther and his men, we jumped them as they traveled over a narrow pass. We only lost ten to Uther's 60,"

Morgause was proud. She had every right to be. Uther was a tyrant who had killed so many innocent people, those who had volunteered for the mission each had a personal score to settle.

"Once all his men were dead, we surrounded him, you should have seen his face," Morgause was gleeful, seeing that Morgana's excitement didn't match her own, her sister appeared to skip some details, "Well, everyone got one stab to keep it fair, many wanted to tell Uther why they hated him, 'You burned my mother', 'you wrongly accused my father',," Morgause again checked Morgana's face which was an impassive mask, "I said, 'I am Morgana's lover, I know what you did, this is from her,' He looked so positively sad as I stabbed him in the gut."

Morgana said nothing.

"We loaded a cart with Saxon bodies that fell during the first day of fighting, took a few axes, and placed them all around Uther's men's bodies," Morgause bragged, "I hear no one questioned it."

Morgana began to cry, Morgause held her.

"I'm sorry," Morgana felt the need to apologize, "I'm just emotional, so much has happened."

Morgause was surprised though, her expression betrayed that she didn't like that Morgana wanted to cry for the loss of Uther. But Morgana suspected Morgause was trying to be supportive of her no matter what. The blonde said nothing, just held her tight and kissed her forehead. Morgana wasn't sobbing, but the tears were falling silently.

"It's over now, he can't hurt you anymore," Morgause comforted her.

Her sibling's hand brushed her cheek, which actually did soothe her after a while.

"So, you and Arthur," Morgause stated awkwardly.

This was the conversation Morgana had been expecting to dread. Morgause valued loyalty highly.

"Ninianne instructed me to give him whatever he asked of me," Morgana said weakly, as if she hadn't chosen.

"I'm not mad at you, Sister," Morgause put a reassuring arm around her shoulder, "We both serve the Goddess and the cause," Morgause was forcing those words out trying to seem like she was more accepting of the situation than she was, "I'm glad I'm not you."

Morgana stared back feeling guilty, and unclean maybe?

"Ninianne told me, you can do more for us than I could with an army of a 1000 great warriors," Morgause repeated.
That actually did reassure Morgana, who wanted to cry again, for the third time this evening.

"I had thought Ninianne a bit crazy when she said that to me," Morgana admitted a little ashamed, "Arthur had never looked at me like that." Well, not since that day when we were barely more than children.

Morgause was intrigued by that statement, "What do you think changed things?"

Morgana turned quizzical, "I've been thinking about that a lot the last few days."

Morgana's expression became far away, "I think the mandrake root revelations that Uther was never the noble king Arthur thought he was, began the change," Morgana mused, "Part of the problem was that Arthur always saw me as competition, he was jealous that Uther loved me more."

Morgana shook her head, why would you be jealous of how Uther treated me? But of course, Arthur didn't know about how Uther really treated her.

"Uther respected that I stood up to him, and wasn't afraid," Morgana observed, "Arthur always did as he was told, hoping that would win Uther's respect, but it didn't."

"Did Uther change in his affections?" Morgause prodded.

"No," Morgana made clear, "It was more that Arthur realized Uther's good opinion wasn't worth as much as he thought," She clarified, "Arthur was forced to believe me over his Father, my prediction made him a hero, then I saved his life."

"How did that happen?"

"I had a nightmare about an arrow piercing his armor and his heart a few hours before the battle was to begin on the second day," Morgana explained, "I woke screaming and tried to convince him not to go out there."

"I heard Arthur led the battle?" Morgause was confused.

Morgana confirmed, "He did, he said to make him an extra piece of armor, which I did, well…"

Morgana paused sheepishly, "The armorer flattened it, and a tailor sewed it on Arthur, but I knew where it needed to go," Morgana smiled.

"That changed everything?" Morgause ascertained.

"Not exactly, it was already changing," Morgana felt hesitant, she checked her lover's reaction.

"I told you not to hide things from me," Morgause responded peevishly.

"The day the invasion began, Arthur became a hero to all those men, they treated him like… a God," Morgana explained, "But he came to tell me I deserved all the praise."

Morgause continued to press for details, "Then what happened?"

"He kissed me, then he insisted on washing me… there was some nakedness" Morgana said awkwardly, then she shook her head, "That's so unlike Arthur, he's obsessed with chivalry."

Morgause was astounded, "To your knowledge has he ever…"

"Never," Morgana concluded, "He was shy when it came to kissing."
Morgause's face flashed something for a moment, a smirk or a contemptuous smile.

She added, "Which I guess is kind of sweet."

Morgana noticed that her tone and expression when she said 'sweet' appeared to annoy Morgause, whom reoriented her back to the point.

"Did you initiate it?"

"No, I let Arthur lead, but I showed him I was willing," Morgana answered.

Morgause smiled, and Morgana knew it was because her sister was proud, that she had correctly read what to do in the situation and had executed her plan effectively.

Morgause was very interested in that information, "So, his desire for you got the better of him?"

"I guess so," Morgana shrugged, she hadn't thought about that too much, "Then the next night, the arrow had nearly killed him, that was when we first…"

"Had sex," Morgause supplied.

Morgana nodded, but didn't want to meet her lover's eye, "And the next morning he proposed to me right before we… had relations," Morgana managed to say, embarrassed like a blushing maid.

Morgause saw the implication immediately, "He proposed to you without obtaining Uther's consent, meaning he was going to marry you over his Father's objection, knowing that you have magic."

Morgana nodded proudly. The blonde smiled, momentarily, then she became serious again.

"Two times in total?" Morgause asked.

"No, four times so far."

Morgause waited for details. Morgana was self-conscious.

"Right after we found out about Uther, and again the next morning, he hasn't wanted to… be intimate the last few days, I think grief has overtaken him now," Morgana supplied.

"Good," Morgause said, she no longer seemed jealous, "Four times around the full moon is your most fertile time."

*Of course she would be asking for that reason!*

"You want me to be pregnant?"

Morgause spoke into the night sky, a dreamy look in her eye and full of faith, "The future king, Morgana, raised by The Isle, taught the way of the Goddess, a future king with magic."

That caught Morgana unaware.

*Morgause is right.*

Suddenly, Morgause's expression turned sad.

"What is it?" Morgana asked, alarmed.
"The Wise Counsel," Morgause paused, struggling, "Has instructed us... not to see each other anymore," Morgause seemed ready to cry. "There is too much at stake."

Morgana felt how she had the only time she ever fell from her horse, unable to breath in. Tears prickled her eyes.

Morgause touched her shoulder in sympathy, and Morgana pulled away angrily. The tears did fall now. *It's not fair!* She just felt so mad. Morgana probably should have seen this coming as well, but she didn't.

"I am sorry," Morgause's eyes glistened in the moonlight, "Everything rests of Arthur's regard for you, and his trust in you."

Morgana began to cry now, she couldn't control it.

"I didn't want this either," Morgause squeezed her shoulder, "But there are many people's livelihood's at stake."

Morgause kissed her a final time before leaving.

Merlin hadn't known what to expect when he followed Morgana out of the castle that evening. He had stayed up last night waiting, watching her chambers across the dark hallway. Arthur slept in her arms, she had no way of leaving. He'd eventually fallen asleep, but he was pretty sure she hadn't gone anywhere. Merlin knew that if Morgana had set Uther up to be killed, she and Morgause would be eager to meet up and discuss the new situation. He had done the same again this evening. Sure enough, at midnight he saw her hooded figure slip out. He followed her to the woods and saw a guard approach. It was Morgause in disguise.

Merlin was shocked when he saw them kiss.

* Aren't they sisters? *  

*If Morgana knows Uther is her father then it isn't incest. But then she knows that she's committing incest with Arthur. But she probably doesn't know about the affair. Or she doesn't care?*

His head hurt.

* I must tell Arthur. *  

*He loves her, and he won't believe me.*  

*He won't marry her if he realizes she loves someone else.*  

*Is she just using him? Does Morgana love both of them?*  

He really wasn't sure anymore.

Merlin got down on the ground behind some thick bushes and slowly pulled himself along the ground until he was within hearing distance. He heard Morgana scream loudly, they weren't being as careful as he would have expected. He had never seen two women do what they were doing, and as much as he wasn't attracted to them, or particularly aroused by watching them together, Merlin envied them their authenticity in their feelings. They might have been hiding from the world, but not each other. He wished he had the courage to tell Arthur how he really felt.

Afterwards, they began to talk. Merlin learned that Arthur had promised to lift the ban on sorcery.
Merlin felt his heart seize.

Arthur is going to lift the ban on sorcery! I'll be free!

And then he knew he had played no part in Arthur's decision. Morgana and Morgause had made this happen, not just for themselves, but for all magical people. Merlin hadn't told Arthur the truth when he could have, how he'd saved his life too many times to count. Merlin should have been the one to show him how magic could be used for good and that sorcerers weren't evil. But he'd hidden in the shadows never challenging Arthur's beliefs. Morgana and Morgause had both pushed him to listen, exposed Uther, and shown Arthur a different way.

I was wrong.

Then he heard them say that The Isle had killed Uther.

I knew it!

Merlin agreed with their assessment that Arthur finding out now would ruin any hope of Arthur lifting the ban on magic.

What should I do? If I tell Arthur how Uther really died, Arthur will hate Morgana and magic.

He could become like Uther, dead set against magic.

I can't tell him.

He heard Morgause say that when she stabbed Uther she said, 'I know what you did to Morgana, this is from her;' He wondered what she meant.

Did Morgana know Uther was her father or was that to do with the rumors that Uther was her lover or something else?

Merlin had no idea. He wanted to be sure of so much more than he was before he did anything.

Merlin already knew that Morgana might be pregnant, but it was interesting to hear her speak of how she and Arthur had come together. It did sound like she did care for him, but what 'The Isle' was doing was so scheming all the same and Arthur would be crushed if he knew the truth. It had happened fast and right under Merlin's nose. When Arthur had told him to get two buckets of water, Merlin didn't even know Morgana was in the tent. He knew Arthur had slept in her tent that night, but he had naively thought they were discussing the battle and tactics and her prophecies, since Arthur was deferring to Morgana more.

The next afternoon Merlin was distracted with his many duties and didn't see anything untoward. And after that he thought they were just consoling one another because of Uther's sudden death. Well, the night at Olaf's castle had made it all clear.

Arthur's child. A child with magic. And the future king.

To a mother who killed his father and might be his sister. A future king who is the product of incest that probably will be sickly?

What should I do?
Gaius knew of a sorcerer who knew of a sorcerer whom said that The Crystal Cave was located in the Forrest of Ascetir. Merlin didn't know if that was reliable or not, but since it was almost Uther's funeral and with Arthur's coronation a fortnight off and the announcement of his engagement, Merlin was panicked about what to do. He was still no closer to having a definitive answer about Morgana's paternity. Every time he thought he got closer to an answer, something else shed doubt on it.

The Crystal Cave supposedly held all knowledge of what is, and what will be. Gaius said that the essence of a seer remained inside the cave, omniscient over the fate of Albion's kings. Merlin felt nervous, the last time he had glimpsed the future in that crystal Alvarr stole from Camelot's vaults he had seen an impending horror of the fall of the castle and fire and death everywhere. That had led him to poison Morgana, and he had caused that future by releasing the lying dragon. Merlin wasn't sure he wanted to go back for a second helping.

He'd questioned more palace guards, subtly about whether or not they had ever seen romantic relations between Uther and Morgana, none said yes outright, but they looked uncomfortable at the asking. The guard who had been loose lipped in Cornwall had vanished or died on the last day of battle. If it were true, it seemed to suggest that Uther didn't think he was Morgana's father, but it's possible he didn't know either way. Merlin felt sick upon hearing that, he couldn't imagine Arthur would take that revelation. Morgana had Uther's same green eyes, that Merlin couldn't ignore, he'd never noticed it before now, but Morgana did bear a rather striking resemblance to Uther, but then again, Merlin had never laid eyes on Vivienne or Gorlois, so that wasn't enough either. Gaius said Gorlois had brown eyes, and medium brown hair, while Vivienne, whom Morgana looked a lot like, had the same hair color as Morgana and blue eyes.

He found the spot where the druid camp had been, the one he'd helped Morgana escape to a couple of years ago. Merlin had an inkling that they would have been near to the location of the Crystal Cave. And then he began to walk slowly and keep looking for anything, a sign of magic, a guide, anything that looked out of place.

After a long time Merlin saw a small falcon. The bird had large round eyes, a white throat, followed by a black band on its body, light grey wings with dark grey outer wing and tail. He knew the breed, they were usually found in moors and heath farther north. The bird watched him intently from the branch of a yule tree, before it flew a small distance to rest on the top of a large rock, that was green with moss. Merlin remembered this spot, it was where he created the mist in the hopes of allowing Morgana and the druids to escape, when Arthur thought he was rescuing her. It hadn't gone well though. He followed the falcon. There was only a narrow track between the two enormous, moss-covered boulders. The bird disappeared, but he could hear its cry echo as if the creature was now inside a tunnel. He moved a few smaller stones and found a small hole. Skinny as he was, even Merlin had a hard time squeezing between. It was pitch black. He thought *Fire*, allowing a small flame to dance on his fingertips, just enough to light the way. He followed the sounds of the bird's call for a long way. It didn't seem as if the tunnel could be this big. Merlin was now sure he was in a passageway taking him farther below, spiraling downwards. It seemed a very long way, Merlin couldn't hear any of the sounds of the forest anymore. It was very dark, and cold even. He finally caught a glimpse of something shiny. It was crystal. From above there were tiny rays of light breaking through, bouncing off the crystals that lined the walls and roof of the cave, they created rainbows. It was breathtaking. Merlin stopped and marveled at the beauty of it all.

"Hello Merlin," He heard the voice of an old man ring off every surface in the cave.
The voice was unfamiliar.

"Hello," Merlin replied, feeling anxious.

"You're wondering how I know who you are," The old man's voice stated plainly.

Merlin was thinking that. Merlin kept turning around, but with the ricocheting sounds it was impossible to ascertain the source.

"Our meeting has been destined since the dawning of time, Emrys," The voice was croaky.

*Emrys*, that name again. Only Mordred used it.

Merlin caught sight of the visual of a very old man with a flowing white beard in a crystal, and the reflection in many other crystals nearby. He decided to focus on that, it was less disturbing.

"Who are you?" Merlin asked the image on the glossy, hard, refracted surface.

"I am everywhere and I am nowhere. I know everything and can do nothing."

"What do you mean, you can do nothing?" Merlin felt scared, "I need your help."

"I can only do what I will do and no more," The cryptic answer came.

Merlin called out, "I was told you know everything that has happened and everything that will happen."

"It is true."

"Then you know why I've come," Merlin stated.

"I do," The old man said knowingly.

"Are they? Are they brother and sister?" Merlin held his breath, and felt his stomach turn while he waited what seemed an eternity for the answer.

"That is the wrong question, Emrys," The old man seemed annoyed now.

"How can that be the wrong question? I need to know if I should do nothing and let them marry," Merlin felt frustrated, "That's the whole reason I'm here!"

His voice echoed for what seemed an extended period, followed by a long silence.

Merlin knew he needed the Seer of the Crystal Cave, so he would need to play his game.

"What is the right question?" Merlin asked, humbly.

The voice boomed, "Who represents the threat to Arthur's reign?"

Merlin shook his head, "I was told to let a young boy die, a magical boy, because he would one day kill Arthur," Merlin was having none of it, "But I was told that by someone who was telling lies. I almost let that boy die on his say so," Merlin was determined, "No more."

"Yes, you trusted a lying dragon and that was unfortunate, Emrys," The voice said, "Kilgarra lied about Mordred."

Merlin realized the voice knew everything, he'd probably watched him make all these mistakes.
"But if it is your destiny to protect Arthur," The voice reminded Merlin sharply, "Then it is your destiny to do battle with the forces that plague his reign."

"I don't want to know," Merlin replied, feeling near tears.

He remembered the look on Morgana's face at the moment she knew what he'd done to her, and that he'd done it on purpose. The shock and the betrayal, and how pale she became, and how her body jerked as the life left her.

The gravelly voice chastised him, "But here you are, asking for knowledge."

"Only knowledge of the past," Merlin reminded the old man.

"Past, future, it is all written, it is just a matter of opening the book to the page you want," The voice sighed as if bored with having to explain such simplicities to him.

"I only desire the answer to a single question," Merlin explained, adamant, "All I want to know is are Arthur and Morgana half brother and sister? Is Uther Morgana's father?"

"Those are two questions."

"What?" Merlin was completely confused now.

Merlin tried a last time to wrangle the information he sought, "Please, Seer of the Crystal Cave, wise one, help me," Merlin begged, "Should I let them marry?"

"You ask the wrong question, Young Wizard," The voice repeated impatiently.

"Please, Seer, I need to know, are they both of Uther's seed?"

The voice enlightened him, "The religion of the Triple Goddess doesn't frown on blood making more blood. It is only the Christians who see it as sin."

"But I was told by a man of science," Merlin explicated, "That the children of close kin are sickly."

"And I have told you that the threat to Arthur is Morgause," The voice replied peevishly, "Heed my warning. Do as you will regarding Arthur's queen."

Merlin tried to make the voice answer, "Will Arthur and Morgana have a sickly child?"

Silence.

"Morgause is going to kill Arthur unless you stop her," The voice suddenly boomed.

"Morgause? Why?" Merlin was shocked at that sudden admission.

"Emrys, if you hear nothing else, know this, The Pact must hold," The voice said slowly.

"The Pact to allow magic?" Merlin tried to clarify, but of course that was what the seer must have meant.

"No matter what," The old man reiterated, "The Pact keeps everything together, you must ensure it remains in place."

"Why should I believe you?" Merlin demanded, "The dragon was lying, I don't know you, or your motives, who are you?"
"That is the right question, Merlin, I am Taliesin, I was a seer of The Isle for many years."

"Morgause is of The Isle," Merlin observed.

"It is so, but some with magic are ruthless and corrupted," The old man said, "They are fanatics. Ninianne would skin her own child if she saw a gain for The Isle."

"Ninianne," Merlin repeated uncertain, "She's the Lady of the Lake?"

"Yes, Merlin," The Taliesin observed, "Wiser, calmer heads need to prevail or everyone is doomed."

"What does that mean?"

"How did you come to be here?" Merlin asked.

The voice sounded dismayed, as if Merlin was wasting his time, "That is not important, Emrys."

"I don't believe you," Merlin crossed his arms, and continued his defiance.

"I see you learned your lesson, Merlin. Good!" The voice sounded proud, "As you will, Young Wizard."

The crystal instead of revealing the old man with the long white beard became a vision of the throne room in Camelot. Morgana, whom looked the age she currently is, was in a long black dress, with a silver necklace of crescent moons and her hair out. Morgana was seated on the throne next to the king's seat. Morgana was, covering her mouth as she began to shriek in horror. What she was seeing, wasn't visible within the limited scope of the crystal. Then the field of view moved slightly and Merlin could see Arthur was standing in front of his throne a couple of yards away, with one hand behind his back, as if shielding someone, but looking at whatever Morgana was screeching at. He was dressed finely and wore his golden crown, his face was also shocked. Morgause, whom was dressed as she often was in breeches and mail, hair wild and her eyes could only be described as crazed. The blonde sorceress ran with a sword at Sir Aldro, whom stood in front of Arthur, protecting him. Morgause ran Aldro through with the sword she held entering his back, piercing his mail, the tip of the sword coming out his chest. Cowardly. The knight stopped, dropped his sword and fell forward in the space between the king's throne and Morgana's. Arthur gaped as Morgause stood in front of him, with hatred in her eyes and blood dripping from her blade. Arthur didn't even have a sword belt on, let alone a weapon. She was one step away from him... And the vision faded.

*Oh no!*

All of the crystals went back to Taliesin's face.

Sir Aldro, same as Sir Leon, were the only Camelot Knights that had served for nearly ten years. He was a capable warrior, from an old noble family. He was a very loyal knight, whom would die for Arthur without hesitation, even if he did tend to speak down to Merlin himself.

The tears that had been threatening to fall now did.

"When will that happen? Please tell me, so I can stop it," Merlin begged.

The voice repeated himself, "I can only do, what I will do and no more, Emrys."

*Was Morgana being next to Arthur a sign that she was his queen? Proving that Merlin would let*
them marry. But she was not wearing a crown? Or does that hint at the timeline, that Morgause will make her move while they engaged and not yet married? Or she took her crown off for a moment? Or... or... or...

"I know it occurs after Arthur is crowned," Merlin tried to stop his voice from cracking, "Is Arthur married to Morgana in that vision? Are they engaged when it happens?"

Merlin asked questions for nearly an hour, and received no more replies. He eventually gave up and found his way out of the cave. His head was spinning.

Morgause is a threat to Arthur.

The Pact must hold.

I still don't know if I should stop Arthur from marrying Morgana.

Merlin tried to go through it all slowly.

What am I going to do?

Taliesin doesn't care about incest, so why wouldn't he just say to let them marry? Morgana is of The Isle like him, why not just say yes? Maybe Morgana is one of the corruptible people with magic and he is worried about her bringing mutual doom? Then why didn't he argue not to let them marry? She loves Morgause, she helped kill Uther...

The Pact must hold! If Morgana were to become queen and Arthur learns how his father really came to die The Pact would be destroyed in an instant. But the Pact will fall apart regardless if Morgana is queen or not, if Arthur finds out The Isle killed his father.

Arthur must never find out.

Arthur is going to make The Pact to allow magic, so why would Morgause kill him?

'I know it's good for the cause, but I don't want you to marry Arthur.' Merlin recalled Morgause saying days ago during her secret meeting with Morgana.

A deadly love triangle?

What to do?

By the time Merlin was on the path back to Camelot he had more questions than before he had arrived. He went over and over the vision Taliesin had shown him in the crystal in his head. When that day came, Merlin wanted to recognize it. What everyone wore, how their hair looked, how the room was arranged. Anything that might reveal when it would happen. He would write down every detail once back at the castle.
I just have to get through today

Half a moon turn had elapsed since Arthur had arrived back at Camelot. Father should already have been buried by now to observe basic decency. Traditionally the body would be laid out on a stone slab so those in attendance could file passed and say a few departing words, lay a flower or some other gesture as they wanted. Arthur wanted to observe this custom, but then Father had beenstabbed so many times, he looked almost disfigured. So, he had decided there would be no public viewing. Then he had wanted the stone carvers to pare Father's likeness onto the coffin's lid so that there would be something of Uther for the mourners to look upon. That had begun to take entirely too long. Even with Gaius' best efforts, Father's remains were beginning to decompose. Arthur's grief had overtaken him, he barely wanted leave the warmth and softness of his bed. His Uncle Agravaine had dealt with it in the end. Uncle knew of a painted portrait of Uther that had been Igraine's. After an exhaustive search the canvas had been found in Camelot's vaults and brought up to be displayed next to the closed stone coffin.

Uncle had made all the necessary funeral arrangements in the end. The guests who were expected to be invited had been, the necessary display of grandeur had been observed. Now, Arthur just had to bury his father.

I just have to get through today.

Morgana grieved alone, she had shut herself up in her chambers. Arthur wanted to feel numb. He wanted to drink wine with breakfast. But he knew all eyes would be on him. He shook all the hands, accepted the well wishes, and the ignorant comments about how kind and just Father was, how chivalrous. No he wasn't. Then Arthur would want to yell at them and their faked concern and dishonest reinvention of Father's legacy.

Bayard, Annis, Rodor and Olaf were all in attendance. Even King Alined came to show his respects, though his kingdom remained outside Arthur's high kingship. Every single king was accompanied by their unwed daughters, no doubt to parade their attractive faces and bodies in front of him. No one was indecent enough to broach the subject of marriage with Arthur, but once Father was buried, it would be the next point of business.

By midday the great main hall was full. The mourners, Arthur thought contemptuously, no one here is mourning Father. Most didn't know him, plenty feared him. No one loved him.

He caught sight of Morgana. She was in the front row, reserved for family. She wore her purple dress with the see-thru blue shawl and gold jewelry. Her eyes were red rimmed, he couldn't quite place her expression.

Morgana hated to show emotion in public, she held a handkerchief to hide her face. It made Arthur remember the lock of her hair she'd given him upon request for the second day of battle, when she'd saved his life. Morgana had been dressed in mail and didn't have a trinket in her possession. He had requested the bracelet she wore at her wrist in recent times, but she said that she needed that to dream clearly. Arthur had kept the lock of hair, it had survived the battle, but was frazzled dark strands of hair after that, tied with thread because she didn't even have a hair ribbon. It was nothing special to look at, but its significance was not lost of him.

Morgana would understand his grief, he wanted to sit with her. He took her hand, and squeezed. She made no move to pull away. She squeezed back. Thank you.

I just have to get through today.
The bishop made a sermon about death. It may have been insightful, or comforting, but Arthur didn't take in the words. He could feel her heat. He looked at her hair, her beautiful eyes, red and blotchy as they were. He wasn't allowed to show such emotion. Morgana and Father had had such a complicated relationship. So much strong emotion, love and hate. No middle ground, neither of them knew the meaning of the word 'compromise'.

Arthur was trying not to focus on his own memories with Father. Learning riding, swordplay, how to lead, battle tactics, diplomacy, so many instructions. The only thing that had successfully been helping him forget his pain had been Morgana. She had been so kind, and he was so bumbling. He craved her warmth. He'd never had that with anyone. Uther was stern, he didn't get hugs, occasional complements. He had grown up with no mother. But at least now, he had her.

His eye traced Morgana's outline, her bust, her thigh, her tiny waist, her strong jawline, her cheek bones. He felt his body stir, he readjusted his position and moved his cape to cover any potential embarrassment. He wasn't fooling Morgana, he was pretty sure she knew what he was thinking. She reached her hand out for his arm, she let her finger tips ever gently glide over his skin. With such a small gesture she set his skin to trembling. It was such an inappropriate and shameful thing to be thinking about at Father's funeral of all things.

I just have to get through today.

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Arthur made the speech he'd been dreading, without crying and without feeling insincere. He found honest things to say about Father, he was strong, he did have conviction, he did the best he could, he did think of Camelot first in his decisions. Provided they were Camelotians without magic.

It was hours later before Arthur could get away. He had to play the gracious host, thank those in attendance, and promise so many meetings in which to draw up the new high kingship, work out the particulars of taxation, boarders, training of the war forces, relations with the three kingdoms not incorporated. It seemed like a never-ending head ache. Arthur would rather just hit something. From now on that would be his life, endless amounts of decrees, treaties, and he'd need to hold court and make decisions. It was not quite midnight when he declared himself done for the day.

He was at her chambers and not his own. The lights were off, he didn't knock, he just let himself in. Her curtains were open and the moon was three quarters full tonight, so there was enough light for him to see. He slid under the covers. He reached for her. She was naked.

Before Arthur could ask, Morgana answered, "I knew you'd come."

Arthur was glad it was too dark to see, so he wouldn't have to look at himself and what he was doing. They hadn't joined their bodies since Tintagel, he wanted to lots of times, but for some reason he just couldn't. It made him feel ashamed, but when he felt ashamed he wanted Morgana anyway, so regardless he went to her, if they only slept in each other's arms he preferred that to not being with her at all.

Morgana's lips were on his. He felt his snake come alive and the blood rushing and pulsing to his groin. Thank God! He didn't want to feel any more inadequate than he already did.

His hand caressed her breast, another felt the length of her thigh. Her hands were busy unlacing his pants, after making short work of his shirt. His lips found a nipple, and he heard her gasp. His hand ventured to her opening. He wanted to be inside her, for them to be connected in the most primal way. Her wetness was waiting for him, he barely needed to touch her first, he brought her hand to
his sword, she moved her fingers up and down his shaft, making him more excited, she moved her hips to allow him to place himself at the opening of her folds. He pressed inside her. He pulled back as she had shown him and thrust again, gently. Neither of them spoke. Talking would have made it real. Father's body wasn't even cold in the ground and Arthur was making love like nothing had happened, to a sorcerer, that he wasn't even married to yet.

*Father is probably rolling over in his grave.*

Morgana seemed to sense his anguish, suddenly her hands held his face, making him look at her. He did, and she kissed him slowly. Morgana had this way of making you feel as if sex was actually happening in your mouth.

He bucked again, it felt so good, he wanted to lose himself in her. To be back at the pond or in the tent before the horrible news had arrived. He thrust faster now, the friction between them produced so much heat. Her hands on his hips indicated she wanted more. He set a frantic pace. Morgana matched him where she could, she held on so tight. Her thighs squeezed his waist. Nothing slowed him down. His release overcame him in a feverish fashion.

*This is Father's funeral.*

Then the shame flooded back with vengeance. Arthur went to get off her and slip out quietly, but he felt her wrist on his arm.

"Stay," She seemed afraid to ask, "Just for a while... I don't want to be alone tonight."

Arthur could hardly deny such a simple request. He felt for her face, she was wet with tears.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No..." She said quickly, "I needed that," Then Morgana stammered like she thought she shouldn't have said that, "Today was just really hard."

*I don't know why I wanted you so bad.*

Arthur confessed, "I'm ashamed to say, I was thinking about you, when the priest was talking."

Morgana was silent a little too long, and Arthur realized his revelation was unforgivable.

*I am not fit to be a king.*

"I think," Morgana's voice broke the silence, "Whatever we need to do right now to get through this... is reasonable." She let her words sink in before validating his feelings, "I can barely get out of bed."

"I don't know what I'm doing," Arthur confessed. "Everyone wants... something from me, and they expect I know what to do."

She held him closer.

She soothed him, "He knew you loved him, he was so proud of you."

*That really does help.* Arthur continued to cry here, where he was in no danger, Morgana wouldn't judge him. She bathed him in her warmth.

"I just wish Father was here," Arthur admitted. *He'd know what to do, and everything would make sense again.*
Morgana kissed him. He curled up with his head on her chest. And Arthur was able to let go.

This is just what I needed.
It was the morning after Uther's funeral. Arthur was set to have an important meeting with his advisors. Gaius and Geoffrey of Monmouth were there, Agrawaine was delayed. Morgana had been crying and lying in bed all day since Morgause had ended their relationship. Rationally, it was too risky for them to keep seeing each other now, but that didn't make it any less of a blow. Arthur thought she was grieving for Uther. The funeral had been hard in all honesty. He had come to her last night, she had known he would, she felt his arousal in the throne room while the sermon was occurring. She knew he was thinking about the pond in Cornwall. He had tried to be gentle, but had lost control, but she hadn't minded that time, it made her think of Uther and punishment. In an odd way it had helped her say goodbye.

Caellan entered the throne room, with Sir Hilden holding her arm. She spoke without waiting for permission, which made Morgana smile.

"The Isle of Mists invites Arthur to attend a Kingmaking."

Arthur was perplexed, he looked to Morgana, "What's a Kingmaking?"

Morgan smirked knowingly, "The Isle will set you a challenge."

Arthur seemed disinterested, "To prove what?"

She tried to explain it to her lover, "To the followers of the Religion of the Goddess that you are fit to be their king."

Arthur was reluctant, "I suppose I have to?"

"Only if you want The Pact to hold," She returned.

Arthur was disinterested, "How long is this challenge likely to take?"

Caellan, who had perfected standing like a statue, came alive again, "No more than three days."

"Three days!" Arthur exclaimed, "Do you have any idea how much I have to arrange before my crowning, I don't have three days."

Merlin interjected in his nervous way, "Arthur, you've got that important meeting with your advisers this morning…"

"Arthur must come at once, and come alone," Caellan notified them all.

Merlin was extra twitchy and adamant, "I think it's important, maybe you could just wait a little bit, I'm sure Agrawaine will be here any moment…"

Morgana dismissed Merlin and offered to Arthur instead, "I'll do some of the preparations for you," Before adding, "Merlin can help me."

Merlin's head snapped around. He clearly didn't like the sound of that.

"I don't suppose kings die doing these challenges?" Arthur wondered out loud.

"No," Morgana informed him, "They aren't those kinds of tests, but you can fail."
"And what," Arthur retorted, "The Isle will not accept me as their king."

Morgana nodded matter-of-fact, "Yes."

Arthur looked over burdened more than scared.

Her lover turned to her, "Do you know what the challenge will be?"

"It's more about proving yourself loyal to The Isle, Arthur, it won't be a test of strength or intelligence," Morgana explained.

"I need you to come with me at once," Caellan interjected.

"I know you will succeed," Morgana touched his arm, a very comfortable gesture between people who are very close, "I will attend the feast on the last night, to hail your successful completion."

_I'll help you through it, My King._

Morgana shot him a seductive look. Arthur's expression conveyed that he clearly knew further resistance was futile.

Arthur rode with Caellan to Avalon Lake, and the boat with the two rowers was waiting. They made the journey during the day this time. He was wide awake and still couldn't make sense of how they got to that open water covered with thick fog. Caellan refused to answer any questions about what the challenge would be, and she was awful at small talk. They arrived, and he was guided to a wooden structure of some kind of dwelling and given a blanket and directed to a small sparse room with a narrow bed. Some hard bread and cheese had been left for him.

The young priestess said, "Your Kingmaking begins at dawn, come outside when you wake."

Arthur thanked her, took off his armor and sword and tried miserably to get comfortable on that ridiculously hard bed. It was too early for him to be tired yet.

Not being able to nap made him think of Morgana. Arthur doubted he slept a moment before it was time to go again. He dressed, washed his face and hands in a bowl of water that had been left for him, and went to meet the day's challenge.

Caellan steered him away from the banks to the hills. At the top of the largest hill there was a man-made circle of stones, boulders that had been cut and carved to be rectangular, that must have been hauled into place somehow forming a series of doorways. Meaning two upright and parallel boulders with a third lying horizontal above creating the top of the door frame between them. There were about fifty people there to watch him. Which was a surprise, since Arthur didn't think there were that many people on The Isle. Most sat on the ground, some on other large rocks.

There was a huge rock, irregularly spherical, it hadn't been carved or cut, it stood as high as Arthur's waist. And sticking out of it was the most beautiful shining sword. It was steel with a gold inlay down the blade with ancient runes on it.

Ninianne was waiting nearby.

"Arthur Pendragon," She spoke more to the crowd than to him, "You have three days to complete your Kingmaking, pull the sword from the stone, and you are our king."

Arthur was again taken aback, _Not a test of strength, thanks Morgana!_
Ninianne's speech continued, "Upon successful completion, you may also keep the blade, this is no ordinary sword, Excalibur was forged in a dragon's breath. It is so sharp it cuts steel."

*If that's true, that is definitely a sword I want.*

"I accept your challenge, Lady of the Lake," Arthur spoke formally, "Are there any rules?"

"You and only you are to pull the sword out," Ninianne was clearly ready for his question, "And you may only use your body, no tools or weapons."

It didn't look too difficult, and the sword clearly hadn't been in the stone a long time, there was no rust.

"How did you come by this sword?" He pondered out loud.

"One of our seers found it in Avalon Lake," Ninianne informed everyone.

*Here goes.*

Arthur placed both his hands on the grip to get a feel for it. There was no give that he could feel. He gave a little tug. The sword appeared full length which meant a good two feet of it was buried.

"Can I inquire as to how you got the sword in here?"

Ninianne didn't answer, but appeared quite amused.

Arthur got a very strong grip now and braced himself, took a breath and yanked as hard as he could. It didn't move a hair. The crowd were eerily expressionless and silent. He expected jesting and laughing even booing. Something to show they cared if he succeeded or not.

He pressed in then tried to pull out with all his weight behind it, to no avail. He then tried delicately twisting the blade ever so slightly in case this challenge was about finesse. He tried every combination of left right left, up down, slight shaking that he could think of.

By the time the pink glow that signified dawn here, was midday sun overhead, Arthur's muscles were aching, he was out of breath and had blisters coming up on his hand. But, the sword shone like a cross on top of a church. He felt like it was mocking him.

*Maybe it's about pulling it through, maybe there's a crack in the rock, and if I look closely, I'll see how they slid it in there and it's a matter of going in not out.* The rock had no imperfections he could see. It wasn't soft enough to carve into, especially not with his fingers, with no mallet and chisel.

*Maybe if I drip some oil along the shaft it will loosen a little.*

"Can I have some oil," Arthur asked.

Ninianne smiled, "If you can find some."

Arthur appealed to the crowd. No one spoke.

"Is this everyone on The Isle?" He wondered.

*They must have oil or how could they keep their weapons sharp. They probably have a blacksmith.*

Arthur went down the other side of the hill now and came upon some small huts made into the
side of the hill.

He knocked on the door of the first hut Arthur came across.

An elderly man, with a wind beaten face, full of wrinkles answered.

"Hello, I'm King Arthur," He said awkwardly.

The old man looked confused, "Who?"

"I'm on The Isle to perform my Kingmaking, I was wondering if you have any oil."

The old man moved slowly, and apparently thought slowly too, taking his time to recollect.

"Might have some grease out back, that do you?"

Arthur said he was willing to try. He was given a small bowl of grease and promised to bring back the ceramic crockery when he was done.

Once he left the man, he went to the next hut, just in case, oil would be better.

A young woman answered. He asked the same question. She quickly said she didn't have any oil.

Okay, grease it is.

Arthur went back up the hill, applied the grease as best he could, but it mostly got his hands all slick which made it even harder to get a firm grip on the sword handle. He wiped his hands on his shirt, then wrapped his hands in his shirt to get better friction. Still no good.

What if I heat it up? No, wait, metal expands with heating. What if I cool it down? It'll loosen.

"Does any part of The Isle see frost or ice?" Arthur inquired, "First thing in the morning?"

Caellan looked at Ninianne, who slightly shook her head at the younger woman. The High Priestess wasn't answering the question, Arthur assessed, the younger woman was inquiring if she was allowed to answer his question.

Getting warmer perhaps?

Arthur went down the hill in another direction now and found even more huts coming off the side. He asked about where the coldest water was. Where ice formed in the mornings. He got a lot of useful information. But he wouldn't be able to use it until tomorrow though. He went back up to the top and asked about food and water while he was here.

"None is provided to you, but you may take whatever you like off trees or hunt as you please."

That was surprising, Arthur expected to be treated as a guest. Arthur saw a few birds in trees, but they looked like no bird he'd ever seen, they might be rare so he didn't fancy killing them. He remembered what happened when he'd killed that unicorn, that would be a fail for sure. He found an apple tree and picked about four apples.

By late afternoon he turned in for the day. He decided to lie in bed, even though he was sure he couldn't sleep. His thoughts kept returning to Morgana.

*How am I supposed to show loyalty through this challenge?* He thought as if speaking to her.
His mind returned to her body and visions of them making love, which helped him relieve some tension, but that was all. There was still no sleep to be had.

Arthur felt tired the next morning, but he forced himself up even before the sun to get down to the lake's edge and collect whatever ice and frost he had been told about from his socializing yesterday. He collected it carefully, not touching it with warm hands, and put all he had into a wine skin.

Most of it was still solid when he got it up the hill. He let the ice press on the blade where it pierced the stone. Arthur came prepared to get a good grip using material he had garnered off his clothes and possessions. When he felt satisfied the blade was very cold to touch he began his game of pull, push pull, twist pull… But nothing seemed to work.

_Now what?_

Morgana had organised all the important undertakings for Arthur's Coronation. She was down to the nitty gritty now. She was working out of her chambers and had been utilizing Merlin to help. Gwen would have been more useful, though, but she needed Merlin occupied, so he couldn't slip out. Merlin was a jumpy, worried wreck. Morgana kept reiterating that the challenge set Arthur wasn't dangerous. Merlin didn't appear to believe her though. He hadn't paid attention to anything she said regarding Arthur's Crowning either. Morgana herself struggled to work intimately with Merlin, she constantly felt on edge.

"He'll be fine, Merlin," His behavior was annoying her, but his regard for Arthur was sweet, "You can't go to him, he needs to complete this task without you, if you were to use magic it would be cheating and Arthur will fail…"

_That got his attention._

Merlin sprung up as if she had jabbed his bottom with a red hot poker.

"What?" Merlin stammered, "I don't have magic, I don't know what you're talking about."

Morgana sighed, "Okay, just help me with these seating arrangements, apparently King Alined and King Olaf have some long-standing dispute over land boundaries and cannot sit anywhere near each other."

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Morgana would leave first thing tomorrow morning for The Isle so that she could arrive for the evening celebration. Morgana had a twisting feeling in her stomach all day, which she was sure meant Arthur was unsuccessful and feeling anxious. She had never attempted it before, but believed she might be able to reach Arthur in his dreams. Ninianne had taken the time to try and teach it to her how to project her presence when she was on The Isle. Seers tended to be the only ones capable of this. Mordred was excellent at it, he was attuned into magical people while they were awake. Arthur wasn't magical though, it was a matter of projecting her magical presence to where he was, then finding his subconsciousness, out of all the other people on The Isle and tapping into him specifically. It helped that she knew everyone who lived there, and that Arthur's aura should stand out.

It required her to drink some herbs that allowed Morgana to become 'out of herself' but it also required supreme concentration which was why it was difficult. She shut herself up in her room that evening and made sure there were no distractions. She lit candles in a wide circle around her
on the floor. It would be no good if she fell unconscious and set the room on fire!

The herbs did their job and pretty soon Morgana felt light headed. Then she felt herself float to the ceiling, she could see her body slumped to the side, as if sleeping. She turned her attention on the window which helped her drift towards it.

*Focus on the moon and stars.* The moon was full this evening. *The moon and stars are the same ones where Arthur is.*

*Focus on The Isle, what it looks like, where you can expect to find Arthur.*

Then she was hovering above the wooden houses, the lake and willow trees, the hill. So many pictures, thoughts, memories were circling from all the people who were sleeping. Then she saw it, the memory of Cornwall, the pond, her and Arthur naked wrapped up in one another's bodies experiencing pleasure.

*Found him!* Morgana located the strand of thoughts and followed them to the source. She saw a flash of Arthur lying on his back with his eyes closed in the guest house.

"Arthur," She whispered into his ear.

He wasn't sleeping.

"Morgana?" She heard him answer.

"Tell me your challenge."

"It's impossible," He whined. "I have to pull a sword from a stone, and I can only use my hands," He reproached her, "You said it wouldn't be a test of strength!"

"It isn't," She explained.

He sounded hopeless, "Help me. I don't know what to do. I've tried everything I can think of."

"The Council and priestesses will have been instructed not to help you, but everyone else on The Isle can."

"They've been helping me, I asked for oil to loosen the blade, then I tried to make it cold so the metal would contract…"

"It's the steel sword with gold inlay?" Morgana asked.

Arthur nodded, before he realized she might not be able to tell his response, "That's the one."

"That isn't an ordinary blade, Arthur, Mordred found it in the lake, it was forged in a dragon's breath…"

"So, I've been told!"

He always covered his fear with anger.

"You're not asking the right questions," Morgana steered him, "To prove worthy of being our king, you need to prove that you trust us, that you would die for us."

"How do I do that?"
"Go to the people, speak with them, ask them about their lives. They probably all know how to pull the sword out, if they trust you, they'll tell you."

"I have to pull it out on my own."

"You will," She reassured him, "They will provide you with the knowledge to do it."

"I've only got one day left."

"You can do this Arthur, I'll be there for the celebration tonight, I love you."

"I love you, too," Arthur replied, "And Morgana… thank you."

Morgana smiled. Well she wasn't sure if she could smile in the form she existed in right now, but that's what she would have been doing if inside her body.

Morgana was tired beyond belief in the morning. She had forgotten how much out of body projection strained you. She couldn't ride, or stand even, the stable boys had to carry her and place her into a cart, drawn by a horses. She almost didn't make it to Avalon Lake in time for the boat Caellan had sent to pick her up. She fell asleep almost immediately.

Arthur felt much more confident today. He was sure that wasn't just a dream last night, he really had spoken to Morgana, he could sense her with him. He found himself increasingly in awe of her abilities.

Her advice also sounded correct. He picked more apples as an offering and went to the houses on the hillside. The old man who gave him the grease let him in. Arthur asked the man about himself and how he came to live on The Isle. The old man smiled, he asked Arthur to sit and began to make them some porridge.

His name was Balin, and Uther had burned his family in the purge. He was the only survivor and had fled and been taken in by The Isle. He sat with Arthur, who noted the wooden spoon kept stirring the pot even though no one was holding it.

They cut up the apples and the old man mixed them with butter and cinnamon. Arthur gave him back the bowl with thanks, and the old man went outside and came back with it full of fresh milk. Arthur asked if Balin knew about how a sword could be removed from stone. He thought for a very long time.

"I've heard it said, that a sword forged in a dragon's breath is like none other, it is sharper and lighter than any other weapon," He said thoughtfully, but not helpfully. He paused again, "If magic was used to put it in there, it stands to reason, magic is needed to pull it out."

"I don't think I'm allowed to use magic, for the challenge."

"Why not?"

Arthur relayed Ninianne's instruction, "I was told I could only use my body."

The old man shrugged, "Magic flows through the body, seems like one and the same to me," He said matter-of-fact.
Arthur had never thought of it like that, *So, I can use magic.*

The porridge was the best he'd ever tasted. Or perhaps it was because he'd only eaten apples for two days straight at this point.

Next, Arthur went to the young woman next door. He noted that she had branches with yellow flowers on them placed above her doorway. She was very petite, red headed and shy. Arthur asked the same question of her. She invited him in to sit. She had three young children.

"Where's your husband?" Arthur asked, before seeing her expression.

He realized things didn't work like that here. It was a rude question.

"My children come from the Beltane fires," Was all she said.

She put a kettle on to boil.

"I apologize," Arthur humbled himself, "I don't know what that means."

"Beltane is a special time of year for us, it's about fire and fertility, people lie together as pleases them out in the open around the fire."

"Does that mean you don't know who fathered them?" Arthur knew his comment sounded riddled with judgement.

"I know who fathered them," Her face pulled taut in anger, "But we made no lasting commitment to each other."

Arthur looked at her children. One was red headed, one had brown hair and her baby in her arms appeared to have black hair. They may have had three different fathers for all he could tell.

"Isn't it a struggle, to have three children and no man to provide?" He asked in earnest.

"The Isle is a collective, we all share everything," She patiently explained, "I am taken care of, and I take care of others."

Arthur nodded, it was all foreign to him, but it didn't sound bad. He couldn't imagine the chaos in Camelot if they didn't have marriage or the forced commitment to provide. Wouldn't men shirk their responsibilities and children grow up in poverty without stern direction?

Her name was Eilan, and she was not yet 21. She had lived there her whole life. Her mother was on the Wise Counsel. She had been protected from the horrors of the purge but had met many survivors. He asked her about his challenge. She agreed that he would need to use magic.

"What kind of magic?" Arthur wondered, "I don't have magic," He stated plainly.

She smiled at him, "You know people have a certain energy to them, I can sense it, since I grew up learning how to use my gifts," Eilan tried to explain, "Your energy isn't like everyone else's," She said. "You are made of magic."

Arthur was stunned, "You can sense that?"

"Yes," She nodded.

Arthur decided to be direct, "How could I use magic to pull the sword from the stone?"
"For me I would focus on becoming the sword and then feel myself slide out of the stone, but that takes years to perfect," Eilan thought out loud, "You'd be better off using a spell."

She had a small stack of books and pulled one out that looked extremely old and dusty.

Eilan reeled off her knowledge of the Old Religion, "A sword is fire, a stone is earth."

"This is your Kingmaking, is it not?" She asked.

He nodded.

"During Beltane, the time of fertility, it marks the beginning of summer when we ask the Goddess to protect our herds and crops."

She continued almost absently, "It has links with The Great Rite, the dagger or athame represents the man, and the cup of blood is the woman."

Arthur had no idea what she was saying, "What woman and what man? Who is going to have a dagger and a cup of blood?"

Eilan smiled knowingly, "You'll see tonight."

"If I don't fail my challenge, you mean," Arthur conveyed his dismay. Everything here was backwards, it made no sense.

"Symbolically, the dagger represents a man's sword, the one he uses to make babies," She smiled, "And a chalice, represents the woman, that which holds life, like soil that nurtures seeds so they grow."

Elian was being patient but she seemed sure she was wasting her time with him, "The man wears red, for fire, and the woman green for fertility, spring, grass… life."

Arthur thought about that for a while, "Beltane is a fertility rite?"

"Yes," Eilan seemed happy he had finally comprehended something.

Arthur wondered, "What does this have to do with me pulling that sword out of the stone?"

Eilan continued to try and steer him in the right direction, or so Arthur hoped, "I think you're on the right track, with viewing the sword and the stone symbolically."

Arthur was puzzled, "How do I pull fire out of earth?"

She amended, "How do you become fire? Then pull yourself out of the earth?"

*How is a sword fire?* Arthur took the book, promising to return it tomorrow, and swore to himself he would bring her some freshly hunted meat to say thank you.

Then Arthur went down the other side of the hill. The next hut held an elderly couple, who still seemed very happy together. He should ask them their secret. He was treated as a guest and asked to sit, they were preparing lunch. The husband was cooking, and the wife was cleaning, until Arthur came, and she started fussing over him.

"Doesn't he look just like "Malewyn," She exclaimed pinching his cheek.

There was something Arthur liked about her instantly, bony fingers aside.
"That's our eldest boy, all grown up now," The old man clarified.

Arthur relayed what he had learned so far and asked for her opinion.

The woman, Hella, looked at the book he had from Eilan.

"What you want is a spell where a magical person transfers their magic to you," Hella observed, "To allow you to complete the task."

"The priestesses and Wise Counsel aren't allowed to help me," Arthur pointed out.

She shrugged, "Most of us on The Isle have magic in one form or another."

"Can you give me some of your magic?" Arthur asked innocently.

"I could, but will I?" The old woman asked to no one becoming devious, "Give an old woman a kiss and I'll think about it."

Arthur was stunned. Her husband was a few feet away, they probably aren't married, he realized, "I… umm, I'm engaged."

"Really?" She asked, her pretty eyes gazing at him curiously, as if she thought he was lying.

"Yes," Arthur stammered, embarrassed, "My intended, she's was here on The Isle. Do you know Morgana?"

"Lovely girl that one," Hella said, "Did you hear that, he knows Morgana."

Gwydion nodded, "That one's a beautiful woman if ever I saw one."


Arthur felt uncomfortable but was amazed at their level of good-humored affection even after what was maybe decades together.

"So?" Said Hella glancing back at Arthur, batting her lashes, "What's it going to be my future king?"

_Is she serious? She's of an age with Gaius! She does have pretty green eyes though._

Arthur mentally chided himself, _How badly do you want to get on with this?_

_Morgana won't mind, they're all a bit nuts around here!_

"As you wish," Arthur said.

He leaned over and placed a very chaste kiss on her lips. The old woman held his jaw and opened her mouth and eased her tongue in between his lips, there was a heaving motion to what she did that caught him by surprise. With his eyes closed it actually felt nice. But Arthur pulled away, a little shocked by the whole thing. He brought his hand to his lips.

"Morgana's a lucky woman," She smiled mischievously at him, winking.

Arthur felt himself turning red.

Gwydion clapped him on the shoulder now as he came to the table with the roast fowl, hard bread
and cheese, served with wine. He wasn't jealous or anything that Arthur had just kissed his woman in front of him.

*How could he not care? If some man kissed Morgana in front of me, I'd break his face.*

"You need to obtain temporary magic, from another source," Hella supplied, holding up her end of the bargain.

Arthur knew nothing, "How do I do that?"

"Find a seer," Hella enlightened him, "They are the best at transferring magic through touch."

"Morgana is a seer," Arthur added.

"She's not here to help you though," Hella knitted her brows, "Well, there's only three seers on the whole Isle, Ninianne is not allowed to help you, that just leaves, Morgana's son, what's his name..."

*Morgana doesn't have a son, maybe she's losing her memory.*

"Mordred," Gwydion supplied.

That name made Arthur sit up, the little druid boy.

"I know him," Arthur said, "He's not Morgana's son though."

Hella shrugged, "He calls her mother because she takes care of him, well, she did, not sure what he's doing now with her back in the world of war."

"Where can I find him?" Arthur asked. He really wanted to pass this challenge as soon as possible.

"Mordred is a rare bird," The woman said, "If you start thinking in your mind that you need him, visualize his face, try to send him a message with your mind," She said, "Well, he'll come to you soon enough."

Arthur was astonished, "He can read people's minds?"

Morgana had reached him last night in his dreams, was it really so strange that Mordred could hear him while awake? The good news was, that Arthur had saved Mordred's life about two years ago, the little boy, whom would be about ten years old now, wasn't likely to have forgotten, and would probably help him. Arthur tried to do what she said.

*Mordred, if you can hear me, this is Arthur, I need your help, I'm on the south side of the big hill beneath the sword and stone challenge. I'm in the hut of Gwydion and Hella. Please come to me.*

"What's Beltane?" Arthur asked casually between stuffing his face with chicken.

Hella explained, "It about observing the natural rhythms of the earth, like seasons, it marks out a time when we give thanks to the Goddess, the mother earth itself for our bountiful harvest."

"So, your crops grow if you all have sex next to a bonfire?" Arthur simplified.

Hella didn't like his tone, "We give back to the earth."

"You'll see for yourself tonight," The old man said.

"What?" Arthur was confused.
"It's tonight, didn't you know that?" Hella was amused.

"I'm not going to be expected to… ummm," He blushed.

The old woman patted his head, "No one will make you do anything…"

Gwydion made a clicking sound though, and a funny look passed between them.

"It's his Kingmaking," Gwydion reminded Hella.

She nodded, "Plenty of pretty young maidens around here, I'm sure we could find someone to your… liking."

The old man winked.

_No thanks_, thought Arthur, _I only want Morgana._

Once Arthur finished eating, he rethought the message to Mordred.

The little blue-eyed boy arrived by early afternoon. He was taller than Arthur remembered, still baby faced, but with the same eeriness to him that Arthur recalled well.

"Arthur," The boy said.

Mordred presented and squeezed both hands with the older couple.

"Come," Was all he said to Arthur.

The boy led him down to the lake to the circle of willow trees.

"This is Morgana's favorite place," The boy said.

Arthur could instantly see why, it was peaceful, and beautiful. The willow trees created a shaded spot that allowed dapples of sunlight to dance in the shade created by the long ribbons of leaves. And one could observe the near still water. There was no view of the horizon anywhere on the Isle and it was sometimes hard to tell time of day, there was sunlight from above, and at night it was dark, but the in between times it was hard to describe, the mist became grey and pink to signify either day break or day's end but you couldn't actually see the sun go down or come up, it was just fog in every direction out across the seemingly endless water.

Maybe the people of The Isle did know about nature better than the rest of Albion, the lushness of their trees, the apples were huge and delicious, everything was greener and more vibrant here. Arthur had noticed it a lot for the past three days.

"Why did you bring me here?" Arthur pondered.

"Morgana brought me here," Mordred said, "It was the first time I felt truly safe."

"Because you were always hunted?" Arthur asked feeling the guilt he'd been experiencing one sad story after another of the people here, "Because of the ban?"

The druid boy nodded, "She said she would take care of me," The brunette recalled, a small smile curving his lips.

"Do you really call Morgana 'mother'?" Arthur asked.
"Yes," Said Mordred plainly, as if there was nothing strange about it.

*Don't insult the kid you need to help you!*

Mordred sat in the center of the trees, and Arthur followed.

"Can you transfer me some of your magic, so I can pull the sword out of the stone?" Arthur asked plainly.

"I can," Mordred said matter-of-fact. "Can we sit a while."

"Sure," Arthur said, "Tell me about your time here, with Morgana."

"Morgana teaches me riding," Mordred almost recited, "Ninianne says she has a way with horses, just like her mother."

*Ninianne knew Morgana's mother.*

"She was her Aunt," Mordred responded, clearly having read Arthur's mind.

*Okay, that's downright creepy! Don't think that, he'll know. Damn it!*

Mordred smiled.

"How did you come to be here?" Arthur asked.

"After you returned me to the druids," Mordred spoke as if reciting a list, "I stayed there, until Morgana came to us for help, and your men came into our camp and killed us. I managed to escape. I met Alvarr, another sorcerer…"

"I remember him," Arthur recalled, "He somehow escaped the Camelot dungeons, do you know how he did it?"

Mordred was silent.

"You do know," Arthur knew, "But you're not going to tell me."

The boy showed no emotion, just stated the facts, "Alvarr kept me safe, until he was caught by your men, I got away. Then Morgause came and found me in the woods and brought me back here."

"Morgana arrived the next day, but she was very sick," He said, "Ninianne told me she might die."

Arthur took the opportunity to find out what happened, "What made Morgana sick?"

Mordred stared at him, then spoke with no emotion, "Merlin poisoned her with Hemlock."

"What!?!" Arthur didn't believe him. "Merlin and Morgana are friends, he'd never hurt her."

Mordred remained silent staring, his face the epitome of calm.

Merlin and Morgause were the only two people with Morgana in the room, Arthur recalled. Father was only just waking up. He remembered Morgause was crying and distraught as she demanded they all get away from Morgana's limp form. Arthur pushed it from his mind. He decided he'd had enough information for now.
"I'll give you some magic now," The boy proposed suddenly.

Arthur was glad, "What do I do?"

The boy had it all figured out, "We need to find all the people on The Isle who aren't on the Wise Counsel, they are the people allowed to help you, if they want to…"

"Where are they?"

"Near where we were, over this way," Mordred was pointing, "You're going to need to convince lots of people to make you their king."

"How do I do that?"

Mordred looked at him blankly with those huge light eyes of his, before his mouth curved up on one side.

*You have to do some of this on your own,* Arthur reprimanded himself.

It took some time to knock on doors. Most of The Isle's people were happy enough to come out, they wanted to gander at the new King of Camelot. Some were scared of any son of Uther's.

"I am here to listen," Arthur said, feeling wise, "You can choose to make me your king, so I want to know, what you need from me?"

They looked dumbfounded. Some had mouths open.

"Don't kill us!" On person cried from the crowd.

Arthur couldn't see who it was.

"Lift the ban on magic!"

"I will," Arthur said, "I have sworn it, and I'll not break my word."

"Make all the kingdoms allow magic!" Said a young man with long, braided, red hair.

An older woman with a burn across her face spoke, "Take The Isle into account in all your decisions."

"Stop others from persecuting us," Said an older man, with a shiny bald head and a wooden staff.

Arthur listened. Most of the requests were very reasonable.

Arthur explained that he now ruled more than just Camelot, and that all of the lands under his rule would allow magic. They were stunned, it was more than any of them had dared to hope.

"So," Arthur wondered, "Have you decided me worthy of being your king?"

"Hold out your hand," Mordred said.

The boy placed him palm flat against Arthur's. Arthur felt a series of flashes. Pictures that went into his mind too fast for him to really take them in. It was a strange feeling, a sort of warm buzzing. He felt a certain twitchiness.

Others followed suit, giving Arthur some of their magic through contact, they would transfer to
Mordred who would then give the energy to Arthur. Maybe fifty people in the end. Each burst made Arthur feel more powerful, like he could do anything.

Arthur turned back to the boy, who was his teacher in this challenge, "Is there a special way to pull it out?"

Mordred nodded, "Push, then pull, think of Morgana while you are pushing."

"Why?"

No response.

It was late afternoon, when Arthur went to the top of the hill. He was followed by the small crowd of people who had supplied him with magic, they wanted to watch. The Wise Counsel and priestesses were there still waiting. He wondered if they had waited all day for three days? That seemed incredibly boring, if so. Well he hoped he wouldn't disappoint them now.

Think of Morgana. Push then pull. I can do this.

His mind immediately went to sex, but then Arthur felt sheepish, way too many people around here seemed to be able to read minds. A different memory. Arthur decided the first time they danced together at a ball. A governess who had been attempting to teach Morgana etiquette at Father's request, insisting she hadn't been taught properly by her own father who let her carry a sword and dress like a boy. That governess was very stern, and Morgana hated her. She had tried for weeks to teach both of them how to waltz. Arthur was a coordinated fighter, athletic, but he had no grace. Morgana kept leading, when she wasn't supposed to, and he kept stepping on her feet.

They were pretty hopeless. They did get it right though, in time for, what was the occasion? Arthur couldn't even remember now, it might have been a wedding for a Duke?

Morgana was about 13, so he must have been 11. They were of a height. She was a woman grown, but he was still a boy. She looked very beautiful that night. She had on a figure cutting gown for the first time, it was violet silk, and white flowers threaded into her hair that had been braided around her temples, but otherwise left flowing. Men in their twenties had asked her to dance while he was left watching them, feeling like a stupid little child.

He pushed then pulled. The beautiful sword came out in his hand.

Phew! Thanks creepy little boy!

Everyone cheered. Arthur swung it a couple of times in the air, the most remarkable thing about it was how light it was, and it was a few inches longer than his current sword. Incredible.

He couldn't wait to test how sharp the blade was. He held it up to show it to everyone. Many were standing, and clapping. Ninianne came forward to congratulate him, and Arthur was ready to squeeze both her hands with his.

"The new King of The Isle of Mists," Ninianne said to the crowd, "Arthur Pendragon."

Ninianne's voice turned soft, "Speak your oath to us now."

Arthur placed the sword on the ground, and kneeled in front of it, "I, Arthur Pendragon, true born son of King Uther Pendragon and the Lady Igraine do solemnly swear to lift the ban on magic when I am crowned king, half a moon turn from now. You may practice your religion freely with no fear of censure or persecution."
There was a stunned silence for a couple of heart beats. Then shouts of joy, cheering, crying. Celebrations.

Once the noise died down a little, Ninianne had her response prepared too, "The Isle not only gifts you this sword, Excalibur, but also the finest fighters The Isle has to offer to serve with your knights."

*What?! That hasn't been agreed upon.*

"Morgause, and Alvarr, our absolute best." Ninianne spoke to the crowd who went wild cheering. The blonde enchantress and warrior stepped forward, and so did the dark and handsome leader of those renegades. Arthur hadn't noticed either of them before now.

They laid their swords before him and took a knee, pledging to fight and die for him.

*I can't say no. Sorcerers both. They aren't knights. The Church won't allow me to keep a woman. They aren't even nobles.*

You must accept, the whole Isle is watching you. Do you want to implode The Pact before it even begins!

"Rise ummm… Morgause and Alvarr," Arthur started awkwardly but regained his composure, "I accept you as able warriors, fit to serve *beside* my knights."

He shook both their hands. They both accepted happily.

"And lastly, we present, Mordred," Ninianne called over all the cheering and clapping, "We offer him as your personal squire."


Who is practically Morgana's son.

Mordred came forward and knelt too, he had no sword to present, but made a vow to serve Arthur faithfully and to the best of his ability.

Arthur hugged the boy, helping him back to his knees and patted him on the head. "I'd be honored."

*He couldn't be any worse than Merlin at squiring.*
A feast was held and Arthur drank mead and ate roasted venison. He finally relaxed and allowed himself to enjoy his time on The Isle. It really was beautiful, he could see out over the lush vegetation, the streams, even the air seemed better. He kept an eye out for Morgana, but she was nowhere. The sun was setting now. He was ready to get going when Ninianne came back with Caellan, and what appeared to be the Wise Counsel. They surrounded him. Arthur felt uneasy.

_This isn't over._

Ninianne spoke first, "There is a last part of the Kingmaking you are yet to observe," She said.

Arthur waited.

The Lady of the Lake responded, "The new king makes the marriage of the land with the Virgin Earth."

Arthur politely inquired what that meant. There were some smirks and knowing looks among the crowd of old men and women in their animal furs holding their wooden staffs.

"It's a fertility rite," Caellan spoke, "We have a sacred place for you to… make a baby with a virgin priestess of The Isle."

Arthur did not appreciate being blindsided.

"I'm engaged," He retorted, "And I'm a Knight of Camelot, I don't just go around making babies with women I don't even know."

Looks passed between Caellan and Ninianne.

"It's tradition, it's expected of you if you are to be our king," A petite woman, around fifty, with short dark hair who must have been on the Wise Counsel addressed him.

Arthur responded stubbornly, "My betrothed is of The Isle, I'll make the marriage of… whatever you like with her."

Caellan touched his arm, "The priestess is always a virgin."

Arthur couldn't see why it mattered, "I understand why that is so, but any child Morgana has will be mine, does it matter the exact day the child was conceived?"

The petite woman seemed very angry at Arthur, "This isn't a silly game to us, the Goddess is not mocked, the Virgin Earth must be a virgin!"

Arthur spoke calmly, "The first time I had relations with Morgana, she was a virgin."

_Strictly speaking, I'm not lying._

"This isn't about your comfort level," The dark-haired counselor snapped back, "This is about the preservation of our religion and your legitimacy to rule over us."

"Ceridwen," Ninianne pulled the woman away from him.
Some on the Wise Council spoke in hushed tones. It seemed to turn into a heated argument.

"Not a virgin," Was said by an irritated elder.

"Might be currently pregnant!" Was exclaimed by another.

In the end the petite brunette and a number of others left abruptly in disgust.

Ninianne addressed him, "As you wish, our new king."

"I don't have to?" Arthur was relieved but surprised they would relent so easily

Caellan grabbed his arm, "You have to make the marriage of the land or you are not bound to us," the serious young woman explained, "But, we shall… bend on tradition a little."

"Meaning?"

Caellan offered, "Morgana can play the part of the Virgin Earth for The Great Rite, as pleases you."

Arthur's relief washed over his face. He nodded.

"We need to prepare you," Caellan said.

She stripped him naked to Arthur's shock, without her seeming discomforted in the least. He was given only the barest of coverings for his groin by way of an animal fur, his skin was painted with a blood-like substance, he was red all over and smelled like copper. Charcoal was used to draw spiral symbols of the Old Religion on his arms. Finally, he was given a headdress with stag horns and a dagger in his hand.

Caellan led Arthur through the crowd to the apex of the hill to the ring of stones. The hill wasn't large and there were hundreds of people and yet no one stood or sat within that circle of stones. In the center was a curved stone alter. Around the edge of the ring stones must have been every man, woman and child on The Isle. About 350-400 people in all.

A figure wearing green, a cape of woven reeds and a green mask lay in the center.

*Is that Morgana?*

*We'll have to lie naked in front of all these people."

*It's not proper that the Queen of Camelot will have been exposed in this way to all these people. Her chastity should be beyond reproach.*

*But, this is their way.*

*You just vowed to let them practice their religion their way…*

*But I'm not of their religion!*

Ninianne waited by the altar, she was also wearing a mask that looked like a goat's head. The sun had almost set and dusk was upon them. The High Priestess gave Arthur some branches from the hawthorn tree, she told him he needed to make fire the traditional way, by rubbing sticks together to light the sacred bonfire. Arthur hadn't lit a fire since Merlin had become his manservant, even before then, he probably hadn't done that in years, and it was a pain in the ass from what he could recall.
There were two great piles of twigs and logs placed just outside the circle. This part was Beltane. He was to make a fire then light both piles. Arthur's hands were already blistered from all his sword pulling attempts but he set about twiddling the branches as best he could. They were dry at least. The full moon shone in the sky, providing enough light by which to perform the rite. It took entirely too long, he was getting embarrassed, but at last the twigs began to smoke as he rubbed one against the other rolling the top branch between his hands. It caught flame and he protected the tiny yellow glow with his hand until it was burning more confidently. He held it to some thin twigs on the outside of the first pile. It caught flame well, and he took one of those twigs and used it to light the second bonfire.

Caellan told him only the High Priestess, the Virgin Earth and the king could enter the sacred circle during the ceremony. Arthur took a deep breath and walked towards Ninianne, he passed between the two bonfires, and heard chanting coming from the onlookers. The woman on the altar was definitely Morgana, he'd know her eyes anywhere. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. Ninianne said something about the sacred chalice of life and Morgana held up an ornate carved silver cup.

Ninianne motioned for Arthur to stand in front of the stone altar, Morgana sat up and held the cup. He was motioned to insert the dagger into the cup, he held it up to the crowd first, then placed it point down into the chalice. It was full of thick red liquid. Ninianne said more words over it. The High Priestess took the dagger, then held the chalice to his lips. It was blood. Arthur swallowed and chose not to think about it. He drank until Ninianne pulled the cup from his lips. She said more words, before offering the cup to Morgana who drank also, and a final ceremonial words before Ninianne drank the rest.

Ninianne displayed the bloody dagger and the empty cup to the crowd, who cheered. The strong low sound of drums began to beat, rumbling low and primal like a collection of heartbeats. People in the crowd began to chant. The dancing was nothing like anything Arthur had ever seen. The furthest thing from a waltz. Men and women were grinding their bodies together. It was sex while standing, to music wearing minimal clothes. Some people were naked. Some wore masks with animal faces. It was very sensual, and it stirred Arthur inside. Cattle were paraded and walked between the fires, even though they appeared scared. Couples holding hands would skip between the two large bonfires.

Ninianne instructed Arthur to make the marriage of the land now with the priestess, that she is the embodiment of the Goddess, The Virgin Earth, that he was becoming one with the ways of the Triple Goddess and the people of The Isle by making her fertile and the land fertile. He was the embodiment of the Horned Lord, through the Stag King.

He didn't understand all of it, but he knew he would have sex with Morgana on top of that stone altar in front of the whole population of The Isle.

No pressure.

He tried to stop the voice of judgement in his head. What kind of religion does this! Something as intimate as making love should not be done in front of others! It can't be further from Christian morality or the Knight's Code.

His heart was racing and his breathing was exaggerated. Morgana was naked, except for the green mask and the woven cape of reeds. Arthur slowly approached her.

What if what happened at Olaf's castle happens again and I can't? And all these people see? Arthur had been trying to block the whole incident out, but it was coming back now. It had happened a few times. Morgana had kindly pretended not to notice or care, but he was mortified.
One moment he had been all ready to and then... inexplicably he just couldn't.

Arthur felt sweat beading on his forehead. Morgana spread her legs, he knelt in between on the stone. He laid down covering her, her arms snaked around his back and held him to her. His began to whisper in her ear.

"I hear you're meant to be a virgin," Arthur jested.

"I hear kings are meant to be wise," She returned cheekily.

Had he been able to see her eyes properly she'd have been arcing an eyebrow. Arthur just laughed.

"Are you questioning my chastity," Morgana pretend pouted.

"Um, yes, since I know for a fact you aren't," Arthur became faux affronted.

Morgana became fake serious, "I'll go find you a maiden if you'd prefer."

Arthur grabbed her tightly around her chest, subduing her arms too, "No, you're perfect," Now being genuine.

He began to kiss her neck. I needed that!

"Thank you," He said, kissing her cheek, "I don't know how you did that, last night, but thank you. I was approaching it all wrong."

Morgana smiled back at him.

"I'm not sure I can do this in front of all these people," He confessed.

Morgana seemed ready for him to say that, both her hands held his face, "Look at me, Arthur," She said, "Look into my eyes."

He did. Morgana had the most dazzling eyes of anyone he knew.

She made him focus solely on her, "It's just us here, forget everything else."

He nodded and tried to block it out.

"Can you take the mask off, I want to gaze upon your beautiful face," He asked.

"We have to leave it on," She responded, before whispering seductively, "We're at the pond. Do you remember the water?"

Arthur thought back to that day. Her slowly stripping off her clothes and diving in the water, him trying to catch up. Her breasts bouncing as he thrust...

He kissed her mouth. The mask was made of thin wood covering from her nose and ears upwards, which at least meant he could kiss her lips and touch her jaw and neck that he liked so much. He just had to be weary of where his stag horns were pointing.

Just focus on her lips. He made it a deep and soulful kiss, and somehow everything else did recede like the tide. He was in Cornwall, just he and Morgana, surrounded by the trees in that clearing, waist deep in the water.

Arthur trailed kisses down her body. He loved her breasts, he sucked and he fondled. He lost the
furry loin covering at some stage. He placed his hand between her legs. He remembered what Morgana had done that morning after he'd proposed in the tent, how she had rubbed herself gently above her opening, he tried to emulate her motions. He felt Morgana responding, her breath caught in her throat, the way her back arched slightly, her muscles became taut. He didn't know why this felt good. He thought the pleasure for a woman came from putting the sword in the sheath, so to speak. But he had no doubt, she knew better than he did in this regard. He brought his other hand in and used his fingers to caress her inside as well. Her breathing became labored.

"Are you ready?" He asked.

It was funny, he expected to want to rush because so many eyes were on him, but now that he was here, Arthur wanted to do this slowly, thoroughly, to make sure Morgana enjoyed herself because he loved her and he wanted everyone else to observe the depth of his feeling.

"I love you," Was all she said in return.

Arthur leisurely found his way. He thrust gently. He sucked Morgana's neck, he stroked her hair, he threaded their fingers together. Morgana rocked her hips ever so slightly in a way that made it feel so good, he followed her lead.

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Those first times having relations after Arthur had found out about his father's death had been hard to endure. That night at Olaf's castle where the desire seemed to leave Arthur's body and grief take over, they had stayed up late speaking of Uther, with an honest fondness. Arthur had seemed better after that, but he hadn't wanted her sexually since, until the night of the funeral, and Arthur had been back to his frenzied lovemaking.

Now, he was being gentle and loving in his actions and Morgana was so relieved. The altar wasn't flat, it was curved, which made it more comfortable than expected, but it was still cold to lie on. Arthur was kindly rubbing her shoulders with his hands to keep her warm. For the first time with a man Morgana actually did feel her body throbbing and responding and the heat rising deep within her, without her needing to imagine something else. She moved her hips slightly to ensure his motions pleased her, it felt good, it felt right.

"I love you," Arthur whispered into her ear.

Even his words warmed her. Rather than thrusting harder this time, he became steadier and deeper with his motions, holding her body to him. She liked it much better. She felt Arthur let go. She didn't hit her peak, but she came close. She held him to her. And there they remained silently.

The custom was not to speak, considering it was a fertility rite, the people involved came to each other as strangers, in costume, representing the Goddess and Stag King symbolically. Often, they never learned each other's identity. She and Arthur had done this their way.

The sounds of the dancing and singing still raged around them and would run late into the early hours of tomorrow.

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Arthur was relieved he had performed his duty satisfactorily.

His cheek was pressed up against Morgana's jaw, and he heard her start to speak softly, "When the new king makes the marriage of the land with the Virgin Earth, they fertilize the land, making her
into Mother Earth, she whom nourishes the land and keeps the people fed and well."

*Kind of how a king is father to his people, he protects them.*

Arthur asked, "How did kings used to do this?"

"Do kings make love differently to the commons?" Morgana began to laugh.

"Not, that!" He playfully nuzzled her neck, "What if they're married before they become king?"

Morgana shrugged, "The Isle expects it of every king who wants the support of The Isle."

Arthur returned to his earlier question, "What are some of the previous challenges?"

Morgana recalled, "I know they used to involve a hunt, and an animal sacrifice, which involved a much higher degree of danger."

"I suppose you don't want to kill the king, before he even gets his crown," Arthur joked lightly before brushing her lips.

"I prefer the challenges they set now, about proving that you trust us," Morgana said between kisses.

Morgana continued to educate him on the religion, "The king must be one with the people, he should know what they suffer, how they live, what they need, these fertility rights tether you to us, your child will be one of us," Morgana said, as if she was well versed in the religion.

"*Our* child will be the Prince, or Princess of Camelot," He corrected.

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Arthur's point was correct. It was hard to draw on tradition for this Kingmaking, because no priestess of the Old Ways had ever become Queen to one of the Roman Kings. The child produced by the fertility rites was simply raised on The Isle, viewed as a bastard by Christians, and often forgotten. The priestess was always a virgin. A huge debate had raged the last few days. Morgana had told Ninianne that Arthur would refuse to participate in a fertility rite with just anyone. The Wise Counsel was split. Ceridwen believed the tradition very important and must be observed no matter what. A young maid, Ciana, seventeen years old and pretty, had been selected to play the part. Others, including Nimueh's Uncle, Merwaine, said the problem was Morgana was not only not a virgin but could be currently pregnant, which seemed to be irreconcilable with the Great Rite. Ninianne had said that Arthur intended to marry Morgana, loved her and was comfortable with her, that he would only accept his Kingmaking on those terms. Arthur had been told the tradition and The Isle's wishes and had insisted on her, so that had settled the debate.

Ninianne had first begun to prepare Morgana for this ceremony months ago. She hadn't said what it was exactly, she just started to explain the history, and what would be expected of the woman playing the Virgin Earth. Morgana had laughed, thinking she was herself the furthest thing from a virgin.

Just before Arthur had come back up the hill that afternoon, Morgana had been sitting with Ninianne. And the High Priestess had asked about that day at her father's cairn. Morgana had been thrown, she initially thought Ninianne was inquiring how Morgana had lost her virginity, which was a sore topic, since force is not choice. Morgana considered the time in the woods with Morgause, her first experience of sex. Ninianne meant something entirely different though. The High Priestess said, without meaning to, Morgana had performed a Kingmaking with Uther.
Morgana had been stunned into silence. Ninianne explained what she knew of that day. Morgana held the power of life and death over Uther. She had inadvertently set him a challenge to prove his worth to rule. The Kingmaking challenges of old often involved a hunt, a new king would be expected to kill a king stag with only a flint knife. The animal was the sacrifice. Her father's cairn was on a hill, marking a sacred circle, complete with its own hawthorn tree. The element of fire existed in the form of Tauren's Mage Stone, Tauren himself had been the sacrifice in the end. She had played the part of the Virgin Earth. Morgana had been in green, Uther wore his red cape of Camelot, his steel sword stuck into the green earth while he had deflowered her, making the marriage of the land. The earth around had been nourished with her maiden blood. Morgana had thought a long time.

"But Uther was already the king."

"Uther hadn't performed a Kingmaking when he was crowned," Ninianne countered, "And the power to end his reign lay in your hands."

"The union bore no fruit," Morgana pointed out.

She hadn't drunk moon tea that first time.

Ninianne nodded, "Your moonblood was late," The High Priestess added, "But these unions don't always produce children, it's just preferable."

"But I killed Tauren, not Uther," Morgana argued.

"Uther convinced you to save him," Ninianne nodded, "And you chose to let him remain the king by your action. If you had done nothing, Arthur would have become king back then."

Morgana continued to disagree, "But the king must complete the challenge without help from the priestesses."

"The priestesses can and do intercede," Ninianne had smirked at that looking at Morgana pointedly, "Like you didn't assist Arthur last night?"

Morgana had become sheepish then, knowing that her mentor knew what she had done.

In parting, as Morgana had been prepared for the ceremony, just in case she was needed, as Eilan fitted the mask, and tied the cape of reeds, Morgana had said one parting observation regards Uther's supposed Kingmaking to her mentor, "I wasn't willing."

Ninianne had thought on that before nodding slowly, "In times of old, the King's willingness was the only necessity, but it has long been unacceptable to force the Virgin Earth, you're right."

Ninianne said even the figure of eight symbol on Gorlois' cairn was symbolic of hand fastening, the symbol of marriage and commitment. Uther had sworn vows to her that day, to listen to her, that he couldn't rule without her friendship and love. Well he had lost her friendship and love, and now he was dead at her hand. She had allowed Uther to remain king that day, and now she had been his downfall.

_"I made Arthur king."_

She couldn't help going over everything Ninianne had said. She lay still, realizing that Arthur's chest was rising and falling slowly, steadily now as he slept.
Arthur woke in Father's chambers. They looked different now, but he couldn't place why exactly. He turned and Morgana was lying next to him. She smiled, sleepily, and placed a hand over his bare chest to rub him with a warm fondness. He began to kiss her, and she responded mischievously. Arthur moved to cover her body with his, but Morgana pushed him down flat as she knelt above him, smiling wickedly. He felt so excited. She had streaks of grey in her hair and had filled out some, and had smile lines around her eyes, making her look more kind. Her breasts were larger now, softer. Her hands rested flat on his chest as she began to ride him, rolling her hips. It felt amazing and Arthur was thoroughly enjoying himself…

The double chamber doors burst open, and Morgana immediately covered herself with her hands and slipped under the sheet. Arthur felt annoyed.

"He started it!" Yelled an indignant six-year old girl who was the spitting image of Morgana as a child.

A boy, a couple of years older with the same dark hair and green eyes, was holding a wooden practice sword felt the need to defend himself.

"I did no such thing!" He cried huffily.

Wooden sticks crossed in the air as the play fight continued.

"Both of you out!" Morgana demanded, not actually that upset.

She had put her nightgown back on, and was out of the bed now.

"But Mom!" The girl had crossed her arms in outrage, "He…"

"Enough!" Morgana held up her hand, "Viv, Aneiren, we don't sword fight in the castle, and how many times do you need to be told to knock first!"

She shot Arthur an, 'I'm sorry, this isn't going to happen' look and smiled.

Morgana grabbed both children, one in each hand. Arthur saw the girl's eye flash gold and her sword flew off the ground and moved of its own accord, smacking her brother on the bottom. He yelped, objecting to the unfairness of it all. Morgana's eye then flashed and the sword hit the ground very fast and lay still.

"That's enough!" Morgana became stern now.

They both sulked as she left the room with them. Arthur was still dazed by what he was seeing. They were both spirited, like Morgana. His queen came back in and opened the curtains and sunlight streamed in.

"We need to get you ready anyway, My King," She said.

"Why?" He asked in earnest.

Morgana wondered what had gotten into him for a second, "The celebration, you know, ten years as High King of all Albion… the feast."

"Ten years?"

She was flabbergasted, "Did you hit your head?"

"Well," He smirked, "You were being rather rough with me."
"I thought you liked it that way?" She matched his devious look.

_I love you._

Mordred pulled a face, "Are you two still doing… gross!"

He looked about 25 years now, he was taller and thinner than Arthur expected, but with broad shoulders. He was obviously a knight of Camelot. He embraced Morgana warmly before kissing her cheek.

"Where's Cai?" Morgana inquired.

"He went for a ride early," Mordred supplied, "You know how he gets at formal occasions, he'd rather be cleaning the stables."

"We need to announce Ginny's betrothal today," Morgana reminded Arthur who was only sitting up in bed, still naked under the covers, and well… eager.

"Promise me you won't forget, we shouldn't insult our new in-laws, even if they are a tad pompous for my liking."

Arthur saw his crown, and Morgana's crown sitting on cushions displayed in the chamber, glittering gold.

"Are we happy?" He suddenly asked her.

She stopped as if she thought it was a very strange thing for him to ask, "I think so," She shrugged, "There's been a long period of peace and prosperity, you are as beloved as any ruler in living memory, and the kids for the most part don't make me want to kill them."

He nodded slowly, "So, we've done well together?"

She cocked her head to the side, "Why so… contemplative all of a sudden?"

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Arthur opened his eyes feeling content. He forgot where he was for a moment. Dawn was upon them. The first rays of sun streamed between two deliberately placed stones, projecting the light towards the altar, but it was still a few feet short for now, keeping their forms in shadow. There may have been more to the dream but it all blurred together. Arthur realized that for once he could see the sun, mist wasn't covering everything. _Have they done that with magic?_ Arthur could see the figures of the people sleeping outside the sacred circle. He and Morgana were still the only ones inside. Now that there light was hitting the stones, Arthur could see the boulders were painted with symbols and pictures.

Morgana must have woken already because she answered his next question without him having to ask, "The 'key stones' as they are known, were placed to exactly to line up with the sunrise precisely halfway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice, so Beltane is the perfect time to come here."

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" He lightheartedly nestled into her some more.

"When does this ceremony end?" He asked.

"Once the line of the sun gets above the stone," Morgana supplied, pointing.
Arthur guessed they still had a while to go. The fires had burned down to embers now, creating a reddish glow.

Arthur was still trying to make sense of his dreams last night, was it a vision? Had he glimpsed the future or was it simply a fantasy of marital bliss? He was interrupted by Morgana pushing him onto his back. Morgana straddled him now. Arthur glanced around, the figures around the edge did appear to be asleep, but they were probably going to wake soon. In truth he liked her boldness. Morgana's hair was braided for the rite last night, but she let him unfasten it now. Her dark locks fell in cascades brushing his face. It tickled him, increasing his anticipation. His hand went between her legs. He was rubbing her nub, which was making her happy. A finger wormed its way between her lower lips. She closed her eyes to savor the feelings he was producing in her.

"Sit up," She commanded him.

She bent his knees out sideways but spread his legs. Then she wrapped her legs around his waist and eased herself down. There was no thrusting this time, just minimal rocking, their bodies sitting up, pressed against one another and they kissed so intimately. He had lost the stag horns, and she was minus the mask.

*Thank God!*

They generated so much heat themselves, it was all happening in small motions, internally.

"That…” Arthur sighed, "Feels… incredible," He managed to say in a brief moment when he broke away from her lips.

"Tell me what you want me to do," Arthur encouraged, "I want it to feel as good for you as it does for me."

Morgana stopped all her motions for a moment, his desire to please her made Morgana overcome with emotion. Then she smiled and kissed him, saying thank you with her sensual lips. She placed his hand back on her mound, and leaned back at little, until she made their motions together please her.

*Gentle remember, that's what she likes.*

He steadied her with one arm, so she could maintain that position. Her breathing became heavy, he felt her body tensing.

"That's good… really good," She said.

He felt her body involuntarily buck. *She was getting close… to what exactly?*

"Keep going," Morgana managed breathlessly.

Arthur was enjoying the challenge of making Morgana lose her ability to think straight the way she routinely did to him.

"Do you want me to go harder now?"

"No…” Morgana gripped his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin, "Keep doing… exactly what you're doing."

Morgana stopped being able to talk, her sounds became all cries of pleasure now.
Her eyes fluttered shut, her lips pulled into an o shape, and he felt her internally squeeze his body so hard that his own release came upon him without warning. Morgana pulsed all around him, and she bucked again, and her stomach lurched forward. Arthur felt himself spew into her. She cried out loudly, then she went limp.

He wasn't entirely sure what that was, but she had tasted hedonism the way he had been indulging himself in her. Arthur was exceedingly proud of himself. They laid back down side by side on the altar.

"How do you know all this stuff?" Arthur really just murmured out loud, he didn't plan to intrude upon her, but he was becoming increasingly curious about her knowledge in this area.

Morgana opened her eyes now. She looked at him guiltily, "I can't tell you."

"You're not still with him, so what does it matter?" Arthur prodded, then hated himself for feeling jealous, but he wanted to know who she'd been with, and how much she loved him.

"I could say the same to you," Morgana fired back, "I don't want to say, I know you, you'll look at me differently."

"It's not Alvarr is it?" Arthur felt his chest tightening, "I don't think I want to be protected by a man who thinks I stole his girl."

Morgana answered very straightforward, "I've never been with Alvarr," Then Morgana scolded him, "And you can't steal women, we're not objects!"

That actually did make him feel better. Alvarr had a dark charm to him and was the kind of man who could probably get any girl he wanted. Maybe Morgana didn't fancy him, for whatever reason. Whoever her lover had been, Arthur didn't want the guy hanging around, if he wasn't in Camelot that was for the better.

He questioned her, slightly annoyed, "So, you knew about the extra knights?"

"I did."

Arthur let his annoyance show, "The Church will crucify me if I knight a woman."

"Knight her, or don't, Morgause is an excellent warrior," Morgana cared nothing for those types of traditions, "You will be lucky to have her by your side."

"And my knights are going to hate this..." Arthur wasn't nearly done complaining.

Morgana seemed ready for his objection, "Arthur, currently all your knights must be nobles before they can even be considered to train for knighthood..."

Arthur couldn't see her point, "So? That's how it's always been."

Morgana spoke with belief, "Maybe, selecting warriors based solely on their abilities as fighters is better, you exclude so many people just because they aren't born male and noble, which isn't most people."

*Interesting thought.*

Morgana stated strongly, "Morgause and Alvarr are better than anyone you currently have."

"Excuse you!"
Morgana patted his arm, "Let's not fight, this is a celebration."

"Morgana, The Church will excommunicate me!" Arthur was mock whining now.

Morgana didn't care, "You don't only serve the Church now, Arthur."

The early morning sun was beautiful, lighting up the view of The Isle. Arthur could see the people around the edge of the stone circle waking up. The circle was thankfully large enough that they were out of earshot to the mass of people.

Morgana changed the subject, "How did you do it in the end?"

"Well, an old woman I met," Arthur thought for a moment, "Hella, she's funny, you'd like her."

"I do like her!"

"She told me that one of the three seers on The Isle could transfer some magic to me. Ninianne and you weren't allowed to help me so I sought out Mordred."

"He's amazing isn't he."

Arthur pulled a slight face, "'Unsettling', is the first word that comes to my mind, but, sure."

Morgana was positively beaming, "I promised him we'd be together, he's so excited to be coming to court."

Arthur was less excited, "Well, he'll be a better squire than Merlin at least."

Arthur noted Morgana's face flash anger at the mention of his servant.

*Could Merlin really have poisoned her?* Arthur would follow up on that later.

She kept speaking, "I want to get Mordred a tutor, and if he's your squire, you'll need to teach him swordplay."

"I will do my duty towards your..."

"Son," She supplied.

"He's not your son," Arthur pointed out.

"Yes, he is," Morgana insisted, "He's got no one else, I look after him. He's mine."

"Your big heart will swallow us all," Arthur said, playfully lying next to her.

She was drenched with sweat. He had to press up against her closely, because there wasn't that much room.

"I hear you teach him riding," Arthur nudged her gently.

"I do."

"Well, I'm glad you are already such an excellent mother," Arthur smiled.

He placed a protective hand on her belly as he kissed her cheek. They laid in each other's arms a long while until the sun was shining between the key stones and lighting up the middle rock. Arthur couldn't help but reflect on his dream. Morgana was his queen, they were happy and had
lots of children. He ruled all of Albion for ten years and everything seemed good, in the land and their marriage.

*That's a life I want.*

He reflected silently for a while.

Arthur spoke eventually, "I can't believe we did that in front of the whole Isle."

Morgana chuckled, "We of the ways of the Goddess don't view relations as something to be ashamed of," Morgana spoke as if they were simply talking about the weather, "Sex is a fact of life, it's how all life got to be alive," Morgana continued taking in his look of amazement, "It's Christians who have this wrong. Sex is meant to be enjoyed, it sets us free."

Arthur had never thought of it like that. Maybe they did have a point. Morgana would certainly show him a different way.

"Sex by a bonfire, maybe I'll convert," Arthur jested.

Morgana smiled artfully, "Maybe you should."

Arthur was still mock whining, "My religion demands I go and confess all of this as a sin!"

Morgana playfully slapped him.

Members of the community came with their woven baskets now to collect the thatch and straw that had been smoked by the Beltane fires.

"What are they doing?" Arthur asked her.

Morgana continued to teach him, "The smoke smudging affects the thatch and straw, it makes the soil they fertilize grow better. It will be spread over the soil to help the next round of crops grow."

"I've never heard of that."

"Ancient wisdom, that's why everything here grows so well," Morgana enlightened him.

Arthur just nodded.

"So, am I fit to be king or what?" Arthur called to no one in particular.

Ninianne came back, no longer wearing the mask. Others were walking inside the circle now. Arthur was given his clothes back and Morgana was given the honor of presenting him with Excalibur, she showed the sword off to the entire community before handing it to her king.

"This is a brilliant sword," Arthur couldn't help handling it and motioning practice cuts.

Morgana shook her head at him with his sword, smiling fondly, "I'm glad you're in love."
It was early afternoon when they finally arrived back in Camelot. Morgana could lift the mists so there was no need for Caellan to escort them. When Ninianne had first talked to Morgana about returning to Camelot, two turns ago, Morgana had refused, adamantly. She had been convinced otherwise eventually as they laid out the plan, but none of it eased the tightening in her chest. But now, all was so different, Arthur was changed for the better. Everything between them was more than she dared hope for. Their freedom was so close, she could taste it. Morgause would be close, and Mordred. Morgana felt content, an emotion she had only learned on The Isle. Arthur's coronation was set for the new moon. He would formally announce his high kingship, accept oaths of fealty from his additional land's rulers, and then Arthur would proclaim the ban on magic lifted, and their engagement. With the wedding to follow soon after. These were exciting times indeed. Everything was to be kept quiet until then because of the hostility to magical people that was rife across the land. He didn't want any vigilantism to wreck his plans.

Arthur was silent the whole way back. Morgana felt that he was contemplating something. Everything had seemed fine with the ritual part of the Kingmaking. If anything, Arthur had handled the situation better than she expected.

She tried to kiss him as they were rowed back. And, Arthur let her, but he wasn't reciprocating, so she stopped. He held her protectively the entire time, rubbing her shoulders and back. But he was brooding over something. Morgana wasn't sure what to make of the sudden change. *Did Ninianne say something to him? Did he have a vision on the altar?*

Arthur had barely retired to his chambers when Merlin surfaced.

"Arthur, I need to speak to you," Merlin's voice was more forthright than usual, "It's very important."

*I need to speak to you too!*

"So, talk," Arthur was short, because he could barely contain his anger.

But, Arthur had decided he would give Merlin the opportunity to defend himself.

"I need to confess something to you," Merlin struggled to get the words out, he was nervous.

*Well, I must say I'm impressed you would admit it, without me letting you know, I already know.*

*But wait, Merlin did this over a year ago, why would he pick right now to confess?*

"I have magic, Arthur!" Merlin broke the silence, tearing up.

*What!?*

*That was not the confession I was expecting.*

"Seriously? You," Was all Arthur managed to say out loud. *Bumbling idiot, you, have magic?*

Merlin nodded and the seriousness of his face, let Arthur know this was no joke.

*Then why don't you use it to make yourself better at well… everything!*
"Umm, I don't know what to say," Arthur felt dumb expressing himself like that.

Merlin continued, "I have always used my magic for good, to help you, to protect you."

Arthur ridiculed, "As if I need help from you, Merlin. You barely know which end of a sword to hold!"

Merlin was strident, "I've used my magic to save your life, I've lost count of how many times."

Arthur had nothing to say to that.

"I used magic to stop that dagger that almost killed you after everyone fell asleep in the dining room because of that witch's magic," Merlin said, "That's when Uther made me your manservant."

"When we met?" Arthur tried to clarify.

Merlin kept on listing his deeds with an urgency, "I used magic to reveal the snakes on Valliant's shield."

Arthur thought back to those incidents, it was convenient that the snakes had just popped out of the shield for everyone to see. Come to think on it, tree branches seemed to fall, and rooftops caved in at all sorts of opportune moments when he was fighting against poor odds.

Merlin continued to assert himself, "I sent you that ball of light to guide you, when you were getting that antidote for me after I drank poison…"

"Speaking of poison," Arthur interrupted, "Did you poison Morgana with Hemlock?"

Merlin's face fell, his ears twitched, and he looked guilty as hell. Arthur had all the proof he needed. He couldn't imagine it, being poisoned by someone you trust. It was so… underhanded! And why on earth!

He felt an overwhelming fury, "How could you do that to her!"

"I…" Merlin appeared about to sob, before hurriedly scampering for an explanation, "I had to. Morgause was going to destroy Camelot, and I couldn't let her."

"Then you should have killed Morgause," Arthur's voice was full of irritation, "Why did you try to kill Morgana?"

_Maybe Merlin knew Morgana was a sorcerer and thought he was doing the right thing?_ When Arthur had found out about Morgana's magic, he knew, immediately inside him, that he couldn't harm her, no matter how true it was.

Merlin could barely speak, "I thought…"

Arthur was getting more annoyed by the second, "You thought! You suspected, but you didn't know? You tried to kill my… Morgana and you weren't sure!"

"I was protecting you, Arthur," Merlin claimed, he looked distraught.

Arthur wasn't nearly finished raging though, "How did hurting Morgana protect me?"

Merlin began to babble, "Morgause put everyone to sleep, she was using Morgana…"

"If you knew how to stop the attack of the Knights of Medhir you should have told me!"
"I couldn't tell you without…" Merlin insisted.

Arthur snapped, "Without what?"

Merlin looked heart broken, "Revealing my magic."

Arthur didn't feel sorry for him, his voice became a low growl now, "So you chose to protect your secret, over Morgana's life," He deduced, looking pointedly at Merlin.

Merlin looked away, ashamed.

"You're a coward!" Arthur yelled, "Get out of my sight, you no longer serve me!"

Merlin had the audacity to keep defending his actions, "I had too, well, I thought I had too, I trusted someone I shouldn't have…"

Arthur tried to calm himself and speak clearly so that even someone as thick as Merlin could understand.

"Because I believe you really have helped me in the past…" Arthur began to say.

He wasn't sure if he accepted Merlin's assertion that his magic saved his life, but Merlin was always there and did sometimes despite all odds, seem to make things better.

Arthur continued, "I won't have you executed for attempting to kill the future Queen of Camelot, Merlin, but…" Arthur waited until his words sunk into his servant's stupid pinhead, "Be gone before sunset in case I change my mind!"

Merlin shook his pathetic head, a tear rolled down his pitiful cheek now, "No, Arthur, you don't mean that."

"I do mean that," Arthur was adamant, "And I am the king, Merlin. Get. Gone," He spoke through clenched teeth.

"Arthur."

Arthur didn't want to hear his lies and excuses, "I don't care where you go, so long as you are out of the lands I now rule!"

Merlin said, "Morgana doesn't love you. Not the way you love her!"

Arthur shook his head, *Merlin why are you still bothering at this point*, "I have no idea why you hate her so much," Arthur threw up his hands to gesture his resignation, "Morgana has a better heart than both of us, more conviction, and she saved my life, she saved all of us, and all you do is doubt her. If I'd have listened to you, Merlin, the Saxons would rule the eastern coast by now."

"I was wrong about the Saxon invasion…" Merlin started to say.

"You're wrong about everything, Merlin! You're wrong about her!" Arthur couldn't stop, his anger poured off him, "How dare you poison Morgana, then pretend to care while I spent a year looking for her, lying to me every day. No wonder she didn't want to come back!"

"Morgana loves Morgause," Merlin said weakly, "Not you."

Arthur picked up the nearest hard object and hurled it at Merlin's head. The skinny fool ducked in time, so the goblet crashed against the wall.
"Go!" Arthur screamed.

))))))

Arthur glanced down from the window in his chambers a few hours later to see Merlin leaving with a pathetically small sack containing all his worldly possessions. Gaius hugged him and said something comforting, no doubt. Merlin glanced up to where Arthur was watching, though he wouldn't have been able to see him, before turning towards the sunset. He was probably heading back to Ealdor in Cenred's kingdom.

*Good riddance!*

Morgana had slept all afternoon. By the time she was up and about it was almost supper. She was so tired all the time at the moment. She went to the dining hall but there was no sign of Arthur. She decided to try his chambers. Arthur was lying face down on his bed, across ways, which Morgana knew was a universally bad sign. It meant that Arthur had made a decision that pained him. He sat up when he heard her.

"What's wrong?" She went to him immediately, leaning over to rub her hand through the hair of his scalp.

"Merlin," Arthur shook his head, "He's not who I thought he was."

Morgana was surprised, "What happened?"

"He admitted to some… troubling things," Arthur said cryptically, "I can't trust him, and I don't want him around you."

She waited for him to elaborate.

"I know about… the Hemlock."

Morgana was silent. Someone on The Isle must have told Arthur.

"You know," She said neutrally.

"I'm so sorry he did that to you," Arthur was genuinely remorseful, "I just wanted to understand why, but he… he was selfishly protecting himself," Arthur was getting angry again, "I can't believe he did that."

*Goodbye Merlin, you traitor!*

The timing of this parting of the ways couldn't be better. Merlin's place at Arthur's side was ending, where hers was beginning.

Arthur turned to her speaking with reticence, "I know why… once he'd done what he did to you, that he would lie about it."

Morgana knew where this was going.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Arthur's tone was curious.

He eyed her closely. The importance of her next answer was not to be underestimated.

Morgana took her time in responding, "I knew I had magic, Arthur, Merlin knew too, I think
"But Merlin has magic too," Arthur replied suddenly.

Morgana pretended to be shocked, "Really? He never told me, then why didn't he understand what I was going through when I asked him to help me?"

Arthur was surprised, "You told him?" Arthur looked at her full of regret as he nodded his sad understanding, "You didn't think you could come to me?"

Morgana recoiled, "Arthur, you'd just killed a peaceful druid camp who gave me refuge because I ran away when I found out I had magic."

Arthur grimaced, he was clearly trying his best not to think back to that time.

Arthur turned quizzical, "Why would poisoning you stop Morgause's attack?"

Morgana shrugged.

"He said he wasn't sure, and that he trusted the wrong person," Arthur relayed, "He poisoned you on a whim!"

Morgana didn't know what that meant. But, Arthur was giving her the benefit of the doubt.

Arthur put his arms around her now and pulled her in close. "I love you, and I'm going to marry you," He kissed her forehead, "Please, no more secrets, I know we don't see eye to eye on some things, but I don't want us to begin our marriage with you feeling like you need to conceal the truth from me."

Then she did feel guilty. *If I tell you everything, you won't marry me. And The Isle is relying on me.*

Morgana kissed him back, on the lips, deepening their contact. They remained like that until there was a knock on the door.

Agravaine was begging an audience. Igraine's brother was a most handsome man. Morgana had always imagined he revealed how Arthur would look in twenty years' time. He had golden blonde hair, lightly touched with silver, always neatly combed, and a well-trimmed beard. He was broad shouldered, and while not known for his prowess with a sword, he certainly looked the part. He had similar eyes to Arthur, and a strong jawline. And perfect white teeth, he flashed often since he smiled easily. Agravaine was the kind of man who moved around at balls speaking to everyone, remembering whom had married whom, and how old their children were. He had a way of putting people at ease. He wore fine silks and gold jewelry on his fingers and wrists. He was a charming man, well liked at court.

"Uncle," Arthur smiled, getting up to clap a hand on the older man's shoulder.

"Sire," His counselor responded with all the deferential respect his king was due.

Arthur asked, "Will King Alined attend my crowning?"

"Yes, it's all arranged," Agravaine was eager to report, "Where have you been?"

Arthur turned serious, "Is there a problem? Is it my coronation?"

Arthur turned to Morgana, who became defensive, "I organized everything. It's all fine."
"No," Said Agravaine, "It's your Father's will."

Arthur was perplexed, "What?"

"He wrote it right before he left for battle, in case…" His uncle let his voice trail off.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Arthur seemed slightly peevish.

Agravaine, ever diligent explained himself, "I apologize, Sire," He bowed his head, "I didn't want to broach the subject until you buried your father, to allow for decency."

Arthur nodded his understanding.

"Then you left so suddenly," The older man said, "Well, I didn't get a chance."

Arthur's adviser knelt and held out the scroll displaying Uther's unbroken seal.

Arthur took it, "Thank you, I'll look at it later."

"Might I advise, Sire," Agravaine suggested, "A reading in your father's chambers with only your most trusted counsel."

"Okay, call Gaius, and Monmouth, and we'll meet you there soon."

Arthur wasn't concerned. Morgana was. Why did Uther even need to write a will? Arthur is his son and heir, everything goes to him. What's left to proclaim?

Uther did love to control his son's life, perhaps he would try to tell Arthur how to rule and whom to marry from beyond the grave?

Morgana felt anxious.

Arthur arrived last. All the advisers were standing next to Uther's desk where he used to write decrees in his chambers.

Arthur questioned, "What does it say?"

Agravaine handed him the scroll and Arthur broke the seal and began to read out loud, "To my son and heir, Arthur, I am so proud of the man you've become, you are brave and…” Arthur started to read in his head, realizing that it was more of a personalized message than a will as such.

Then he paused on one part. He glanced at Morgana, he looked positively heart broken.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

Arthur couldn't go on, he was suddenly so upset, the scroll dropped from his hand and he covered his face with his hand.

Gaius offered to keep reading, picking up Uther's Will.

"No, leave us, all of you," Arthur's gaze fixed on Morgana.

Arthur sat on Uther's bed and put his head in his hands.

Morgana was extremely alarmed, what could it possibly say that was so bad?
Morgana read it for herself.

To my son and heir, Arthur,

I am so proud of the man you have become, you are brave, honorable, an excellent swordsman and leader. I have no doubt you will be the king this land needs and deserves.

Ruling can be very difficult to balance the needs of the common people with the needs of its rulers and to protect this land from threats. I hope you will heed Gaius’ wise counsel, as well as Agravaine, and Geoffrey of Monmouth.

I fear I must confess a final sin of mine. I intended to take this to my grave, but I worry that not telling you could be the larger sin. I had an affair with Vivienne, Duchess of Cornwall many years ago, and I know I am Morgana's father. I never told anyone because I was ashamed of my conduct, and because it would affect Morgana's claim on Tintagel if she were revealed to be a bastard. I am telling this to you, to use this information wisely and as you see fit. But I have always considered you both my children, and would hope you will take care of Morgana as family.

I love you very much,

Father

She couldn't believe it.

No!

I asked him outright if he was my father. And he lied.

Morgana couldn't hold it in, the anger at the betrayal was too much. Her feelings made the room shake. A few items fell off the desk and dresser. Then Morgana started to retch, she fell to her knees and then really did throw up. Arthur was shocked by her reaction, his expression was one of apprehension. Morgana covered her mouth in horror but remained silent and on the floor.

Why are you surprised! Uther was a liar, a hypocrite and a tyrant!

Disgusting man, how could he! How could he do that to me, when he knew!

It was a while before Morgana regained control of herself.

"Gorlois is my father," Morgana stated defiantly.

"I know this is a shock," Arthur finally found his words, "It's a lot to take in."

She got up by holding onto the chair, her legs felt unsteady. Morgana wanted to scream, cry and hit something.

"I need to be alone," She finally managed.

"Of course," Arthur nodded, "I'm so sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" Morgana asked, You didn't do anything awful, this was all Uther.

Arthur took a breath, "Because I can't marry you."

What? Morgana hadn't gotten that far in her thinking, she was still caught up on Uther's lies and disgraceful behavior towards her.
Arthur looked exceedingly uncomfortable, "You're my sister, we must stop seeing each other."

"Oh," Was all Morgana could think of, that implication hadn't occurred to her yet.

Arthur tried to reassure her, "I love you, this is not about how I feel, but about what is right, it's a huge sin."

"Oh," Was all she responded to that.

Everything was swirling, she couldn't think clearly or form words. She just needed to be away from all of this. She wanted to be in Morgause's arms. She couldn't take any more. She ran back to her chambers and flopped on the bed.
Arthur didn't sleep at all. He poured over everything.

He felt an unbelievable anger.

*How could you not tell us!* 

*We didn't meet until I was eight, I don't see her as my sister.*

Arthur had spent his early years of adolescence and young adulthood thinking about Morgana. How pretty she was and how much he wanted to touch her.

*Father were you blind? Couldn't you see I loved her? Even back then?*

He thought back to that day at the stream so many years ago now. Even now he could remember all the details. How beautiful Morgana had looked in that violet silk dress and her hair fastened with the silver butterfly clasp. Arthur had no idea just how sinful it had been.

*At least we produced no child.*

*But now? How many times had it been?* At least seven by his quick count.

*We didn't know! How could we have!* 

*My feelings are real. I love her, I want to marry her.* 

*We've already been sleeping together.*

*Why Father, why?*

And then Arthur started to think what would happen if the truth got out.

*The king who mocked God. The king who produced a child of incest. The king who loved his own sister. The king with no morals and no shame.*

*That will be my legacy.*

---

He knocked at her door after breakfast. Morgana welcomed him. She remained sitting on her bed. Arthur was reticent in her presence, no doubt he thought all her tears were about the broken engagement.

"What are your feelings today?" He asked, very concerned.

Arthur hated to be the bad guy, and no doubt wanted to take all the responsibility for what had happened.

Morgana conveyed resignation, "We didn't know, Arthur, how could we have?"

"We know now, though," He replied sadly.

Morgana knew this was the crux of the issue, "What if I'm already pregnant?"

"I don't know," Arthur looked completely forlorn. "There was no intention to sin, I don't blame
either of us for that."

Arthur took both her hands in his, apologetically, "But I can't marry you, I can't make love to you, ever again," He looked very miserable to admit that, "I need an heir, a child of incest is an abomination."

_Stupid rules!_ Morgana snapped, "So that's it, you want nothing to do with it, if I am pregnant."

Arthur's tone turned soothing, "I'll always take care of you, and any child you have, I hope you know that."

Morgana's voice became low and threatening, "You would call our child, made in love, an abomination, and deny that child."

"I've just been made high king of most of Albion, I can't afford to have all the Christian kings rebel against me, it was going to be hard enough as it is…"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Morgana snapped.

"Everyone thinks you're a sorcerer," Arthur reminded her.

"_I am_ a sorcerer," Morgana reminded him indignantly.

"It was going to be hard enough for the Queen of most of Albion to be a sorcerer, but my half-sister as well," Arthur sounded desperate, "I need the respect of the royalty and the people."

"We don't even know it's true, Arthur," Morgana tried to argue, "The truth died with my mother, Uther might just have thought he was."

Arthur shook his head in disagreement, his tone dismayed, "He confessed it in his will, I think Father must have known, Morgana, maybe your mother did tell him a long time ago," Arthur responded.

Morgana felt so angry at him, "So that's it, for us." Stand on your own two feet Arthur. Don't do everything because someone else expects it of you!

Arthur had his consolation offer all ready, "I want you to stay and be my adviser, I think your abilities make you invaluable to me."

Morgana lost her temper, "You think your precious nobles and royals are going to want you to be advised by a woman, a sorcerer and an unwed mother!" She yelled her contempt.

Arthur's expression was one of shock, "You are pregnant?"

Morgana saw the fear in his face, "It's too soon to tell."

Arthur off-handed remarked, "I'll find you a husband, then."

Morgana scoffed, "Don't you dare!" You completely missed the point!

Arthur was intransigent, "I can't tell anyone it's mine, I'm sorry, I don't want this, but I have to serve Albion."

This is why I really would have hated being married to him, unless he was constantly bending to my will.
Arthur suddenly embraced her, a passionate kiss, his mouth and tongue moving with a desperation he hadn't displayed before. Morgana responded accordingly. She gripped his back, pulling him in closer to her. She slid her hands beneath his shirt. His hand went to her bodice. Then he regained his senses and pulled back completely from her.

Arthur immediately hung his head in shame, "I'm sorry."

He stood up and walked a few paces away deliberately putting the desk between them.

_He is torn._

Morgana changed tact, "No one knows we are related, burn the will."

Arthur was stunned at her suggestion remaining quiet.

She tried to appease him, "On The Isle siblings produce children all the time…"

Arthur was positively horrified, "Morgana, everyone in the kingdom, from the peasants in the fields, to the nobles and the priests, all despise incest."

"Only if they know about it," Morgana retorted pointedly.

"I'll know," Arthur stated bluntly.

His honor weighed him down. The silence hung between them. Morgana could feel her hopes and dreams being crushed.

She asked quietly, "Are you going to let people know we are… siblings?" Morgana asked.

Arthur shook his head, "I don't want to lie, but…"

"Everyone already saw us, you slept in my tent, I slept in yours," Morgana reminded him, "We very publicly shared a room at Olaf's Castle."

Arthur agreed, "I think the less people know about our familial connection, the better."

"Then let's go ahead, pretend we don't know," Morgana tried again.

Arthur became frustrated with her urging him to lie, "I can't do that," He further explained, "It also puts your claim on Tintagel into question."

"What?"

Arthur seemed surprised Morgana hadn't realized herself yet, "This revelation makes you a bastard, and not related to Gorlois, from whom the title of Duchess of Cornwall comes from."

Morgana felt annoyed he even raised that as an issue, "I couldn't care less about a land claim."

"No one must know the content of Father's Will," Arthur came to the answer that he would repeat from here on out, "I will tell people that our relationship has been misinterpreted, we were raised as siblings, and that I see you as my sister, that I sort out your comfort, as family does for each other in a time of grief, there is no romantic relationship between the two of us."

_There is no more argument_, Morgana realized to her dismay. _The only thing he's ever had any conviction about!_
Morgana raged the day away. She met up with Morgause that night. The situation was changing so rapidly, it was making her head spin. She hadn't reported what had happened via the crow, she wanted to talk face to face.

"Sister," Morgause kissed Morgana on the cheek, "What's wrong?"

Morgana was dejected, "Everything's changed."

"How so?"

"Uther wrote a will before the battle," Morgana was full of contempt, "He has confessed he's my father."

"What!" Morgause was caught completely off guard by this revelation, but Morgana fathomed she had never told her sister about the relationship.

"Do you believe it's true?" Morgause finally managed to say.

"I knew they had an affair," Morgana admitted, "I saw it in my dreams, I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Sister," Morgana said guiltily, "I didn't want you to think less of my mother."

"So, it is true?" Her sister deduced.

Morgana shook her head, "I confronted Uther about the affair, I could see it in his reaction, it was true," Morgana was bothered more than she could say by the latest revelation though, "When Uther learned I had magic," She said full of hurt, "He kept saying, as if by explanation, that I had bewitched him, which justified his unnatural attraction to me."

Morgause, who wasn't easily disturbed, was appalled.

Morgana wasn't sure, but she relayed, "In anger he said 'how could I have produced a sorcerer' or something like that."

Morgana hadn't stopped being bothered by that exchange since it had happened.

"At the time, I felt Uther had accidentally admitted he was my father, but he may have just meant it because he had raised me since I was ten," She recounted.

Morgause observed, "You don't sound sure."

Morgana was bothered, "When he threw me in the dungeon, Uther came to…" Morgana realized she had left this part out of what she had told her sister as well.

Morgause held up her hand to block further explanation, "I can guess what he did to you in chains, Morgana," The blonde supplied.

She was relieved not to need to spell it out.

"I called him 'Daddy', to see if it… excited him…" Morgana felt ashamed and needed to justify her actions, "I was pleading with him, I was so worried he was still going to let me burn."

Morgause held her shoulders, making Morgana stare into her big brown eyes, "I'm glad, you convinced him not to kill you, make no apologies for doing what you had to do," Morgause sealed her words with a kiss.
Morgana felt so safe with Morgause, she was showing that nothing Morgana could do would make Morgause stop loving her or see her as dirty or soiled.

She returned to her narrative, "Right before he left, he said, 'I'm not your father. If you want to get my attention, act like your mother' or something close," Morgana remembered shaking her head, "I felt he was telling the truth at the time though."

"When did the affair occur?" Morgause always knew how to logic things through.

Morgana dismayed, "I don't know with any certainty, there wasn't any way to date the visions from what I could see, Uther would have been 27 when I was conceived, he could have been that age in my visions, his hair was completely brown."

"Do you think it's true?"

Morgana shook her head, "If he would lie to me then, why confess it to Arthur? In his will no less? Why did he feel the need to do that?"

Morgause thought immediately, "To stop you two from marrying."

"Uther didn't suspect anything between Arthur and I," And Morgana reiterated, "And at the time, there really was nothing between us."

"Why else confess it?" Morgause was intrigued now, "Well, we know what Uther intended for you, if he'd told you the truth, that would have made you more resistive and disgusted by him, he probably didn't want that, he probably felt guilty enough as it was."

"Heavy conscience?" Morgana drew the logical conclusion from Morgause's words, but she didn't really believe that.

Her mentor remained unconvinced too, "Uther took so many other sins to his grave, he was never going to tell Arthur about Igraine, why admit to that?" Morgause asked off-handedly, "Could the will be a fake?"

"It's Uther's hand, his unbroken seal, it sounded like him... he is sometimes sentimental," Morgana wasn't sure of that either, "Who would do that? Why?"

"Someone who doesn't want a sorcerer queen," Morgause appraised.

Morgana argued, "They had to know about the affair, and who knew?"

Morgause was silent a while. Sometimes Morgana felt she could actually see the pieces of information being sorted and tried against all her sister's existing understanding and then rechecked and placed elsewhere.

Something else was bothering Morgana. She kept going over the will. Something in the wording.

"I have always considered you both my children," Morgana recited.

Morgause was confused.

Morgana explicated, "That's what Uther wrote in his will."

Her sister shrugged, not understanding.

"It's not the incest that bothers me, I'm no Christian, you know that," Morgana smirked at her
lover, "I look like my mother, I know that's what... drove his desire."

Morgana became flustered, "But... it's..." She struggled to express herself, "Mordred is my son. When you become a parent, you worry about your child, are they safe? Are they happy?"

Morgause was intrigued but remained silent.

"If someone forced him, hurt him, the way Uther did me," Morgana shook her head, "My instinct is to kill them, to rip their head off with my bare hands."

"How could he do that if he knew all along and saw you as his child," Her sister finished Morgana's thought.

She nodded, she felt troubled.

"Uther was a broken man," Morgause observed eventually.

A long silence hung in the air.

Her sister pointed out, "You're older than Arthur."

"So?"

"So, you are heir to the throne of Camelot," Morgause realized.

Morgana was yet to even consider that possibility.

Morgause looked excited, "We could crown you queen."

"Didn't I say the same to you once?" She replied, "And you told me then, that an unacknowledged, bastard girl would never rule Camelot?" Morgana reminded her sister before she got too carried away.

Morgause paused, and nodded slowly, "Uther has formally acknowledged you, but you're right, Arthur is known throughout the land as Uther's son and heir."

"What would be the point now, anyhow?" Morgana asked, "Arthur's going to lift the ban, regardless."

The older woman honed in on Arthur's response, "How did our new king take the news?"

She was resigned, "The engagement is off, Arthur will keep me as his adviser."

Her sister was very happy at that news, "A king's adviser is a very influential position, Morgana."

Morgana hadn't given that much thought. The wounds were too raw for now. From queen to adviser felt like a huge fall from grace.

She relayed, "I told him to burn the will, but his honor won't allow him to lie."

"Who else knows?" Morgause probed.

Morgana shook her head, "Just us."

Her lover thought for a moment.

"Is there a way to use magic to be sure?" Morgana asked her mentor, full of hope, "If I could
convinced him it isn't true…"

"I'll ask Ninianne," Morgause responded immediately, but then she wanted to know, "What if you're already pregnant?"

Morgana allowed her frustration to show, "Arthur says he'll take care of me and the child, but he won't acknowledge them," Before becoming forlorn, tears welling in her eyes again, "He's angry, he's torn, but Arthur's too honorable to come back to me."

Morgana began to cry in earnest now as the reality sunk in.

Morgause announced, "You carry Arthur's heir."

She didn't really believe it, "He'll marry someone else now, probably a princess from one of the kingdoms that just made him their high king."

Her lover disagreed, "Ninianne isn't sure why, but she believes your child will succeed Arthur on the throne."

Morgana didn't know what to make of that.

"Arthur won't accept our child as his heir, he told me," Morgana informed her sister, "He said the child of an incestuous union is an abomination."

She wiped a tear from her cheek just recalling those words.

Morgause spoke with conviction, "He may feel differently, in time."

Morgana felt so drained from everything, she had hardly thought through the possibilities. *I carry the future king*. It was a comforting thought, though in light of what she'd just lost, she couldn't appreciate it.

Morgause sat on the ground in the leaves, and dirt, and motioned for Morgana to sit in her lap, which she did. The blonde held her close, as she sobbed. Morgause soothed her as best she could. Morgana eventually must have run out of tears. Her cheeks burned.

"You've done more for The Isle, for all magical people, than any of us dared hope," Morgause comforted her.

Morgana laid against her, too overcome to speak.

Her Blonde Beauty stroked her hair, and kissed her neck softly, "He loves you, he'll always listen to you, The Pact will hold."

Morgana listened, but it still felt like little solace.

"I know you wanted to be queen," Morgause said, "But, this might work out better."

She didn't understand what her sister meant to begin with.

Morgause kissed her lips, and made clear the intention of her words, as her lover's hand disappeared under her skirts.

Morgana let her. But she felt annoyed. She was so mad about the injustice of it all. She was so close to getting everything.
"We'll both be at court," Morgause whispered between her lips sucking on her throat, "We can make this work."

"It's too risky," Morgana began to protest, but her heart wasn't in the resistance.

"Mordred can read minds," Her lover replied, "We can put him to good use, he'd make an excellent look-out."

Morgana was horrified, "He's my son!" She chastised her lover, "I can't ask him to do that!"

"Like he doesn't already know what we get up too," Morgause sneered.

Maybe it was the mention of Mordred, or all the disappointment of the last day, but Morgana pulled Morgause's hand away. She just wasn't feeling it.

"I can't, I'm sorry, not today," Morgana apologized.

Morgause nodded her understanding, though she seemed dissatisfied. The blonde and kissed her chastely in parting.

"Until next time, Sister."

_I guess we aren't sisters now?_ Morgana suddenly grasped.

When they had first become involved, Morgause's admission that they had the same father had repulsed Morgana and made her break off their romantic contact. But now their connection was soul deep. The possibility that they weren't both of Gorlois actually made her feel sad.
The Dawning of Greater Camelot

Arthur hadn't felt particularly guilty about having relations with Morgana before marriage, because nothing was going to stop him from marrying her soon anyway. *Except this.*

*The Knight's Code exists for a reason.*

Morgana had been avoiding him. She was extremely mad, not that he blamed her. If he were in her position, he would hate him too. She would have him sacrifice honor for love, risk his kingdom, and the potential future of Albion.

*That is the Morgana I love.*

*But I have to be a king.*

Arthur had politely asked Gaius if there was a medical reason why the church frowned upon incest, even if the people in question, only shared one parent. Gaius had told him in the strongest possible language that the children born of such unions were more likely to be sickly. Arthur asked a follow up question, how likely? There's no way to say, the old physician had replied.

Before that conversation Arthur had been tempted to burn Father's will too. Not now. He may have already saddled Morgana with a sick child and destroyed her respectability. He would need to arrange her a marriage, but it was still too raw for her to even discuss it.

He wanted to hold her, he wanted to kiss her. Arthur didn't trust himself to be alone with Morgana, he wanted her body more than ever because he had tasted her. She plagued his dreams, he would be experiencing bliss with Morgana as they merged their bodies, only to see his father watching silently shaking his head. In the more vivid nightmares a baby would suddenly appear with two heads both of which were the splitting image of him to a court full of royal onlookers whom pointed at him and proclaimed his disgrace.

He could only imagine how Morgana felt with the additional news, that Gorlois, whom she idolized, wasn't her father, and that Uther whom she loved and hated, was.

*I wish I had known that the last time we made love was the last time. So, I could have said goodbye.*

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Gwen had been staggered and dismayed by Merlin's sudden departure, he didn't say what had happened, only that Arthur didn't want his service any longer, and that he was going back to his village. Arthur had been relying on her more heavily, until he could find a suitable replacement. Which was fine, because Morgana was being waited on by Caellan, the serious woman from the mysterious 'Isle', with the dark robes, and braids. They were distant kin, and Morgana liked the healer's company, so Gwen could hardly object. Arthur was a very different charge to wait on. He was unappreciative and rude all the time. She hoped he was just temporarily stressed about his high kingship and that his behavior was not the norm.

Arthur threw himself into his role as king. His time was spent with meetings for the four additional kingdoms now under Arthur's domain. Arthur had Gwen attend him at most conferences, so she had a good idea of all of the responsibilities he was now undertaking. The new kings would be more akin to high lords or dukes in the sense that taxation would go to them, then half would be passed on to the crown. They would still call themselves kings though, with the position of high
Gwen wasn't privy to the news Arthur got in Uther's will, but whatever it was, he was suddenly angry, all the time, and then sad. He and Morgana were fighting about whatever it was. They were barely speaking now. Soon after Merlin's sudden departure Morgana had left for a few days to visit kin she said. She had come back stone faced, with the always equally inexpressive, Caellan. Gwen desperately wanted to ask about what had happened between him and Morgana, but clearly neither of them were going to be forthcoming.

Gwen kept hearing the rumors about the king and her mistress. In truth there had always been gossip around the castle. Gwen's theory was that servant's lives revolved around their royals, so endlessly speculating about their lovers and intrigues was one of life's few pleasures for them commoners. But Gwen, who knew them both reasonably well, had always known what a load of hogwash it was. But, things were changed now, though she couldn't place what and why. And the rumors were more detailed, that Arthur and Morgana had shared a tent while on campaign, that Arthur was going to make Morgana queen. Merlin had said it was just talk by people who were bored and didn't know them, and she was inclined to trust his observation. Merlin would know the truth of it.

Arthur was to be crowned on the first new moon after Uther was buried. He had asked Morgana to invite The Isle of Mists to attend his coronation. Gwen was endlessly curious about The Isle. Strong magics were said to reside there. Gwen knew so little of their actual religion, how they organized their society, how powerful they were?

No matter what, Arthur had a kinder heart than Uther, and was a most honorable man, so she was confident that his rule would be better for the people. The politics of being high king seemed worse than the responsibility of defense of the whole kingdom as far as Gwen could tell. Agravaine had been having quiet discussions with King Alined about incorporating his sizable lands within Arthur's high kingdom as well, to be sealed with a marriage to Alined's daughter. Arthur said he would consider it, but he'd need to meet the girl in question.

Morgause had relayed the contents of Uther's will to the Wise Counsel. They had discussed the situation extensively and had requested Morgana return to answer questions which she had done in the week before Arthur's crowning. Because most of the Counsel had lived on The Isle for many years and the culture and belief system was so different to Roman Christianity, they mostly asked her if Arthur could be brought around on the question of incest. She didn't think so and told them honestly. He certainly wouldn't marry her acknowledging their relatedness openly and his adherence to the Knight's Code made any more sexual contact unlikely, but she would try. Upon her return Morgana had asked Arthur if she could keep the will, which he thought was odd. He said no to her request in the end, Morgana was sure it was because Arthur was worried she would destroy it. The Counsel wanted to keep it in case The Pact ever broke, because it proved Morgana herself had a claim to the throne. Morgana was also extensively questioned over her visions of the affair. The only things that dated what she had seen were the dark blue dress with bead work, that her mother had been given as a wedding present, the tapestry that Uther had given Gorlois when he became his first in command, before he wed Elaine, and her remembering that they were both married at the time of one of the liaisons.

When Morgana returned she had been asked to encourage Arthur to wait, hold off on marriage to anyone until after Samhain, in six moon turns when magic could be used to tear the veil between worlds and communicate with the dead. They would summon Vivienne and ask her the truth. Morgana was gladdened by that notion, and not just because she would get to see and speak to her mother again.
There were faster magical ways to reveal a person's parentage, but it required having the hair from the parents and child in question. Since Vivienne was long dead, and her body had been burned no less, it was all but impossible. And she wouldn't even suggest exhuming Uther to Arthur.

Arthur indicated that he couldn't imagine Father putting something like that into his will unless he was certain, so he didn't see the point. Arthur's response had been, he needed to forget her, and she needed to forget him. He asked if she had any preference for a marriage he might need to negotiate for her, and Morgana had handled the conversation badly. He was insensitive for even considering that so soon. But then he had looked at her with a longing that suggested he hoped despite all logic that it wasn't true.

A feast was organized for Arthur's Coronation. A circus, a harpist, had been arranged for entertainment. Extra cooks had been brought in. The castle was full to bursting with guests, and their servants. Because there were now the nobility of five additional kingdoms in attendance. It would likely only be a few days.

The Isle arrived the morning of Arthur's Coronation. Their leader was a woman a little younger than Gaius, with her hair long and grey, she looked round in her layers of animal furs, and held a wooden staff. She had light blue eyes. Morgana had explained to Gwen her name was Ninianne, and that she was the High Priestess of the religion, which Gwen thought must mean she was the most powerful sorcerer. Ninianne was attended to by three young women all wearing the dark robes, one of whom was Caellan. Morgana followed, she was dressed like the priestesses of The Isle, the black figure-hugging robes almost to the floor, that tied in the front with long sleeves, their black boots could always be seen. Morgana's hair was braided, and she wore the silver jewelry. Gwen could tell Arthur was irritated, but he didn't reproach her over it. Morgana looked different dressed like one of them. Gwen remembered that sorcerer Uther had sentenced to death for stealing a crystal, he had escaped from the dungeons, he came next followed by Mordred and Morgause. Gwen was shocked to see the little boy, but glad no harm had befallen him. Morgana had grown so attached to him so quickly.

Then came the rest of The Isle's contingent, some said they were called the Wise Counsel. They were maybe 20, dressed the same way as Ninianne in the animal furs, even the men had very long hair and beards, all braided. The room full of royalty and nobility were shocked to see the open display of the Old Religion. Their animal skins marked them as distinctly different from the Romanic ways of Camelot.

Arthur was up the front of the great hall, bursting with onlookers, while Geoffrey of Monmouth recited the oath, and reaffirmed Arthur as Uther's heir. Arthur accepted and the golden crown, jeweled, intricately worked, was placed on his golden head. Gwen's heart burst with delight to see Arthur proclaimed king officially for the first time. He was the very image of everything a king should be, regal, commanding, handsome, beaming with pride, grace and generosity.

Arthur made an extra effort to show his approval of The Isle's leaders, "Honored guests, please take your seats," He gestured, "And be assured of your safety and warm welcome from all in attendance," Arthur spoke with kingly authority, sending a shiver down Gwen's spine.

Agravaine sat at Arthur's right. Igraine's brother was blonde and blue eyed as his sister had been according to the servants who had been around longer than Gwen. He was a majestic man, well-mannered and very handsome for a man of his years. Gaius was next to Agravaine with his new physician's assistant, whom Gwen had only spoken to a couple of times, he was a kindly man named Rhys, whom had come to Camelot with his adorable grandson, Emmet, a gangly boy of eight.
Ninianne sat at the high table next to Morgana who was at Arthur's left. Morgana warmly embraced the older woman and they held hands while facing each other, which must have been a greeting custom of The Isle, which clearly set chins waging about Morgana's supposed sorcery. Not supposed, actual sorcery.

"To our honored guests, King Bayard, Queen Annis, King Rodor and King Olaf, I welcome you and your guests and families into my kingdom. To the other kingdoms, King Alined of Cumbria, you are very welcome here."

King Odin hated Arthur and had not attended, and Cenred was the war-some type, not interested in diplomatic relations.

Arthur continued to deliver the words with authority, "As ruler of Camelot and our new conjoined lands to be known henceforth as Greater Camelot, I vow to be a fair and just ruler, to protect all my people from harm, to keep order, and to allow the people to worship freely."

That particular line about 'worshiping freely' caused a few nobles and royalty in the room to sit up and take notice.

Arthur continued on, "I vow to be wise, to weigh up the needs of the rulers with the needs of the people, to listen to what my people want and need, to be one with them."

Gwen's was overwhelmed. Whenever Uther made decisions 'the people' he took into account were people like him, other nobles. Arthur meant, he would rule with the commons in mind. People like her.

"This I vow to all of you, as your king."

The room applauded Arthur's oath as was the custom. Arthur then invited the kings who now served under him to make their pledges of fealty, which they did. Each king, or queen, signed a treaty agreeing to be ruled by the High King of Greater Camelot.

"May this joining of kingdoms lead to greater peace and prosperity for the land of Greater Camelot."

Then Arthur summoned Ninianne up.

Arthur explained the new way of his rule, "In that vein, I have invited the leader of the Old Religion, Ninianne, The Lady of the Lake and High Priestess of The Isle of Mists to accept my offer of peace."

Once Ninianne was in front of him, Arthur said, "I, Arthur Pendragon, High King of Greater Camelot do hereby lift the ban on sorcery."

Gwen was completely blindsided. Arthur had kept this part to himself. There was a rumbling going around the room now. There was some serious disquiet.

Ninianne spoke to accept The Pact, that there was to be peace, no killing or persecution from either side. Ninianne explained that Arthur was accepting Morgana as his advisor, Morgause and Alvarr were to fight alongside Arthur's knights and Mordred would be his squire. They were all formerly presented to the new high king.

Sorcery had been banned for as far back as Gwen could remember and she felt nervous about Arthur's suddenly changed stance. She wondered if The Isle were enchanting him, or if they were trustworthy? Should Arthur be weary? She trusted that Morgana would not hurt Arthur and that
gave her comfort though. Morgause on the other hand, she had tried to kill Arthur the first time they met.

Arthur continued his speech, unfazed, "I have 30 courtiers with scrolls whom will be from this day traveling the lands of Greater Camelot to read this decree to the commons in the taverns and churches all over these lands until it is understood how things are done in my new Kingdom of Great Camelot. This is the dawning of a new day, a new time of peace and prosperity for these lands."

Arthur was not put off by the feeling of hostility in the room, "If a sorcerer steals, or murders, then he is guilty because he stole or killed another unjustly, not because he used magic or because he simply is magical, and that is how I will enforce the law."

Arthur kept clarifying the new order, "Using magic that harms no one is the right of magical people now, using magic to harm someone is only punishable because of the harm inflicted with no more penalty than anyone for doing unjustified harm to another."

More rumbling.

"Hate only begets more hate," Arthur's voice rose above the crowd, "I have seen how the ban on magic tore this land apart and tormented a people who simply wanted to live their lives as they are, expressing their own faith their own way." Arthur came across as clear and strong, "It will take time to heal these wounds, this is a big change, but with cooperation among the kingdoms it can be achieved."

Arthur signaled with his hand, and Sir Leon and Sir Hilden came forward with two men whom had been in the dungeons since before the Saxon invasion. They both looked skinny, dirty and scared.

"In that same… spirit of clemency, I pardon these men you see before you, each of whom has been accused of sorcery, but none of whom hurt anyone, my Father was set to execute them before his untimely death," Arthur paused for dramatic effect, "I begin my reign with the gift of mercy. Go now, you are free."

Both men could hardly believe their ears and were quick to find their way out as if expecting the king had misspoken or would change his mind any moment now.

Gwen's couldn't help but think Arthur was a most wise king. Her father had suffered falsely accused at Uther's irrational hatred, and now Arthur would ensure that situation would never be repeated, that Morgana would not have to suffer how many others before her had.

"As a token of good faith," Arthur's voice rang out, "I am returning the Crystal of Nehrtid, seized by King Uther Pendragon during The Great Purge, to its rightful owners, The Isle of Mists."

Ninianne came forward and Arthur gently placed the large clear shiny rock in her outstretched arms. She appeared very happy. Ninianne then spoke that The Isle also gifts Arthur a most special sword, Excalibur, a magical sword that will protect him. Morgana presented the sword to Arthur. It was very beautiful, with a gold inlay through the steel, and some symbols down the blade. Arthur held it up, looking very pleased. Then Arthur encouraged everyone to enjoy the feast. The circus began to perform and music rang out and soon there was much talk and food being served, and drunken laughing.

The Isle kept themselves separate. No one drank too much, they seemed to be on alert due to the hostile audience. But since Arthur had made clear they were esteemed guests, everyone else either kept the peace or at least avoided these strangers.
It was part way through the festivities when Gwen saw Arthur touch Morgana’s arm to get her 
attention, and she retched away from his touch, to Gwen’s shock. The king tried to speak to her, but 
she deliberately ignored him and walked away. Gwen didn’t know what to think.

Uncle was blindsided by the decree allowing magic, but at least he had the decency to wait until 
after the feast to broach it with him in his chambers.

"Sire, I was most shocked to see your changed stance on sorcery," Agravaine stated plainly, 
annoyed perhaps.

"I vowed to The Isle I would," Arthur explained, "You haven’t been here, Uncle, seeing what The 
Great Purge and the continuing repression has done to Camelot, this is a good thing, in time the 
kings will realize it."

"You have taken a great risk, My Lord," Uncle advised him, "You are young, and have suddenly 
found yourself more powerful than you ever imagined, but you are still fortifying your hold on 
power."

"Do you think my new kingdoms will rebel?" Arthur hadn't expected that.

"I honestly don't know, Sire," Agravaine admitted, "But for as long as I have known Bayard, he's 
held similar views to Uther on sorcery, though his punishments were never as severe."

Arthur thought on that, "Bayard is a loyal sort of man, he will accept my decision."

"I hope that is true," Agravaine said, pensively, "Rodor is most displeased, he had my ear during 
the feast. He hates sorcery and doesn't like this level of… interference in the ruling of his 
kingdom."

Arthur thought on that, "He just swore me an oath of fealty, I am high king, if he wishes to 
disobey, he will be guilty of treason."

Agravaine's expression turned worried at Arthur's response, "Sire, I suggest, you not speak such of 
treason, this is early days, you are still finding your feet, so to speak," Agravaine tried to be calm, 
but he was clearly anxious, "A soft approach to keep these men, whom have ruled as they saw fit 
for many years, may not take kindly to many drastic changes so quickly."

Arthur could see the logic in that, "What do you suggest, Uncle?"

His adviser had clearly already thought on it, "That you make an advantageous, political marriage 
as soon as possible to ensure your high kingship cannot fall apart."

It was the last thing Arthur wanted.

"I propose you throw a ball, My Lord."

Arthur knitted his brows, not comprehending, "A ball, why?"

"So, you can choose your queen," His adviser stated, "A princess from among the kingdoms you 
now rule, or hope to rule."

Arthur wanted to flee.

"Not yet," He raised a hand as if to stop the suggestion physically, "I just need more time." To 
forget her.
"You need to do this now, while you're still formalizing your hold on power," Uncle reminded him.
A/N: My understanding is that Samhain is pronounced Sow-een.

Being in Greater Camelot those first days that magic was made lawful were memorable. Morgana made a point to go to the market and around town wearing her priestess robes, Caellan and Mordred accompanied her dressed similarly. Morgause and Alvarr came as protectors wearing mail with swords at hips. Some of the common people were scared, some avoided them. But there were others. A few people did approach and thank them for changing Arthur's stance. It wasn't common knowledge what had led to the new high king's radical shift, but most people assumed Morgana was the cause. Since her magical outburst in court a couple of turns ago, the whole kingdom whispered about her sorcery.

On the second day in the bustling market two wide horse-drawn carts had tried to pass one another but had collided. The cart full of apples had overturned pinning a young girl under the wheel. Many had dashed over to free her, but even with ten men, they couldn't move the massive weight. Morgana very publicly displayed her magic as she used her mind, Wind, as she felt the power go through her as she held out her hand to direct her magic to lift up the cart and right side it.

The child was screaming in pain, her leg badly broken. Morgana laid hands on the girl and said some words of the Old Tongue, and felt the bones fitting back together, and the blood flow restore and the broken flesh and skin repairing. The child stopped crying, too over-awed to speak. Her distraught mother came running a few moments later demanding the 'witch' unhand her daughter. Then she saw what Morgana had done. The girl ran and embraced her mother. She ran. Her leg was completely fine.

The crowd of onlookers were silent. A couple of people crossed themselves. No thanks was forthcoming, but the incident was talked about all over town. In the following days commoners flooded outside the castle gates requesting the 'witch' heal their many ailments. Morgana attended some herself, but mostly left those duties to Caellan whom was very dedicated to the healing arts. Demonstrating to ordinary people that magic wasn't to be feared and could improve their lives might go a long way towards changing public perception of all of them.

Those of the Wise Counsel left not long after the ceremony. Ninianne stayed on. Morgana suspected because The High Priestess wanted to watch Morgana and Morgause closely to ensure their feelings for one another were not obvious. Additionally, Ninianne wanted to construct a new plan regarding the revelations of Uther's Will. She would continue to find evidence either way, including talking to Vivienne's friends on The Isle she may have confided in about the affair. Alvarr was for lying about all of it. He wanted to pretend to use magic to declare the will a fake and have Isler's pretend to have spoken to Vivienne about the affair and say it occurred a year before or after Morgana's birth. He argued that Morgana becoming queen was paramount and that Arthur must be convinced beyond a doubt Uther could not be her father. Morgause argued The Pact would hold regardless because of Arthur's genuine regard for Morgana even if they couldn't wed. Morgause would usually have been for Ninianne's position, or even Alvarr's, but Morgana...
suspected her judgement was being affected because of their personal relationship. Morgana had sincerely asked Arthur to wait for her, it was only six months until Samhain, and she was quite adamant that he would do so. He would try with others of course, but it wouldn't work out because he still loved her.

Morgause and Alvarr also had to deal with the perils of training with Arthur's knights now. That in of itself, was an additional source of frustration for her lover. It had nothing to do with her skills, it was being cold-shouldered, undermined and met with jealousy, hostility and men's arrogance because Arthur's knights thought they were just naturally better at everything. Not only were Alvarr and Morgause sorcerers, but Alvarr was also a commoner, and Morgause's blood was only half noble Roman which apparently wasn't enough. And of course, Morgause was a woman. The more she proved them wrong, the more Arthur's knights froze her out. Morgause wouldn't talk about it, she was swallowing her rage for now. Morgana watched training from her window where she could. She had seen some low blows, deliberate shoves and other petty male behavior and no one wanted to talk to Morgause or Alvarr.

Not long after Arthur's crowning she had seen, Sir Hilden, mocking Morgause in front of all the other knights, when Arthur was called away for a moment, the knight had asked in a patronizing tone if Morgause needed to rest because it was "her time of the moon cycle."

Morgause had said she would happily show him how it was done right now. He had obviously been hoping she would accept his challenge, and rather than sparring, the challenge had quickly descended into a very aggressive display of fighting prowess, thankfully with blunted swords. Rather than the older, more sensible knights putting a stop to it, they had urged Hilden on. Morgana felt nervous. Morgause did an excellent job of defending herself, eventually besting him, to his obvious disgust. She had hit him behind the knee forcing him down and held the dulled blade edge to his chest.

The arrogant, young knight spat and refused to say 'yield'. Morgause stepped away, never turning her back, she trusted no one here. He cried that she had cheated and used sorcery. Some of the other knights appeared to believe it true. Some didn't.

The tall young knight stood up, casting the practice sword aside in disgust and began to storm off. Morgana saw the quick gold flash in Mordred's eye as magic caused Sir Hilden to trip and land face first into a pile of horse dung. Arthur's knights begun to chuckle at Hilden's expense. But, Morgause remained stoic.

My dear boy, you are everything a mother could hope for!

Morgana and Morgause had only kissed once since they had both been in Greater Camelot. It was fleeting, behind the privacy screen in Morgana's room. Morgause had been talking to her about something, no doubt serious, and Morgana had been changing her clothes, she asked Morgause to bring her nightgown, and had grabbed her Golden Beauty's wrist when she had brought it forth. Morgana pulled her lover into a tight embrace behind the screen and kissed her furiously. Morgause lost herself in desire deepening their caressing of lips and tongues, skin pressed against skin. But only briefly. She regained her sense of duty, putting a halt to things.

Morgana felt that Morgause, like her, had no real intention of ending their relationship, she simply wanted to wait until Ninianne left and she had a better sense of the castle and dynamics of the new situation, and felt confident they wouldn't be discovered. Morgana didn't care though. Maybe it was
her rage at Arthur for just accepting the situation, but she was being reckless.

"That is your new duty, My Golden Knight," Morgana said wistfully still naked and holding onto the nightgown, "Find somewhere we can be alone and... safe."

She combed her fingers through Morgause's golden waves.

"My Queen," Morgause returned, bowing with all knightly manners, before retreating from the screen.

Morgause escorted Ninianne back to Avalon Lake. The High Priestess had requested her company, which always meant her mentor had something of importance to discuss with her. Where had they left matters on the way forward in the wake of Uther's Will? Nowhere exactly. No one could agree on what to tell Arthur. More time to observe the new high king was all they had reached consensus over.

They were not far from where the barge would be waiting to sail the High Priestess home, when Ninianne who had been quiet and contemplative the whole journey as they rode, finally spoke.

"Moggy," Ninianne addressed her by the special name she had given Morgause in childhood, but seldom used anymore.

"Yes, Ninay?" She replied by the familiar name she had called her mentor as far back as she could remember.

Ever direct, Ninianne stated her concern outright, "I am worried about leaving you here."

"Why Ninay?"

"I've known you all your life, Moggy," Ninianne said.

Morgause waited silently for the wisdom she knew was coming.

"In this situation, with so much riding on Arthur's... regard for Morgana," Ninianne sighed, "I would be for telling Arthur that we are certain Gorlois is Morgana's father, to persuade him to marry her."

So why aren't you? Morgause thought silently.

As if her mentor had read her mind, "You know why I'm not arguing for that?"

Morgause shook her head.

"Because I'm worried you and Morgana aren't going to stay away from one another."

Morgause didn't protest her commitment to the cause.

Ninianne continued, "I am terrified that all could be lost in an instant, if you get careless."

Morgause noticed that she was being singled out. Morgana was younger and more ruled by her emotions, more heedless. Ninianne is trusting that I will see sense.

"Arthur is not forgiving where his heart is concerned, and he certainly isn't open minded the way The Isle is, if he realizes the love between yourself and Morgana is not sisterly... the Goddess help all of us then!"
Morgause had nothing to say. She had been planning to begin carefully and quietly paying visits to Morgana's chambers once Ninianne left, perhaps during the day, pretend they were just sisters taking tea together, she hadn't worked out all the details yet. Her mentor must have picked up on it. She flooded with guilt.

"I know you sacrificed a lot for her," The High Priestess said carefully.

*That is an understatement.* Morgause couldn't allow herself to think about that.

Ninianne continued, "I know you love her more than anything, but this is the struggle, it's every day and it's hard, believe me I know."

"Between love and duty?" Morgause replied.

"Yes."

"But if he doesn't marry her, The Pact will hold, you know it will," Morgause said.

"It will hold I agree," Ninianne said, "But, if Arthur marries someone else, a lot could change, depending on whom that someone else is."

Morgause had given it some thought, she hoped in time Arthur would move on and not concern himself with Morgana's affairs as much. Which would mean they could have a very quiet and well-hidden relationship.

Ninianne, always contemplating the possibilities, had already thought it through, "Olaf, Rodor and Bayard are all ardent Christians, if Arthur were to marry any of their daughters, who knows what the new queen might urge him to do, and how effective she'll be in doing it."

"So, you want Morgana to marry Arthur?" Morgause deduced.

"Of course I do!" Ninianne exclaimed, "Their marriage would gain us the most, but, if Arthur were to realize she doesn't love him the way he loves her."

"She wants to be queen," Morgause retorted.

"She does," Ninianne said, "But marriage is long, and hard to endure, without having to see your lover every day."

"Is that to be any harder than for me, Ninay?" Morgause snapped more than she wished she had, "Having to watch her be married to him, having his children and declaring her love for him in public!"

Ninianne shot her a knowing look, "This is what I worry about, the instability of their marriage."

"Then why did you bring me to court, Ninay?" She felt annoyed, "You could have picked another."

Ninianne was adamant, "You are the best, Moggy, everyone will be judging The Isle based on how you, Morgana, Caellan and Alvarr behave."

*Surely Alvarr is the one who needs this censure before I do!*

"Our religion knows a woman's value," Her mentor replied, "But, the Christians see women as the bringers of sin, sent to tempt good men away from God's path, I need you to prove them wrong… every day Morgause."
It felt like having a huge boulder thrust onto your back that you would have to carry around for the rest of your life. Morgause felt herself sinking as she thought about the weight of her responsibility and daunting future laid out before her.

"Then what do you think is best?" Morgause asked knowing her teacher would not enter into this conversation unless she had something to offer.

Ninianne suddenly turned very stern, "Can you promise me, take a vow, that you will give Morgana up in truth?"

*Mother, please do not ask this of me. You know I have no one else!*

Morgause hesitated.

Ninianne must have seen the truth in her face, "I thought so," She shook her head in dismay, "I know you are committed to The Isle, to keeping the Old Ways alive, Moggy, but your feelings for her put everything we have worked for in danger."

"I'm sorry Mother," Morgause heard her voice crack, "Please forgive me, I have been selfish,"

She felt like crying, but she had long learned how to hold it in. Tears showed weakness. Morgause showed no weakness.

Ninianne remained unconvinced, "I think we should do as we are, see if Arthur waits for her."

"And if he does?"

"Then you know what you must do," Ninianne eyed her, before grabbing her arm in a comforting gesture perhaps as an afterthought, "I want you to be happy, I'm not condemning you to loneliness, tell me what you need, and I'll find you someone else, we can have her come to the castle as your personal maid, tell everyone she's your cousin, it doesn't matter, but you must let Morgana go. The feelings too."

*Morgana isn't a horse to simply be replaced with another that could be ridden and obey just as well!*

*Morgana is irreplaceable."

"This is the struggle, Morgause, and it is every day," Ninianne cautioned as she stepped into the barge.

The High Priestess left with strict instructions that she was to keep her abreast of the situation in Greater Camelot.

Morgause stood a along time, even after the barge was long gone. She just felt hollow.

Agravaine wasn't the only one to express his reservation about the new decree on magic.

Sir Hilden, whom had been a knight for nearly two years, having survived the dragon attack among other hazards, came to him at the end of training not long after Arthur's crowning.

"My King," He knelt, he was tall, serious and always gallant to a fault, "I must speak with you."

Arthur gestured for him to stand. He didn't like conversations that took place with one party on their knees.
"I am concerned about this alliance with those who practice sorcery, Sire."

"What concerns you?" Arthur asked.

Always straightforward, he said, "They possess powers that we do not, Sire."

"There doesn't have to be an us and a them, anymore," Arthur pointed out.

Hilden's tone was serious, "Sire, we spent years killing them, surely some of them want revenge. I fear for your safety."

"How so?"

"They have abilities that render our weapons useless to stop them, I remember when we all fell asleep in the middle of the day, I am stronger and braver than most men, but I could do nothing against Morgause's magic."

"Magic isn't good or bad, in of itself," Arthur stated, "I can see that now, it's how those with magic chose to use it," Arthur held up his wrist, where His Love had set his broken bone at Pembroke in mere moments, "Morgana used magic to save my life and to heal me."

Hilden remained unconvinced, "How am I to fight beside her, and rest when Morgause, a known sorcerer who has made attempts on your life, is now entrusted to protect your life, My Lord?"

"Morgause has no reason to attack us now, we are allowing her to be who she is, without fear," Arthur explained, "That magic that... concerns you, those abilities that are greater than our muscles, minds and weapons, well, Morgause and Alvarr can use that magic to protect me from whatever threats I face, from Saxons, from other enemies."

"Are you sure we can trust them?" Hilden was uncertain.

"The Pact holds us all together," Arthur said, "They have more to lose than we do by breaking it."

Hilden was simple and loyal, "But what if they are pretending, Sire, when they really want revenge?"

Arthur enlightened him, "While sorcery was banned, magical people were hunted, we have stopped killing them, so they can stop needing revenge. I am safer now, than I have ever been," Arthur felt as confident as he sounded.

Hilden didn't appear convinced, but he questioned no further, "You are very wise, My King, I will perform my duties as best I can."

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder, "Thank you for your honesty, please, make our new additions feel welcome."

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This was the second private meeting in days. They were in Father's chambers. Arthur had expressed his distaste at taking them for himself, so Agravaine had use of them. The ball was being organized mostly by Gwen as they spoke. Morgana had asked Arthur to be left out of all such plans as it was too painful. Which was fair enough. All the unwed princesses of the kings whose affections Arthur was vying for would all attend. It would be less pressure than formal courtship. He could meet them, talk to them, and dance with them, in the one evening, and then decide which of the young women he would like to invite to dinner to get to know better. His advisers thought it
was a good idea.

Arthur protested, "I can't marry someone I don't love."

His uncle shook his head, "You're approaching this all wrong, "It's not about love, it's about alliances, marry the girl whose father you need."

"No," Arthur refused.

Agravaine was a patient man, "Marriage has nothing to do with love, it's about what's good for your land and rule, I take it you want to be a good king, Sire?"

"Yes, but…" Arthur said weakly.

"You love Morgana, fine, see her as much as you want, but…” Agravaine began to say.

Arthur bristled, "There's no love of *that* kind between Morgana and I!"

"I apologize, Sire," His adviser immediately recoiled at the king's distaste.

Arthur had been in meetings with all of Greater Camelot's kings in the last few days, and every single one had asked if it was his intention to marry the Lady Morgana, and Arthur had had to repeat every time that they had been raised as siblings and that that is how he saw her. All of the kings had been astonished, but pleased.

"I only meant, produce a hundred base born children for all I care with a woman you love, and many different whores, it doesn't matter, but your heir comes from your queen." Agravaine was trying in vain to make Arthur understand politics.

Arthur was apparently a terrible student, "How can I be a good husband and honor my queen if I can't love her."

"You do your duty," His uncle encouraged, "Love is one thing, duty is another."

Agravaine had moved on, "If you marry Alined's daughter, you bring him into the fold, then you will be in control of six of the eight original kingdoms."

Agravaine had assured Arthur that this match was the most politically useful.

*A most romantic prospect.*

"I'm not marrying anyone until I meet them." Arthur was adamant, "What if we can't stand each other!"

"Then you can both keep lovers," His adviser quipped.

"What?" Arthur was shocked at that suggestion, "Marriage is a sacred union, fidelity is paramount!"

"Of course," Agravaine agreed backtracking, "You may have many lovers, a queen must remain faithful, or she's guilty of treason."

"I do not make empty vows," Arthur informed him, "I will not keep lovers."

"King Rodor has a rather attractive daughter," Uncle said, "His lands are poor, though, but he hates The Pact with The Isle so marrying her might help bind him to your cause."
His adviser seemed determined to ignore the disgust on Arthur's face, "King Olaf is very committed to you because of your assistance with the Saxon invasion, there isn't much political gain in marrying his daughter, though she's pretty if you like blondes."

Arthur grunted his answer.

Agravaine pretended he didn't notice Arthur's disinterest, "Queen Annis has been ruling since her husband's death. She is passed her child-bearing years, and her only son died, so no alliance though marriage is possible."

Arthur was in the completely wrong frame of mind to even attempt this. He couldn't think about anyone but Morgana.

Uncle was indifferent to his disdain though, "King Bayard has a good case for you to marry his youngest child, a maid of 22, you owe him, as he provided the largest army to the invasion and sustained the greatest losses in Amata until your father's forces arrived."

Arthur liked Bayard, he was a straightforward, loyal sort of man, with strong values.

Agravaine's appraisal went on, "I've not heard much about his daughter, if you find her unsuitable, you could wed Morgana to Bayard himself, he's been widowed for ten years now, and mentioned to me that he was quite taken with her beauty."

Bayard finding Morgana attractive made Arthur irrationally annoyed.

"He's older than Father, Morgana would kill me!"

His adviser nodded solemnly, "He's also a bit orthodox when it comes to sorcery, that probably would be an unstable alliance at best," Agravaine agreed.

Uncle had said something that rang true, "Find a woman who is kind-hearted and will be a good mother."

_Maybe it was better if there wasn't white hot emotion. Strong feelings were hard to endure. Where love had been, hatred could grow._

Agravaine was trying. "You don't have to love her, you just have to be able to tolerate her, for formal occasions, and you must produce an heir."

Arthur let his head fall and smack on the table. He wished to knock himself out in truth. It didn't work.

He became adamant, "I can't do this anymore, we'll pick up again another day."

"That's fine, Arthur, but you must marry, and marry soon," Agravaine called to his retreating figure.
The afternoon that Ninianne departed, Morgana asked if she could run her Golden Knight a bath to soothe her aching muscles from knight's training, which Morgause agreed to. Once in the water, Morgana began to massage her lover's shoulders. But Her Love seemed to have turned cold on the resumption of their relationship.

Morgana couldn't help but wonder if Morgause witnessing her relationship with Arthur was the cause. His eyes followed her every time she entered a room, he deferred to her judgement and he noticed when other men looked at her. Morgause didn't like seeing any of it. And this was since the will and the broken engagement, she and Arthur were in fact fighting a lot at the moment, and Morgana was remarkably mad with him.

Morgana pressed her lips ever gently to her lover's neck, to see if she would protest. She said nothing. Morgana kissed her shoulder, sucking the flesh more forcefully before assessing her lover's reaction. She ventured a hand into the water to find her lover's breast. She had only just begun her ministrations when Morgause stifled a sob.

"What is it, My Love?"

Morgause placed a hand over her mouth to stop herself. Morgana halted playing and turned calming.

Morgana was full of concern, "What's wrong, please talk to me."

"I…" Morgause seldom struggled to express herself.

Morgana’s hands held her lover's head to her breast and let her weep. She realized she had never seen Morgause cry like this. Or cry at all. Her Golden Knight had held her many times while she had sobbed, it seemed like Morgana's life was one drama-ridden spectacle playing out in front of all of Albion, with Morgause constantly picking up the pieces. But never the other way around. Morgause was always so composed. Her lover became self-conscious and pulled back.

"Please, I want to help…" Morgana pacified her, "To make it better in any way I can."

Morgause had an expression of anguish and something else, Morgana couldn't name.

Her lover's voice trembled, "Come for a ride with me."

Morgana was quick to agree. There was still a little light before sunset. Morgause wanted to go to Avalon Lake, so they circled the banks slowly. Morgana hadn't been out with Moonlight in far too long. The sky was pink when her Golden Knight said she wanted to go behind the waterfall. They climbed up on the rocks. It wasn't hard to get behind the cascading water, they only got a little wet. It was a pretty shallow cave, but since the light was fading fast it was difficult to see. Morgause lit the path with a magical flame that she let dance across her fingertips.

"I haven't been behind here in years," Morgause suddenly spoke after a long silence.

Morgana waited, hoping Morgause would open up, about anything. Morgause tended to evade discussion of the past, lovers, friends, her relationship with Ninianne.

Morgause was nostalgic, "I used to play behind here once upon a time with a dear friend when we were barely more than girls."
This was a huge step, in trust and intimacy between the two of them. Morgana felt nervous that she would say the wrong thing.

"Erin was the closest thing I'd ever had to a sister, before you, of course."

Morgana had never heard Morgause mention the name, Erin. Morgana wasn't even sure she'd heard anyone else refer to her either. And Morgana knew almost everyone on The Isle anyway.

*A lover, as well?* Morgana couldn't help but wonder, and feel a pang of jealousy, then wanted to know everything there was to know about this Erin.

Morgause told her story, "We used to come here to tell each other secrets."

*Do not ask Morgause to tell you a secret, just let her tell you if she wants to.*

Morgause found the back of the cave and sat down. Morgana did the same facing her, legs crossed, as if they were girls still.

"She was my closest friend for many years," Morgause said, remembering, "Kind, and spontaneous, funny, generous, where I am afraid to let go and let other's in, she is fearless."

"Is she magically powerful?" Morgana wondered.

Morgause seemed thrown by that question, "Not especially, she only possessed the gift a little."

*Then why was she so important to you?* Morgana wondered. Morgause worshiped talent.

Morgause answered Morgana's unasked question, "You know how some people are completely different from one another and yet they are... what each other need?" She had a faraway look, "She always helped me to relax, and feel loved, she was a fiercely loyal friend, which was important, since I hadn't had much mothering since our mother left The Isle to marry Gorlois."

Morgana listened, paying attention to the little flickers in Morgause's dark eyes as she recalled particular memories of childhood.

"I remember the last time we came here together," Morgause said, "I was twelve, Erin, a little older."

Morgana smiled at Morgause's carefree expression as she recounted it now.

Morgause smirked, "I wanted to tell her that I thought she was very pretty and that I thought often what it would be like to kiss her."

Morgana smiled and took Morgause's hand in hers and squeezed.

"She went first and confessed her love for... Ollwyk? It's not important now."

"Eilan's cousin?" Morgana asked, she hardly knew him.

"The very one," Morgause became more expressive, "My heart sank, and then it was my turn, so I could hardly tell her the truth then," Morgause confessed shamefaced, "But I did say that I didn't like boys."

Morgana was curious, "What did she say to that?"

"Erin had said something like, 'you are young, sooner or later you will discover boys;"
Morgause remembered it proudly, "I shook my head, 'That's not me' I replied, sure of myself, 'I think girls are pretty, I think about kissing pretty girls'." Morgause looked deep into Morgana's eyes, "Erin stared at me as if I'd said something very strange. That was when I realized I had admitted I wasn't like everyone else."

Morgana spoke only to ask, "What did Erin do then?"

"She was silent a good long while, and I got very scared, it's funny, I consider myself brave… but in some things… well," Morgause admitted her vulnerability, glancing at Morgana before fixating on the ground.

Morgana reached out to her lover, raising her chin with her hand, she wanted to kiss and hold her to take away all her pain.

"She finally said, 'Then which girl do you want to kiss?'" Morgause's face changed, she smiled, genuinely happy as she recounted, "It was the perfect response, because she was showing me it didn't matter, girl, boy, she wanted us to share secrets about whomever we fancied. Though I didn't admit to my crush on her, I'm sure I pretended to like some other girl," Morgause smirked as she recalled it.

Morgana's chest heaved with joy. She couldn't imagine having such a childhood experience even if she had understood her feelings at that age.

"She didn't treat me differently after that," Morgause said, proudly, "She always supported me."

After a comfortable silence Morgana worked up the courage to ask, "What happened?"

"What do you mean?" Morgause didn't understand.

"I haven't met Erin," Morgana said gently, "Does she still reside on The Isle?"

"No, not anymore," Morgause said, her eyes sad.

Morgana pulled her lover into a warm hug, kissing her cheek ever delicately when they finally pulled back.

"Thank you for sharing with me."

Gwen was the only person who had a clue, since Morgana had refused to take part. Arthur was useless at such things, he attended social engagements, how they got to be that way was a mystery to him. Arthur was very grateful for her help. While she didn't know how to do everything herself, she knew who to talk to. Once Arthur got her Agravaine's list of guests, she arranged a meeting with the cooks and butchers to arrange the feast, and they would then go see the farmers who would supply any special food items or delicacies.

The same for wine, flowers, candles and lamps, decorations, attire for the servants, she thought of everything. Gwen knew you needed musicians who knew enough songs to play for an entire evening. The reliable sort who could be trusted not to get drunk, and could play lively music appropriate for dancing, but also some slower songs for waltzing.

"How are you so good at this?" Arthur asked off hand, one morning.

Gwen smiled sadly, "I used to imagine attending balls as a lady when I was a child, what I would wear, having a prince dance with me, the feast, the music," Gwen had a dreamy look in her eye,
before seeing Arthur stare at her and becoming self-conscious.

Gwen then began to falter, "That was before I understood how things work, I'm a maid, the only way I get to attend balls is when I'm waiting on my mistress."

Arthur nodded sadly, "Well, you've been a tremendous help to me, I won't forget it."

She also helpfully suggested that a dancing master to help Arthur himself brush up on his own skills might be in order.

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Arthur was very troubled about Agravaine's implication that Greater Camelot might fall apart. As indecent as it was to discuss him needing to make a political marriage with Morgana, he wanted her advice regards the instability of his current lands. Caellan opened the door, bowing immediately and letting him pass. It made him smile, not a single woman from The Isle knew what a curtsy was.

Morgana was sitting at her desk teaching Mordred how to read. He was reading aloud from a history book of Albion's Wars.

Arthur stood still, watching, rather than interrupt. He noted how she had her arm around his back and smiled at the boy when he pronounced a difficult word correctly.

*Find a woman with a kind heart, who will make a good mother.*

Arthur's chest seized. Then he flooded with shame.

*She's your sister. Father will roll over in his grave.*

*Feelings don't just stop because you want them too. It is just going to take some time.*

Morgana caught his eye. She asked Mordred to go find a different book, and he went without a word.

"I need your help," Was all Arthur said.

She gestured for him to sit on her bed, but he preferred to stand with a few yards between them. Morgana's bed made him think of the other things they had done in that bed.

"My uncle thinks that I have run the risk of my high kingship falling apart by lifting the ban on sorcery," Arthur began.

Morgana cocked an eyebrow, surprised, "I'm sure some of them don't like it, but give it a few moon turns, when the sky doesn't fall in, all will be fine."

Arthur's fears had not been allayed though, "Agravaine thinks I need to make an advantageous political marriage as soon as possible, while I'm only just solidifying my hold on power."

Morgana thought on that for a while, "That's one way to do it."

"What's another?" He was interested.

Morgana reflected before saying, "I think you should ask every king to supply you with one adviser, and hold meetings regularly, and allow each of them a turn to speak, listen to each and every one of their suggestions so they feel heard..."
"You obviously haven't heard some of the suggestions these kings make," Arthur cut her off mocking the prospect, "I can't imagine their advisers will be any better."

"You don't have to do it," Morgana smiled, cunningly, "You just have to appear to think what they have said is important."

_That is sly, but clever._

"Why?" Arthur questioned, "I'm the king, I need to assert my authority, I need to show them that even though I'm young, I am not weak. That's what Father would do in my place."

"That's not the only way to be strong," Morgana countered.

She paused a moment then remembered something, "Arthur, one of your knights had reservations about The Pact, right?"

"Yes, Sir Hilden, what of it?" He really didn't follow her logic.

Morgana was ready for him, "When he was unsure, you didn't turn around and say, 'I'm your king, shut your mouth', so he could go away angry, still worried about your safety but feeling disrespected," Morgana explained, "You tried to make him see what you see."

Arthur furrowed his brow, "How do you know about that?"

Morgana recounted, "Because he has extended the arm of friendship to Morgause and Alvarr they both told me," She stated plainly, "That's why you are better than Uther will ever be, you lead by example."

_She has a point._

"I think you should create a round table."

He couldn't follow her logic, "What does that mean?" He wondered, "Tables aren't circular… ever."

Morgana was very patient, "It's a symbolic gesture of shared power. There is no head of the table, no place of authority over everyone else, the advisers sit at the table with their king as equals, each being given the opportunity to speak to their ideas."

Arthur thought on that, "So every king feels that he has my ear," He went through the implications, "That I am sharing my power, that they all get a say, and have respect in all of my decisions."

Morgana could see he was liking the idea, and smiled, one of her beautiful smiles that showed off her perfect teeth.

Arthur smiled back, and not just because Morgana's gorgeousness made him happy. He glanced at the bed, then back at her, then had to excuse himself before his resolve weakened any further.

_My Wise Queen, I love you!_

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A dancing master arrived the next day.

Morgana said she was ill, to be fair, it probably wasn't a good idea for them to practice dancing together. It would stir up too many feelings, that just made everything harder. Morgana had made
clear she didn't even want to attend the ball.

The castle was bursting with extra nobles, and servants, who wouldn't leave until soon after the ball. But Arthur didn't want any of the royal guests to see how out of practice he was. He needed to make a good impression. Gwen saved the day, again. She played the part of princess and helped him remember the steps. How she found the time, Arthur would never know. The dancing master was a stern old woman, whom reminded Arthur of that first governess, when he was a boy. She made him feel like a child, caring not that she was speaking to the High King of Greater Camelot, just a clumsy man who should never have gone so long between practicing a waltz. She had a riding crop she would beat against her thigh and yell, "One, two, three, one two three!"

He and Gwen rolled their eyes at the dancing master as much as they dared when she wasn't looking, which was very little. Arthur tried to keep his frame, to hold Gwen's waist firmly, but not too firmly. To step in the right place at the right time without looking at his feet. He tried to focus on Gwen's kind eyes. She would nervously glance at him too. It took far longer than it should have, but he finally did remember how it was done. Gwen was far more graceful than he was, she borrowed one of Morgana's old dresses to practice in, it was nice to see her like that.

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Before he knew it, the ball was tomorrow and Arthur was finishing his final lesson.

"Thank you, Guinevere, you are too generous," Arthur bowed to her, a gesture never exercised by a king, but he didn't care, it was just the two of them after all

"When I don't fall on my face tomorrow night, please know I will be silently singing your praises."

Gwen smiled meekly, displaying her dimples he liked so much.

"I shan't keep you any longer," He said, sure crimson was creeping up his cheek, "I'm sure you have much to attend to."

She curtsied shyly before leaving, "Sire."
The Ball

The day of the ball arrived faster than Arthur could believe. He had a new set of fine clothes, he had allowed Agravaine to select them since his uncle was rather stylish himself. They were bright and made Arthur feel like a peacock, but he didn't feel confident enough to select something else.

Uncle had also found him a new manservant, Argyle, whom was very proficient and obedient, and a fantastic cook. He observed appropriate silence and didn't talk unless Arthur requested him too. It was a very new dynamic, Arthur was getting used to the new situation. Argyle was short, and round, and already balding on top, and had bright red hair, where he still had hair.

The servants had to wear funny feathered hats for the ball. Argyle looked amusing, not as bad as Merlin would have looked of course, but still, closer to a court jester. The serving women looked much more comely.

Morgana refused to attend. Arthur told her, he expected her there. She said she would wear her priestess robes. He said no. They were fighting more and more. It was a struggle, but he couldn't begin a life with someone else while he was still holding onto her. He knew it. She would come to see that in time too.

Everything was mad, the servants and cooks and maids and scullions were running all over the castle on final preparations. Argyle helped Arthur get ready. Once his hair and clothes were all in order Arthur glanced at himself a final time in the looking glass in his chambers.

Time to put on your king's face.

Arthur wanted to meet with all the princesses separately in the entrance hall and guide them to the banquet hall. It had been a half moon turn since his crowning, so the royal guests had stayed on so they could attend the ball. King Alined was ready first with his only child, Princess Bethany. She was about Morgana's height, and curvy in all the right places. A brunette with long shiny straight hair, and nice brown eyes. She had a beautiful smile. There was nothing to immediately dislike about her. She offered Arthur her gloved hand, and he kissed her at the curve of her wrist.

Her dress was figure hugging and made of pink satin, she knew how to walk to get a man's attention with her hip sway. Her jewelry conveyed her wealth, diamonds set in gold mostly. Bethany possessed a confidence that befit a queen. Arthur walked her into the hall. The harps and violins were playing quiet mellow tunes before the meal, basically during the idyll talk portion of the evening.

Arthur complemented her beauty and she complemented his leadership skills.

"So, Princess Bethany," Arthur began his checklist of questions, "Tell me about yourself, likes, dislikes."

"My King," She curtsied, "I like to help the peasants," She spoke calmly, "In Cumbria, we sometimes have famines, and Father always provides rations during the worst of the winters to make sure they don't suffer any more hardship than they need to."

Kind hearted.

"Dislikes?"

"Liars, cheats, people who don't uphold the Knight's Code, I believe it is a good way to live."
Arthur checked his questions on his mental list, "Tell me about you? How would you describe yourself?"

She became coy, batting her lashes, "Aren't you going to answer the questions you just asked me, My King?" Bethany smiled deviously, "Otherwise I feel like I'm being indecently questioned."

"Sure," Arthur liked her poise, "I like fighting in tourneys, riding for the sake of it, and…"

Making love to my sister.

Don't say that!

"And, eating roasted anything," He finished.

"A simple man," She observed, smiling warmly.

"So," Arthur redirected, "Describe yourself."

Bethany was quick to answer, "I am passionate about people, I like dancing, and I love listening to singers, they sing the most beautiful songs about love and brave knights."

Less interesting.

"What are you looking for in a husband?"

"You mean in a high king," She corrected, "Someone who does what's right, someone who will treat me with respect, and someone who will make the hard decisions, lead when there's a need for it."

Good answer. Princess Bethany, you are still on my list.

Arthur excused himself and returned to the main hallway.

King Olaf and his daughter, Princess Vivian were making their way to the Great Hall for the ball. Arthur had already met her, and they had had a strange experience. He remembered not being able to think about anything except how much he loved her, and he could recall kissing her. She was golden blonde, and had large green eyes, and nice curves. Her hair was pulled back with a tiara. She wore pearls to compliment her yellow gown.

After the initial pleasantries Arthur repeated the same process.

Vivian complemented Arthur on how handsome he looked. She became excited with the question of her preferences.

"I like balls, dinners, tourneys, being able to see other royalty socially," She said.

That seems honest enough. People person.

"I dislike sitting in court," She sighed, "Peasants go on with such prattle about where the exact boundaries of their land are, or who saw witchcraft, it's terribly tedious. Rude servants who don't know their place also annoy me."

Honest, but conceited. Now he remembered her, she was rude to Gwen last time we met!
Vivian described herself as capable of running a household, excellent at entertaining guests, and well dressed.

_Boring._

What was Vivian looking for in a husband? Someone to enjoy life with, balls, feasts, tourneys.

_Frivolous._

Bayard's daughter, Princess Arya had long auburn hair and nice blue eyes, and a cute splattering of freckles on her round cheeks. She was taller with broad shoulders, not much by way of breasts or hips. She was much shyer than Bethany and Vivian. She took her time answering his questions. Arya said she liked reading, and riding and that she collected daggers.

_Interesting._

"Why daggers?" He probed.

"Honestly?" She said, "Because my father won't teach me swordplay or let me go hunting, so this is the closest I get to what I want to do."

_She sounds like Morgana._

Arya mentioned she disliked formal events, before shyly looking at the floor, the irony not lost on either of them. "I don't dance or sing well," She admitted, "And, my brother's wife says I don't know how to dress well, either."

_Failing at stupid pursuits doesn't matter to me, Arya._

"You look beautiful," Arthur said honestly, the pale blue gown was simple but complemented her complexion well.

"Trystaine's wife picked it out," She shrugged, as if indifferent.

_Honest, but I need more information._ "What do you like reading about?"

Her face lit up when she spoke, "The history of Albion's wars. I hear you are the best battle commander in all of Albion, you saved the entire eastern coast!"

He smiled, trying not to blush, "I thank you," Arthur leaned in in interest, "That's an unusual hobby for a woman, why?"

"It's useful to know what came before. I like learning about how battles were won, strategically, and about swordplay," She was genuinely interested in this conversation now.

_I'm liking you more and more._

Last was King Rodor's daughter, Mithian, who was as pretty as promised. She had chestnut curls, and big brown eyes, cute freckles. She was petite but had good hips.

Her answers indicated that she was wanting to have lots of children and make a comfortable home and honor her husband. She complemented his fine clothes. She liked needlepoint and sewing her own clothes. She had made the dress she was wearing. She clearly was talented. Mithian's dislikes included surprises, war and she feared bandits, because she was almost abducted once.

_Sweet, maternal, shy. Is she interested in me?_
So far Vivian was the only princess he felt confident he didn't want to marry. Arthur had directed each princess to his table one at a time. Their fathers were scattered around the room away from one another to prevent rivalry and fighting. Agravaine thought these things through well.

The clumsy boy, Emmett, was a cup bearer for the evening, though he diligently filled every goblet with wine. The servers including Argyle came over and laid out the plates of roasted boar with crispy crackling. Gwen had scolded Arthur just this morning not to pick up the crackle with his bare hands tonight, which he had been about to do, before he remembered her censure. Arthur had been reminded by Gwen a dozen times to be on his best manners when eating. He resented it at the time, but he did have a bad habit of just chewing down and talking with his mouth full.

Morgana appeared at the double doors leading to the hall. She had been sick for the last few days, so Arthur had hardly seen her. She looked stunning. She wore a dark blue figure-hugging satin gown with white bead work on the bodice. Morgana had scarcely taken off her mother's necklace since they had returned from Cornwall. In true Isle fashion, she had a silver chain around her crown of hair, like a halo. Her skin looked extra radiant, her bust more full and her waist smaller, perhaps it was the dress that just made her appear so.

Arya asked, "Is that the Lady Morgana?"

The others seemed shocked that Bayard's daughter didn't already recognize Uther's Ward.

The Princess of Mercia gaped at her, mouth open. "She's very beautiful," She commented.

I agree, Arya.

"Is she married?" Arya asked him.

"No," He managed to say stiffly.

"She's a sorcerer," Vivian said as if it was scandalous information, then saw Arthur's face, and immediately stopped.

There was an empty seat on Arthur's table, but both Morgana and Arthur had agreed she would sit elsewhere. Suddenly, Caellan filled the seat. Her dark hair was combed out straight, her braids missing for once, her kind blue eyes and pale skin, high cheekbones more noticeable now. She wore Morgana's purple satin dress, with gold arm cuff bracelets and a shear blue grey shawl. It was Arthur's favorite of Morgana's dresses. That is probably not a coincidence. Caellan was clearly The Isle's candidate. Just because Arthur couldn't marry Morgana, didn't mean she couldn't marry another woman of the Old Religion. Caellan and Morgana bore some resemblance. He decided to be fair and ask her the same set of questions he'd asked the princesses.

"I am of The Isle, as queen I would do what is necessary to help The Isle and The Pact to continue." She sipped her wine.

Fair enough, I expected no less of you Caellan.

Caellan knew what he was up to.

As to her dislikes, the priestess said, "King Arthur, I hate persecution, I've seen what it has done to my people. But, I would think you know that."

Arthur found himself observing her more closely than previously, specifically how closely she resembled Morgana. Caellan's face was thinner, her lips less full, her eyes less prominent, her teeth not bad, but Morgana's teeth were exceptional, she also lacked Morgana's curves, and was taller. If
he squinted they looked similar, but Caellan upon closer inspection was slightly inferior in every way.

*And she always seems colder than Morgana, or is that just how she presents?*

Arthur found himself asking her other questions, "Have you participated in the Beltane rites?"

Then he remembered Caellan had been the one to strip him naked for his Kingmaking.

"Yes," She admitted readily. Then she kept her voice low so the others didn't hear, "But so have you, neither of us are virgins," She shot back, arching a wicked eyebrow, just how Morgana might have.

*Oh, Caellan, I thought you were so serious all the time! Why do you have to make this so hard!*

Caellan described herself, "I am a healer by choice, I wish to continue to learn the healing arts as long as possible, so I can help as many people as I can," She sipped her wine, "But I like children and will have as many as you like."

"Do you already have children?" He asked.

She pulled a face, "Excuse you?"

"You said you have been to Beltane…"

"Women on The Isle chose when they want children," Caellan replied, offended, "I have not had the inclination as of yet, King Arthur."

Arthur didn't know what that meant, he'd have to ask Morgana later.

Arthur asked the compatibility question, "And what are you looking for in a husband?"

Caellan was quick to reel off her list, "Someone who doesn't murder magical people, because they are born the way they are, someone who will make the other kingdoms respect our right to our religion, someone who can see that commoners have plenty to offer, someone I can have a decent conversation with."

Caellan stared back at him, she had an icy way of making you feel like she saw right through you. Kind of the way he found Mordred unsettling.

She added perhaps as an afterthought, "Someone who won't be threatened if I want to go off on my own sometimes."

Arya had barely taken her eyes off Morgana who was now sitting on a table with some of Arthur's knights.

"I'll go introduce myself," Arya said of Morgana getting up.

Arthur watched the young auburn-haired woman, who was so shy when he had spoken to her, approach and strike up a conversation with Morgana.

Bethany sneered, "There she goes again, Bayard ought to put shackles on that one!"

Vivian agreed, "He sent her to a nunnery after the last time."

Both girls giggled then.
Arthur had no idea what they were talking about, "Why was Arya sent to a nunnery?"

Bethany struggled to find the right words before saying, "Let's just say, she's a little too fond of beautiful women."

Vivian wasn't as tactful, "She was found in bed with her maid."

"I heard it was her tutor," Bethany quipped.

"It was probably both," Vivian tried to stifle her laughter.

They giggled again.

Arthur had never heard of that.

He needed to be clear about what they were saying, "You mean she doesn't like men, she likes women, to... have relations with?"

Both became shy but nodded.

Caellan spoke for the first time to the other diners, "So what? On The Isle we let people be as they are. It's perfectly natural, leave her be."

The others shot Caellan disgusted glances, except for Mithian who didn't appear to care one way or another.

*Two women together... romantically? That's... disgusting.*

*How do they even have relations?*

He shook his head, exaggerating his need to get that ugly thought out of his head.

Arthur watched the interaction between Morgana and Arya very closely after that. He could see a look of desire in the younger woman's eye. The way she would touch Morgana's arm to get her attention. She even brushed hair away from Morgana's face at one point, a very bold move between people who hardly knew one another.

Arthur stood up to go over there, but felt a hand grip his wrist. Caellan was sitting a couple of seats down from Arthur, so she must have anticipated his move.

"Leave them be," Caellan repeated sternly.

"I should at least tell Morgana that Arya's intentions are not what she thinks they are."

Caellan shot him a funny look that Arthur couldn't decipher, then her face returned to its impassive mask, "Morgana can take care of herself, she notices these things better than you do."

Bethany began to tell Arthur more about herself. Specifically, the work she did with the poor in Alined's kingdom, working with orphans before moving onto how she delights in looking after her sister's children. Vivian remained vacuous and arrogant. And Mithian was well? Polite, kind, but she didn't seem like she wanted to be there. She made no serious attempt to engage him in conversation.

Once the first two courses had been eaten the music became louder, and the time of evening for dancing came upon them. Agravaine had explained to Arthur that he was expected to dance with every single one of the women he was here to meet, even if he'd already decided he didn't like
them. Otherwise it would look rude and like favoritism.

*I want to dance with Morgana.*

*You're a king, not a boy! You cannot be ruled by desire.*

*Let's get this over with.*

Arthur asked Vivian to dance first. She was of course an excellent dancer, very graceful, and knew all the correct social graces, much better than he did. The song playing was designed for partner dancing, not too fast or slow. Arthur did a passable job of the moves, enough not to embarrass himself anyway, which was all he wanted. *Thank you Gwen.*

The dancing was a chance to look each princess in the eye, to observe her womanly beauty, to see if he felt anything touching her hand, or waist. He could acknowledge she was pretty. But he'd already decided Vivian wasn't for him. Arthur made sure to conduct himself with perfect manners.

Arthur's eyes continually found Morgana no matter where she was in the room. She was dancing with old King Bayard, which bothered him more than it should have, perhaps because he recalled Agravaine saying Bayard found Morgana attractive and wanted to marry her. The old man held her close for a slow waltz, she rested her chin on his shoulder and they seemed to talk easily to one another. Arthur didn't see any attraction from her side though, he expected she was just meeting her obligation.

The song ended, and Arthur guided Vivian back to her seat. He politely asked Mithian to dance next. This dance was slower than the last, which was good, because he was more interested in talking to her.

"Tell me more about you," Arthur pressed.

Mithian seemed surprised at the question, "I don't know what to say," She replied earnestly, "Ask me specific questions and I'll answer them as best I can."

"If I were to make you Queen of Greater Camelot, what would you do?"

Mithian didn't smile at the prospect, she turned thoughtful, "A queen is still primarily a wife, I would do my wifely duties to you, and try to look the part in public, I guess?" She deferred to him, as if she thought she hadn't answered the question well enough.

*There's something going on here.*

"Tell me about a typical day for you now," Arthur asked.

Mithian gave a fairly detailed account of what time she wakes, what she eats for breakfast, when she does her needlepoint, when she sits outside watching her father's knights practice their swordplay.

The mention of her father's knights was the first time her face lit up. Arthur decided to inquire further, "Do any of your father's knights fight in tourneys in Camelot?"

"I don't think so."

Arthur tried another variation, "Who's your father's best knight."

She mentioned the name, then began to talk about a young up and coming knight who was going to
be better once he had more experience. Her face positively beamed while she spoke about the young knight.

*She's in love already.*

*I have much sympathy for you Mithian, and you are clearly a better person than me, since you've been letting me know not to waste my time with you. I have been letting you all waste your time with me.*

*No, you are serious, Arthur! You are going to pick one of these women!*

The next dance was with Bethany. Arthur was feeling interested in her. She also seemed big hearted, and regal in a way that was advantageous for a queen. He liked her looks, she was more sensual than the others. He suspected she was no virgin either, she knew how to get his attention, bat her eyelashes, and subtly touch him as if by mistake to set off his senses. She was a very good dancer, she moved her hips seductively, she allowed her body to get close to his so he could feel her heat and smell her hair.

"Do you have any more questions for me, Arthur Pendragon?" She whispered.

Arthur came up with an important question he should have asked all of them, but he'd been worried they would also simply agree with him, "What do you think of me lifting the ban on sorcery?"

Bethany thought a moment, "I think in time we will see it is a good thing. Magic can be used for dark purposes, but so can swords, we don't rid of all the swords just because some people use them for bad purposes."

Arthur smiled, "Well said."

*She thinks well on her feet. Has some grasp of politics. Knows how to be diplomatic.*

Arthur had been counting all night, ten different men had asked Morgana to dance. She said yes to everyone she was required to say yes to. She had danced the last song with Agravaine, which was only polite. And Morgana was currently waltzing with Alvarr, which really bothered Arthur. She said they hadn't been lovers and he believed her. He watched them very closely. How comfortable did they look? How close were their bodies? Were they talking? Laughing? If Arthur was to bet, he would say they looked like two friends having a polite social dance. Alvarr hadn't been taught the moves properly, but he was doing a passable job, which also irritated Arthur, who peevishly was hoping the sorcerer would make a fool of himself.

The song ended and Arthur came back to the table. Arya was back now, but he had decided to ask Caellan next. Caellan to his surprise knew the steps to a waltz.

"Morgana showed me these last few days," Caellan supplied before Arthur even asked, "Gwen's been busy organizing the ball, I've been waiting on Morgana."

"Morgana looks… stunning," Arthur admitted, "Whatever you did seems to have worked." Arthur observed.

Caellan gaped at him, before realizing he really didn't understand, then she tried to backtrack. *There's something going on with Morgana, and Caellan's shocked I don't already see it.*

Caellan comprehended her dance was going badly, and redirected the conversation, "I think you should ask more questions of Bethany, and check what she says is true with others."
"Why?"

"Because she's lying," Caellan was matter-of-fact.

"How do you know that?" Arthur didn't like her insinuation, before lightening his tone, "Or can you read minds too?"

Caellan missed that he was joking, ever somber, "No, but I observe people, people who are lying sometimes pause, and they don't use their hands when they speak," Caellan let her words sink in, "When Bethany talked about all the help she gives to orphans, she was lying."

Arthur challenged, "Maybe you're just jealous?"

"Anyone can say they are anything," Caellan countered, "Make her prove it."

The priestess let it drop at that, "Your next dance will be with Arya?"

"What of it?"

"I think you should tell her that she doesn't have to live in a nunnery if she doesn't want too," Caellan advised him, "The Isle will give her sanctuary, to love as she wishes."

Arthur found that request absurd, "You want me to tell a princess who is here to potentially marry me that she can run away and have relations with women on an island she likely doesn't believe exists?"

Caellan seemed annoyed, "Arthur, you clearly aren't going to marry her, and she doesn't want you either."

Arthur showed he was listening.

"This is about her having a life where she doesn't have to hide who she is, think of The Pact, so sorcerers don't have to hide in the shadows anymore, it's the same thing for her because she was born loving women rather than men."

Arthur did not want to even attempt a conversation like that with a young woman he barely knew, "How on earth can I broach that with her? Even if I wanted too!" Arthur tried not to pull his disgusted face, because he knew it would further anger Caellan.

The priestess spoke with passion, "Tell her about The Isle, you've been there, say you were at a religious event and you noticed that sometimes two men or women would have relations with each other and that's it's perfectly acceptable there," Caellan explained, "If Arya wants to know more, tell her to talk to me."

She is attractive, she would make a good queen, she has the right kind of mind, she's logical and blunt in a way I can respect. And yet Arthur felt he would spend his entire marriage quarreling with her. I need warmth. The song finished, and Arthur was relieved to be away from the serious priestess.

Of course, that meant his last obligatory dance was with Arya. She was back to being shy. He led her to the dance floor for another slow song. She was well-coordinated, but her dance moves were all wrong, but who cared.

"Did you have a nice talk with Morgana?" Arthur asked, to break the ice, he was feeling very uncomfortable.
"Yes," She smiled sweetly, "She's very nice, she began to tell me all about The Isle, it sounds like a wonderful place."

"Better than a nunnery?"

Arya looked upset at the mention of the nunnery and her eyes dropped to the floor.

Ass! Arthur chastised himself, *The girl probably hated it there!*

Arthur tried to redeem himself, "What about The Isle sounds good?"

Arya thought for a while, "All of it, more freedom, Morgana said she learned sword fighting there."

"Did Morgana offer to take you there?"

"Yes, she said if I want to go, she'll help me escape," Arya looked so happy, then realized she probably shouldn't have said that last part, "Don't tell my Dad."

Arthur was relieved to know he didn't have to have the uncomfortable talk and impressed that Morgana whom hadn't heard the conversation about Arya's past behavior had still figured it out.

*And Morgana being Morgana was doing something about it.*

*That's why I love her.*

He continued to make polite discussion with his potential suitors and respected guests, but his heart was no longer in it. If anything, he felt more depressed and less over Morgana than before.

Mordred was sitting on Morgana's lap now, and she was letting him eat sweets while she cuddled him. The boy had been sewn a special suit just for the evening, Morgana had hired the tailor herself. He looked, less creepy than normal, which was good as far as Arthur was concerned. Arthur had to stay until the end. He remained quiet at the table and listened to Vivian and Bethany talk. Bethany seemed to enjoy the same superficial gossip as Olaf's daughter. The more he heard the more he thought Caellan was correct.

*Damn you all!*

There was a dessert course and a round of drinks before the ball ended. Arthur had shaken the right hands, complemented all the princesses and finally escorted everyone to their guest chambers and was done playing the gracious host. Arthur went to his chambers. Agravaine was waiting for him. His uncle was most impressed with how Arthur had conducted himself.

"So, can I set up a dinner with you and one of our kings and his daughter?" His adviser queried.

"I'll have dinner with Bethany," Arthur wanted to be sure, before he dismissed her. She had said a number of things that had impressed him.

"Anyone else?"

"Caellan, God help me!" Arthur sighed.

Agravaine seemed satisfied at that, "As you wish, Sire, I'm here to serve."
Weakening resolve

Morgause had been watching her lover's misery all night. Her Dark Queen was feigning her enjoyment, when she was feeling crushed. Her Love was wishing what was, wasn't so. While Morgause was wishing she didn't have to watch what was, be so. The copious amounts of ale were helping at least. What's so good about him anyhow? Insensitive idiot, whom knows none of what really goes on beneath his nose. If he were not royal, would anyone think him so fine? She couldn't help but think him so much… less than Morgana. But she was trying her best to understand. She needed to understand. He was her king now, and she had pledged to die for him.

She would have liked to have worn a gown tonight but she didn't want to draw further distinction between herself and the other knights. She dressed as they did. She danced with no one, which was a relief, since the only person she wanted to embrace, and rock slowly in time to the harps was Morgana and she could hardly get away with that. Sisters could embrace, expect privacy alone together in Greater Camelot, but not that. So, she was observing. Arthur appeared to be genuinely trying with his princesses, which was more than she had expected of him.

Good! Pick one, any one will do nicely, then you can forget all about Morgana!

She knew she was being petty. Who knows what might happen if he married some Christian zealot? So, she sipped her ale and waited. She knew Morgana would turn in as soon as permitted by social etiquette. And then her Dark Beauty would go and cry in her chambers. Morgause knew she shouldn't, especially since Ninianne's parting words had really stuck with her. She could almost see her mentor's accusatory face. Arthur was distracted by the ball, and would suspect nothing.

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He doesn't like any of them very much. Mordred had projected into her mind as she left the ball. Thank you, my dear boy! She had been too proud to ask her son.

Even so, having to watch him with all those pretty young, princesses, knowing it was meant to be her… it was too much. Especially now. She broke down only a few paces from her chambers.

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She heard Morgana before she saw her. She walked as if patrolling, holding a guard's spear, helm on and visor down. There were no watchmen around. She let a soothing, mailed hand rub her lover's back, Morgana didn't even check who it was, as she was guided to her room.

As soon as the door was firmly blocking them off from everyone else, she ripped off her helm and let it clang on the floor as her golden locks spilled about her face. Morgana smiled, just a little, happy to see her, but not all that cheered up. She took her Dark Queen's hand placed a chaste kiss on the soft skin at her wrist. Morgana grinned again, meekly.

She whispered, "He's a fool not to marry you!" I would make you mine forever in a heartbeat.

A heartbeat. That's all there was for a few moments. Morgana's bottom lip turned out and quivered as she tried to stem the flood of emotions. Then Morgause lost all abandon. She pulled her distraught lover in tight, saying with her mouth what she had no words to express. Their lips connected, warm, wet, sucking. Her tongue was desperate, searching. Morgana's gown didn't stretch so she had to slide the material up her naked form. She pressed her Dark Beauty up against the heavy oak door.
"Just take it away," Her young lover pleaded in a rare moment her lips were free.

The pain? The anguish of waiting? The visual of watching him with them? Morgause wasn't entirely sure, but she knew how to make a lover forget.

Her armor was ridiculous, where it wasn't too hard and bulky, it made all sorts of noise. Morgana insisted she be put down, and she began to painstakingly unfasten every piece, setting the metal guards on the floor quietly, like a trail of ants eventually leading to her bed.

To think what I have done to taste you for a mere moment, and he, whom could have had you forever, out in the light, would throw you away and call it honorable! He doesn't deserve you! What a miserable, retched, fool!

She released her Dark Queen of her blue silk gown, but decided to leave the silver jewelry. Morgause liked pretty dresses, but she would always prefer naked.

This is the way of the Goddess. We are as we are born. There is no hiding from Her.

She caught sight of their reflection in the looking glass facing the bed, and it gave her an idea. She left her young lover sitting atop the mattress, wondering what excitement was to come. She lit a row of candles on the vanity. The moon was full. Morgause felt calm as she walked around the bed, purposefully, as if hunting, pouncing on Morgana from behind and nuzzling her neck. Her Dark Queen watched their images in the mirror. She pulled her lover up against her chest as she kissed the tender flesh between shoulder and throat, pulling gently on her earlobe between her teeth. Morgana suddenly jolted as she watched the reflection and felt all of Morgause's actions together. She smiled, wickedly, committing more of her young lover's likes and dislikes to her vault of memories.

He is a king because he was born the first legitimate son of a king. The Isle would never select a leader in such a fashion. Whose position was not earned through ability but handed to them as birthright.

Morgause made her Dark Beauty watch in the mirror as she cupped her breasts, teasing her nipples until they stiffened. She felt the weight of them, how they moved like water, heavy, spilling out from her splayed fingers. She squeezed lightly. Morgana smiled, a dimple evident. She moved a fingertip to circle the peak, gently. Then the other. Using both hands, the circles became lazy, radiating out until she was kneading her Dark Queen's bosom, as Morgana stared on, breathlessly. Morgause ground her groin up against Morgana's buttocks, just to feel the friction where she was sensitive. Then she let Morgana watch as she released her teats, they bounced, Morgana's perfect pink points waving at her. She glided her fingers down, down, down, passed the valley of her lover's stomach, out to her curved hips. Her hands rubbed her Dark Queen's thighs, which Morgause knew she liked, her protégé was very sensitive to this form of stimulation. The brunette shuddered beneath her touch. She heard her lover's breath catch in her throat, as she remained still, mesmerized. Morgause gripped behind both knees. She felt it was time. She quickly spread Morgana's knees, splaying her in full view of the mirror. Morgana could see her own folds, and she allowed Her Love's excitement to increase watching Morgause's rough hands tracing the hairs at her groin. Morgana would probably have never seen her body from this angle, so exposed before, it could be an intriguing experience in of itself.

She slowly fingered the brunette's sensitive nub, while Morgana watched, trying desperately to control her breathing and her volume. She made her Black Beauty watch as her fingers circled her lower lips before they disappeared into the younger woman's cleft only to resurface again and again, as the visual matched the sensation. Her fingers became shiny with the slick, clear fluid that coated them, further visual evidence of Morgana's desire. The younger woman's dark head fell back.
and her eyes closed, but she insisted her protege watch.

It wasn't long before she felt Morgana losing herself to pleasure, her body jerking at Morgause's ministrations, became shuddering, until she lost all control. Morgana cried out, her knees snapping together, as she doubled over. Morgause held her lover to her, satisfied.

Morgause leisurely brought her hand back up, sensually licking her fingertips, then sucking the fluid off, in a display worthy of an audience, allowing her Dark Queen to see how much she enjoyed the taste of her. Morgana turned her head to capture her lips in a demanding kiss, wanting to share her womanly scent between them.

They laid back down, still for a moment. There was something else Morgause had been considering trying with Morgana, but hadn't dared broach before now. One had to be very careful with magic that held the power of life and death. It was a spell that could give her a man's sword between her legs, just to see how it felt to both of them. She knew the words, but she had been hesitant to suggest it to Morgana, whom had a history of being forced. She wanted to know what it felt like to a man, to feel herself within her lover in that way. Morgause was endlessly curious about it.

"Bulbospongiosus," Morgause said the words, barely audible.

She felt the familiar energy of earth and fire and wind and water as it went through her. She looked down and saw the snake between her legs. The visual of Morgana in front of her, weak with expended pleasure that Morgause had caused her, was enough to send the blood rushing to her groin and she felt herself grow hard and stand at attention. She immediately grasped herself with her hand to feel the length of her, she felt herself throbbing from the head to the base. Morgause leaned forward to kiss Morgana's neck, initiating further relations.

"Not yet," The younger woman protested, rolling onto her back.

It was only now that the brunette caught sight of what Morgause had done.

Morgana's eyes widened, "How did you?"

"Magic," Morgause grinned.

Morgana couldn't take her eyes off her blonde warrior's new addition. Her lover's gaze only heightened Morgause's experience, and she began to stroke herself, while looking at the beautiful Goddess-like figure of her lover as she did so. Morgause kept changing the way she was feeling herself, did it feel better to touch her whole length, just the head? The sack as well? How hard was too hard? She kept experimenting, and laid down next to Morgana to touch her shaft. Morgana watched, fascinated. Soon she felt herself desiring more, she wanted to be inside Morgana.

"Lie on your side," Morgause commanded.

Morgana happily obliged, facing the mirror, her back to her lover now and waited, clearly nervous but also excited in anticipation. Morgause lay down behind her, also on her side, almost pressed up against her back, but not touching her young beauty. Morgause's hand pushed between her Dark Queen's knees, forcing them apart, holding her top leg up. Morgause watched it in the mirror as her sword became visible, strong and hard, and ready. She lined herself up, using her other hand to part Morgana's lips, feeling a churning in her stomach. Morgause had never been with a man. Morgana must have remembered, because she reached her own hand down to hold the head of the snake, guiding it between her folds. Morgana was considerate that way, relieving Morgause when she was
feeling reticent. Morgana's fingers on her head was so much more exhilarating than when she touched herself. She clenched her cheeks and stomach muscles to push ever gently, as was her way with intimacy, into Morgana's throbbing desire. Morgana looked on, obviously aroused.

"How does that feel?" Morgause asked, curiously, her hot wet breath purring into her lover's ear.

Morgana bit her lip, "Good."

Morgause pushed farther in, she disappeared halfway now. Morgana's body was so hot and swollen with desire and slick which smoothed their bodies to glide against one another with every thrust.

"And now?" Morgause purred.

"So good," Her lover admitted.

They both watched now as the magical sword disappeared all the way into Morgana's cave. Her young lover reached back to grip her hip. Morgana dug her nails in, which made her gasp. She fought to control herself. She was extremely weary of hurting Morgana and didn't want to forget herself and cause distress. Morgause brought her top hand forward now to pleasure lover's nub as she thrust ensuring she was pressing along Morgana's bundle below her hair. Morgana let out a cry of delight,

"Hold on," Morgause instructed sharply.

Morgause was trying to find a way of getting them both off together, she was getting close herself, but not that close, Morgana would need to find a way to contain herself. Morgause pushed deep, and Morgana gasped, and gripped her lover's hip tighter. She thrust harder, and Morgana's hips reared, pushing her bottom into Morgause's groin, gasping again. Morgana's eyes were shut, and she was biting her lip, hard. Morgause grabbed a handful of dark hair to jerk her head back. The younger woman opened her eyes, surprised at the sudden rough move.

"Look," Morgause said as she continued her steady motions.

Morgause pulled out suddenly, fully, the visual of her glistening member, covered in Morgana's slick desire for her, made the experience better. Morgause moved her bottom hand to Morgana's folds, drenching her fingers in her young lover's lubricant, then that hand went to the brunette's rump, parting her cheeks, a finger circled her small puckered hole. This was something else Morgause had wanted to try, but hadn't dared broach with Morgana yet. The small pink hole was receptive to the tip of her finger, she pushed in and it swallowed her, just a little way, she could feel it clutching her tight.

"Do you like that?"

"I don't know," Morgana was unsure, "Make me like it."

Morgause played with her lover's hole, teasing her quickly pushing her finger in to the first joint then out again.

"Relax," Morgause ordered.

"I'm trying," Morgana sounded breathy.

Morgause kept up the anal play until she had her middle finger all the way into Morgana. She added her other hand back to little fold above Morgana's opening, allowing the brunette to watch her quick finger motions. She repositioned her shaft in line with Morgana's folds and then…
Morgause suddenly pushed her member all the way back into Morgana's sacred cave.

Her Dark-Haired Goddess cried out, "No, oh, no, no!"

"Do you want me to stop?" Morgause asked pointedly.

"No!" Morgana almost yelled.

Morgause was out of hands to clamp one over Morgana's mouth.

"Ssshhh," Morgause cautioned, "Sister, you forget yourself."

Morgana was panting, and her hands were desperately moving to find something to grip. Morgause began to slide in and out again, timing it so that both her finger and throbbing arousal pushed into her Dark Queen together, giving her a momentary reprieve before repeating the process.

It was a feeling hard to describe. She felt an intense pressure building within her, a heat, but also like a trickle being pulled from the edges of her body, all pooling at her groin. She felt a need, like a thirst, that couldn't be quenched, and yet could be, if she only thrust more.

Morgana wasn't used to this kind of stimulation didn't hold on for long. No more than few hip thrusts later Morgause felt her young lover explode beneath her, a crushing orgasm that milked her snake with a sheer intensity that felt like her sword would blow apart, like she might die. She held Morgana tighter as she felt that trickle leave her body in waves, jerking as she reached ecstasy. They both screamed. She laid back savoring the moment, a tremendous feeling of relief washed over her. She pulled out her now flaccid cock.

So that is how a man feels doing this.

She preferred their way to this, but it had been fun. Morgause suddenly felt a deep sense of calm.

"I love you," She whispered into her Dark Queen's ear.

Morgana's eyes had been closed, flew open, their gaze met in the mirror.

Morgana's hand went to her mouth. Her eyes looked so full of remorse. She shook her head, her dark waves flowing.

"How can you still love me? After all of this?" Her Dark Queen was genuinely ashamed.

Her beautiful green cat's eyes stared back at her from the reflected surface, guiltily, "A decent person would not… do… the things I have done… I have not been… true to you."

I know you love him. Morgause thought for a while, this was a very key moment in their relationship, and she wanted to make her lover understand.

"I see no… shortage of love within you," Morgause said very carefully, "When I think about… what we are to one another… our connection, I think… none of this matters."

Morgana didn't understand, "What do you mean, it doesn't matter?"

"What we are to one another," Morgause clarified, "It transcends all of this, whether you become queen, the intrigues of this court, come what may… our love will last, I know it."

Morgana's face pulled with emotion, overcome, she turned her head to capture Morgause's eager mouth. There was so much to how they touched one another, and what was felt between them.
They remained. Just locked at the lips for a long time. A kiss that stirred so much physical response, deep within her, but also so much feeling. Morgause eventually had to break the contact to fill her chest with much needed air. Morgana was unrelenting though, her lips sucking at her throat.

"I am yours," She whispered into Morgana's ear, "And you are mine."

Morgana smiled back, reaching out a hand to intertwine their fingers.

"No matter what," Her young lover completed the sentence.

Morgause felt as content as she could ever remember. Then they laid back side by side, too exhausted to move. That's when she heard the reverberation of boots off stone. She waited, listening to see if whomever went passed the door. The footsteps stopped though. Morgause dove onto the floor and then rolled under the bed. Morgana's door opened and closed again quietly.

I'm so sorry, Ninay.

))))))

She knew it was Arthur. He felt his way to her bed in the dark, kicking something metallic that was certainly Morgause's armor. He didn't bother seeing what it was.

Thank the Goddess!

Morgana felt panic. Her heart pounded in her neck and she could barely remember how to breathe.

"Are you asleep?" He asked softly.

Should I pretend to be asleep?

Morgause being found in here would be very bad. But if Arthur wanted to resume relations with her, Morgana thought she should, he might change his mind and marry her anyway. As far as Arthur was concerned, they were still the only two people who knew.

But Morgause will hear everything. What kind of a person would do such a thing?

I can't do this!

"Arthur?" She said softly, as if waking from sleep.

He climbed onto the bed next to her, but on top of the covers. She laid still, intent to just listen.

He's come to your chambers at midnight, it's not your advice he desires!

"I can't stand this," He sighed.

"What?"

"Marrying for political purposes," Arthur was frustrated, "I'm ready to kill Agravaine!"

Morgana knew enough to know that revisiting their earlier conversations about their relationship would drive him away right now. His hand reached out to touch her, finding her arm, clad in blanket. She allowed her hand free, and he held her.

"You looked stunning tonight," He said, as if she had made everything harder on purpose, "It was
hard to notice any other woman in the room."

There was no good response to that statement that wasn't likely to lead to sex with Morgause under the bed. So, she said nothing.

"I hate all these princesses already!" Arthur groaned, "None of them are you."

He leaned in closer. She could feel his hot breath inches from her face. Morgana felt overheated, and sweat rolling down her forehead. She knew he wanted her to encourage him to continue, but couldn't ask herself. If Arthur thought anything of the lit candles on the vanity, he said nothing. She ran the back of her hand along his jaw but no more. Morgana felt him grasp her hand. He kissed her palm.

"I just didn't know…" He started to say and then stopped.

"Didn't know what?" Morgana asked.

"That the last time, would be the last time," He sounded so broken.

He needs a goodbye.

Morgana was getting tenser by the moment. Arthur gently placed a very chaste kiss on her lips, wondering how she would respond. She didn't pull away, she encouraged him only slightly. His other hand slipped beneath and reached for her. If he thought anything of her being naked, he said nothing. Morgause was already hating this situation enough without it being dangled in her face. Arthur was clearly becoming more engaged in this interaction by the moment, she felt herself tremble beneath his touch. He leaned in again, this time with his mouth open, his tongue finding hers in fluid motions. She reciprocated as minimally as she dared. He pulled back, perplexed.

He broke the silence, "How was your dance with Alvarr?" A reproach crept into his voice.

Morgana had not been expecting that question.

"Fine," Morgana said flatly, "He's not really meant for me."

His began to kiss her neck, trailing kisses, that were about to require him to peel back the blanket.

Morgana tried to be playful, "I like golden hair."

She grabbed a handful of his blonde tresses. And large dark eyes, and a golden mound with pretty, pink folds between strong thighs that I can stick my face between!

He broke contact, his cool damp lips on her sensitive flesh. He unbuttoned his fancy shirt. She felt the heat coming off him, inching toward her. He tossed the blanket aside and began to suck her nipples. She felt his hard stomach muscles up against her. Morgause's stomach was strong like this, something Morgana particularly liked. She kept a hand in his hair, not moving. Letting him do as he would.

"I like a knight who is brave, and righteous," She whispered.

Morgause is under the bed hearing all of this. I'm so sorry, My Love.

Arthur was about to move to cover her when he suddenly stopped.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Arthur seemed genuinely concerned.
Morgana really didn't want to have *this* conversation, especially not now.

"I'm much better."

But Arthur wasn't letting it go, "What have you been sick with these last few days?"

"I'm not sure, my stomach's been a bit upset, that's all."

"I see," Said Arthur stiffly.

No words were spoken for a time. Morgana became anxious and so, sought his mouth, but he turned his face, so her lips landed on his cheek instead. His hands grabbed both her wrists now to stop her. Holding her face right up to his.

"Have you…" Arthur became hesitant, "Ummm, have you had…"

Morgana waited.

"Your moonblood, umm since we?" Arthur was obviously uncomfortable broaching this topic with her.

Damn it! She hoped she'd have more time before he figured it out. This was going to send him scurrying from her. But she knew he wouldn't accept an evasion on this topic.

"No."

"So, you are pregnant?" Arthur's voice was full of fear.

"It's too soon to really say that," Morgana corrected, "Women lose pregnancies all the time in the early stages."

"But you are?" He simplified, "It's just too soon to tell anyone?"

"Yes," Morgana forced herself to say.

He retreated, covering his face in shame. A long, uncomfortable silence followed. Morgana reached out to reassure him, rubbing his back but he pulled away. She didn't want him to spoil her euphoria over this wonderful news. She'd been sure for a while now; the vomiting had just confirmed it.

"I'm so sorry," He managed to say.

"I don't regret this, Arthur," Morgana reached out to touch his shoulder, "I'm going to love this child, even if you won't."

Arthur recoiled, his guilt affecting him profoundly.

"Gaius told me the child will probably be sickly, I'm so sorry," Arthur admitted, his voice cracking with emotion.

*What?* Morgana didn't know that. She would ask Caellan and Ninianne. She had been led to believe that it was not uncommon for close kin to produce children on The Isle, and that it was just Christian morality that frowned upon it.

Morgana did her best to put him at ease, "I don't think we are related, so I think this child will be fine."
"Morgana!" Arthur was exasperated, "You have Father's eyes!" He regained his composure, "I never noticed until the will. I started looking for signs, but you do, his exact color. Even your jawline looks like his."

"That's not proof," Morgana pleaded, "Wait for me, we'll have the answer in half a year."

"I shouldn't have come in here," Arthur was morose, "I was weak, it isn't fair."

She said nothing.

"What I said before is right, I need to move on and you should too," He was already getting up before he finished his words becoming formal, "Please forgive my intrusion."

Under different circumstances she would have stopped him. *Don't you want a goodbye? But, not with Morgause here, she was relieved."

His hand brushed her lips for a moment, regret and longing radiated off him, but he allowed himself no more. He retreated, kicking some more of Morgause's armor apologizing. Morgana told him not to worry about it, she had dropped a candlestick before and had been too lazy to pick it up again. He accepted her words as truth. Arthur left quietly, indicated by a brief flooding of hallway light as the door opened and closed, as if her king hadn't been there at all.

Morgana began to contemplate just how precarious what she was trying to do really was. He wasn't as confident about moving on as he was trying to sound. She didn't want to hurt her relationship with Morgause, but she was. Morgana felt like crying and being sick. It was just a mess for now. Morgause, ever sleek, moved and began to collect her mail off the stone floor, she was silent, but her motions were aggressive, Morgana knew she was fuming.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that," Morgana was contrite.

Anger emanated off Morgause. She sought her Blonde Beauty hoping to embrace her, to soothe her. Her Love raised her elbow to prevent contact.

"Tonight, was far too risky," The blonde admitted, "Ninianne will be so angry if we compromise all we've sacrificed for now."

Morgause was clearly mad with herself for her lack of self-control, something she usually prided herself on. She was so committed to the cause.

"We're done," The older woman announced in a tone that brooked no argument, "I'm sorry, but there is too much riding on your relationship with Arthur and his trust in you."

_No!_

"We can't throw away the peace The Pact brings on a whim," Morgause's words were blunt, but she softened them by reaching out to brush a lock of Morgana's hair back behind her ear, "I love you more than anything, I meant every word I just said," Her eyes were shiny, in the candlelight, "But The Pact must hold, The Isle is depending on us."

Then Morgause looked at her, with a shattered yearning, like she was never going to see Morgana again.

"Don't leave me!"

Morgana burst into tears, in a blind panic she grabbed Morgause's retreating form, clinging to her.
"Morgana!" Her lover sighed, dismayed, "This will only make it harder."

Too bad.

For the first time ever, Morgana was forceful. She suffocated Her Love, snaked around and pinned her arms to her sides, yanking her back towards the bed. She was the one to push her Golden Knight onto the mattress. She refused to let go so easily, as if this relationship meant nothing. How could they, who had been more connected than she ever could have believed possible, be over. She was the one to separate those well-muscled thighs. The first time with her hand was frenzied. She wasn't exploring, or even touching, Morgana was digging. Searching for lost treasure, in Morgause's sacred cave. She didn't stop until her Golden Knight was slick with her own juices, and even then, her hand kept sliding, in and out. As if reaching for something that was forever just out of reach...

"Stop!" Morgause pleaded weakly, but she didn't mean it.

She felt her lover quake, sporadically, before her quivering became uncontrollable shaking. Morgana felt her mentor lose all abandon. Morgause gripped the bedhead to steady herself, and she was overcome with her own intense erupting spasm. She had to stifle her screams into a pillow, and was heaving.

"Goddess! Don't demand this of me, what is not within my power to give! I beg you!"

Morgause spoke not to Morgana, but in discussion with her faith. She seemed genuinely pained.

Then Morgana had calmed down. She drew all the curtains and pushed a solid box against the door. No one would be getting in. She slowed her motions to light and sensual. She closed her eyes and let her tongue guide her. She caressed those strong thighs while she sucked that wrinkled little nub as if it was her mother's teat.

She tasted Her Love savoring her nectar. She traced every defined muscle, her golden waves, her beautiful dark eyes. Morgause seemed subdued with her sensory bliss, looked down helplessly at Morgana whose face was buried in her thighs. Morgana held her lover's gaze as she continued to pleasure her with her tongue and adept fingers. She tried to give her Golden Knight as many moments of pleasure as she could. Enough to last the lifetime they weren't going to have together, so close to each other and yet so far.

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She's having his child, even if he sees it as a sin, he's still going to care about her, and the babe, even if he won't admit it. He'll never really let her go.

It's too dangerous.

I was arrogant Ninay! I should have listened.

We all have to make sacrifices for the cause, she kept reminding herself.

Morgause lost count of how many times her Dark Beauty had caused her to release. She drank water beside the bed because her throat was parched. Her lover's touch was setting her on fire. Morgause lay still a long time holding her lover, allowing a stubborn tear to roll down her cheek.

It's not fair!

She needed to be the strong one now.
"Love is still love," She whispered to Morgana, "Even when you can't act on it."

It wasn't a solution, but it was all she had to give right now.
Arthur's knight's instincts were now to marry Morgana. He had gotten her pregnant, he needed to take responsibility. But, as a Christian, he couldn't.

*Father, forgive me.*

*By the time we get a definitive answer about our relatedness, she'll be about to have the baby. A king's adviser cannot be an unwed mother. If I wed her now and we find out we are siblings, if she marries someone else... and then we aren't...*

*She's your sister, you know it.*

*Father worshiped her. He spoiled her. That only makes sense if he knew all along.*

Arthur had already met with Bayard, Rodor, Alined and Agravaine of course. Both Alined or Bayard could be appeased with a marriage to Morgana. Arthur knew she would refuse, and he certainly didn't wish to make her wed against her will. But he did need to offer these important allies an olive branch, of some sort. Perhaps he could arrange a very advantageous marriage for Arya to a king or heir of one of his lands. But knowing her... inclinations, that might not be stable, what if the girl ran off to The Isle after she was wed? That could cause big problems. He would ask Morgana for advice. Another reason he couldn't just marry Morgana off, she was his most useful adviser.

*But she's pregnant, and will be showing in a moon or two. It will be apparent that she was pregnant before marriage.*

All the kings and heirs whom were vying for Morgana's hand, none would take her soiled. He would need to arrange a respectable match for her with someone he trusted, someone close at court, one of his knights. Sir Leon perhaps. It was a huge undertaking. The first child, if a boy, would be heir. It was hard to ask a knight a take another man's child as his heir, even if you were getting a king's bastard. But he had resolved to let her chose. But then he worried that she would choose Alvarr.

His head kept spinning. He wished he had someone to talk to. He missed... he couldn't bring himself to even think about that skinny, fool! *Besides, he wasn't trustworthy.* But he missed him all the same.

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Arthur passed Gwen in the hallway, "What did you think of the ball?"

Gwen thought for a moment, "I think it went well, in the sense that everything ran smoothly, we had enough food, we didn't run out of wine, the music was appropriate, people danced and were merry."

No one killed each other in the dining hall.

Arthur nodded, "Yes, I suppose from that perspective it was a success."

"How did you go with your… princesses?" She was almost afraid to ask.

"Badly," Arthur admitted, his frustration plain on his face. "They don't really care about me, they just want to be queen."

"Surely there was one among the bunch who is honest and kind?" Gwen said, ever the optimist, "No one expects you to love one another instantly, Arthur."

Her features took on a dreamy look, "Love takes time, you need to get to know one another, allow the feelings to grow," Gwen became embarrassed now and averted her eyes.

"Love requires trust," Arthur spoke his thoughts as they occurred in his head, "But what if I don't trust their motives?"

Gwen didn't know what to say to that.

Because Gwen is honest, and kind, who wouldn't even think of pretending to love a man to improve her lot in life.

"Thank you for your counsel, Guinevere," Arthur was still glum, "And for your help with the ball."

Gwen curtsied again, "My King."

Arthur was left alone to brew.

As for his newest un-knights. They were exceptional fighters the pair of them, which was giving his knights a few ruffled feathers. Alvarr excelled at strategy, and was very skilled with a sword, and an extraordinary rider. Morgause, was well, Morgause. Arthur felt that she hated him, but she was fierce and skilled and the best of the lot. But he knew that, she'd proven herself when she beat him in single combat.

There were teething problems though. The knights didn't trust them and showed their concerns in how they dealt with the two sorcerers. A few were more hostile than that, but Arthur made clear that he wouldn't tolerate behavior unbecoming of a knight within his ranks.

Then Arthur began to think about Lancelot, hadn't he been a great fighter, and upright to a fault? But because of his common birth had thus been excluded from becoming a Knight of Camelot. Maybe Morgana did have a point.

Mordred was surprisingly good with a sword, and very apt at defending himself. Arthur began to realize that it was because the boy could read his opponent's mind and therefore knew where they would go next. Morgause and Alvarr had done a good job with his technique as well. They were just finishing a session on footwork when Arthur turned to the boy.
"Mordred," Arthur changed his tone completely.

"Sire," Mordred stared back at him with his big blue eyes.

"Could you do me a favor."

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Arthur was cordial at dinner. King Alined talked laws, and taxation, and defense through the soup and main course, and Arthur respected the direction the conversation took. Once those topics were exhausted, he engaged with Bethany, who had dressed to be rather alluring.

Arthur remembered what Caellan had told him and asked for more details about Bethany's work with orphans in Cumbria. If she was thrown by the question she recovered well and gave a fairly detailed answer. She continued to complement Arthur on his leadership, and the fine knights he was producing, his dancing, his courtly manners.

He left the dinner still feeling impressed with her and finding himself attracted to her. Arthur showed them to their guest quarters, Alined wanted to watch Arthur train his knights the next morning, then he would take Bethany for a ride in the afternoon. Arthur then returned to the dining hall. Mordred had been hidden behind a suit of armor statue in the corner.

"So, what do you think?"

"She's lying about helping the poor," Mordred said frankly, "When you asked her about it, she thought 'What did father tell me to say'?"

Arthur was surprised, he'd believed her.

Mordred kept going, "She despises commoners because they are smelly, dirty, disease-ridden and uncivilized."

Arthur was now shocked, "She thought that during dinner?"

Mordred nodded.

"Anything else?"

"She feels threatened by Morgana," Mordred informed him, "She thought, 'when I am queen, the first thing I shall do is marry her off to some old king, far away'."

Arthur was horrified, that while Princess Bethany had been smiling at him, and he'd been enjoying her smiles, she had been thinking that.

Mordred kept telling him everything, "She doesn't really care about politics."

Arthur was surprised at that.

"King Alined is magical," The boy added, "He's thrilled you lifted the ban on sorcery."

That was contrary to what Agravaine and Alined himself had said to Arthur's face.

"He's pretending he won't join Greater Camelot if you don't marry Bethany," Mordred said, "In truth, he wants to join you anyway."

*That is very useful information if in fact true.* Agravaine had been counseling him repeatedly that
this was the most politically advantageous match and the only way to bring Cumbria into the fold.

"Bethany thinks you're handsome," Mordred said.

Arthur began to laugh, because there was nothing else to do, "Well, at least she wasn't lying about that!" Just about everything else!

Arthur found himself patting the boy on the head. He took him down to the kitchens and asked them to give him a special treat.

"Mordred, do you know how lucky you are?" Arthur wrapped his arm around the boy, proud of him, before saying flippantly, "You will never marry the wrong woman."

"You should marry Morgana," Was all the boy said back. Maybe you aren't as wise as you think you are, Little Wizard.

Arthur wasn't the only one courting under duress. Morgana had been told by Agravaine that she had to accept a dinner invitation with King Bayard of Mercia.

I will not be sold like livestock!

She decided to have the dinner, but if it became more than that, she would have Arthur intervene. Morgana felt confident that Arthur wouldn't force her to marry anyone, and that he wouldn't want her to leave court. Mercia was as far north as it got. Besides, she was pregnant, none of these kings would take her in her present state.

It was formal, but the king brought his unique daughter, Arya, whom Morgana was actually fond of along with him, which made it easier. She was eager and clearly happy to be in Morgana's presence. The girl reminded Morgana of herself a few years ago.

Bayard, on the other hand was nearly as old as Ninianne, anti-sorcery, and a bit traditional. He had five married sons and had been widowed a long time. Kind, loyal and straight-forward for all that, but really not for her. He actually reminded her of her Dad, which made the prospect of marriage even more horrifying.

Arthur had Agravaine set up his dinner with Caellan for two nights after the dinner with Bethany. She wore Morgana's royal blue gown this time with the gold trimmings and sheer sleeves. It didn't fit right on her because she was too thin, but he appreciated the effort. Her hair again was left flowing, with two gold hair clasps of Morgana's at her temples. She seemed different tonight, more nervous. He had no idea what he was going to say. He continued his mental list of her similarities and differences to Morgana.

Caellan got the conversation started, "Tell me about your ideas for ruling, now that you're high king."

Good question. Shows she actually cares about the state of the kingdom, not how many pretty shiny things I'll give her.

"I'm mostly trying to keep everyone happy, since I lifted the ban on sorcery."

She asked the logical follow up question as she casually sipped her wine, "How do you plan to do that?"
"By being fair and just to everyone," He responded vaguely.

She didn't accept his evasion, "And how will you do that?" Before forgetting herself, "My King."

"I haven't decided on all the details yet," Arthur was feeling defensive, "Listen to those I'm ruling, I suppose."

She smiled, "The Isle practices similar, our Wise Counsel vote, with the majority deciding the course of action."

"Vote?"

"A show of hands, one Wise Counsel member, one vote," She clarified, "Which ever decision gets the most agreement among The Counsel, is the course of action that is carried out," She explained simply.

"So, there isn't a ruler?" Arthur was surprised, "Then what does the Lady of the Lake do?"

She didn't miss a beat, "She makes the immediate decisions, when there isn't time for the Counsel to discuss everything."

"Like what?"

Caellan paused too long before answering, "Like that day you came to collect Morgana from The Isle, you refused to lift the ban when you became king, but were willing to end the sorcerer hunts and war preparations, Ninianne made a judgement to accept your offer."

Arthur nodded, remembering it well, "A lot can change in a short time, and here we are."

"Yes it can," She smiled sadly, then as an afterthought lifted her goblet to cheers to that.

Arthur smiled shyly back and reciprocated. The metal clinked on metal and he gulped his drink. Caellan was on edge. Her voice wobbled, she was tense. Arthur wasn't sure what to make of it. He couldn't decide if her behavior meant she didn't want to be there, or if she was striving to impress him, but was scared of failure. *She's not a people person, but she's really trying.*

He wished she had a warm, or feminine bone in her body though. She could wear Morgana's gowns, but it didn't make her graceful, she didn't observe proper social graces when eating.

*I'd have to teach her everything from scratch.*

The other kingdoms will hate having a sorcerer queen. When he was going to marry Morgana he accepted 'come what may', but Caellan wasn't his first choice, he wasn't sure he wanted to endure the extra hardship for the sake of her.

*Can I love her? Or will I just be thinking of Morgana the whole time.*

*She's not my sister.*

*She's a healer, she likes children, she won't be threatened by Morgana being in my life. She's smart and has ideas about ruling.*

"What was it like to grow up on The Isle?" He asked suddenly, realizing he genuinely cared for the answer.

She smiled warmly at that, "The Isle is the best place in the world."
Arthur encouraged her to elaborate.

"We share everything, everyone helps each other, we don't have a few whom are very rich while so many are very poor," She proclaimed proudly, "We don't tell boys they must learn to fight, and girls that must spin yarn or look after babies."

She wants to change everything that makes the Roman way, Roman.

Arthur decided to challenge her, "Before the Romans came here, tell me, how many roads were there? Sanitation? What about safety, lawlessness?"

Caellan paused, angry, before she forced herself to say, "We had other ways of settling those things."

"Lots of tribal wars?" Arthur answered for her.

The priestess snapped back, "Just because Rome had the biggest army, doesn't mean it had enlightenment in other ways."

"Roman rose this land up, and made it great," Arthur said.

"Rome's wealth was based on slavery," Caellan replied, defiantly.

"Rome had many slaves, that's true, but Rome was run by free men with big ideas, clever men who bought civilization to many parts of the world."

"I'm not sure I'd call invasion, war and murder, civilized, My King," Caellan was clearly trying to hold her tongue.

You just said you would rule by listening to the people, listen to her!

Arthur tried not to turn this into further argument, "Why do you think your way is better?"

"We give people choices to live as they choose," She explained, "That's how I came to be a healer, it is my passion."

"What if no girls want to have children?" Arthur said, "Or no men were willing to defend your precious Isle. What then? Wouldn't you need to... enforce a code of behavior? Or your society would cease to exist."

He wasn't entirely serious in his challenge, but rules were important to stop conflict and keep life fair.

Caellan thought on that, "Women can defend The Isle, as does magic."

She prefers this conversation, he knew.

"I've never found freedom to be the problem," She sipped her wine, smiling in a self-satisfied manner, "People fight harder to defend their freedom, it's worth dying for."

Arthur had never really thought of it like that.

A lot of sorcerers had died, trying to kill Father because they wanted their freedom.

Arthur tried to get a rise out of her, "I'm Christian, I would want to raise any children we have as Christians."
The slight tug on her mouth downward said she didn't like the idea of that.

Caellan became contemplative, "I think there can be room in a child's life to learn about different ways of doing things, and they can choose what they think is best when they get older."

"So what? Take the children to church one week and Beltane the next?" He said, sipping his wine.

The mention of Beltane made her bristle.

She forced herself to reply but her words were very controlled, "Young children don't attend Beltane,"

Before Arthur could vex her further, she managed to get him off balance, "What if our children are magical?" Caellan said, "Your church might not accept them."

Arthur had never considered that.

"I'm high king," He said finally, "They'll have too."

She smiled at that, "Well said."

What if my child with Morgana is magical?

That will be the least of their problems, be grateful if the child doesn't have webbed feet and two heads!

The soup arrived, and the serving boy refilled their wine.

Arthur decided he didn't have anything to lose, so he tested her, "Do you actually like me, or do you just want to be queen?"

She thought on that, "I like what I know so far, and what Morgana has told me of you," She began, "I think you pretend to be more insensitive than you are, more manly, but I think underneath it all, I see a kind and true heart, the heart of a champion of the people."

He stared back at her. Dumbfounded.

She added, "You have allowed magic, if I knew nothing else of you, I could love you for that alone."

Her kind blue eyes held his gaze for a long moment.

She meant every word of that.

"Do you know why I broke the engagement with Morgana?"

She shook her head, "My cousin wouldn't say."

He paused, shocked, before realizing she would have meant related on Vivienne's side. Besides, everyone else believed Morgana to be the child of Gorlois. She noticed all was not right with him.

"You're cousins?"

Caellan quickly clarified, "Our grandmothers are sisters, we are really only second cousins,"

She knows something. He was sure of it. Too bad Mordred could not be relied upon to spy on The
The priestess reached across the table for his hand, just making the faintest of contact with her fingertips, "I don't know what happened, but you both seem sad about it."

Arthur felt like he would cry.

*Get it together.*

Arthur forced himself to respond, "It's hard to talk about."

He took a few deep breaths and thought about swordplay until he was calm. Arthur nearly downed an entire glass of wine just to give himself a momentary reprieve.

"Aren't we here for your marriage prospects?" He redirected the conversation.

"It's obvious you still love her," The priestess replied.

Arthur took another long swallow of wine, it grated down the back of his throat as if there had been broken glass in his cup.

"There is no point in dwelling on what cannot be," He said decisively, ending the topic.

They ate three courses. They both drank far too much wine. He couldn't say why, but she was making him nervous this evening, perhaps because for the first time he was seriously considering her.

Caellan kept the conversation light after that. She teased him, the way Morgana did. He was finding himself comfortable with her in a way he didn't expect. He offered to walk her back to her guest chambers. Caellan accepted happily, and wrapped her arm around his. Her fingers lightly caressed his bicep, and it had the desired effect on him.

When they reached her door, all she said was, "I enjoyed your company, My King."

She gazed into his eyes, she glanced at his lips, but she made no greater attempt toward overt contact. He thought about kissing her, just lightly brushing her lips, then he thought better of it. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was because she was reminding him of Morgana. She still seemed anxious.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," Arthur said, bowing.

He went back to his chambers, and thought about Morgana while he satisfied himself.

They waited until Arthur had well and truly left before going to Caellan's guest chambers. Morgause and Mordred were hiding in the servants' quarters opposite the small dining room where Arthur and Caellan had eaten. Mordred had listened in and told Morgause Arthur's thoughts, and she had him instruct Caellan by beaming his thoughts into her mind, and Morgause's instructions about what she should do, while they were talking and eating. *For all the good it did!* Caellan had ignored most of the advice and stupidly revealed how much she resented Roman ways! It was imbecilic to insult the way of life of his Father so openly. Caellan would know that and yet she did it anyway! *She is as stubborn as a mule.*

The healer had managed to redeem herself, later in the evening she had listened, and had managed to banter the way Morgana might have, and Arthur had responded to her lighter, warmer side. *The*
Morgause had told her to hold Arthur's arm, and lightly caress the muscle, to gaze into his eyes with longing, to stare at his lips. She couldn't see the interaction though, she doubted Caellan would have successfully pulled it off. She should have gone herself, glamoured as Caellan.

The door was cracked open. Caellan stood looking out at the waning moon, she turned briefly making eye contact with Morgause.

She's unhappy.

"He believes that you like children," Mordred said to the healer.

Good!

"He thinks she smart and would be good at ruling." The boy added.

The original plan had been for Morgana to pretend to be Caellan. But, Her Love said she couldn't, it would be too painful to play her replacement, she would sabotage Caellan's prospects out of spite. She wished to be left out of all such plots. Caellan was honest to a fault, she didn't know how to get a man's attention and she certainly didn't know how to flirt or intrigue.

Mordred had said Arthur thought about kissing her because she was reminding him of Morgana.

He's considering her, but he's not falling for her.

In truth Morgause had taken a perverse pleasure in trying to attract Arthur to Caellan, trying to convince him of his affection for someone who wasn't Morgana.

"What am I going to tell Alvarr?" Caellan sighed her gaze fixed on the night sky, forlorn, "He's going to hate this."

Morgause knew exactly how this felt.

After the dinner with Bethany that had gone all so wrong, Arthur hadn't been able to stop thinking about Morgana. He only wanted her. Maybe he would wait six moons. Maybe he'd marry her now. Gaius said the children might be sickly, if they had ten, surely some of them would be fine. He could find other ways of appeasing his kings to ensure the stability of his kingdom, and then he would marry for love.

What if someone else knows.

What if I burn the will, and then someone exposes the truth?

Everyone despises incest, even if the sin was unintentional.

She's your sister. You know it.

Father was beside himself when she was gone. You know he favored her. Father knew she was his daughter.

And then something strange had happened. Arthur was beneath the castle in the endless tunnels near the dungeons, looking for a guard who was in trouble for consistently sleeping at his post. He was approaching another tunnel when Arthur bent down to tie his boot lace. Two patrolling guards walked passed, engaged in conversation, not noticing him.
"He had her a bunch of times," The taller one with the deep voice said, "I saw it with my own eyes, otherwise I'd 'ave never believed it."

"He was practically her father!" Said the short round one, in a tone, that said what they were discussing was scandalous.

The big one boomed, "When Arthur ran off to rescue her maid, the king called us into his chambers at midnight, he was naked and she was in his bed."

"No way!" He other squeaked, shock apparent.

The tall one spoke confidently, "Myself and three others all saw, I had to stop myself from gasping."

"How could she! With both of them!" The round one squealed, "Father and son… surely God's laws are against that!" He was practically beside himself.

"Well, she's not exactly a good Christian is she!" The other jested, elbowing his partner in the ribs, "Nor married to either of them, so there's plenty of sin right there."

"Arthur obviously doesn't know, or he'd never touch the whore witch again!" The shorter guard finished.

Arthur remained crouched down for a long time after that.

*The whore witch they were referring to had to be Morgana.*

*That guard is saying… Father and Morgana… had relations.*

*That simply cannot be.*

*He would never, not if he knew he was her*...
Arthur couldn't sleep. He couldn't stop thinking about what he'd heard those guards say.

*That's so... gross!*

*He would never.*

*She would never.*

Morgana had been his guardian angel since she'd come back from The Isle. She had done nothing but love him, and support him and guide him. He owed her his trust.

*How can I even think this of her!*

*Those guards were just bored. It's all nonsense!*

))))))

He tried to forget it, but he couldn't. He would be carrying out his many duties when he would suddenly recall touches, and looks he'd seen pass between them. Their relationship had always been love/hate and intense. Father let Morgana get away with murder. He always had. He showered her with gifts and affection. He respected her, more than he showed anyone else that kind of distinction and trust. Were there signs of romantic love there?

The only thing he'd found suspicious was a single, fairly recent, incident. It was when Arthur brought Morgana back from The Isle, that banquet Father had thrown in her honor, not only had Father's speech sounded like he'd had his entire reason for living restored because Morgana could smile at him again, or something equally over the top, but he had hugged her right afterward. After an uncomfortably long and close embrace, Arthur had happened to notice the bulge in the king's breeches to his shock before he quickly averted his eyes and Father had gone outside. Arthur had promptly forgotten all about it, because Father had been affected by the that root thing that made him act strangely.

*But the Mandrake root only revealed the truth.*

He needed to know the truth. Either way. He'd never sensed anything on Morgana's end, though. Not towards Uther, but she was never forthcoming about her feelings in that regard. Not with Arthur. He was only beginning to suspect there was a lot more going on with Morgana than he knew.

))))))

But it gnawed at him.

*Morgana's sorcerer boyfriend?
Can it be?

'I know you, you'll look at me differently,' Her words from the Kingmaking came back to him.

How could she?

No, it doesn't make sense! Father almost executed her for sorcery before the Saxon war.

But he couldn't.

Have you ever seen King Uther Pendragon pardon a proven sorcerer?

Because she is his daughter or his lover?

Father had always spoken of Gorlois as the best kind of man and true friend. One of the few people Uther ever spoke about in such glowing terms. His king had said to him one day, that Morgana was just like her father in that regard, and that sometimes when he watched her, the person she was, he saw Gorlois. That in her, Father said, he saw his equal. Arthur was not only peeved that Father would speak of her such, while ignoring his many achievements, but he had thought it a strange comparison to make. Stranger yet when Father had followed it up with a comment that Morgana had gotten all of her mother's beauty and then some, all recalled with a dreamy look in the king's eye.

Father was lonely for a long time after Mother died.

Other than when Father was enchanted by that troll, he couldn't recall a single woman that had caught the king's eye in that way.

Father never tried to arrange a marriage for her. I always thought it was because he intended her for me.

Morgana was nearly five and twenty by the time she returned from The Isle. Old by the common age of marriage for women.

Father couldn't part with her.

He started to dream about it. How it had happened. All those private meetings, those intimate dinners with just the two of them, all those expensive gifts Father gave her. The way her hips swayed seductively in all her beautiful array of silk gowns... Or had they been fighting and hatred and passion had suddenly mingled together? Was Morgana yelling at Uther in the throne room after he sentenced yet another sorcerer to die and she screamed that she hated him, and Father grabbed her, feeling wounded, and wanted to show her he did care...

She should have told me.

He was becoming increasingly annoyed at her secretive ways, that she only let him know what she wanted him to know.

She hid having magic for years, You Fool!

Merlin. Merlin managed to hide it from you too!

You're just a blind idiot!

Arthur wanted to confront her about it. But he didn't have any proof. She might laugh in his face, and then what could he say? He wanted something more definitive.
After too many disturbed sleeps, it occurred to Arthur, that he could have Mordred spy on the guards. He didn't tell the little boy what information he was after, he just asked his squire to hide in the tunnels and listen to all the guards talking, and note anything that was said and thought about Morgana.

Mordred had been cleaning his armor after training in the servant's quarters when Arthur stopped by. The boy was scrubbing furiously brush in one hand, helm in the other.

His squire didn't even look up, "I know what you are wondering about."

Arthur didn't think the boy had even noticed his presence.

"Come for a ride with me and I'll tell you what I know," Was all his squire said.

*He's her son, he knows what she is thinking. Of course, he knows the truth of it.*

*But why would Mordred betray her confidence?*

Arthur expected them to stop at the first secluded spot. But Mordred insisted that they ride to the cairn on the hill. The sun was high in the sky. The wind was blowing profusely. The branches on the hawthorn tree were swaying. His red cape was making a spirited attempt at escape from his shoulders.

"This is where Morgana's father is buried," Arthur stated.

*Well Gorlois is buried here anyway.*

"I know," The boy said.

He remained mounted a few yards from the stone slab. Arthur had escorted Morgana here numerous times over the years. But he didn't usually take in the details of the cairn, today his eyes traced the symbol, two loops, with no beginning and no end. Eternity.

"This is where it happened the first time," The boy announced.

"Where what happened?" Arthur asked.

Mordred looked worried, "Morgana and the king came out here over two years ago now. That's when Tauren and his men attacked them. Morgana stabbed Tauren in the back, saving Uther's life, that's when the old king kissed her," Mordred's eyes searched Arthur for a reaction.

Arthur felt everything around him stop. Suddenly he couldn't hear the wind, or notice the movement of the nature. He was just rooted to the spot.

Mordred continued, reticent, "Then the king laid her down, and parted her legs and then he put his thing inside her."

Arthur stood open mouthed.

He eventually managed to force his shock into coherent words, "Father and Morgana?"

"He forced her," Mordred made clear, "She bled, on the ground, on her dress, on his breeches."
He used that much force she bled?!

Wait... what? Now he's saying Father raped her.

Never.

"My father would never do that, to any woman!" Arthur was adamant, And Morgana well, "He loved her like a daughter."

"He did it lots of times," Mordred replied plainly, "She hated it."

No! Arthur flushed with annoyance at his squire. How dare you imply such! He was the king!

Arthur snapped, "Mordred, you weren't even there."

"I see it," Mordred insisted, "Mother thinks about what he did to her sometimes," The boy added very quietly, "It makes her sad."

This cannot be.

Mordred's voice got quieter, "She's afraid to tell you."

"My Father wrote a will," Arthur responded, "He confessed!"

"Your Father behaved the way he did, because he desired her," The boy said sharply, "I don't know if he was her Father."

Arthur was speechless. He gaped, he opened his mouth but no words formed.

"You're not sure," The boy stated, "Wait until Samhain, you'll get the answer," He urged.

Arthur didn't know what to do, but he knew he wanted to flee.

"Stop calling Morgana mother!" Arthur yelled at the boy, "She's not your mother!"

He pulled the reins hard, and kicked his black stallion, Bravery, and headed for the nearest open fields. He galloped leaving Mordred far behind. He wanted to feel the wind through his hair, and not to think. Anything but that. He kept demanding more pace. He found rougher terrain, the ground was uneven, low lying branches hindered his vision. Passing leaves slapped his face. Everything passed him in a blur. He was at breakneck speed now, a single wrong step and he might end it all…

Tempting fate, are you?

His horse finally pulled up, gasping, and lathered. Arthur was heaving and he could feel his heart pounding in his neck. His thighs burned from the strain of keeping his seat. His forehead was wet with sweat.

Could Father really have done that?

Before Morgana came back, he would have confidently said no. But after everything else...

I can't ask Morgana about this.
Morgana didn't get the special dreams often, but when she did, she very much considered them to be warnings to compel her to act to prevent whatever was coming. Until this. It had caught her unprepared and rocked her to her foundation.

She felt sick, more than just sick because of the life growing inside her. She shut herself up in her chambers and slept. She couldn't face the day. Arthur suddenly went hunting, taking only his manservant and two other knights. She hadn't seen or spoken to him. Morgause came to drag her out for a ride eventually, not understanding. Morgana told her what she had seen.

Morgause was displeased. She felt very strongly that they should intervene. Morgana worried that Caellan wouldn't be a convincing seductress. And if Arthur were to find out, it would do irretrievable damage to their cause.

"Morgana," Morgause was becoming increasingly annoyed, "We can't do nothing, convince him to wait for you."

"Something has changed, he's no longer interested," Morgana sighed, resigned, "It will never be the same again."

"There are other pretty girls on The Isle, tell Ninianne to send someone else," Morgause stated flatly.

But, Morgana knew it to her core, "It won't help."

He didn't even care what he was hunting, he just needed to get away from everything and clear his head. He tried to forget everything he had learned. But it kept eating away at him.

Argyle was no company, the man never said anything. If his demure servant had opinions, he kept them to himself. Leon rode easily next to him. The loyal knight asked if anything was bothering him. While Arthur trusted and loved him well, this was too sensitive. He did want to talk, but…

I just wish Merlin was here.

))))))

He had been gone three days when Arthur killed the largest deer he'd ever seen. Then he realized his excuse was over, he needed to return. It was almost sunset, he'd be back at his castle in Greater Camelot by tomorrow. No more avoiding.

As he lay awake in his tent that night, a couple of things kept haunting him. The first being how Morgana had cried when he brought her back from The Isle, and the second was that fight Father and Morgana had had. The one where Father had imprisoned her in her chambers for a moon turn, it was right before Gwen and Morgana had been abducted by Hingus, meaning; around the time
those guards were referencing. Neither one had ever told him what had happened. The night that quarrel ended, he remembered Father wanting Morgana to retract an accusation she had made about him. That was also the night Morgana had asked Arthur to sleep in her chambers. She was afraid.

Father couldn't do that!

But, she wouldn't lie about that.

You never actually asked her.

I can't!

)))))))

Arthur returned to his many duties and tried to keep busy.

I know he lied. I know he wasn't as... honorable as I always thought... but I cannot believe this of him.

Another voice in his head asked, The rape or the incest? Or both?

But, he just kept twisting. In the end he decided the worst part was the uncertainty. Arthur just wanted to know for sure. His mind kept exploring the worst possibilities anyway. He went to Morgana's chambers late one evening, having rehearsed what he would say in his head. He stood at the door, fist ready to knock... and then he couldn't.

What is said, cannot be unsaid.

But, he just couldn't stop the twisting in his gut, that things between them were ruined, no matter what the truth was. Then he hated himself for feeling like that.

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Arthur found himself sending Argyle out on pointless errands, so that Gwen would need to attend to him. He didn't want to order her around, he just wanted to see her.

"Is Caellan still here?" Arthur inquired.

"Yes, I think so," Gwen said, "Would you like me to arrange for you to have dinner with her? Or supper?"

"No."

It wasn't in the least bit fair, but since the revelations Mordred had told him, Arthur could barely look Morgana in the eye, something that had unfortunately for Caellan, made it hard for him to look at her too, since she reminded him of Morgana.

Gwen didn't understand his intentions at all, "I was inquiring to see if Morgana had someone who could attend to her."

"I think Caellan is with her now," Gwen was diligent as ever, "Do you need help with something, Sire?"

Gwen was so innocent and kind. It made Arthur smile.
The high king asked the maid, "Guinevere, why don't you come out for a ride with me,"

Gwen was taken aback, "Umm, I, umm, really?"

Gwen didn't have her own horse, Arthur ensured a gentle Palomino, good with under-confident riders, was saddled for her use. They meandered leisurely to a nice shady spot in the woods near the destroyed Roman wall. Gwen seemed very ill at ease with her modest clothes, she kept fidgeting.

"So," Gwen asked sweetly, "What am I doing here?"

Arthur shrugged, "It's just a nice day, and I wanted to get away from everything."

Gwen nodded but seemed disappointed with that answer. Arthur dismounted, and helped Gwen off her horse. He sat on the grass in a sunny spot, and invited her to sit beside him. They remained sitting a while, soaking up some sun. Outside the castle walls was the only time he didn't feel a tightening in his chest these days.

"What's going on, Arthur?" Gwen asked suddenly.

"In what sense?" Arthur wondered.

"You and Morgana seem angry with each other, well, she's angry with you, you look guilty..." Gwen voiced her observations.

Arthur didn't know how to respond to that.

Gwen kept talking, "Then you hold a ball. Supposedly to pick a bride, even though you seem completely disinterested in finding a queen," Gwen finished talking then seemed shocked she had spoken such to her king.

She became flustered, "I, I mean, ummm, it just doesn't seem like you... My King."

Arthur wanted to tell her everything. But he couldn't without telling her about the incest, and he didn't want anyone to know about that.

"Morgana and I..." He began, were lovers until I found out we're brother and sister and now I've left her pregnant. Something you'd never do, Gwen. Don't judge me.

He finally said, "... have found ourselves in a difficult situation, not of our choosing."

Gwen clearly would have liked more information but she nodded.

*It wasn't a lie exactly, but cryptic enough that Gwen couldn't figure out the truth.*

Gwen looked ready to cry for a moment, before quietly saying, "Morgana used to confide in me, but now she's got all those magical people around her, and they're all so... secretive."

Arthur was pretty sure Gwen still had no idea Morgana was pregnant. It was still early days. Caellan had been attending to Morgana entirely. And, Arthur was beginning to keep Gwen busy with fun activities, so she thought the request had come from him. Arthur didn't know why Morgana would keep that from her dearest friend, but he was grateful all the same. The less people who knew, the longer it would remain a secret, the less obvious the time frame of when Morgana fell pregnant would be. Arthur hoped, the less anyone would connect the pregnancy to him.
Gwen thought for a moment, before her face changed, "Do you have to arrange her a marriage now, for political reasons and that's why Morgana's mad?"

That sounded very plausible. But Arthur didn't want to feed Gwen, sweet, honest, kind-hearted Gwen, fabrications.

"That's not quite it, please trust me, Morgana and I are coping as well as we can with all that has happened."

Gwen smiled, "I do trust you, I know you to be an honorable man, Arthur."

You wouldn't, if you only knew what I've been up to. I bedded Morgana on the day I buried my father, our father, see Gwen, Morgana is my sister, I bedded her numerous times when we weren't even wed. I almost bedded her after I knew. And now I've left my sister pregnant. Oh, Gwen, you should run from me, I bring shame to the Knight's Code.

Gwen, thankfully, let the conversation drop there. They were silent a long time.

"You know," Arthur let her in, "Sometimes I think about, I don't know, running off, somewhere no one knows me, where I could be a farmer."

Gwen tried to stifle her laughter, "You, a farmer, why?"

Arthur thought about it, "I could live as I chose, and not have everyone expect so much of me."

*I could marry whomever I wanted and damn the consequences. The fate of Albion wouldn't come crashing down around me. I could live and love selfishly.*

Gwen clearly found his assessment of farm life amusing, "You know farming is a lot of hard work, Arthur," She informed him, "Just to scrape by. No maids, no servants, no time for leisure, you'd be lucky to be wealthy enough to own a horse."

He hadn't thought of it like that.

"Everything would be so simple," Arthur countered, "I wouldn't have to worry about everyone else."

"Until the next famine, or pox when you'd probably die," Gwen's tone was in jest, "Such is the plight of we commoners," But there was a bitterness underneath.

Arthur ruefully commented, "Gwen, you're not really in the spirit of my dreams here."

"I'm a maid, Arthur," She reminded him, "I live that simple life you are craving, it's not as much fun as it looks," Gwen said, "I am at the castle before Morgana wakes, and don't leave until she goes to sleep. I have no life of my own. Morgana is my life."

Arthur realized he must seem terribly spoiled to her.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," Gwen sincerely apologized, "I think you just want to imagine a life different from the one you have," Gwen's sympathetic words soothed him as she gazed at him with genuine warmth, "I can certainly understand that."

Arthur thanked her.

Then he humbled himself, "You're right, I shouldn't romanticize a life of poverty, I don't know
what I'm talking about," Arthur agreed, feeling like a pompous, dollop head! Where did that term come from?

"Is there anything I can do to make your burdens less, My King?" Gwen asked naturally.

And Arthur instantly knew that was what he really needed from this exchange, why he'd spontaneously invited Gwen out riding.

Arthur decided to let Gwen in, "If you had to marry out of duty, how would you decide who to marry?"

"I don't understand the question," Gwen admitted, "If it's duty isn't the choice already made for you?"

"How so," Arthur was now the one confused.

Gwen was straightforward, "Who do you owe the duty to?"

"Greater Camelot," Arthur admitted.

Gwen was nonchalant, "Then pick the woman who will serve best."

"On what basis is the best service?" Arthur asked, "One of the princesses pretended to be concerned for the welfare of the poor, but she was lying, just telling me what she thought I wanted to hear."

"Oh," Was all Gwen said, "Surely there were others."

"One, well, I didn't like her, she said she didn't like servants 'who don't know their place'," Arthur recalled, "One prefers women to men."

"Who was that?" Gwen inquired suddenly, as if very interested.

Arthur dismissed it, "Just one of my many potential wives."

Her face changed to relieved, Arthur couldn't help but wonder why.

"Guinevere," He became adamant, "What do you know?"

"Nothing, I just thought… nothing."

"Guinevere," He drew out her name to sound adamant.

"I thought that you were talking about Morgana," Gwen said uncomfortably.

She kept squirming and her eyes darting about, checking no one could hear them. They were out in the open on flat ground. In short, there was nowhere for anybody to hide, so not bloody likely.

Arthur was completely thrown, "You think Morgana prefers women to men?"

Why on earth would she think that!

"No!" Gwen was quick to correct herself, "I didn't mean to imply that."

She knows something.

"You know Morgana as well as anyone," Arthur realized he might be able to get the conformation
he so desperately wanted that didn't make his whole future rest on the honesty of a nine-year-old sorcerer.

Gwen looked nervous, "Yes, Sire?"

"Has Morgana ever… confided in you about… relations, her feelings towards… anyone, romantically? How she felt towards my father?"

Gwen didn't want to answer the question. Gwen's eyes became large. She thought for a long time.

"Morgana is very private about those kinds of feelings," Gwen measured every word, "She has never told me of her feelings for anyone."

Gwen was shaking, and wouldn't make eye contact.

*There's a lie in there.*

"Have you ever noticed…" *Signs of rape? How can I ask this? "Morgana being afraid of anyone, or seen signs that anyone had mistreated her?"

Arthur felt impatient, tapping his fingers on the ground as he watched Gwen. He saw her remember something, then look scared, as if she were trying to push the thoughts away.

"Please," Was all he said.

Her eyes conveyed fear, "I think something happened that day, right after my father died, when the king took Morgana to visit her Father's grave," Her voice trailed off, "I know they were attacked by Tauren and his men…"

Arthur encouraged her to continue.

Gwen was struggling to find the words, "Her dress, it was ripped and had blood on it."

"Well, they were attacked," Arthur responded.

"Morgana had no visible injuries," Gwen insisted, "But there was blood…"

"The blood was what?" He didn't mean to pressure her, but he wanted a straight answer.

"On the back of her dress, low down…" Gwen was too uncomfortable to continue, "I love her, she wouldn't want me to tell you this," Gwen was terrified, and guilty, and begging him with her eyes not to make her say anymore.

Arthur held her gaze and spoke pointedly, "Do you think she was raped?"

Gwen froze, her large eyes staring at him, afraid, she nodded slowly, "She never spoke about that day with me, I asked Gaius to see her, but she sent him away."

Arthur was silent for a time. *It could have been Tauren or his men.*

They remained there until almost sunset, silent. Arthur brooding and contemplative. Gwen, guilt-ridden, and anxious.

"Thank you, for your honesty and counsel, Guinevere," Was all Arthur finally managed to say before they headed for home.
Relief washed over her features. But she was still a little jumpy.

Arthur decided to make his afternoon rides with Gwen a daily occurrence. It was nice to get away from everything. She was so easy to talk to, and he didn't have to worry that she would tell others his private thoughts, or be weaving some secret plot, or only cared for him because of his position. She was a sturdy raft in a raging sea.

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Arthur confirmed Gwen's observations with Gaius. He said the dress implied rape, and that was what Gwen had suspected at the time. The old healer told him he had offered Morgana moon tea, but she had refused, and she wouldn't allow him to examine her. Arthur didn't know what moon tea was. Gaius had to enlighten him that women drank it to ensure they didn't get pregnant, if taken soon enough after relations. Or rape, Arthur realized. Arthur asked him the natural follow up question, to his knowledge had Morgana ever taken moon tea? The old healer said yes, in the half a year leading up to Morgana being abducted by Morgause, a few times.

You wanted to know for sure.

Tauren and his men were dead by then. Do you need it written in the stars.

Arthur couldn't remember much about the rest of the day after he spoke with Gaius. Except that he had called off knights training, and then decided to practice his swordplay on the wooden body target his knights used for practice. He took Excalibur, and he just begun to swing. The more jarring the contact, the better. He felt the vibrations all the way to his shoulder. He just kept slashing, imagining Uther's face.

How could you!

You raised her from when she was ten!

Disgrace!

I hate you!

I hate you!

I HATE you!

He must have stopped eventually, out of breath and unable to lift his arms any longer. The wooden torso was left a mere post, with timber shavings decorating the ground.

))))))

A shell of himself sat in court, held meetings and made decrees. But he was only ever half anywhere. He was still preoccupied, though he was trying his hardest not to be.

His brain kept going to the dark place. Where he would start to imagine what had happened. Then he would push it back down. Then he would curse his father's name and then he would have to suppress the urge to cry.

Nothing will ever make that right.

And then I rejected her through no fault of her own.
And left her pregnant.

And then he had to push the feelings down even further. It made him feel unsteady, he could be fine one second, and ready to go to water a moment later. It was unsettling. *I am high king now. The realm is relying on me to hold it together.* He tried to forget all about it. But he couldn't.

He couldn't sleep, thinking about Father forcing himself on her. About how disgraceful that behavior was. Seeing Morgana made him feel ashamed of Father. And regretful of his own behavior toward her. He obviously hadn't known what had gone on, but he hadn't protected her. She probably didn't feel she could come to him about it, the same as when Morgana discovered she had magic.

*If she had told me, would I have even believed her? Probably not. Not back then.*

Then he felt worse.

*Morgana's sorcerer boyfriend.*

*I was so insensitive!*

Then he felt mortified with himself.

At other times he would think worse thoughts, thoughts that ashamed him, like that Morgana might compare him to Father, their bodies, their way of… And then he really hated himself.

And finally, he was just horrified about all of it.

She obviously didn't want him to know. Would speaking about it, just make everything worse?

*This has been the truth the whole time you were with her, you just didn't know it.*

Arthur requested Mordred never speak of it again. That wasn't likely to be a problem, since the boy had become more brooding and quieter than usual.

Since returning from his hunt, Arthur's demeanor towards her was utterly changed. When he wasn't outright avoiding her. It was like he was afraid to look at her. There was shame in his eyes. *Why?* She didn't even cry anymore. An invisible grey cloud had settled over her and followed her everywhere. It told her to sleep and to hide, that there was no point to anything. She was in no state to disagree. Mordred said he didn't know what had happened either, and her son was spending so much time with Arthur. Morgause didn't push her. But her Golden Knight didn't want to give up on The Isle's prospects either. She wanted Morgana to help Caellan become more alluring to him.

*I can't do that. Not to her.*

Morgause was by nature action-oriented, wallowing wasn't her. She couldn't understand Morgana's position.

"It won't help," She said, frustrated that her lover refused to accept what she knew to be true.

"Morgana!" Morgause became exasperated, "Everyone is relying on us."

"His mind is made up," She responded, "Nothing you or I do now, will change anything."

"What?! How can that be?" It was beyond Morgause's comprehension, "A mere moment ago you were all he could think about."
"I don't know why everything has changed," Morgana was filled with resignation, "But it has."

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Arthur did the honest thing. He came to see her, with his news, soon after he'd made up his mind. She told him she already knew, she'd seen it weeks ago. If her words unsettled him, he said nothing. But all she really wanted was an explanation. She just needed to know why. But he wouldn't say anything, he just kept apologizing. And then he began to weep, uncontrollably. In all their time growing up together, Morgana had only seen Arthur cry when Uther died. *Something has gone very wrong, and he's too afraid to tell me.*

She continued to demand answers, his tears didn't soften this rejection. He just kept saying sorry. Which made her mad. Their brief talk in her chambers ended abruptly with Morgana screaming at Arthur to get out and her throwing hard objects at his retreating form.

*I've lost him.*

Every passing day, was one more day she needed to wed, before it became too obvious.

*Morgana needs a husband. But, how can I make her go unwillingly into another man's bed, especially now?*

Arthur told Agravaine that Morgana was pregnant and needed to have a marriage arranged for her quickly, and quietly to a trusted member of his court who would claim the child as their own. His adviser, ever diligent, came back to him a couple of days later with three suggestions.

"Sir Leon offered himself for Morgana," Agravaine said.

Leon was loyal and trustworthy, and blonde, like Arthur himself. He didn't hate that idea. *He is kind. If asked he would give her time... to adjust.* Except that he liked the man and felt he would grow to hate whomever became her husband.

"Or Alvarr will happily wed her," Agravaine said before adding, "Though he isn't a knight, does that matter?"

Arthur shook his head. *That won't matter soon enough.*

Arthur hated that idea. *His and his mysterious, charming, sorcerer ways! I will hate him forever. I'll send him on a suicide mission just to be rid of him.*

*How can you even think something like that!*

He felt ashamed.

"Or... I offer myself," His adviser said plainly.

That caught Arthur by surprise, "You?"

"I'm widowed for years now," Agravaine said, "I keep a... common woman I'm very happy with..."

Arthur didn't understand.

"A concubine, Arthur," Agravaine was embarrassed, "I need not require Morgana to perform... wifely duties for me," His adviser paused to let the meaning of his words be fully comprehended.
Arthur was quite shocked. He had never imagined someone as refined as Agravaine would... *It's more dignified than what Father was doing!* *Who are you to judge anyone else's morality?*

Agravaine saw none of Arthur's internal struggle.

"I could do this for perception purposes, she would be here at court and close if you ever wanted to..." He stopped himself clearly remembering how Arthur had bristled at the suggestion of romantic love between them.

Arthur liked that idea more than he was willing to admit.

His adviser was still making his case, "I already have three grown sons, I'll happily claim her child as my own."

That was especially true if the child looked like Arthur whom had a strong DuBois family resemblance. *Morgana will be close forever.*

He suggested Agravaine go make the same offer directly to her. Morgana would appreciate it more if it didn't appear that they had decided her life without her.

Perhaps Ninianne had the same vision Morgana had had because the High Priestess arrived back in Camelot a day after Agravaine had offered to marry her. She scolded Morgana for not taking better care of herself, and quickly set about forcing her into a strict routine, of daily rides with Morgause, Alvarr or Mordred, and regular Isle-style stews to keep up her strength. Morgana hated it, but she didn't have the energy it would take to defy The Lady of the Lake.

Despite everything else, early pregnancy had done wonders for her figure, her bust was full and her waist smaller than ever, but she was right at the point now at which her belly would start to swell slowly from here on out.

She told Ninianne it was her intention to accept Agravaine's offer of marriage, explaining that she wouldn't have to do anything, and that she believed Arthur would also prefer this situation. Ninianne thought on it a long time, finally coming back with a counteroffer. It was just the three of them speaking in Morgana's chambers on a sunny morning.

"Seers are rare Morgana," Ninianne instructed, "I would have you wed one of The Isle."

Morgana grimaced, "Ninay, since when do we care for such ceremony as the Christians? We don't wed."

"We don't," Ninianne acknowledged her words, "But I want you at court, so we must... do as the Roman's do, so to speak." Her mentor explained, "I couldn't care less about Christian marriage in of itself, Morgana, I want you to have many magical children."

Morgana checked Morgause for a reaction, she clearly didn't want Morgana to wed any man.

Morgana was taken aback by the notion, "Arthur will hate that, he'd prefer I remain unwed and at court."

But she couldn't be at court pregnant and unwed. But she knew her assessment of Arthur was correct. Just because he couldn't have her, didn't mean he wanted anyone else to either. He would know that was childish and possessive, *but it is what it is.* Which was why he would prefer her to accept Agravaine's offer.
"A bit of jealousy, might do our noble king some good," Ninianne observed.

"Besides," Morgana was dismissive, "Magic doesn't work that way, you can't predict who will and won't have it. Neither of my parents had magic."

Morgause took a deep breath, "Ninianne wants you to wed Alvarr."

"What?" Morgana was shocked, searching the High Priestess' face for the truth of it.

Ninianne nodded, "Think on it. He will serve you well."

The Lady of the Lake left them alone to contemplate her will.

Morgana was still stunned, "Does she not know about him and Caellan?"

"She does, but you are stronger in magic," Morgause explained.

"That's ridiculous. I won't," Morgana felt annoyed, crossing her arms, "Caellan's my dear friend and her grandchild, Ninianne should at least talk to her before trying to meddle in such things."

Morgause smirked, clearly in agreement, "Caellan doesn't want children, we all know that."

*That was certainly true. Neither of them did. It was one of the only things that made their relationship make sense, since they were so different in every other way. Her, honest, dedicated to learning, but naive of people's darkness. Him wild, passionate, charming and elusive.*

"You… at court, married, but not really…" Morgause smirked again, "That sounds good to me."

It was the most they had flirted since the night Arthur almost caught them in bed together. Small as it was, it was a sign that she cared. Morgana had no doubt their feelings for one another would endure, but it was nice to be reminded all the same. She felt her tears threatening to fall yet again.

Morgause had made sure they spent little time alone since that night, and she didn't let her guard down anymore. Even on their rides, they talked, they shared, but only as sisters, as if Morgause could shut off everything else that had been between them. That's not to say she was happy, but she hid her pain better than Morgana could. Morgana just hurt. Every moment of every day, it emanated off her. She had lost both of them in one fell swoop.

It was a loss that was hard to come to terms with, she still saw both of them all the time and yet they were no longer. It felt like having her arm cut off. At least then she would have had a physical expression of her pain, something that was easy to understand and to see. The proximity to both of them was its own torture, like being chained up and watching everyone live their lives without you, while they slowly forget you.
Arthur had summoned all his under kings back to the castle at Camelot for the big announcement. *Announcements*. He was exceedingly nervous, Arthur couldn't sit still, he had been pacing and jumpy for days. Morgana had already told her, so she would need to feign her surprise. In truth, she was more than a little happy, not that she could let her Dark Queen see. This whole mess was going to work itself out, better than Morgause had dared hope.

All the noble and royal guests, the courtiers were left waiting in the Great Hall a long time. Hundreds of guests in all. All of Arthur's knights, and Alvarr and herself were left to stand at the double wooden doors leading to the Large Throne Room, to keep order as the crowd became increasingly restless. Finally, the stiff, oak doors creaked as the light streamed into the room and Arthur appeared. The high king was dressed in all his finery, his golden crown glistening on his head.

"Come, my honored guests," Arthur gestured, leading the guests inside.

There in the center of the throne room, was a large wooden round table. He'd had three carpenters working on it for the last half moon turn. It was a thing of beauty, made of heavy oak, polished, ornately carved with runes. Each piece a wedge that had been fitted together, forming a small circular space in the middle. It could seat about ten people easily, with chairs arranged around the outside.

"It has been a practice of the Old religion for a long time," Arthur began, "Not to have the ultimate rule of a single individual…"

The pews were also set up in the room, in rows, with an isle left down the middle leading up to the new table. Arthur walked around and sat at one of the places around the table, facing the benches, that were now filling with courtiers.

The silence of mouths in a crowded room, left only the shuffling of boots to echo off the stone floor.

Arthur continued his speech, "… but to discuss, among the wisest, those leading, those responsible for defense of the realm, to each put forward their ideas, to provide the king with counsel about the best course of action, and to make decisions based on the highest level of agreement."

Arthur explained, "A round table is the symbol of such rule, no place of authority, no throne for the king to sit above everyone else, a circle, has no high and no low places."

The high king stared out at the crowd, genuinely engaging them in his vision of the future, "Everyone is equal, and ruling together."

Morgause glanced at the kings and queen to gauge their reactions to Arthur's proposal. They all looked interested, if surprised by his notion.

"King Bayard, King Rodor, Queen Annis, King Alined, and King Olaf," He used each of their names and titles to demonstrate respect, "While I know you each have your lands that you will continue to rule," Arthur said to his kings and queen, "I wish each of you to supply an adviser to remain at Greater Camelot's court to help rule with me."

Arthur gestured to the table, and demonstrated his will by humbly seating himself at one of high backed, polished oak chairs, facing the crowd. The high king motioned for his under kings to sit
around the table with him. None moved immediately, as if still considering this new way. Morgana was first, sitting next to Arthur on his left. Agravaine slowly moved to sit at Arthur's other side. Gaius and Geoffrey of Monmouth, stood behind Arthur's Uncle, while Ninianne stood behind Morgana.

"You will always have my ear, and a say in all my decisions," Arthur spoke with kingly confidence, "My advisers will be free to speak to their ideas and I will listen before making decisions."

An excited buzzing went through the room. This was certainly a completely different way from the iron clad rule of kings, their divine right, bestowed by God.

Arthur sat at the table, no more prominent than anyone else as he continued to deliver his speech in front of the crowded room, now full, with nobles, courtiers and a few commons, sitting in rows at the wooden benches, looking on at this momentous occasion.

"I do not command, but cordially ask, each of you to join with me," Arthur said, his tone modest, "Together we can rule this land with fairness, and justice, peace and prosperity."

Cheering could be heard coming from the back of the room.

King Bayard was the first to stand, he took a few paces toward Arthur and held out his hand. Arthur gladly accepted and they shook on it. Clapping could be heard from the crowd of onlookers. Then Bayard took the seat next to Agravaine. Rodor sat at the next seat, Queen Innis next to him. Olaf came next, and finally in a rather bold move, King Alined very publicly and deliberately took a seat at the table, a symbolic gesture of Cumbria joining Greater Camelot whose significance was lost on no one. The last two seats that would have completed the circle coming back to Morgana were vacant, probably waiting for the final two kingdoms, Cenred and Odin, that remained outside of Arthur's high kingship, to join in their alliance.

That was the easy part, Morgause thought.

"To my royal and honorable guests, esteemed nobles," Arthur began his rehearsed speech, "I, King Arthur of Greater Camelot, summoned you here to announce a most happy event," He paused, apparently for dramatic effect, "I am to be wed."

A quiet murmur went through the room, no doubt speculation about which princess had won the heart of the King of Greater Camelot. Morgause watched Morgana. Her face gave nothing away. Arthur spoke loudly, "I am to wed Guinevere."

Sighs, gasps and whispers went through the audience.

Morgana remained impassive. Morgause was trying not to smile outwardly, but she couldn't help but be happy. Morgana had foreseen it weeks ago, her lover was obviously still crushed, but at least she wasn't blindsided. Arthur had told her himself, privately, a few days ago as well.

"No doubt," Arthur silenced the whispers, "Many of you are wondering, who is this Guinevere? And of what noble house does she come? Why have I not heard of her?"

Arthur didn't seem concerned about the mounting disquiet, "You haven't heard of Guinevere because she is of common birth, specifically she is the daughter of a blacksmith."

Stifled gasps and shocked utterances rumbled throughout the room.

Arthur didn't let it bother him, "I marry her not because she will bring me powerful alliances, with
strong armies, or riches, but because I love her."

Morgause could feel the tension in the room. It was her sworn duty to watch the king, but she had no illusions what her duty here really was.

This was when Arthur nodded to Gwen who was off to the side, not far from the round table, next to a group of Arthur's knights. Morgause was on the other side standing with the rest of Camelot's knights. Gwen was dressed in one of Morgana's white gowns. A wedding dress was being sewn for her day and night, but she had no clothes fitting of her new position, so Morgana's wardrobe was sufficing at present. Morgana mostly wore her black priestess robes anyhow. But not today.

Gwen blushed meekly, she smiled kindly at the audience, she took Arthur's extended hand, that he now held up for everyone to see his approval of her. Rodor fumed in his seat. Bayard's face pulled taut in anger. Alined seemed unphased, but he was the scheming type, so who knew what he really thought. Bethany cried silently next to him. Neither Mithian, nor Arya seemed as upset as might be expected at being passed over for a maid. The feelings of Arthur's under kings were offset somewhat by the prior announcement about how Arthur would rule. Clearly done deliberately to throw them a bone, before he disappointed their hopes.

*It is good for The Isle, excepting if he'd married one of us, of course.*

*Gwen is no zealot, she comes with no force to threaten The Pact. Arthur will have more need of The Isle's support if he continues to keep his under kings offside.*

Arthur continued his speech to this stunned crowd, "To celebrate this most joyous occasion a fortnight hence. There will be a Christian service in the morning, after which time there will be a great tourney to celebrate my marriage."

Arthur seemed so excited as he spoke, "My legacy as King of Greater Camelot shall be this; ability over birth."

Morgause couldn't help but be moved. Arthur was keeping his plots very close to the chest at present. Morgana didn't even know if his intent. Morgause felt a certain pride, Arthur was embracing the way of The Isle. She was herself, a child born under suspicion of being a bastard of adultery. Nowhere but The Isle would she have been able to rise and learn all that she had. To Vivienne she was eternally grateful. The Christians left children like her in nunneries to be forgotten.

"Presently, only those who are of noble blood may become knights," Arthur paused to let the next part of his speech sink in, "But what about the talented? The strong? The quick, the brave and the clever? Why should being born a peasant or a commoner preclude a man from the opportunity to better himself if he proves himself worthy?"

A rumble went through the room.

*This is a most serious break with tradition.*

Geoffrey of Monmouth came forth handing Arthur a scroll that he presented to the onlookers.

Arthur seemed oblivious to the discontent, "Which is why, I, King Arthur of Greater Camelot, sign this royal decree declaring that knighthood shall no longer be the preserve of the nobility alone, that commons and peasants will now have the opportunity to win knighthoods based on their talent and effort to better themselves," Arthur allowed for the room to hear those most groundbreaking statements, before he continued to explain.
Arthur sincerely connected with the people in the room, looking out and speaking as if to everyone personally, "This new way will begin at my wedding tourney, anyone may enter the lists, those who prove themselves worthy will be welcome to train beside my knights until they show the requisite skill and knightly morality."

*The common people will love you forever, Arthur.*

*But, not this audience.*

Arthur announced, "I will be knighting Morgause and Alvarr of The Isle of Mists on my wedding day."

*Really? That's news to me! The Church are going to excommunicate you, Arthur! But I thank you.*

The high king said, "Both have been training beside my knights and have proven…"

"Arrrrrrhhhhhhhhhhhh," A scream of guttural hatred rang out echoing off the walls, coming from just behind Morgause.

*Morgana.*

She immediately tried to pull her own sword, but her hand burned with cold and the blade was stuck. She didn't bother wondering what had happened, Morgause instantly lifted her hand to use magic.

It was Sir Aldro. He had drawn his sword and had sprinted past her, towards the large wooden table.

*Wind,* she thought. But nothing happened.

She grabbed the sword of the knight beside her, and was off before he could object.

"You did this!" He cried in a fit of anger.

Arthur grabbed Gwen beside him, and pushed her behind him for safety, while his hand moved to his sword belt, finding it empty. He hadn't thought to wear Excalibur to court today. He took a few steps back, using his chair as a barrier.

*Morgana is the intended target, not Guinevere.*

Morgana had been listening to Ninianne who was leaning over whispering something in her ear, which was why they were both caught unaware. Morgana raised a hand to use magic to stop the knight, Morgause saw the glint of gold flash in her lover's eyes, but nothing happened, yet again.

"Die witch!" Sir Aldro screamed, honing the point of his blade towards her chest.

Aldro was picking up speed as he ran, his sword was outstretched in front of him a yard from Morgana, who was desperately trying to flee, but had only at this time managed to push her chair out from under the table.

*No!*

Ninianne stepped in the path of Aldro's sword. The blade pierced her gut and slid in so far. It was very quiet, except for the scream of pain that escaped the High Priestess' lips. The sight was sickening as the steel came out the other side dripping with blood, the tip of the blade touching Morgana's breast.
Ninay!

Morgause, despite her slow start, was only a few steps behind, but too slow to prevent Ninianne's impaling. The Lady of the Lake was slumped in Morgana's lap now, Morgana was too shocked or scared to move, she covered her mouth and shrieked in horror at the blood pouring from her mentor's grievous wound.

I'm so sorry!

Sir Aldro hastily pulled his weapon out of the High Priestess taking a huge backswing, on an arc that could leave no illusion as to his intent, which was to behead Morgana. Her eyes became large with fear as she lifted her arm to shield her face.

Arthur had began to run forward now, realizing it was Morgana who needed protection, to stop his crazed knight, even though the king still had no weapon.

Morgana!

A collective gasping of breath of the shocked audience could be heard.

Before Sir Aldro could bring the sword down for the killing blow, Morgause ran him through with the blade in her hand, piercing him between the shoulder blades.

Die you retch!

For all the good it will do!

Ninianne is worth a 1000 of you!

His sword clanged loudly on the floor. His hands reflexively went to his chest, holding the steel tip that was sticking out his front. He tried weakly to pull it out, his mail was rapidly covering with blood. He screamed, as he fell forward to his knees before collapsing at Morgana's feet, covering Ninianne whom had slumped to the floor by then.

Morgana stood now, but she was still screeching in terror at the sight before her. Morgause stood before Arthur, heaving, blood dripping from Leon's blade that she had pulled from Aldro's chest, she felt the hatred course through her.

She yelled, "These are the men whom you call honorable knight!"

Arthur had the same shocked look on his face as Morgana, and couldn't take his eyes off the gruesome sight at Morgana's feet. He was jolted by her words. He looked at her with dismay and began to shake his head slowly, still too shocked to form a coherent thought.

The crowd were stunned, most remained seated, some had jumped to their feet at the threat of violence, but everyone was more or less paralyzed watching the grizzly events unfold.

The dying knight kept yelling abuse but stopping to gasp for breath, "She did this… that witch enchanted our king… we must stop her!"

Morgause wasn't done raging either "Is this what you think of The Pact!" She challenged Arthur's other knights.

The other knights seemed to have been slow to react, she was farther away than most, but was the only one to come to Morgana's defense. Alvarr was one the other side, blocked by the table. Those
same useless knights were now moving to surround Arthur and Guinevere.

Sir Aldro continued to wail, "She's making him do these things… spitting on his father's legacy…" He spat vitriol and blood, "Uther would die of shame… if… if he knew Arthur was marrying a maid on the say so of that lying, whore, witch!"

Gaius made a quick assessment that there was nothing to be done for either wounded party. Morgana was crying and begging Ninianne to hold on, screaming for Morgause to fetch Caellan. Her Love was kneeling now, she couldn't take her eyes off Ninianne on the floor in front of her, who was gasping and turning an unnatural shade of white.

Morgana held her hand and reassured the dying High Priestess that they would use magic to save her. Ninianne managed to wrap a weak hand around her forearm, shaking her head.

Her voice was shaky, "Do not, child… the sacrifice is not worth it… you must rule after me."

Morgana knitted her brows, "It's not your time, don't leave me, I'm not ready."

Morgause was on the floor now, holding up Ninianne's chest and head. The Lady of the Lake saw her, the closest thing she'd had to a mother since Vivienne had left The Isle to wed Gorlois when she was five years old.

Morgause was too distraught to say much, she raged, "Mother, we must save you."

"You cannot," Ninianne insisted her gaze fixing on Morgause, "You know the price… and you are both needed for what is to come."

Ninianne began to spit blood, she said some unintelligible words. Morgause leaned with her ear to her mentor's lips. And Ninianne whispered her last message.

*Four words.*

*Four words that changed everything.*

*Ninay, how could you know?*

*She hadn't given it a thought in years!*

Morgause was dazed. She nodded her understanding to her mentor. Ninianne, whom had been holding on to pass on her last pieces of crucial knowledge or foresight, now let herself go. She fell unconscious and didn't wake up. Ninianne was so powerful in every sense of the word. A fierce leader, capable of making hard choices, wise, clever, one of a kind. To think her life could just be taken… Hatred welled within her.

*How dare they!*

Morgana's sobbing filled the hall. Alvarr stood next to her, sword drawn, ready to defend them if need be.

Sir Aldro was bone pale now, his lips blue, and huffing and shivering as his life's blood drained away, "Knighthoods are for the noble and Godly…" He gasped, his mail and the floor covered with red, "You knight savages… they are not fit… to serve beside me!"

His voice was getting quiet now, it would not be long, "You mock God!"

*Is this the justice we can expect in Greater Camelot?*
Aldro screamed, "And, I'd do it again!"

*How dare they kill our leader!*

*This is the behavior of the nobility! And they dare call us savages!*

For a moment Morgause wanted to believe there really was hell, the way the Christians conceived of it, just so Sir Aldro could burn for all eternity.
The destiny of uncertainty

Arthur tried to maintain order. He commanded Sir Leon and Alvarr to take Gwen back to her chambers and keep her safe. Alvarr was hesitant to leave, understandably fearing for those of The Isle. Arthur then procured a sword off Sir Ector, and stood over Morgana's weeping form himself. He literally didn't trust anyone else to protect her right now.

Morgana.

His heart couldn't stop pounding.

She almost died. Because of me, and my disloyal knight.

She was holding Ninianne's pale, lifeless body in her arms now and sobbing. And Morgause was holding her, her face pure rage.

Sir Balden, who was a sensible sort of man, told the guests at court, that the session was over, and they needed to leave via the back doors. Most were in a hurry to do just that. Others continued to gawk at the abysmal sight before them.

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Gwen was pacing in her temporary chambers. Her eyes were red rimmed.

Arthur stood at the door, just watching her momentarily. Why can't everyone be as kind and trustworthy as you, Gwen?

Her eyes met his across the room, she ran to him, "It was so awful, poor Morgana, and Morgause… I can't imagine what they are feeling right now."

She pulled him into a hug of worry.

"You shouldn't marry me. Your kingdom could collapse."

"I'm marrying you," Arthur reaffirmed.

Gwen wept at the horror of it all while he held her close.

Despite the present chaos, it made him remember back, to the picnic they had gone on only a fortnight ago. So much had happened since then. Arthur had the cooks prepare a lunch, he put a fur on the ground for them to sit on. And they ate hard bread and cheese, and cold roasted pheasant, and Arthur supplied wine from his own skin. Gwen seemed so happy just to be alone with him.

Gwen didn't know he was seriously considering her at the time. She just thought he wanted company on his rides. Every day he asked her more about her childhood, her hopes for the future, what she would like to see happen in Greater Camelot. She spoke fondly of her brother, and her father. Her hopes were mostly that the lands remain peaceful and prosperous. That Morgana would find happiness. That Arthur would find a queen worthy of him, and that they be happy and have many healthy children. Of her life all she said was that she liked being a maid in the castle, and that even if Morgana preferred to be waited on by Caellan, that she wished they still find some duties for her. Gwen was stunned to be asked her opinion on ruling and deferred to him about what was best.
"You are more than just a maid, Guinevere," Arthur reminded her, "What about yourself, you said you wanted Morgana and I to be happy, what about you?"

Gwen smiled politely, "I am happy, how many maids get to escort the High King of Greater Camelot on his rides?"

He smiled back, "Do you wish to marry?"

Gwen was surprised, then made self-conscious by the question.

She kept her focus in the ground as she spoke, "I don't expect to."

"Why not?"

A dejected longing crossed her face before her eyes averted. Gwen looked absently out towards the horizon.

She seemed far away as she said, "Call me a dreamer, but I will only wed for love, and the person I love… well, we can't be together."

He'd never heard her mention anyone, he had always felt she fancied him, a least a little, more so since they had kissed during that jousting tourney in her humble abode. *Maybe she does mean me.*

"So, who is this man that you fancy?" Arthur asked playfully.

"It doesn't matter," She smiled sadly, still not making eye contact.

Arthur reached out, to hold her fidgeting hands steady, as he leaned in and kissed her. Just the faintest brushing of lips. Her eyes fluttered closed. She was warm, and damp, and so soft. She blushed heavily now, stealing glances at him, as he resumed his former position. She was shocked but flattered by it all.

"You're very beautiful," He commented.

Gwen's light brown cheek turned a healthy shade of crimson, a grin broke out.

"You did mean me, right?" Arthur was still being good-humored, but still a little unsure.

Gwen's pretty dark eyes stared back at him, full of love, and he knew. He sought her lips again. This time she reciprocated merrily, and the kiss became less innocent, more lustful. But Gwen was still shy and hesitant, she had never done this before, he was sure. There was nothing to stop them, so they spent an afternoon in one another's arms. He made no greater attempt to touch her body. He would never lose himself to the sin of the flesh again, not without being married. She laid between his arms, against his chest, staring out at the sun almost ready to set. He let his chin rest on her shoulder, staring out at the same peaceful sight.

Gwen asked, "Do you remember when we kissed in Morgana's chambers."

Arthur was confused. They'd only kissed once, when he was pretending to be Sir William of Dareah.

Gwen got a dreamy look in her eye as she recalled it, "Do you remember what you said?" She eyed him as she spoke, joy in her features, "That you had made an excuse to come to Morgana's chambers because you wanted to be around me."

Arthur had no idea what she was talking about, but Gwen blushed sweetly as she recalled it.
"I was embarrassed and so I said, 'I'm a maid', and then you replied, 'why should it matter, when I'm king, I can change the rules',' Her kind eyes focused on his, full of love, "I never dared hope that you really meant it."

She seems so happy. But, I really don't remember saying that or the kiss. Gwen wouldn't lie. Could she be mistaken?

He decided it didn't really matter. He kissed her again, and recommended they ride back very slowly.

He proposed the next day, on another picnic but now they were on the banks of Avalon Lake. He offered Gwen flowers he had picked. Well, asked Argyle to pick, but still. Gwen still could hardly believe her ears.

"But, you're the high king, you have to marry a princess," Was all Gwen in her stunned state could manage to say.

His vulnerability had shone through for a moment, "Don't you want to marry me?"

Gwen was flabbergasted, "Yes, of course, Arthur, yes!"

He was so relieved. They had kissed some more.

For a mere moment, he recalled a similar proposal and a tent in Cornwall. It seemed a lifetime ago now. There is no point in dwelling on what cannot be.

That had been the moment he started to be able to imagine how his life would unfold. Gwen would be his high queen, Morgana his adviser, he would rule wisely and the commons would love him.

Arthur returned to the present moment, with Gwen weeping, her hot breath on his ear. He did his best to reassure her. He would need protection with her at all times. And Morgana. That's what knights are supposed to be for.

Arthur stopped long enough to realize he was shaking.

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It was nearly midnight when Arthur was finally free of pressing matters, and able to visit Morgana's chambers. The candles were lit. Caellan was crying in Alvarr's arms, Morgause lay in Morgana's arms on the bed, and Morgana was attempting to soothe her. Morgana was still wearing her white gown, covered with dark, dried blood.

It was supposed to be her wedding day.

Morgause looked up, somewhere between overcome with sadness, and searing mad. Morgana's face told him this wasn't the right time to discuss the future stability of The Pact.

What can I possibly say? I can offer them nothing for their grief.

You can ensure none of your knights ever behave so dishonorably ever again.

"I'm so sorry," Was all Arthur managed in the end.

The fact that the Islers hadn't stormed off in anger screaming bloody vengeance meant they didn't hold Arthur personally responsible. He could reason with them, they were all decent people. It was his own ranks he felt ashamed of.
Aldro has always been loyal. He followed every order Father ever gave him. Arthur had never questioned that he need be concerned by his conduct. Aldro was of an old noble family, in very good standing, they were themselves once kings or perhaps it was more warlords back then. He was in agreement with Uther where sorcery was concerned, and was traditional, but Arthur always knew that the oath to the king that knights pledged prevented them taking their political convictions too far. In recent times, Aldro had become quiet, he certainly made no effort to acknowledge Morgause or Alvarr but Arthur believed once the sorcerers had both proven themselves apt fighters, that his knights would see what he did. Like Sir Hilden, whom had been honest about his doubts and had been reassured by Arthur.

Arthur looked at the faces of his knights. Which ones are trustworthy? He didn't know now.

Arthur couldn't remember his father ever having this problem with a knight before. Have I strayed from the Knight's Code? Christian morality doesn't have to be the preserve of Christians alone. And surely the first rule is to obey your king.

But I didn't. Towards the end, I disobeyed Father, because I knew he was wrong.

It's not the same! My actions were for peace, and forgiveness, Sir Aldro's actions were for more hate and war.

Arthur paced in his chambers, Agravaine was his only counsel.

He blamed himself, "I should have made all of my knights aware of my intention, and had each and every one of them swear me a new oath of loyalty, including that they would uphold the rights of magical people."

Agravaine nodded gravely, "Might Aldro have done what he did anyway?" His uncle wondered aloud, "If he bore such... ill will toward Morgana?"

"A man like Sir Aldro, would have refused to make such an oath," Arthur was only just starting to understand it now, "And then I would have known to release him from my service."

Agravaine wasn't reassured, "Are there others, knights, who think as he did?"

"I will have to find out," Arthur said.

He felt the weight of all of it, pressing on him. He laid his head in his hands as he finally allowed himself to sit on his bed, "What of the other kings? And the princesses?"

Agravaine informed him, "Rodor is most displeased, but Bayard will accept your decision, though he still wants to marry Morgana, and King Alined... who knows?"

"It'll be okay?" Arthur looked to his older companion for guidance.

"I surely hope so," His adviser stated, "In future, you should run such plans by me, I know I didn't agree with your decision to wed Guinevere, and I certainly don't wish to... revisit that argument," Uncle managed to say stiffly.

Neither do I.
Agravaine had nearly birthed a litter of puppies he was so overcome that the High King of Greater Camelot was going to wed a blacksmith's daughter, a blacksmith executed as a traitor no less, for all the world to see. The very thought of it was abhorrent to him.

"You are slapping your new vassals, your under kings, in the face," Uncle said sternly, "To pass over old Roman families, princesses of high birth and good character for a common maid."

"And allowing the commons to become knights…” Agravaine shook his head, "You turn the very foundation of Roman society upside down, how are we going to keep order if every stable boy and farmer's whelp thinks himself the equal of the nobility, Sire?"

"The nobles are the few," Arthur stated, "This is about giving hope to the many."

Agravaine shrugged, unconvinced, "But I doubt any commons and peasants will prove themselves the equal of the sons of royalty."

*We'll see about that!*

Agravaine moved to leave, but stopped in the doorway, "I fear what happened in the throne room…” The older man waited until he had Arthur's full attention, "…might become a common occurrence."

Arthur knitted his brow, clearly not understanding.

His adviser explained himself, "Perhaps Sir Aldro thought himself the equal of his king… that he knew better than you, Sire," He chose his next words carefully, "Why should he obey you?"

"Because I'm his king and he swore me an oath of loyalty," Arthur replied, before realizing the contradiction.

"But, if we are all equal," Uncle warned, "The distinction between king and stable boy, doesn't exist. Your power rests on the people believing in your divine right to rule them, without it, what's to stop anarchy?"

Those last words unsettled him.

The courtiers were already beginning to make their announcements around Camelot about Arthur's intended marriage and the decree on knighthood and wedding tourney. The responses they were getting were overwhelmingly positive. The commons and peasants were ecstatic, at even the hope that they might one day rise above their poverty and daily grind, or that someone they knew would, held such appeal. Arthur was already popular, but since that day, he became something else. The hero on a mass scale, beloved of the people everywhere. If nobles were thinking about rebelling over the news, they would have no recourse, no peasant or common would lift a finger against their God, King Arthur.

Merlin suspected Arthur didn't want to let the nobility in on his new way until it was decreed and done. But he probably wished now, that he had. It is always so clear in hindsight. The Islers left for a few days, escorting the High Priestess' body back to their island on Avalon Lake.

Merlin returned to the Crystal Cave. His mind hadn't stopped spinning since Arthur's wedding announcement, the round table and Ninianne…

Taliesin said that Morgause was a threat to Arthur, *but how could that have been?*
Merlin had never left Camelot. He only pretended to. He had perfected an aging spell. Gaius had helped him to re-invent himself as the new physician's assistant. No one suspected the dodderly old man, in the plain robe, with the long white beard of anything. Except for a few comments to Gaius that perhaps he should be training an assistant who was... likely to outlive him, 'Rhys' went unnoticed. But being an old man with no official business at some events, had limitations. That's why Merlin had also learned a reverse aging spell. He could make himself look eighty, and when it suited him, he became an eight year-old boy. He pretended to be Emmett, Rhys' grandson. No one had realized they were never in the same room at once. Merlin had managed to be a serving boy during the ball. At every conceivable time Arthur might have contact with Morgause, Merlin was there watching, ready to protect his king.

The risk of discovery was great, especially from The Isle. Merlin absently fingered the medallion at his wrist, he'd journeyed far and risked much to gain the charm that repelled other's magic. Merlin was sure it was the only reason Mordred had not discovered him. Gaius wore a matching talisman, since he was the only other person who knew the truth. All his best laid plans were for nigh if the boy knew what he was up to.

Merlin had been on edge every time he sat in court since he had visited the Crystal Cave. But every time, it was never quite right, not what he'd seen in that vision. And then... that day, he began to wonder, there was no round table in the vision he saw, the thrones he had seen in the crystal were gone now... had the future changed? Had whatever horrible fate been prevented? That day, Morgause was dressed how he'd seen her, but Morgana was in white, with her hair tied up. Merlin had actually begun to relax, until...

The more Arthur spoke of his new way, of elevating the commons, of his impending marriage to Gwen, the more the hostility of the nobles in the room grew. Merlin could feel it, but he was really only watching Morgause.

He'd sat in one of the rows of pews towards the front, not far from the new wooden round table and kings. He had seen Morgause edge closer to Arthur, subtly. Arthur wore his crown, and was dressed the way he had seen in the crystal.

The more he went over events, the more Merlin was convinced that his foreknowledge was the only reason Ninianne was dead. Morgause had been very quick to respond to the danger posed by Sir Aldro. Had Ninianne not assumed she was instigating violence, rather than defending someone else, with Arthur's interests at heart, Merlin would not have frozen her sword to its sheath, she probably would have stopped the knight before he even got to Morgana. And Ninianne wouldn't have needed to sacrifice herself. Aldro might have died, but most certainly no one else. And if Merlin hadn't prevented her from using magic, Morgause would have stopped him that way, or Morgana herself, as she had tried to do. Every which way he thought about it, it seemed to Merlin that rather than no one dying or just the hateful knight, that his actions had caused the High Priestess' death.

'Ninianne would skin her own child if she saw a gain in it for The Isle', Merlin recalled Taliesin saying last time, before adding that calmer, less fanatical heads needed to prevail within the leadership of The Isle of Mists.

He used me to remove Ninianne.

Morgause posed no threat to Arthur. Even in her anger at Ninianne's death, the most she did was yell.

The vision had been deceptive, only showing him a narrow view of what was really going on. The vision in the crystal had made Aldro appear to be defending Arthur when a crazed Morgause
stabbed him in the back, before holding a blood-drenched sword in front of Arthur, with the intent to kill the king.

Merlin made his way down the curving path towards the deep dark abyss where the crystals were, lighting his path as before.

"You lied to me," Merlin spoke petulantly to the rainbows of reflection hitting the walls, "You used me to murder Ninianne!"

"Emrys, you've got it all wrong," The withered old voice replied unfazed.

Merlin said, "You clearly didn't want her ruling."

Silence.

"You knew that would happen!" Merlin raged, the echo becoming unbearable within the cave as he raised his voice.

"I did," Taliesin conceded, "But you aren't seeing the whole picture."

"How so?" Merlin expressed his disbelief, feeling betrayed.

"If you hadn't intervened, Morgana would have died," Taliesin said plainly, calmly, "And the rage at her death would have led Morgause to kill Arthur in the heat of the moment," Taliesin spoke with a conviction that surprised Merlin, "Such was her rage at her lover's death, and blaming Arthur for the actions of his knight."

Merlin shook his head in disbelief, "Morgause would have cut Sir Aldro down before he even got to Morgana if I hadn't acted."

"That's not true Merlin," The old Seer was confident, "Without you, it turned out differently."

Something about that statement bothered him, but Merlin couldn't immediately articulate why, so he waited, expectant.

The wise old man explained, "Morgause pulled her own sword immediately, and Aldro saw her, which is why he threw his sword at Morgana. He knew his life was forfeit, but he was determined to take Morgana with him."

Merlin wasn't so sure now, "But Morgana would have used magic to deflect the sword."

Taliesin was ready for that question too, "Morgana heard him call 'witch' thinking Ninianne was in danger and pushed her mentor out of the way," Taliesin said, before agreeing, "Arthur thought Gwen was in danger and protected her, and Ninianne was about to stop the sword using magic but Morgana's shove caused her to miss her target, and Sir Aldro's sword went through Morgana's heart, and lodged in the wooden chair behind, pinning her as she died."

"And that caused Morgause to blame Arthur?" Merlin tried to clarify.

"It wasn't rational, but Morgause has never loved anyone as she loves Morgana," Taliesin explicated, "It was done, and Arthur was dead before anyone could do anything."

Merlin felt a tear run down his face.

"Then what happened?"
"Morgause was killed on the spot by Arthur's other knights, as were Ninianne and Alvarr. Widespread hatred of sorcery returned to the land, and Greater Camelot and Arthur's high kingship fell apart when Arthur died with no heir."

Merlin felt more hot tears stinging his eyes.

"You did a wonderful thing Merlin," Taliesin reassured him, "I know it doesn't feel that way, but it was."

"You said," Merlin tried to control his voice, it was hard to get the words out, "Last time, you said, the future and past are written like a book. Now you say I prevented an awful future?" Merlin tried to get all the swirling thoughts in his head straight, "Then it wasn't destined to happen, that was only one of many possibilities. Which is not prophecy at all."

The old sorcerer didn't miss a step, "I told you what I needed to tell you to get you to do what you were going to do," The voice replied.

"You lied!" Merlin returned, angry.

"I can only do what I will do and no more, Emrys," Came the repeated cryptic answer.

Merlin felt such frustration as he wanted to strike the old magician. But there was no way to reach him, he was just a glimpse in a refracted surface, barely more than a mirage.

Taliesin reassured him, "You saved Arthur, now he won't face another serious threat for a long time to come."

"How long?" Merlin asked.

"Not for a long time," Taliesin stated, "Mordred will save Arthur's life."

"Mordred?" It seemed strange to Merlin. The lying dragon told you to distrust the boy.

"This is the dawning of a new era of peace and prosperity, Emrys! Arthur is safe."

Merlin still had so many questions though.

"Why did it not look quite right?" Merlin wondered aloud, "Morgana was wearing white, her hair was up, they weren't sitting on the usual thrones, lots of details were wrong..."

"I showed you what I needed to show you in order for you to do as you would," Came the equally useless response.

Merlin wanted to scream, and force the elusive old man to answer him properly.

"Arthur is safe, and can now fulfill his destiny as champion of the people, thanks to you, Young Wizard," Taliesin softened, "You are proving your great destiny, Emrys!"
The tradition of death on The Isle was to send the body off in a small wooden boat, shaped like a fish in profile, full of straw and twigs, with the loved one laid out on top facing the sky. Once the boat was well out into the lake, the boat was lit on fire becoming a pyre. A flaming arrow sparked the blaze, and was wielded by a capable archer, usually a family member. Morgause, unsurprisingly, was bestowed the honor. The entire Isle were assembled, but it was silent and somber, which wasn't their way. Oftentimes, the elders would recall fond memories of the person passing between the veils. Not this time. Most were shocked and incensed by what had happened. There were no words. Bodies became ashes and dust, giving them to the earth, fire, wind and water. *That is the way of the Goddess*, Morgana reminded herself. Of course, Morgause didn't need more than a single bolt. Morgana held her afterwards as they watched Ninianne's flesh turn to ashes and be swallowed by the lake. They both still seared in their anger at the injustice of it all.

Immediately after the throne room, Morgana had receded to that feeling she had when she knew Uther might discover her secret any moment, that everyone was potentially someone who might want to hurt her. That Greater Camelot under Arthur wasn't so different from Camelot under Uther after all.

And then the guilt had set in. Morgana was alive, when one as powerful and wise and important to the cause as Ninianne was no longer on this plane. The trade of lives was completely inadequate. That day in the throne room had changed her, irreparably she feared. She felt a hardness within her, like her hatred had frozen solid in her chest. There was no comfort.

As her mentor and friend's body burned, a young bard with a beautiful voice sang an old song of the bravery of heroes long lost but never forgotten. Their deeds live on and inspire the future heroes. Ninianne was very fond of music, many people had recollected.

Morgana recalled the first time she met Ninianne. She was in the healer's house, with its low thatched roof, lying on a narrow bed that felt very hard to her. Her vision was blurred and she felt awful. Morgana had focused long enough to realize a grey-haired woman was standing still by her side.

"I've been waiting a long time to make your acquaintance," the older woman had said.

Morgana was too dazed to say anything.

"I'm your Great Aunt, Ninianne," She replied, "Have you heard of me, child?"

Morgana shook for no. She could barely remember her mother anymore, it seemed unrealistic that she'd know anything of her mother's family that she had never met. *Where am I anyway?* she had thought. And then she had remembered, the sleeping spell, the wine skin and Merlin holding her as she tried in vain to breathe, willing her sister to somehow save her.
She didn't need to ask the question, Ninianne was already answering her, "You are on The Isle of Mists."

Morgana shook her head, not understanding.

Ninianne looked annoyed for a moment, "Your mother is from here, have you never heard of this place?"

Morgana motioned 'no', again.

Ninianne's hand came under her chin, lifting Morgana's gaze to her cool blue stare, "Morgause tells me you have the sight."

Morgana wasn't sure how much she should say.

"Morgause saved your life Morgana, you are in no danger here," The kind woman reassured her, "We are ourselves, sorcerers."

Morgana tried to talk, realizing her throat was burning. The older woman held a skin of water to her lips. It hurt, but she drank.

Morgana tried to speak again, "Are we safe? Won't Uther come for you? Did the spell work…is he…"

Ninianne's face showed something Morgana couldn't place at the time, "It is Uther who must now worry that we are coming for him," She proclaimed proudly.

Morgana was too dazed to express any joy at the notion, since she was still not sure she wanted to trust this woman. *Had she and Morgause been caught? Was this a trick played by Uther to get her to confess her deliberate attempt to aid in his death?* She didn't know much. She wanted to see Morgause.

The woman in the animal furs, holding the wooden staff with a crystal handle smiled in a self-satisfied manner, "Morgana, I think you just might hold the key to changing the plight of magical people in Camelot."

Morgana had tried to pick the wineskin back up again to soothe her parched throat. She realized to her dismay that she was too weak to even raise her hand. She certainly hadn't felt like a force capable of doing anything for herself let alone anyone else. Ninianne obviously believed it so. Because she had taken Morgana under her wing as soon as she had recovered from Hemlock poisoning. Ninianne had helped her to come to terms with what Uther had done to her, what she was capable of, how she could use her strengths and abilities, and about the sight. What it meant, it's limitations, it's accuracy. And she had needed that so desperately. She was eternally grateful and indebted to Ninianne.

The High Priestess eventually admitted, that that wasn't actually the first time they had met. She had been the 'friend' that had delivered Morgana's mother's crescent moon necklace to her in the wake of her father's death. But Ninianne had glamoured herself as a woman of an age with Vivianne when she had come to Cornwall all those years ago now. She recalled it well, that Morgana had been dressed like a stable boy, sword on skinny hip.

Ninianne said, "You were only ten, so I didn't pay you much mind at the time, but you were full of rage as you said your father's death was Uther's fault."

"I thought it was just a child's frustration at a situation out of her control," She admitted, "Neither
of your parents had magic, and without meaning too, I'd assumed you wouldn't have the gift."

Morgana had been surprised by this story, but had remained quiet, to let Ninianne make her point, as she always did so poignantly.

"But my niece came to me in a dream not long after, and told me she believed Uther had left Gorlois in battle without reinforcements on purpose," The older woman had said.

"What else did she say," Morgana had been so curious to know anything of her mother.

"I asked her why he would do that, and she said 'Uther wants Morgana'," Ninianne replied flatly, "I had no idea what that meant at the time, he already had a healthy son and heir," Ninianne had shaken her head sadly, and looked away, "I fear I know all too well now."

Morgana had slunk away from Ninianne's words. She hadn't even told Morgause about Uther, not at that stage. It had made Morgana remember when Mordred had let her know he knew all her deep dark secrets too. You feel naked and ashamed. Ninianne had gently squeezed her wrist, to stop her from shying away.

"You are not to blame, Morgana, not for any of it," The High Priestess had spoken as if it was a command that Morgana must obey, before softening again, and becoming a grandmother figure, "I realized after that dream, that you might have the sight, I started to watch you more closely after that."

"Then you know what Camelot is like? Uther..." Morgana had trailed off, feeling incensed and panicked, "Why did you leave me there?"

Ninianne was unmoved, all she said was, "We all have our own paths to walk."

That had been little comfort to Morgana at the time, who found The Isle to be the sanctuary of her dreams, that she wished she'd known of sooner.

Morgana returned to the present. Had Ninianne foreseen Arthur's changing stance on magic? Well over a year ago? She resolved to make her life worth that sacrifice. She began to repeat the words; Ninianne was wise. Ninianne always knew what to do. Ninianne knowingly sacrificed herself for me. Make that sacrifice worth it. Lead wisely in her place.

It helped. Morgana seethed as the image of Ninianne pale and blood covered as the life drained out of her would come to her unbidden all the time. Maybe it's the life I carry that's important, the thought suddenly dawned on her, the future king with magic.

But how can this child be the future king now? After everything. )))

Morgause had been very initially distressed that her delay in acquiring a sword made Ninianne's death her fault. But she had come to suspect, as had Morgana, when they had talked it out together, that magic had been used against them in court that day. Morgana explained how she had put up her hand and thought, Wind, expecting to feel the jolt and see Aldro fly backwards from her. But he hadn't, for no reason Morgana could understand, suddenly she had no power. Morgause had felt her hand burn with cold when she had tried to pull her sword, but couldn't explain why. She had also tried magic, before resorting to Leon's sword.

Morgana had been told once by Ninianne that seers can never foretell their own demise. Morgana
had raged that she had had no warning. What good were her talents if they couldn't alert her to something so dire! With reflection Morgana suspected that the decision to attack her wasn't planned, but a fit of anger on the part of Aldro at the idea of Morgause and Alvarr being knighted and serving a blacksmith's daughter as queen. She believed the hate-filled knight had reached his boiling point and lashed out. Morgana's visions and dreams, she had always believed were warnings, but that she picked up on other people's consciousness, their thoughts and intentions, but split-second decisions rendered her talents useless. It troubled her none the less.

They both had nightmares. Morgana had been frozen in fear in that moment when the blade was about to pierce her chest, knowing there was nothing she could do. In that instant she knew she would die. Then she had watched in horror as that sword went through Ninianne's body. She had witnessed the life drain out of her mentor. The blade had even touched her gown where it had come out of her mentor's back. The blood, and her gasping for breath had been the worst. And that horrible man screaming 'I would do it again!'

Morgause said very little, her eyes were those of one who was tortured. Morgause was reliving that day every time she closed her eyes, over and over. Morgana did her best to help her sister through this dark time, but she felt so empty herself. The night of the send off, they had retreated to the quarters they had shared previously when they had lived on The Isle. They had fallen asleep in one another's arms.

Morgana was heavily pregnant and wearing a wedding gown, and for some reason standing hand in hand with Arthur in front of the round table before the huge crowd of people about to wed in a Christian ceremony presided over by a priest, Arthur was just putting the Queen's Crown on her head, when Aldro ran towards her, a sword already dripping with blood. Morgause was unable to move, watching on helplessly as the knight cut the growing babe right out of Morgana in front of everyone, but the babe, and then Morgana's bowls toppled onto the stone floor while she somehow remained standing. Aldro wasn't Aldro anymore, he was Uther, who was now bestowing upon Arthur that he had done him a favor, no good would have come of a witch's demon spawn born of incest. Arthur seemed strangely attentive to the advice. Ninianne ran over to object, and Uther lopped her head off and it rolled to Morgause's feet.

This was the point at which her lover awoke screaming and drenched in sweat. Morgana was convinced that she had experienced Morgause's nightmare alongside her sister.

Morgana held her tight, "I saw it too."

Morgause didn't talk about such things though. She didn't know how to put such vulnerability into words. Partially it was grief, and that they were at no risk of discovery, but Morgana had made the first move. A hug, that had turned into a kiss. A touch that was more sensual than pure comfort. They resumed relations, that night in the dark. Morgana felt so guilty knowing that Ninianne had forbidden what they were doing. It was a despicable action given their mentor's death. But the flesh was weak and it helped soothe some of the pain. The situation at Arthur's court had forced them both into abstinence, but the feelings had never gone away. Now, they lost all abandon.

The practicalities of the new situation took over. The Wise Council had extensively questioned those who were present in court that day; how it had come to happen? Most agreed The Pact must hold, even if what had transpired was disgraceful. The Isle's younger fighters were inclined to call for blood, while the elders tended to call to let it be.
In the coming days the discussion raged about whom would become the new Lady of the Lake. Morgause relayed that it was Ninianne's dying wish that Morgana replace her. But Morgana, compared everyone on the Wise Council, had very little experience. While all agreed she was magically gifted, and getting better all the time, they had years on her. Morgana had only lived on The Isle for a year, and didn't yet possess a proper understanding of the religion, let alone the role of the High Priestess. It would be a difficult path to convince the elders of her suitability.

Ceridwen was put forward as a suitable choice. She was nearly 70, had lived on The Isle her whole life. She had short dark hair, was very petite with sharp features. Ceridwen argued for a soft approach to The Pact. That sorcerers committing violence were to be stopped and turned in by The Isle, lest anything compromise The Pact. She wanted The Isle to lay low, and for Morgause and Alvarr to avoid Arthur's wedding tourney, and accept their new knighthoods meekly. She was for no response to Ninianne's death. A 'turn the other cheek approach', that channeled the very supposedly Christian values, and angered all those whom had been close to the High Priestess.

Caellan was too overcome initially to put forward a course of action, now she argued for forcing Arthur to show he was taking steps to purge his own ranks of disloyal knights. Alvarr in his rage that first night had wanted blood, he wanted them to depart for The Isle immediately, and had had to be talked into calming down. Morgana spoke now to the Wise Counsel very much as she had that first evening to the Islers. She was against such measures, saying that while she was no expert in magic yet, she was an expert on Arthur. He wasn't irrational and wouldn't hold them responsible for the actions of rogue individuals. Any more than they held would him personally responsible for Sir Aldro.

"That doesn't mean we give no response," Morgana warned pointedly, distinguishing her position from Ceridwen's, "I agree with Caellan, that we make demands that he root out the traitors in his midst."

Harwyn had raged, "The man was Arthur's sworn knight, he's high king! It's a disgrace!"

Many that had made up the fighting force that had killed Uther agreed with the man with the crow on his shoulder.

"Arthur already feels that," Morgana responded, "He's is disgraced by association. The wedding tourney is real though, open to everyone, The Isle could conceivably supply more knights to Arthur's court, we should send more of our most able."

Morgause spoke for her cause. Morgana's usefulness in the role couldn't be denied. The simple fact was, that Arthur loved her, and he listened to her. The future of The Pact mostly relied on Arthur's adherence to it, and Morgana was the guarantee. Ceridwen questioned Arthur's regard for her, citing that the high king wasn't marrying her, he was taking a Christian bride instead. It was a very raw wound that Ceridwen was picking at, and it made Morgana want to kill her with a look. Morgana had to take deep breaths and fought to keep her composure, before managing to say that despite Arthur's change of heart, his love for her was very real. She hoped to be convinced of her words, though the truth was she still wasn't sure what had happened and what he felt for her now. Ceridwen seemed to permanently be in disagreement with Ninianne's approach, and by extension those she mentored. There had been bad blood between them, but Morgana didn't know exactly what it was.

In the end a compromise was reached after days of raging debate among the Wise Counsel. Morgana would be the Lady of the Lake, but she would rule from Greater Camelot as Arthur's adviser, the day to day problems of The Isle would be presided over by Ceridwen and she would oversee religious events unless for some reason Morgana was on The Isle. Morgana was surprised,
but happy with the decision. Ceridwen, not so much, but she accepted what was offered all the same.
Morgana only arrived back from The Isle the day before his wedding. And everything was so hectic, Arthur only saw her in passing. She was wearing her dark priestess robes, which hid her belly well. He couldn't tell that she was pregnant, but he knew she would be showing soon. She looked different, somehow, more authoritative or something. She held a wooden staff with a crystal at the wide end that one holds onto. It was familiar somehow.

_It was Ninianne's._

He just wanted to reassure himself that she was safe, to relieve the panic that had festered inside him brought on by that day's events and had never subsided since. Arthur's very trust in those close to him had been slashed to pieces in an instant. He could live with her hating him for now, while she lived, he could still beg her forgiveness.

As he made his way to her chambers on the eve of his wedding, Arthur thought back to just over a fortnight ago when he came to tell Morgana he was marrying Guinevere. Morgana had looked so destroyed. Her eyes were red rimmed with dark circles beneath, and she had a resignation to her before he'd even begun speaking.

"I know," Was all she said, defeated, "I saw it, weeks ago."

"I'm sorry," Was all he said.

But, he wasn't apologizing for choosing Guinevere. He took both her hands in his, and squeezed. He felt too guilty to even make eye contact. _I'm sorry about what he did to you._

She stared at him heartbroken, "Arthur," Morgana's voice wobbled, "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I…" Arthur couldn't bear to tell her what he knew. _It will only hurt her more._ That's when he started to sob. He couldn't contain it anymore. All his feelings about what Mordred had told him about that day… learning it was true… _that Father was…_

"I'm so sorry," He cried.

What he wanted to say was; _I should have protected you better. I didn't know, please believe I didn't know._

"But why?" Morgana questioned him, her eyes searching his face for reason, "It's only five more turns until Samhain, that's nothing, your reign strengthens all the time, you can marry for love…"

Arthur couldn't help but continue to cry.

_Father, you've ruined everything! I hate you!_
Morgana wasn't appeased in the slightest.

And why would she be, you haven't given her an honest answer. She will blame herself.

"Why won't you look at me anymore?" Morgana was anguished.

That was what really made it hard.

It's not her fault, any of it, and yet I know I can't.

She reached a hand across the table, coming up under his chin in an attempt to lift his gaze. Arthur was startled by the contact, recoiling from her touch.

"I'm sorry," Was all he repeated.

Giving her an answer will help her move on.

I can't look upon you with desire anymore since I realized my Father... did that. I wish I was a stronger man who could not be affected by this knowledge. And I'm sorry that it feels like I'm punishing you for his actions. Please, please forgive me, one day.

"Your new kings don't want you to marry a sorcerer," She spat with venom.

Arthur was firm, "That's not it."

"Then what!" She had demanded, beginning to lose her temper.

There had been a short silence, before Morgana had screamed at him to get out. She had yelled that he was a weak coward who needed to stand on his own two feet. As Arthur had retreated to the door, he had been hit by a flying object, her tea cup that promptly shattered on the floor after making contact with his back. He then had heard the tea pot smash on the floor soon after.

"I hate you!" She yelled as he scurried away.

They hadn't spoken since. She had been ignoring him as they sat side by side at the round table for his big announcements. And then, she had almost died. Arthur had felt his stomach retch, in that long moment when he had realized that his knight was trying to kill Morgana. And that in his rush to protect Guinevere he had sacrificed her life, and couldn't protect her because he had stupidly not worn Excalibur to court that day! He had tried to throw himself in front of Morgana, but he was too far away by then. Then Ninianne... and Morgause's blade... and the rest was history.

He had been left shaken to his core. That someone he trusted could do that. That there was so much hatred towards magical people just bubbling below the surface. He felt in a constant state of panic, and a need to hold her, to ensure that she was safe. That evening, Morgause was sobbing in Morgana's arms when he came to see her. And the Islers had left early the next day escorting the High Priestess' body back to The Isle of Mists.

The memory of that day brought Arthur back to the present. And now, he'd had a fortnight to think of what to say, and yet he was still at a loss for words. Sir Leon and Alvarr were standing guard outside her chamber door. They stood aside when they saw their king. He was taking no chances with all these extra guests for the wedding and until he had a greater number of trustworthy knights. Morgana was sitting taking tea with Morgause.

He stood before the sisters very formally, "I make my vows tomorrow."
Of course she knows you're getting married tomorrow, it's all anyone has been talking about for a half moon turn!

Morgana looked at him with indifference. *Cold isn't her.*

Morgause bowed and left. Morgana didn't invite him to sit, so he walked over to the window, gazing upon the horizon.

"I," Everything he could think to say was completely inadequate, "I'm sorry things aren't different."

She no longer pleaded with him for a reason. She was stiff from holding in her feelings.

"I don't want your sympathy."

She stood. Even though her black priestess robes hid her body well, he caught the outline of her slightly swollen abdomen. She noticed him staring at her stomach.

"You're still not married," Arthur observed.

Morgana's mouth pulled taut. Arthur thought back to that horrible day in the throne room. After he had finished his wedding announcement, he was supposed to inform the court of Morgana's intended marriage to Agravaine and the ceremony was to take place then and there. Morgana was wearing white in court that day because it was to be her wedding gown, a tradition Agravaine had insisted upon, since Morgana had wanted to wear her dark robes. The priest had to be talked into letting a good Christian marry a priestess of the Old Ways. They hadn't wanted to wait any longer or her pregnancy would start to show.

"I am the High Priestess now," She announced, "I'm not going to marry."

Arthur couldn't hide his surprise, not that she was now the leader of the Old Religion, but that she would be so foolish.

"Morgana, you can't remain a king's adviser unless you are wed," He tried to reason with her, but he knew what one of her defiant moods looked like, and this is definitely one of them, "You're still pregnant."

"I'll leave," She remained headstrong, "I'll make an excuse and return to The Isle for half a year, when I return, I'll resume my duties as your adviser."

Arthur didn't like that plan at all. Despite all the ugliness of the past moon turn, Morgana was a glowing light sent from God to guide and protect him, he was sure of it. Her leaving him, even for a short time, made him nervous. Though he couldn't think about her that way anymore, his love for her was as eternal as the mountains and lakes and oceans. He was in awe of her. He only hoped the Gods wouldn't punish her for the sin of incest. *Please God, let the child be healthy,* he repeated his daily prayer.

"What's wrong with Agravaine's offer?" He retorted, "Nothing's changed."

"Arthur, I'm too far along, the whole castle whispers about us, no one is going to believe this is Agravaine's child, born a few months into my obviously fake marriage."

He countered, "So what, you disappear, so no one thinks there was a child at all."

"I would have thought you'd be glad at this solution," She said.
"Why?" He was utterly perplexed.

Morgana looked at him with disbelief and anger, "Gwen's not stupid, she'll figure it out! Aren't you worried about wrecking your marriage?"

_I hadn't thought about that at all, actually._

"Despite all the rumors about us being lovers," Morgana admitted, "Hardly anyone knows I'm pregnant, just you, and those of The Isle I trust."

Arthur remained uncomfortable, "That's still our child. Who will raise him or her, when you come back?"

Morgana stood firm, "The Isle is a collective, I'll find someone who'll pass the child off as their own."

Arthur was displeased. This way he wasn't going to know the child. _And don't you want to raise my child yourself? Do you only care about ruling?_ She must have seen it in his face, because her fury set in. She crossed her arms and he could feel that she was about to demand he leave.

"Since when do you care!"

He supposed he deserved that.

"I do care," He reminded her, "I know I… reacted to the pregnancy badly, but that doesn't mean I don't care about you, or our child."

She stared at him with an icy rage, before keeping her voice low and threatening, "No, we're just an abomination."

"Please," He begged her in a most un-kingly fashion, "Reconsider Agravaine, we could raise our child alongside my children with Gwen. Like cousins or siblings. I want to watch the child grow up."

Morgana smiled sadly, in a way that said she didn't think so.

A grin had crept onto his face though. Thinking about a future filled with children playing. For the briefest moment it made him remember that dream he had during his Kingmaking on The Isle. The sword fighting children he'd imagined he and Morgana would have in their future marriage, when everything was simple. How much had changed since then.

Arthur tried to banter in good-humor, "Except, we'll find a way to tell them they're related, so they don't accidentally fall in love."

But Morgana burst into tears again, covering her face with her hands. He held her. She finally let him.

"I'm so sorry about Ninianne," He whispered, "I will dismiss every knight who doesn't accept the new way, and surround you with the most loyal and best fighters Greater Camelot has to offer," He vowed to her.

Morgana just cried harder. He held her tighter to him.

Arthur continued to whisper, "I don't know what I would have done, if I had lost you."

She gripped him as she buried her face in his mailed shoulder. Morgana stopped crying after a
while, but she was still red and puffy and her nose was running. Her sad eyes looked at him, and before he knew it, she kissed him. He felt her lips on his. She expressed a passion and hunger for him, with just her mouth. Her touch in that way made him jerk away from her. Morgana looked so hurt, on the verge of tears again.

"Why?" She cried, "Please, just tell me what happened." She was pleading for some reason, to make sense of his sudden loss of lust for her, "What did I do?"

*I can't, I'm so sorry.*

Her anger reared again. She shoved him, hard.

"Coward!" She exclaimed.

Arthur was about to leave when he saw something cross her features, he couldn't place it except to say it unsettled him.

"Your making a big mistake," There was an heir of certainty to her words.

A doubt crept in, but he quickly shook it off. *You're just jealous.* But he had the good-sense not to say it aloud. Morgana stared through him as if she were reading his mind right now, and the corner of her mouth twisted up wickedly on one side, satisfied.

"Don't say you weren't warned," She called after him as he left.
Arthur didn't pray as much as might be expected of a good Christian and a king. He liked to only bother God when he felt it was important. He kneeled at his bed, the morning sunrise streaming in through his window, creating a more sanctified experience.

*Holy Father, I pray you give me the strength and guidance to stay true to my people and my word. To rule justly. And to honor my queen and marriage to the fullest of my ability. Please help Morgana to find the strength to forgive me, my weaknesses. Please help me to be a good man, a good husband and a good father.*

*Amen.*

He felt nervous, and jittery though. He didn't understand why. *All I have to do is say 'I do' when the priest tells me to, then kiss my bride and watch my wedding day tourney. Why the nerves?* … and the bedding.

But since he'd already done more bedding then he should have, Arthur didn't feel nervous in that duty either. *I have a pregnant sister to prove it,* he was reminded of his shame.

He had bathed. Then adorned his crown, and fanciest formal clothes. He always felt a little silly in them, but it couldn't be helped. Then he ensured Argyle still had the vows the priest wanted him to memorize before the service. *Of course he does! He was completely reliable, unlike a bumbling, former manservant who shall remain nameless!*

The Great Hall was full with guests of the royalty and nobility. The round table remained out the front, giving special importance to Arthur's under kings and advisers, whom occupied those places. Guinevere arrived, in white and veiled, holding white roses. The dress was intricately woven with pearls and diamonds and gold and lace.

*She looks beautiful. No kinder woman can be found in all my lands. A true soul who will be a wonderful mother. I thank you, Guinevere, for coming into my life. I am better for knowing you.*

The music played and the vows were spoken.

Arthur proudly proclaimed "I do."

Gwen smiled sweetly throughout, and happily said her 'I do'.

The priest went on for a very long time in Latin, a sermon Arthur suspected no one but the clergy understood. His own Latin was very poor. Finally, the very old man, in the very large cardinal's hat, that looked ready to slide off his feeble head at any moment declared them husband and wife, king and queen. Arthur watched proudly as the cardinal placed the crown that had been Igraine's, on Guinevere's head. It was three gold ribbons woven together with emeralds embedded between.

Arthur looked into her pretty dark eyes and smiled. *Today is the first day of the rest of our life*
He leaned over and met her lips, in what was a chaste kiss in front of a thousand people whom had been packed into the hall. It made him think back to that first kiss they had shared in Gwen's little house, during that tourney he had been determined to win fair and square by pretending to be a commoner. Her censure over his spoiled ways had made him examine himself. He was a better man for her honesty.

And finally the tourney, the first of its kind, open to all comers, would potentially provide a path to knighthood for the talented few. The concept was so popular with the people, that unprecedented numbers had entered the lists. The jousting was by its nature more exclusive because much training went into proper technique as not to kill oneself on the first pass. But Arthur had ensured there were other events to select for strength, and skill. The hammer throw, the archery contest, a skilled riding display, a melee on foot. Armor was provided for those who didn't have their own, and weapons too. Arthur's current knights were not permitted to enter. The winner of the jousting was guaranteed a knighthood by the end of the day, and the additional incentive of a kiss from the new Queen Guinevere.

The tourney grounds were overrun with commons as well. So many were willing to try their luck to win a potential knighthood. The Isle had sent the entire Wise Council, provided healers for the tourney and a few priestesses as well, much to the chagrin of the priests. Arthur credited The Isle for the lack of a single death, which was quite a feat, since there were so many men willing to try dangerous combat with little formal training. The Isle had their best ready for every foot that got stuck in a stirrup leaving the rider to bound along next to their galloping horse.

A magical doom, clear, but somehow solid, was produced by The Isle to enclose the archery, so no stray arrows killed anyone. That had been Caellan's idea, and she had thought through practically what needed to be done, and it was a relief. Archery was one of the easiest events to enter, which is why there were so many people entering the lists. Never had so many clueless and inexperienced archers whom had ever bent a bow tried their luck.

The archery was fortunate or unfortunate depending on where you were standing. A contestant, wrapped head to toe with linens had been the undisputed winner of every round. The commons had been guessing the true identity of the masked man. He had brilliant aim, out shooting every opponent with ease. Eventually, King Bayard had grabbed the archer by the arm and dragged him off before he'd had a chance to claim victory. Arthur had been informed later by Agravaine, that the contestant had been Arya, Bayard's wayward daughter.

"Good thing you didn't marry her, Sire!" His adviser had whispered, showing how scandalous he felt the whole affair was.

If you are put off by a woman thinking she is the equal of a man, then maybe you shouldn't marry Morgana! Was all Arthur immediately thought to his uncle's scoffing.

Uncle was less than pleased that Morgana had changed her mind regarding their marriage. But Agravaine was biting his tongue for now. He thought her decision to remain unwed was most unwise, and had pressured Arthur to force her to see sense. Arthur had decided long ago, he wouldn't compel Morgana to do anything in that regard, only encourage her. He told Agravaine as much, and Uncle just kept shaking his head.

"You're high king, Arthur. And you can't even make your ward obey you, how will you rule?"

"Morgana's not my ward," Arthur had said, deliberately ignoring the substantive point.
"When your father died, Morgana became your ward," His Uncle informed him.

He always was a master at all the rules of inheritance, land ownership and taxation. In short, all the topics that bored Arthur to tears. It seemed so strange to think of Morgana as being under his guardianship. Well Father's dying wish was for me to protect her.

The melee had suitably blunted weapons, and was fought with four lose teams, versing each other knock out style. The last standing team of ten was then pitted against one another, all against all, for a sole victor to remain. To everyone's surprise, a commoner known for hard drinking, womanizing and bar fights had won the melee. Gawaine was his name, he kept his brown hair long, face smooth shaven and had charming way about him. The women in the stands swooned over him.

A large man, named Percival, who came from a farm in Cenred's lands won the hammer throw. He had close cropped sandy hair and muscular arms, but had a gentle way about him. A man of few words.

To Arthur's surprise, the best rider was Gwen's brother, Elyan. With all the goings on, they hadn't managed to meet before the wedding. His face and features resembled Guinevere's. Elyan was perhaps shorter than Arthur might have imagined. Arthur was proud to get to shake his hand and formally invited his brother-in-law to train alongside his knights. Gwen was thrilled embracing him warmly in front of everyone. It had been some years since the siblings had been reunited.

The main event was always the jousting though. Over 50 people entered the jousting lists. The first round involved 26 bouts. The next, 12, down until there were four remaining champions, and only enough daylight for three more matches.

Two mystery knights made it to the final four. Both riding with no coat of arms, and leaving their visors down before and after every pass. Arthur was not surprised to learn that one was Morgause, she only revealed herself when she won an impressive victory over Rodor's son, a well-regarded knight of Nemeth. The commons had mixed reactions to her. Many knew of her reputation for sorcery, most simply saw a woman proving herself every bit as good as the men. Her bravery at defeating the rogue knight, Sir Aldro, had not won her as much praise as it should have. But Arthur certainly had found a lot more gratitude towards her since that wicked day. Some Camelot locals remembered her from her famous single combat against Arthur. Some booed and hissed that a woman should be allowed to enter. But at least there would be no question of Morgause's worthiness when Arthur knighted her at the end of the day. Alvarr made it to the final four, as did Bayard's youngest son, Myren, who was a knight in Mercia. And the last of the final four still did not reveal himself. The Mystery knight wore no sigil, had only plain, inexpensive armor, and was riding a very ill-tempered, but fast Destrier mare.

Morgause went on to defeat Sir Myren, and the Mystery Knight won a decision over Alvarr, with Arthur standing as judge, over whose blows were better struck. Putting them into the final match against one another. The final jousting bout was very exciting. Both champions were very serious, neither particularly trying to encourage the crowd to root for them. Each kicked their mount to a gallop, and slowly lowered their lance, as the distance between them closed.

On the first pass Morgause was nearly knocked off her horse, but rallied and kept her seat. The second time she shifted in her saddle at the last moment, so that her opponent's lance missed its target, and she knocked the Mystery Knight so hard he dropped his lance.

It all came down to the final tilt. The Mystery Knight sped up at the last moment, both lances exploded, both riders hit, but Morgause's saddle strap had the misfortune of breaking with the impact, and she was sent reeling from her seat. Arthur caught sight of Morgana for the first time
since the church service. He only knew where she was throughout the day, because Morgause was never more than a step away guarding her. Morgana now ran from the stands to ensure her sister was unharmed. Caellan was hard on her heels, but Morgause was able to walk back to the healer's tent unaided, to a respectable level of cheering.

The commons and nobles alike were very impressed with the skills shown by the stranger. Gossip abounded that it was really one of Arthur's knights in disguise, that it was Uther Pendragon himself, come again. The stranger finally revealed himself. It was Lancelot. He rode an additional lap around the tourney grounds, allowing the commons in the stands a good look at him. He waved to the crowds who cheered even harder for him. One of their own showing up all these highborns!

Arthur was all too happy to proclaim him champion. Lancelot very humbly accepted Arthur's praise, knelt and accepted the knighthood Arthur bestowed upon him. The dark haired, dark eyed commoner vowed to uphold the knight's code and very shyly kissed Gwen on the cheek. She blushed very sweetly.

Alvarr and Morgause were also knighted in the same sitting. There was a lot of silence and some jeering, reminding Arthur yet again of the long way still to go, after so much prejudice against sorcerer's for so long. The winners of all the other events would be invited to train with Arthur's knights, with an expectation of knighthood in time.

Next was the feast. It was the most extravagant party Albion had ever seen from the telling of it. Twenty courses of food. Free flowing drink of every kind. Entertainment. The dining hall was flooded with people, the mood was jovial.

Arthur and Gwen sat at the long table out the front, in the high place of honor overlooking the rest of the tables. His under kings and most esteemed advisers were the only other guests allowed to sit there. Gwen smiled, they held hands, fed each other morsels of food off each other's plates. It seemed impossible after all the other courses, but they ate wedding cake, baked superbly. Everyone needed a piece of him. Arthur constantly had to excuse himself and go shake a hand, or talk politics with a royal. It was a huge show.

Gwen looked regal. The lessons for the last moon turn had done wonders. She was not only learning to read and write to a standard that befit her new position but also, dancing, and etiquette as expected of any noble lady. Her confidence still let her down at times, but Gwen would grow into her role as queen.

Arthur and Gwen were given the stage to themselves for the first dance as king and queen. It was a slow waltz set to harps. Gwen must have remembered those lessons they both took for the last ball. She was very graceful, and he managed to look like he knew what he was doing. He held her close, and tried to block out everyone else for a moment, so it could feel like it really was just their day.

Arthur had assigned a four - guard tail of trustworthy knights to Morgana and Guinevere until all these strangers left. He would take no chances. Their safety was paramount. Arthur felt more at ease as the night went on. But, it may have been short lived. As is often the case, with free flowing wine and ale, comes free flowing emotions and the misplacement of manners.

Arthur caught sight of Bayard practically dragging Morgana onto the dance floor. She was annoyed, but tried not to show it. Arthur felt himself became frustrated. He had told Bayard nearly a moon turn ago that Morgana wasn't going to marry him. The old king had desired a better explanation and Arthur had only said to find someone else, she was unsuitable. The man seemed to think Morgana wouldn't have him because he was nearly 60. He wanted Arthur to make her take
him. Arthur had refused, but vowed to make him a very good match. He was considering Princess Bethany of Cumbria for the ruler of Mercia.

Agravaine, ever the fixer, let it go for a single dance, before asking Morgana to partner him for the next song. Bayard was unimpressed, but didn't cause a scene. Agravaine seemed to spend the entire dance talking to Morgana with her quietly nodding and shaking her head at times. She was still not going to marry Uncle, no matter his usefulness, Arthur was certain. Which reminded him that she was about to leave for half a year at least.

It was well past midnight when the new king and queen finally made it to Arthur's chambers.

"My Queen," Arthur said as he carried her into the room, placing Gwen gently onto the big bed.

"My King," She smiled shyly.

She lay still, too nervous to make a move. Arthur came and lay next to her. The exhaustion of the long day finally caught up to him. Arthur kissed her, delicately, just lips at first. Gwen responded. Gwen stood up and turned so that he could unlace her corset from behind. It fell to her ankles and she stepped out of it, covering her breasts with her hands. Arthur helped her out of her petticoat too. Gwen was so shy though, so she immediately got under the covers of the bed.

Arthur took his clothes off standing in front of his queen, who watched, sheet pulled up to her chin, closing her eyes once he took off his small clothes. Arthur came around the bed, and slipped under the covers. What will make it nice for her? Arthur resumed kissing, and Gwen reciprocated. Arthur's hands soon began to roam towards his wife's breasts. Gwen was too shy though, and tried to keep her arm across to cover herself.

"Guinevere," Arthur put on his fake stern voice, "Let me see,"

Far be it from Gwen not to obey her husband and king. But she lay flat with her eyes closed and didn't want to move either. It was hard not to compare the bodies of the only two women he'd ever been naked with. Gwen's nipples were larger and darker than Morgana's. Her bust and shoulders larger, where Morgana had more rounded hips and backside. He touched her nicely, hoping that what he'd learned from previous experience would be enjoyed by Gwen too. She showed neither pleasure nor displeasure. Arthur let his hand touch the inside of her thigh. Gwen was shocked and moved away.

"It will feel good," Arthur promised, "Just let me touch you."

Arthur found himself rushing because he wanted Gwen to start enjoying herself, so he went to her nub. She jolted at the contact, and then tied to lay still for him and spread her legs.

"Do you like that?"

"Yes, My King."

He inserted a finger. Gwen said nothing, it was like she was trying to play dead.

"Does that feel alright?"

"Yes, My King," Gwen responded with the same flat tone.

He touched himself. Gwen was closing her eyes again. He would have liked to have shown her the affect she had on his body. Arthur prepared her with his hand as best he could under the circumstances. He brought the head of his snake to her opening and gently pushed, then pulled
back. Gwen looked discomforted. But she didn't complain. Arthur felt sad though, he wanted her to like it. Then he remembered maidens often bleed the first time.

_Gentle._

Arthur continued to touch Gwen's delicate nub and pressed in again just a little bit farther. He was very controlled in his motions, not wanting to cause her any more distress than was absolutely necessary. Gwen had the air of someone resolved to endure the whole ordeal no matter what. He remained contained and did his best to help her through it. He took her hand in his, and whispered complements about how much he desired her. Arthur felt like he'd made love to a warm, dead body in the end. Her lack of enjoyment affected Arthur.

_Maybe I should have said we don't have to?_

_Maybe she's just really tired from everything?_

Arthur rolled on his side and pressed his body against Gwen's back, and put his arm around her and covered them both up. He kissed her neck and told her he loved her. Gwen said she loved him too. Arthur felt relieved. But, he couldn't help but feel disappointed with how the 'bedding' had gone.

_I'll show her how good it can feel, it will just take some time. The first time at the stream, I had no idea what I was doing either. Gwen's just scared._
Only death pays for life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The castle was still overrun with guests the next day. Many nobles and royalty were recovering from the excessive food and drink the day before. There was a formal late breakfast. Morgana was on the High Table but down the end, sitting with Caellan. Too far away for Arthur to talk to her. Morgana left before the end of the feast. Arthur found himself wanting to talk to her. But he knew he had to leave it. They shouldn't be seen together alone, not while there remained a few rumors about them. Arthur sat next to Gwen who was all happy smiles. He had kissed her in the morning, but had not tried for anything else. His wife seemed to want to pretend nothing had happened.

Over half of all the guests left after breakfast. Arthur and Gwen stood out the front where the carriages pulled up and thanked the kings and queen and other nobles for their attendance, gifts, and well wishes. It took until afternoon.

By evening Arthur was talking with his under kings’ advisers. Caellan begged an audience, saying she needed to speak with Arthur urgently.

Once they could speak privately the young woman looked very serious, "It's Morgana."

Arthur was immediately alarmed, "What's happened?"

His mind jumped straight to Morgana having been attacked by another guest who hated sorcerers. The solemn priestess' face implied that was not it, but it was something bad. Caellan led him to Morgana's chambers. Morgana was lying in her bed. Morgause was holding her hand. Alvarr was pacing in extreme agitation.

Then he saw the blood. Towels that first appeared red. Morgana was crying, great sobs.

_Our baby._

Arthur moved to the side of the bed, and knelt, taking Morgana's hand from her sister. Morgana looked so sad.

"I just started bleeding," Morgana struggled to suck in air to speak such was her pain.

Arthur placed a hand over her forehead. She was cold and wet with sweat. She was as pale as the dead. He wanted to cry, but he needed to be strong for her.

"I'm so sorry," He managed to say.

He got onto the bed so that he could better hold her. Caellan gestured to the others and they were left alone. Morgana was inconsolable. He didn't say much, _what was there to say?_ He kissed her brow.

He almost said, 'I'm glad you are okay', then stopped himself. _Morgana won't see it that way._

"I just… don't know what… why!?” She wailed, at the senselessness of it all.
Then she started to cry all over again.

Arthur was about to say 'you are young, you can have more…' And again had to stop himself. He'd vowed never to touch her again, and it was his baby that Morgana had wanted. He almost said, 'You still have Mordred,' That seemed very insensitive as well. So, he just held her.

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It was hours before Arthur turned in to his chambers. Gwen was in bed but had waited up for him.

"Is everything alright, My King?"

There were no words. None he could allow himself to say. He shook his head. Arthur didn't feel like having relations. But he couldn't even tell his wife why he was upset. Then it dawned on him, *this is a terrible way to start a marriage.*

Arthur lay awake that night haunted by his own demons. She had miscarried, even though Morgana's pregnancy was passed the most dangerous time for a miscarriage. Arthur couldn't help but feel a Christian God was punishing him for his transgressions. In thought certainly, he had tried not to sin once he found out about their relatedness, but he had failed. He had lost himself to sin the night of the ball, even though they didn't make love, and there had been numerous stolen kisses. He thought he might think it was for the best, because of their blood connection, but he had grown attached to the idea of that child, he and Morgana forever being bound in that way, seeing some version of them growing up. Now, Arthur grieved the loss of a dream he had had.

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Gwen slept in or pretended to be asleep the next morning. Arthur went to Morgana. Caellan was with her. He asked to be alone, and the solemn healer obliged silently. Morgana looked completely drained of all her energy, her will, her feelings. She didn't want him anywhere near her today. She remained in bed, Caellan had said she was too weak to travel.

"Why is that an issue?" Arthur asked absently.

"Because I want to go home," Morgana snapped.

*Where could she mean?*

"The Isle, Arthur," Morgana was impatient, "I want to go home."

Arthur was stunned, then he realized he didn't want her to go.

"But everyone you love is here," Arthur pointed out, Him, her son, her sister, she had no family left there.

"I need to get out of here," Morgana said forlornly, "Everything reminds me…"

Arthur felt anxious, "For how long?"

"I don't know," Morgana was dismayed, "A couple of moon turns maybe."

That seemed forever to Arthur.

"But I need you," Arthur reminded her, "You're my adviser."

"Caellan can advise you just fine, as can Morgause, or Alvarr, the whole Wise Counsel can stay at
court if you'd like," Morgana was exaggerating now.

Arthur tried to think of some compelling reason for her to stay, but came up empty.

"I'm in no shape to advise anyone about anything, Arthur," She reached out, surprising him, and squeezed his shoulder with her hand, "Let me go."

He nodded, there was nothing left to do. No matter what emotions Arthur had about the miscarriage, Morgana was feeling it more acutely. If she wanted time and space, he had to honor her wishes.

This part was easy. He knew what to do. He'd been training and leading men for so much of his life. He invited his knights, and those who had been invited to train alongside them into the throne room. It was empty now, most of the guests had left. The round table remained.

Arthur explained the new way of things. Any man or woman who couldn't accept the new way, was welcome to leave without any dishonor. But if they were staying to serve faithfully, then they would need to swear a new oath, part of which included upholding The Pact and rights of magical people to be magical, and the right of commons and peasants to become knights, and that they would defend Guinevere, Morgana and any of Arthur's esteemed advisers with their lives.

Arthur had made a similar speech when he announced the round table. He said he wanted men he could trust, who could serve, but also men who would feel free to put forward their ideas when it came to battle and strategy, and skill at arms. He didn't want men who simply nodded their heads at him. He wanted men who felt part of Greater Camelot and would be proud to die defending the freedom they enjoyed there.

One by one they knelt and took the new oath, and Arthur offered them a place at the round table. Needless to say, he was joined very spiritedly by each and every knight and potential knight, bar two. Sir Parvus and Sir Ector, elected to go. Both were from traditional Roman families, and both had served under Uther for years and had grievances with sorcery. Arthur felt safer for their honesty. He thanked them for their service, and breathed as sigh of relief as they left the hall.

Ale was served, and they raised their glasses and toasted to King Arthur and his knights of the round table. Arthur told them the story of how he acquired Excalibur from his Kingmaking on The Isle, leaving out the part where Mordred had to tell him what to do, and the part involving Morgana and that alter in front of everyone. He was fond of showing off that sword, there wouldn't have been a warrior alive who wouldn't envy such a fine blade. Since Arthur had shared, some of his newer, soon-to-be-knights all followed his example.

"All my life, I've always hated injustice, I root for the underdog even when I think there's no chance," Gawaine raised his cup, "But Arthur, My King, you make me a proud and loyal servant, because you are the champion of the common people, I feel no need to rebel against you."

They all drank to Gawaine's toast.

Elyan stood next, and began to explain his journey, "I am the son of a blacksmith, a man who died, falsely accused of treason. I have always secretly wanted to be a knight." He began, his dark eyes speaking directly to Arthur, "That was only a dream until recently, when King Arthur, chose to make my sister, a commoner, his queen, and give me hope that my dreams didn't have to be just fantasy, no other king but Arthur would do that," Elyan raised his chalice to toast Arthur, "To King Arthur."
"I have always been strong, much stronger than most," Perceval now towered over Elyan as he too spoke of his feelings about his sudden elevation. "But had given up hope of ever doing more with my arms than dragging sheep that needed shearing and tossing bales of hay, thank you Sire, for changing my life."

It was the most words Perceval had spoken the entire time he'd been at court.

"I was born under suspicion of being a bastard," Sir Morgause said, "If not for The Isle I would never have learned what I have, and been allowed to pick up a sword, and have my magical abilities nurtured, but I never would have thought I would experience that kind of freedom, as a woman, and a sorcerer, anywhere but The Isle, thank you Arthur, for changing the rules."

Arthur didn't know that of Morgause. He had thought her the true born daughter of Gorlois and his first wife. He would make inquiries later about what had happened.

Alvarr stood next, "I have always fought passionately for that which I believe in. The plight of magical people is my fight, since my parents were killed in the Great Purge and I've spent my life hiding from those whom hate me for being magical, but I have never considered magic to be a crime, it is a gift," He spoke proudly.

Arthur could see the charisma ooze off him. He pleased and led men so easily. But he couldn't fault Alvarr for his words, they were honest and from the heart.

Sir Alvarr continued, "I met Arthur, My King, briefly, once, when I was sentenced to die by his father for being a sorcerer. Now I stand here, a knight under his son, in a land where I am free. My new cause, is your cause, Arthur."

Lancelot spoke next, "I, like Elyan, have dreamed of being a knight my whole life," Said Sir Lancelot, "I am not even the son of a blacksmith, but an orphan, with no name of my own. But I have always been smart and quick, and I have watched how the noble fight and behave and have always wanted to sit at their table and show that I am just as good, just as worthy."

Lancelot was so humble, and so good, as he stood in front of these knights, and soon to be knights of Greater Camelot.

Arthur encouraged him to continue, and Lancelot explained, "I have, since I learned of knights, I have tried to follow the Knight's Code, to behave honorably, to defend the weak, and uphold what is right," He spoke with an earnestness that resonated with the entire room. "And while I can't change my common birth, King Arthur, you have given me the opportunity to show that being of common birth doesn't make you less."

The others nodded, in recognition of that truth.

Lancelot continued, "The first time I met Arthur was a lie, I passed myself off as a noble so that I could train with his legendary Knights of Camelot and earn the knighthood I so desperately wanted. When Arthur learned the truth, he respected my skills."

Arthur interjected, "Meeting you Lancelot, seeing your bravery, and your upright nature, was one of the reasons I decreed that commons should be able to earn knighthoods."

"I am honored, Sire," Lancelot bowed his head, uncharacteristically emotional.

Sir Leon spoke of how he had always served loyally, whatever his king had asked of him. But now, he was serving with pride, he was proud to be part of the first knights of Greater Camelot who are chosen because they are worthy, not just well-born.
Morgana wasn't well enough to leave for a week. Arthur and Gwen still hadn't had any more relations. He desperately wanted to talk to someone about it, then felt guilty, his petty problems were miniscule in comparison. Arthur saw Morgana in her chambers earlier in the day, so he could avoid a public goodbye with further scrutiny. She seemed still and angry and sad, just so sad. Arthur kept reminding himself that she wasn't going far, nor for very long. He hugged her, and kissed her cheek. And hoped… what did he hope?

_**Time, makes losing the baby you really wanted, better?**_

_That a change of scenery will help you move on?_

He'd want to hit anyone who said that to him if he were in her position. _I can't be in her position._

In the end, he just held her tight for far longer than anyone else would have dared. _I'm the king, so I'll do as I please!_

"There are no words," He whispered into her ear.

Her sad eyes, thanked him.

Mordred barged in, angry, saying he didn't want her to go. Morgana patiently explained she had to go. Mordred held up a sack saying he was packed and ready to go with her. The boy's worldly possessions apparently were no more than an armful. Arthur could see Morgana considering it. Morgause was adamant that the boy remain in Camelot, despite an objection he noted in Morgana's eyes. _She would prefer the boy go with her._ Morgause sharply explained to Mordred that being a king's squire was very important, and that he needed to keep his vows to serve Arthur faithfully. Two moon turns didn't matter to Arthur, but he didn't want to intervene. The boy cried. He wouldn't let go of the woman he called 'mother'. Morgana kept telling him she'd be back soon, that Arthur and Morgause, Caellan and Alvarr would all help him, that he was a big boy now and could take care of himself. The boy ran off, refusing to acknowledge reality.

_Ah, to be nine years old!_

"Arthur," Morgana said, as if it was the last exchange they would ever have, "Please…"

He suddenly became worried, "What?"

Morgana wanted him to understand her regret, "Lookafter my son, don't let him feel no one loves him."

Arthur's face fell. _This is good-bye._

He nodded, "I will."

Morgana made her request more practical, "Could you spend time with Mordred, not just when you train him, but in the evenings, tell him stories, teach him how to be honorable, tell him about me," Morgana was the one who sounded desperate now.

He hugged her, "I swear it."

She expressed her genuine relief with a grateful smile. He knelt and kissed her hand. He felt her lightly trace his jawline with her fingers. He saw the regret in her face. And he felt he wanted to hang onto her too, grab a hold of her skirts to prevent her from leaving. _Can you imagine it, a king!_
Sir Morgause offered to escort her sister back to The Isle. She carried Morgana and delicately placed her in the litter. Sir Alvarr offered to ride alongside the carriage until Avalon Lake, insisting it was for safety reasons. He probably just wanted a more private place to say farewell.

Alvarr and Caellan said their good byes to Morgana on the banks of Avalon Lake. Both sharing kind and supportive words of condolence. Only Morgause accompanied her in the barge. Her Golden Knight held her in her arms, wrapped in a warm fur, as the rowers slowly made towards the mists.

They had been silent a long time, when her lover finally spoke, "Sister, I will look after Mordred for you as best I can, until you are able to return."

The offer gladden her heart. Children were the furthest thing Morgause would choose for herself. Her sister was doing this out of love for her. Morgause lacked her softness, and patience, but Morgana was confident she would do her best. She snuggled against her lover's chest, feeling so connected to her.

Morgana was sad that Morgause had been so against Mordred coming with her.

"Why couldn't Mordred have come back with me?" Morgana questioned. "I know it's not what we talked about, but he will be happier." While it was not ideal, she could have made it work. They had vowed not to part after the last time. It felt like circumstances were always coming between them.

"No," Morgause was determined, Morgana wasn't a hound that simply obeyed, she needed a reason.

Morgana had been thinking a lot about life and death of late. She couldn't help it since Ninianne. She was silent a long time before she worked up the nerve to ask the burning question on her lips, venturing the answer she had been dreading.

"How did you save me?" Morgana asked, suddenly, clarifying, "When Merlin poisoned me?"

She felt Morgause tense, she couldn't see her face, but she knew her words had unnerved Her Love.

Morgause took entirely too long in responding, and used painstakingly, deliberate words, "I used powerful magic to grant the power of life."

That was true as far as it goes. But Morgana was no novice. She felt her stomach churning, as she pressed her lover for the truth. She felt herself shaking lightly. There is no going back.

"Only death pays for life," Morgana said, "Who paid for my life?"

Morgause rolled her lips under covering her teeth, making a line of her mouth that made her lips disappear. She clearly didn't want to say. Morgana could see the guilt in her sister's face. There was a heaviness, and sadness that was pouring off her now.

"Please," Morgause said, as if begging Morgana to pursue this line of inquiry no further.

Morgana waited.

Morgause snapped defensively, "I had only the time it takes for you to hold your breath until you
faint to decide, I used powerful magic to bring us to The Isle instantly, and only had a moment to
decide if I was willing to pay the price, all while I watched the life draining out of you."

Morgana nodded ever slightly, reserving judgement, but she still had to know.

"I thought it would be Ninianne who would pay," Morgause admitted, with tears in her eyes, "And
I did it anyway."

"I have to know," Morgana replied honestly, "Sister."

Morgause had the look of someone who is terrified that something good is about to break.

"Erin paid for your life."

_The childhood friend Morgause had loved as more._ Morgana remembered back to the innocent
memory of shared secrets, and acceptance, and connection.

_It must be so hard to live with._

Morgause seemed to read her mind.

"I think I did what was best for all of us, but it still hurts," Morgause finally managed to say,
between her stiffened jaw, "She didn't have any meanness in her."

_She doesn't regret it._

Morgana embraced her and held on so tight. Morgause didn't cry, but she had an angry and hard
look on her face. She didn't like be reminded of it. They stayed like that for a long time. The anger
eventually dissipating from Morgause.

They were nearly at The Isle when Morgause suddenly spoke again. Perhaps because the worst
seemed over, her sister decided to share even more of her knowledge.

Her Golden Knight finally said, "When Ninianne was dying she whispered something, very
important to me."

Morgana had been too distressed to notice at the time. She couldn't help but wonder what would
have been the most important thing to their mentor in that moment.

"Ninianne told me," Morgause said, pausing with dramatic effect, "Mordred is Nimueh's son."

"What?" Morgana couldn't help but be completely thrown by that revelation. She had given up all
hope of ever finding the boy's blood kin ever since those first weeks on The Isle together when he
had asked her if there was any way he could find his family using magic. And she had learned they
could only compare his blood, or hair if they had kin or suspected kin to compare it too. So, they
had both given up.

Morgause appeared to be waiting for a more avid reaction, Morgana could tell, it perplexed her
further.

"I'm thrilled that I can tell him who his mother was," But, Morgana questioned her lover, "Why
was this so important to Ninianne that she'd spend her dying breath passing it on?"

Morgause looked uncertain how to continue, "There is something you must know about him."
A man heavily robed in a style very foreign to Albion, dirty and weary from a very long journey rode up to the castle wall in the dead of knight, he was coughing and spluttering, but determined to get an audience with King Arthur. Some of the guards wanted to send him on his way. Merlin happened to be making a final round of the castle, in his disguise as Rhys. He heard the kerfuffle and came down to investigate. It was lucky he had, for the traveler was now fallen off his horse and being poked with the end of a long spear by the indifferent guards, who were about to leave him in a cool, dank dungeon for the night. Merlin had the man carried to Gaius' chambers, where his mentor nursed him back to health. Gaius used his considerable skill to help the man breathe easier, and get some much-needed rest, and nourish his starving body.

"He was lucky you were there, Merlin," Gaius said, affectionately, and proud of his apprentice's good heart.

"Why do you think he came so far?" Merlin couldn't help but wonder.

Gaius gave a nonchalant toss of his head, "I haven't a clue, but it must have been important. He seems to have traveled very far, making great haste, without stopping to eat."

Despite his fever, the man kept to his mission. He kept insisting that he had a matter of urgency to discuss with King Arthur. It was another three days before the man, whom identified himself only as John, was finally brought in front of Arthur. He begged a private audience, he didn't quite get it in the end. Arthur, Agravaine, Gaius and half a dozen knights stood witness over the meeting. John was about thirty, with sun kissed skin, dark hair and eyes, and a heavy beard. The outsider seemed fatigued beyond his years, but lit up at a glimpse of the man he sought. The weary traveler commented that he had ventured far and wide and had never seen a court like this one. Arthur's expression conveyed he couldn't imagine what this stranger, was doing here.

"I am your humble servant, My King," The man spoke in an accent from far across the sea, "Your reputation as a Christian who defends the common people, and who allows freedom of worship is known far and wide, Sire."

Arthur looked bored, before chastising himself to pay attention. Merlin knew him well enough to tell. Merlin reflected, that to every person who came before King Arthur, it was their first time in court addressing a high king. But to Arthur it was just another day.

"This, Sire, concerns a matter of the utmost importance," John paused, with great dramatic effect, "My King, I have come about the Holy Grail."

Chapter End Notes

End of Part 2. I need at least at least 2 moon turns myself before I'm going to start posting part 3. I'm rewriting a few parts, so once I get far enough in front, I'll start with the next chapters.

End Notes
A/N: If you aren't going to read Alchemy (Part 1), what you need to know is;
Morgana kept Tauren's Mage Stone from 'To Kill the King', which has made her prophetic
dreams clearer, and she has learned how to use the stone to perform a glamour. Uther was
raping Morgana for the passed year before she joined forces with Morgause that culminated
in the sleeping spell/ Fires of Idirsholas. Morgana and Morgause have been lovers since
2x12. Morgause's backstory involves her believing she is the child of Gorlois and Elaine
(unrelated to Vivienne in this version), though she knew Morgana's mother growing up.
There is a possibility that Morgause is Uther's daughter. Morgana knows Uther had an
affair with her mother as she saw it in dreams/ confronted him about it and is sure it is true.
Morgana glamourised Igraine in 'The Sins of the Father', making Arthur think he was really
speaking to his mother's spirit, only for Uther and Merlin to convince him afterwards that
Morgause lied about everything, hardening his stance against magic. Morgana was
hopelessly in love with Gwen and kissed her after she was abducted by Hingus (Lancelot
and Guinevere), which went badly. Morgana later, glamourised as Arthur, tricked Gwen into
kissing her (The Witchfinder).
Morgause told Morgana her mother was an excellent healer but wasn't magical.
After the events of The Witch's Quickening, Morgana had Morgause find and protect
Mordred and Alvarr.
It was revealed in the Epilogue- The Last Dragonlord (chapter 13) that the dragon was
lying to Merlin about the prophecies to give him leverage from which to negotiate his
release. The dragon admits Morgause's intention was only ever to kill Uther not destroy
Camelot, when she used Morgana to put everyone to sleep. The prophecy about Morgana
being evil/ in an evil alliance with Mordred has been thrown into question as has Merlin's
destiny to be a great sorcerer and Arthur to be a great leader.
In my universe there is no such thing as a dragonlord- I explain this better at the end of
Alchemy. Arthur was wounded by Kilgarra, and they met Merlin's father in Cenred's lands
as he was the only person left capable of healing dragon wounds. Merlin's father dies the
same way as in the episode. Merlin does not have dragon-wrangling powers, no one does.
The Great Dragon got some revenge, then elected to leave Camelot, and let Merlin know he
despises him for killing magical people while propping up Uther's anti-magic reign.

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