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**The Price of Eight For One**

by dancingpenss

**Summary**

The soulmate words were seemingly the one form of magic Uther Pendragon could not best. Merlin has never wanted hers; they are sure to be a great deal of trouble on top of being a warlock. After all, soulmarks are a type of magic, and she has eight.

**Notes**
Okay everyone, I hope you enjoy this! One simple rule: don't like, don't read. Eight For One is originally posted on FFN, so if you want, you can head over and read it there. Chapters should be posted near the same time from now on. I've been working on this fic for quite a long time now, and it will go through season 5 and should end up as a fixit.

**THERE WILL BE CANON DIVERGENCE**

Some brief guidelines of big things that will change:
1) THERE IS NO LANCELOT/GWEN. In this fic, we have fem!Merlin, and Lancelot does not have eyes for Gwen but for Merlin. This fic will be Arwen, and brief Freylin, and later Merlin will end up with someone else (NOT Lancelot). Because of this, a lot of major conflict points are changed, so unless a specific event that has to do with the Arthur/Gwen/Lancelot love triangle is mentioned, ASSUME IT DOES NOT HAPPEN.
2) Another big change: Merlin is born a girl. I really hope you've picked up on that by now. Cookies and warm hugs even if you didn't.
3) This is a SOULMATE AU. (If you've read any of amusewithaview's Marvel soulmate AU stuff, same sort of principle. If you haven't and you're a Marvel fan, or especially a Darcy Lewis fan, go find it right now and READ. Literally that author is so amazing, and there are so many different ships that you can pick and choose which you like.)
   In this AU, the first words that your soulmate(s) says to you are tattooed somewhere on your skin in black in their handwriting. One of the only differences from amusewithaview's concept is that when a soulmate dies, the words turn gray.
4) I just feel like you should know this: all of Merlin's soulmates are platonic except one, which I feel like she is suitably disgusted with because they're almost all cute guys. But like I said above, the only ships here are: Arwen, Freylin, Merlin/YouDon'tKnowYet, and possibly minor Lancelot/minor OC because I want him to be happy at SOME POINT. Point being once again, don't like, don't read.
   And another thing: the tense switches from past to present in this first chapter because I was experimenting with it and wanted most of the prologue in past even though I'm writing the story in present. I hope it doesn't screw with your brains too much and let me know what you think!

Okay, sorry to bore you with this incredibly long note, but I needed to clear things up. I should be updating at least every three weeks, if not sooner. I'm erratic, sorry!

On to the show!
Prologue and Wishful Thinking

Spoilers for BBC’s Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Prologue:

Once upon a time, in a land full of magic and happiness by the name of Albion, someone first spoke the spell to give a child their words—their soulmark. There are those who said it was a druid who had invented it out of curiosity. Others insisted it was a gift from the creatures called the Deiamares.

Whatever the origin, everyone agreed that the soulmarks were an amazing magic. To have a sorcerer or sorceress speak over a child, and for a set of words to scroll over the newborn’s shoulder, or chest, or arm, or leg, or wherever else…it was truly something. The inky black words, each in a different set of handwriting, were said to be the first words ever said by the child’s soulmate to the child. Sometimes it was a platonic soulmate, and sometimes a romantic one.

It was possible for a child to have more than one soulmate, or even three; but to have four or five soulmarks was almost unheard of. Amazing or not, still it was unknown whether the magic actually worked.

Until it did.

I’m so pleased to meet you. I’m sure we’ll be good friends.

I would have waited for you to say that forever if need be.

It had worked.

Within months, every child had the spell spoken over them and were rewarded with a soulmark, or two or three if they were lucky, because every parent (or nearly every) wished their child to be happy, and if finding their soulmate would make them happy, it was worth it. Even the ones who could care less (and there were very few of them) did so to follow the customs of the time. It wouldn’t do to seem lacking.

Years later, the first generations of children with soulmarks were having children themselves. But when the magic-users arrived to say the spell, they were astonished to find the puzzled parents holding a child with words already scrawled in their soulmate’s script. It seemed that the magic was passed through the bloodline of the parents, and there was no stopping it now. Over five hundred years later, every child born in the land of Albion had a set of words…occasionally two or three.

More soulmarks were usually considered good luck, for the child would either be so loved that he or she had more than one soulmate, or the child would need more than one soulmate to help straighten them out. It was a win either way.

And then there came the Great Purge of Uther Pendragon. The king of Camelot tried and tried to discern a way to erase the words, or at least to stop their magical appearance at a baby’s birth, but there was none to be found; for there were none who even remembered the spell once used to make
the words appear.

The soulmate words were the one form of magic Uther could not best.

Finding your soulmate was still a cause for celebration, because it was not your fault you had the words and they were your soulmate, but the more sets of words you had, the more shunned you were. Magic must have been in your family to touch you so, people would say, and though otherwise they would not be concerned, they would have no wish to be accused of conspiring with sorcerers while Uther Pendragon was king.

Two marks were considered normal, because everyone knew that King Uther had two marks himself. There was a rumor his son had two as well, although it held no truth. Three marks were enough to get stares if you didn’t cover up at least one in public. But to have the misfortune to be born with four or five? It might have been enough for the king’s men to hunt you down themselves.

More and more magic-users were killed, and their essence of magic was poured back into Albion. The magic, no longer being used, fought to be released.

Through the years, it has never found an escape.

Until now.

Now, it finds an outlet when a baby girl, the daughter of a Dragonlord, is about to be born.

The child would have already had power, once the father died, at least, for the power of a Dragonlord passes from parent to firstborn child. This suits the magic, for even the mighty power of the dragons is now fading, one dragon left, and the Last Dragonlord is driven into hiding.

And then, the girl is born, and the magic comes with her, and is her, in essence. Just for a moment, every magic-user left feels the surge of power, and the quiet whispers begin.

Emrys. Emrys is here.

And the girl is given the name of Merlin by her mother, for the hawk that soars through a sky of the same color as her startlingly blue eyes.

Merlin Emrys, the warlock that will bring magic freely to Albion, is born with eight sets of words.

Chapter 1:

Merlin grows up with a singular distaste for her soulmarks—even with the insanity that has been her life from the day she was born, Merlin can’t really understand how she can have eight perfect complements.

How can clumsy, silly, ridiculous Merlin have eight people who will love her (romantically or not) and stay by her, and watch out for her, and pick her up when she stumbles and falls? How in Albion is she the perfect person for all of them?

It is remarkable enough, Merlin thinks morosely, that Fate has decided that eight people will even like her enough to be her friends, warlock or not. They must be something really special.

Her mother, Hunith, laughs and remarks that one day, Merlin will understand. She rolls up her sleeve
and exposes the words written out in a strong, blocky script.

*Would you care to dance, lady?*

Somewhere out there, a thin flowing hand answers in exactly the same shade of black, *I’m afraid I don’t know how, as no one has ever asked me before.*

It is the only thing Merlin knows about her father: his words. But Hunith, Merlin decides, doesn’t understand.

She understands that Merlin is special in more than one way; that her daughter was born with magic, and that she carries eight soulmarks. For her, that is enough. She does not understand the weariness of wearing long-sleeved everything so that no one will see three different soulmarks on her arms alone, or boots and breeches instead of dresses because there is always a chance the skirt might fly up and show any of three more. She does not understand sweltering in the summer, or the way the other children disdain her for not showing off her soulmate words as they do.

“Look at my wrist,” one girl says. “You have the voice of a fallen angel.”

“My shoulder,” a boy asks. “Someone read what it says again?”

When those types of conversations come up, Merlin quietly slinks away, knowing she can’t get caught up in them. In conversations among the children about magic, she does not even have that luxury in case someone connects the topic with her steady disappearances. At least with soulmarks, the others just assume that her soulmate’s first words to her are something exceedingly uncomplimentary, which although unusual, is not unheard of.

One boy in Ealdor has the misfortune to have *Oh, NO! I can’t be stuck with HIM!* coiled around his leg, and one of the girls has *So it’s you then? Honestly, I thought you’d be prettier.* along her spine. Merlin is lucky enough, she supposes, that none out of her eight soulmarks say anything terribly nasty, although she does wonder about a couple.

She has always grown up always only a bit shorter than normal, and she despises being short because people seem to look down on her. Even at eighteen, her figure is that of a girl three years younger. However, Merlin’s face has cheekbones that could cut glass, and her long, pale fingers and small hands are decidedly feminine. Her ears stick out a bit, but the young warlock has never thought about what she looks like enough to care. Her hair would be considered beautiful, long black hair the color of a raven’s wing, but Merlin wouldn’t know to care about that either; and keeps it up in a messy bun from which small wavy strands escape to hang down and frame her pale face.

The only feature she really likes enough to notice is her eyes. Merlin’s bright blue eyes are just like her father’s, unless the magic burns through to turn them gold.

And like most people, her soulmarks help tell her who she is—disregarding the magic problem.

*Well, yes, but you may as well drop the Sir, seeing as we’re soulmates and all that.*

*Look out!*

*You do not know me, and yet you call me friend?*

*I really hate dungeons right now.*

*I think what you did yesterday was very brave. Oh, sorry, I don’t think we’ve been introduced?*
You have got yourself into a bit of a pickle, haven’t you, my lovely lady?

Why did you do that for me?

And one of her personal favorites (note the sarcasm):

RUN!

Honestly, not a single one is commonplace, Merlin decides yet again, staring at the inky black words that spiral and flow and twist over her ankles, arms, collarbones, shoulders, and back. But it suits her, really. If she herself was normal, she might appreciate that, the ability to know almost immediately if she is talking to her soulmate in a land where a majority of marks are as simple as Hello or It’s a pleasure to meet you. It drives a lot of people off the wall.

But Merlin is anything but commonplace—anything but normal—and from a young age, she fully intends to avoid every single soulmate for as long as she can in order to steer clear of the impending chaos she is sure having eight soulmates will be.

That is absolutely the worst sort of thing for someone like her: someone who doesn’t need any sort of attention. At eighteen, she’s succeeded in avoiding soulmates completely so far.

Unfortunately, her magic is hard to control, and she is constantly catching things like apples as they fall from trees or pinning flies and mosquitos in place when they fly close enough to annoy her. At least she isn’t knocking trees over anymore.

One time when she was ten, she accidentally toppled a tree over on top of Old Man Simmons. That is the day Will found out officially. (He tells her later that he knew for ages—he was waiting for her to tell him.) The fair-haired boy who is her only friend didn’t stop laughing for hours.

“The point is,” Merlin insists to her mother, “my control is improving.”

“Mmm,” Hunith says neutrally. She starts thinking.

Merlin goes out into the woods every day with Will, who is unafraid to show the whole world exactly what he’s thinking every moment of every day, and lets it out. She creates butterflies and bees from grass and flowers and bark and stone, and makes squirrels dance with happiness when she lets her magic shine out of her.

“That’s disconcerting,” Will says, chucking an acorn at her.

“Why?” the warlock asks, lying back on the grass, grinning and throwing four back at once—without her hands.

Will rolls his eyes. “Squirrels dancing, Merlin. You have that effect on them, and it’s disconcerting.”

“Well, since you’re so disconcerted, why are you still here?” Merlin asks playfully.

“I wouldn’t leave you for anything,” he says only half-jokingly. Merlin’s blue eyes twinkle at him with mirth, and Will rolls his eyes again. “Oh, shut up, Merlin!”

She doesn’t think anything of the seriousness in his voice the moment before.

Will groans and rolls over in the grass to stare up at the clouds. She is so oblivious. Will wishes Merlin was his soulmate, instead of Be more respectful, won’t you?
Merlin is gone the next day, off to Camelot on her mother’s insistence without so much as a Don’t worry for me, Will.

“What do you mean, she’s going to Camelot?” he demands, standing at the doorway to Hunith’s cottage on the outskirts of Ealdor. “That’s the worst possible place for—for her!”

Hunith sighs, leaning against the wooden doorframe. Her eyes look tired. “The only person I know to trust with the secret of her magic is my half-brother, Gaius. He is the court physician at Camelot. He practiced magic himself, before the Purge. He will help her learn to control it.”

Will sputters indignantly. “But—but! It’s Camelot! And the roads are lined with bandits and robbers, she won’t be safe.”

“You and I both know why that isn’t true, Will.”

He draws himself up, and wipes the back of his hands across his eyes. “I—I would have gone with her.”

Hunith smiles sadly. “I know.”
Courage and Friendship Are Here

Chapter Summary

Merlin arrives at Camelot, meets a new friend, meets two brand new...well, that would be giving it away, now, wouldn't it? Also, she really doesn't intend to get into a fight. Oh, goodness.

Chapter Notes

Wow, what a great response! I'm so glad y'all like it!! It means a lot. I've decided to rapid-post the chapters here to catch up with the cross post I have on FFN, just so you all know. Thanks so much for all the support and encouragement, and I hope you enjoy!

Spoilers for BBC's *Merlin*, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 2:

Merlin's feet are sore from her new boots by the time she can see the walls of Camelot, but even that can't stop the wonder, awe, and happiness from appearing on her face. Gaius, the court physician and her mother's relative, will help her. She will be happy, free, and able to avoid any and all soulmates as necessary.

Camelot, for a place she always dreaded, is beautiful in so many ways. Merlin readjusts her bedroll and pack, straightens her favorite red neckerchief under her well-worn jacket, and walks through the gates for the first time, ignoring the looks she gets for being female and daring to wear breeches and a tunic. If she stays, they'll get used to it.

The beauty is marred by the execution.

"This man, Thomas James Collins, is guilty of the crime of using enchantments and magic." Uther Pendragon, King of Camelot, is just as she always feared him to be.

She can't tear her eyes away as the axe comes down. The old woman, the mother of the unfortunate man, is so distraught that Merlin would have pitied her, if she didn't already.

This might not have been such a good idea, Merlin thinks for a moment.

And—she glances sideways at the flash of a red cloak—it is almost certain that one of her soulmates is a knight. Visiting knights go through Camelot all the time, and that's if he isn't a Camelot knight himself.

She asks directions to the court physician and absentmindedly consoles herself that at least Sir Knight
wouldn't insist on titles, probably, and there was practically no chance that any of her other soulmates would be higher ranked. She'll do her best to avoid them, anyway. Merlin smiles to herself, reassured, and walks through the door to Gaius's chambers.

The warlock decides she likes him almost immediately, and fights the urge to jump up and down on her new bed. Although, she wonders more sedately, if he might not like the fact that she has eight soulmates.

Merlin doesn't get a chance to bring it up, and is sent out to help him do his rounds. She is walking back to his chambers, intent on finding the aging physician to discuss soulmates when it happens.

A blond man, looking to be maybe just twenty to her eighteen-nearly-nineteen, is throwing knives at a target while the servant is still carrying it.

Merlin has avoided calling anyone she doesn't know friend for as long as she can remember, but she is so annoyed at the young man's bullying that it slips her mind. "That's enough! You've had your fun, my friend."

The servant drops the target in shock, and the courtyard immediately falls silent. She takes advantage of that to stop the rolling target with her foot. The blond has zeroed in on her, and is looking her up and down with a faint air of surprise and annoyance and curiosity.

"You do not know me, and yet you call me friend?" he half-states, half-asks.

She can practically feel the black script running from the back of her right hand all the way up her arm to her shoulder burning.

Oh, no!

Merlin says as much out loud.

"I have been intrigued for years about the man who would dare to call me friend without even knowing who I was. It seems it was not a man at all." He continues, ignoring her protest completely.

"Oh, no!" she says again. "This isn't right. I could never have a soulmate who's such an ass!"

His eyes narrow in annoyance. "Nor I a soulmate who is such an idiot!"

Merlin's eyes spark with defiance. "Soulmate or not, I swear I'll still hit you!"

Blond doesn't even spare a moment for consideration. "You wouldn't dare!"

She kicks him.

Hard.

He rolls over on the ground, clutching his groin. "I'll…put you in the dungeon…for that! Guards!"

They appear out of thin air, two to grab her elbows and two more to hoist Blond up.

She really needs something to call him besides Blond, she reflects idly, attempting to kick one of the guards, who has the foresight to see it coming and dodge away. Prat might be good.

"Who do you think you are, the king?" she spits defiantly.

Blond has recovered enough to stay up on his own, and glares at her, shooing the guards away and grabbing her elbow himself. "No, I'm his son, Prince Arthur."
Okay, so Merlin regrets her assumption of the day before. *No one higher ranked than a knight*, indeed. Apparently one of her soulmates is a prince. How that happened, she will never know.

Blond—*Arthur* drags her through the castle by her elbow; earning her a sympathetic glance from the maidservant Merlin had noticed watching the exchange out a window earlier. He drops her off at the dungeons with an order to the guards to let her out in the morning.

*Prat* might be good, she thinks. *Or His Royal Pratness.* Oh, yes, that was just fine.

He walks out the door only to reappear a moment later. "What's your name, and where are you staying? I'll need to know for later."

"It's Merlin," she says finally, letting him win this one. "Gaius, the physician, is my mother's half-brother. I'm staying with him."

Arthur nods once, opens his mouth to say something else, but apparently decides against it and leaves.

Merlin lets out a groan and sinks back onto the hay, rubbing her temples. One soulmate on her second day in Camelot. And a prince to boot. She can feel a headache coming on.

"That bad, huh?" One of the cell guards asks sympathetically. She nods in defeat.

He chuckles. "I pity anyone who's soulmate to the prince. You sure do have your work cut out for you, there, missy."

"Thanks," she replies. "I think." If Merlin hears a distant, gravelly voice calling her name…well, the warlock just ignores it.

"Merlin. Merlin!"

It's been a long day.

Gaius hears about what happened, and gets her out.

She honestly wouldn't mind entertaining the market kids with the stocks, really, if the headache hadn't come on with full force. She grins anyway, and ducks halfheartedly and almost enjoys herself.

Arthur walks by with a group of knights-in-training, and laughs at her for a moment, but she grins back cheerily and ducks again and silently laments her hair.

The kids run off to the kitchens to find more rotten fruit, and the maidservant Merlin had seen yesterday takes advantage of the brief lull.

"I need to make better life choices," Merlin is muttering to herself, shaking her hair back out of her face.

"I think what you did yesterday was very brave." The girl supplies reassuringly. Her smile fades at Merlin's look of shock. *Two already? Really?* "Oh, sorry, I don't think we've been introduced?" she asks.

Merlin swallows, fighting the urge to try and look down at the flowing handwriting wrapped twice around her left ankle. She wouldn't be able to see it anyway. "Oh. Right. I'm Merlin, but most people
call me idiot. Are we soulmates?"

The girl's mouth opens in an O of shock that Merlin figures must be mirroring her own. She takes a second to collect herself visibly. "Well—well, yes, I suppose we are. I'm—I'm Guinevere, but most people—my friends call me Gwen." She reaches over and they shake hands slightly awkwardly.

Merlin can't help but grin. Even if she couldn't avoid this soulmates business, possibly it wouldn't be as bad as Arthur all the time. "Gwen, I have a feeling we're going to be great friends." The warlock chuckles to herself. "Well! Camelot is full of surprises."

Gwen smiles a bit more. "Yes, well, I saw what you did. Arthur's a bully, and everyone's quite impressed. You're a bit of a hero."

"Really?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Oh. Well…" Merlin notices the kids lining up again to starting throwing again. "I'd better go, Guinevere. My fans are waiting!"

"Oh!" Gwen pulls a ribbon out of her pocket. "I'd meant to give you this—to try and save your hair."
She quickly and neatly ties Merlin's mane of black, perpetually messy hair back to the nape of her neck.

Merlin gives her a smile of pure gratitude. Gwen is a beautiful, beautiful human being. "Thank you, thank you! I'll find some way to thank you for this, I swear!"

Gwen laughs and steps out of the line of fire. "I'm so glad I met you, Merlin! We'll talk later."

The first thing Merlin does when they finally let her out of the stocks is take a hot bath.

Perks of being born with magic are few and far between, she knows, but hot water at the touch of her hand? It's the best. Her clothes are covered with fruit, so she puts on new ones to keep up appearances, but magically cleans the old ones anyway and puts her jacket back on.

Gaius is an amazing cook. His food looks very gross sometimes, but if you can bring yourself to put it in your mouth, you will be in flavor heaven. Merlin sits down to dinner with him and tries to figure out how to bring up soulmates. As it turns out, she doesn't need to.

"So, the king told me when I requested that you be let out of the dungeon that you were Prince Arthur's soulmate. Is that correct, Merlin?"

The young warlock looks down and puts more soup in her mouth. "Maybe," she mumbles.

Gaius lets out a breath, folding his hands on top of the table and looking at her seriously. "Do you realize what this means, Merlin? The future king of Camelot has a soulmate who is a sorcerer!"

"I'm a warlock, Gaius, and anyway, Arthur isn't going to understand about…me!" She waves a hand at herself. "He's a total prat. It's not going to happen. But anyway, I wanted to talk to you about soulmates. I met another one of my platonics when I was in the stocks earlier."

Gaius's eyes widen. "Another one? Exactly how many soulmarks do you have?"

"Her name's Gwen, and she's really nice. She gave me a hair ribbon so my hair wouldn't get completely covered with tomato. Do you know her?"
Gaius sighs, putting his spoon down with a clink. "Yes, I know her. She's maid to the Lady Morgana. She's very sweet, and I'm sure you two will get along famously. Merlin, answer my question. How many soulmates do you have?"

Merlin swallows her mouthful hesitantly. "Eight."

"Eight? My goodness, dear girl, are you sure?"

"Pretty sure, yeah."

Gaius gives her a long look, nods, and goes back to his meal as though it holds all the answers. Merlin wonders if it does, and leans forward just a bit to peek into the bowl.

Nothing in it but soup. It's not until later that she realizes, Soup. Of course that bowl held all the answers.

There's something a bit off about Lady Helen and that funny doll thing in her chambers, but Merlin sees Gwen in the corridor and goes off to chat a bit; and puts it out of mind. Nothing will come of it, she's sure.

Merlin holds onto her luck and Arthur doesn't send for her.

But then, of course, he finds her in the lower town on her way back from doing an errand for Gaius, so it doesn't matter, anyway. It

"Merlin? Is that you?"

She walks a bit quicker. Maybe His Royal Pratness won't think it's her.

"Oh, come on, don't be like that! We are soulmates, after all. You don't need to run away!" he says in a rather teasing voice, spreading his arms wide.

Merlin stops in her tracks, turning to face him with a glare. "The only thing I'd run from, Soulmate, is your face."

Arthur looks taken aback for only a moment, before surveying her up and down. "Well, I don't see that you're any better. You not only act as though you were born in a barn, you look like you live in one."

She can feel herself flush red, clenching her fists inside the sleeve of her slightly-too-big and worn favorite jacket. "Look, I told you that you're an ass, I just didn't realize that you were a royal one. And I won't even hesitate to kick you again."

Arthur manages to wince and look affronted at the same time. If she isn't so annoyed, she might laugh at his expression.

"Look, you can't talk to me like that!" He finally protests, hands on his hips, choosing to ignore her jibe about the day before.

Merlin chooses to deliberately misinterpret his remark, letting a smirk work its way onto her face. "Oh, I apologize." She bows low. "I won't hesitate to kick you again, my lord."

Arthur turns as red as she did before, crosses his arms back over his chest, and tries to ignore the
comments again, changing the topic. "Are you any good with a mace, Merlin? You're so…" he waves his arms at all of her, "…unconventional, I almost wouldn't be surprised. I, of course, have been trained to kill from birth."

This is the last straw. Damn politeness and propriety. "And how long have you been training to be a prat?"

...Oh, dear.
Destiny's Voice Can Be Very Annoying

Chapter Summary

Well, this seeming prat of a soulmate may have decided to start a fight, but Merlin will be damned if she doesn't finish it. Also, Merlin is having a kind of bad day, there is a dragon underneath Camelot (how is there enough room??), Arthur almost dies for the first but certainly not final time in this story, and both Merlin and the dragon are having strange, possibly precognitive dreams. Lovely.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Three, everybody!! Hope you enjoyed the last chapter. This one is unfortunately devoid of soulmates, but it's a little important. Soulmate Number Three is coming up in the next round, I promise!! Enjoy!

Spoilers for BBC's Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 3:

…In hindsight, perhaps Merlin should have walked faster in the first place and avoided His Royal Pratness completely.

She turns and resorts to tripping Arthur for the fifth time, ducking as his mace whirs over her head. How he managed to goad her into this, she can't really comprehend.

Merlin falls backwards onto a pile of sacks, trying vainly to hold her ground without the use of…oh, screw it. A rope discreetly snakes up and pulls on Arthur's foot, allowing her time to scoot a bit to the left and stand up. The crowd of townspeople cheers.

"That all you've got, Merlin?" Arthur pants, jumping back to his feet and rolling his shoulders.

"Ready to give up, Sire?" She snarks back at him snidely, with absolutely no hope that he will. Not with his little knight friends and half the lower town watching, and certainly not to a girl.

He snarls. "Not on your life!"

She's only a moment late in sidestepping, but his next swing-and-lunge clips her across her shoulder, pushing her farther to the side. Merlin is caught off guard, and Arthur's mace chain is wrapped around her neck in an instant so that he has the warlock almost in a sort of embrace, their fronts close together.

"You were saying?" he asks, arrogant smirk returning with full force. He thinks he's won, she
realizes, and something in her eyes must tip him off, because her frown and pulls away just a bit. "What are you—"

She kneels him in the stomach.

"Oooff!"

"You were saying, Your Royal Pratness?" It sounds even better out loud, Merlin thinks, and in that moment, she doesn't even care how much trouble she gets in. This is so worth it.

Two of Arthur's guards rush up and grab her elbows, presumably to haul her off to wherever they stick Soulmates-To-The-Prince-Who-Are-Sort-Of-Idiots.

"No, no, let her go," he demands from where he's doubled up, catching his breath. "She may be an idiot, but she's a brave one. And my soulmate," Arthur adds under his breath as an afterthought, straightening up.

Arthur looks at her again, that same intense look he had given her when she first spoke his words. "Since you're connected to me now, it's good to know you have the guts to defend yourself," he says finally, and turns to walk away.

Merlin can't really tell if it's supposed to be a compliment or not.

"But…" He pauses. Arthur's eyes, a shade of blue only a bit lighter than her own, sparkle with curiosity, and something like approval. "…there's something about you, Merlin. I can't quite seem to put my finger on it…." He hesitates for only a moment, then shakes his head and is gone.

Gaius is cross with her, but after recent events, she is crosser.

"If I don't have magic, I might as well die!" She spits the words out like venom at his face, and turns and rages up the stairs. Merlin means it, right down into her heart, and she knows he knows that. It kind of hurts.

"Merlin." Gaius pokes his head around the door, evidently deciding it's safe to enter. "Come on, take off your shirt. I saw Arthur clip you across your shoulders with that mace contraption of his."

"Gaius, I'm a girl."

He raises and eyebrow. "Merlin, I am a physician." He has a point, and it won't be anything he hasn't seen before. Also, Merlin thinks, that fact that he cares that she's been hurt …that's nice. It's kind of like her mother, a bit.

She takes off her shirt and lays face down on her bed, staring at the red and cream striped blanket. "You don't know why I was born like this, do you?"

He sighs, dabbing at the scrapes across her shoulders. "No."

Merlin swallows, something inside her yawning with hurt and pain and turmoil. "I'm not a monster, am I?"

Gaius pauses. She looks up hesitantly. "Merlin, don't ever think that."

"Then why am I like this? Please…I need to know why."

"Perhaps…." The physician shakes his head. "Perhaps there is someone with more knowledge than
Except the dragon hidden in the caves beneath Camelot, apparently. If there's one good thing, at least it's nice to know she hasn't been imagining the voice calling her name.

"Oh, no. No way. No, there must be another Arthur, because whether he's one of my soulmates or not, this one's an idiot!"

The dragon winks his great golden, magical eyes at her mysteriously. "Perhaps, young warlock, it is your destiny to change that."

Merlin never wants to hear the word destiny again. Oh, she has no idea.

"We have enjoyed twenty years of peace and prosperity. It has brought the kingdom and myself many pleasures, but few can compare with the honor of introducing Lady Helen of Mora." Uther claps, and the court follows suit.

Lady Helen does have a beautiful voice, Merlin thinks. It's so lovely she just wants to drift off to sleep….She jerks her head up and claps her hands over her ears. That isn't right.

Everyone else has fallen asleep.

Helen continues to sing, but the room is growing darker, the candles going out and cobwebs forming on tables and sleepers alike as the beautiful, dark-haired singer slowly stalks up the aisle between the banquet tables. Merlin has to do something, she realizes, but what? If she uses her magic, she'll be executed, and if she doesn't….

Lady Helen pulls a dagger out from her gown, readying to throw it…straight at Arthur. He may be an ass and a prat, but he is her soulmate, and even if he wasn't, Merlin couldn't watch him die.

She looks up. Lady Helen is just beneath the chandelier—and Merlin stretches out her hand as if to pull it down, her eyes glow gold—and the chain breaks. The huge light fixture falls directly on top of Lady Helen, who is no longer Lady Helen but the old woman who saw her son executed in the courtyard the day Merlin arrived in Camelot.

The court begins to slowly awaken. Ladies and lords are pulling cobwebs off themselves; servants are sitting up where they fell to the ground.

At the high table, Uther, Arthur, and Morgana are drowsily standing up, and suddenly, Merlin sees it.

Mary Collins, the old woman, has the dagger, and just a drop of life left, and throws it. Merlin knows it will kill the prince, and no one will have time to do anything. She instinctively slows time down around the dagger just as she did with Gaius when she first met him, and runs, and pulls Arthur down, out of the way—and the dagger slams into his chair.

The young warlock rolls off of him immediately, brushing the cobwebs off her tunic and trying not to turn bright red, because the king of Camelot is staring directly at her.
"You saved my boy," he says, and the absolute gratitude in his voice surprises her. Somehow, Merlin had believed Uther Pendragon was incapable of any emotion. It seemed she had been wrong.

"Yes, well, I…I, um…" she stutters, wring her hands and trying to find an escape.

"Father," Arthur says quietly enough for only the three of them to hear, "this is the girl I told you about. My soulmate." He turned to gesture to where she stood.

"I see," Uther says just as quietly, and with a hint of astonishment. "Well, though you are a female… I would not normally see fit to appoint you to such a position, but this deserves a special reward, and you are Arthur's soulmate, so there would be no impropriety lost."

"Oh, no, really, Your Highness, you don't need to…" Merlin tries to protest again, taking a shaky step back.

Uther raises his hands, as well as his voice so the rest of the hall can hear. "Don't be so modest; you have done me and my house a great service, young maid, and I shall see it rewarded! You shall have a place in the royal household, as Prince Arthur's personal servant!"

The court bursts into applause. Arthur and Merlin stare at each other in dismay. The prince groans under his breath. Gwen smirks at Merlin from the corner, where she is safely out of the way.

Merlin sighs.

Only her luck.

So apparently being maidservant to the Prince of Camelot has its ups and downs. Sometimes more downs than up, the warlock thinks, but it's not totally horrible, all of the time.

The royal pra—prince explains to her that the business of them being soulmates is of an utmost secrecy. Of course, within twenty-four hours of her appointment, the whole of Camelot knows that the Prince's maidservant is really his soulmate.

At least, Merlin thinks, the original rumors have immediately subsided. She suspects the dungeon guard who told her he pitied her—apparently, not enough.

Arthur and Merlin bond through banter and insults, she wakes him up in the morning by pulling off his blankets and he tosses goblets at her head and misses purposely. Merlin and Gwen and Morgana chat in the evenings when Merlin doesn't have to be out with Arthur, and the three girls become very good friends, although Merlin and Gwen are especially close due to being platonics.

The days blur together in a series of unfortunate circumstances, each seeming more bizarre than the last. Merlin conjures snakes from a shield, kills an afanc to save Gwen, and even drinks poison in the weeks that follow.

After the incident with the poisoned chalice, she goes to see the dragon again.

"I need your advice," she calls out into the cavern, looking for any sign of green-gold scales and glittering eyes. Swoosh! The dragon, Merlin thinks, has a penchant for dramatic entrances and exits.

"What is it, then, young warlock?" Kilgarrah asks, although she's nearly certain he knows. The amusement is practically rolling off him in waves. Any more and she might be able to taste it.

"I need to tell Arthur about my magic," she says, right to the point. "He's my soulmate. He deserves
"You cannot," the dragon says, after a long pause. "It is not yet the right time."

Merlin frowns, placing the hand not holding the torch on one hip. "Why not? You know what he did for me. If I don't tell him now, I'll lose his trust when I do. I can't help him become the Once and Future King if he doesn't trust me."

Kilgarrah shakes his head solemnly, gold eyes serious in the torchlight. "If you tell him now…even I cannot see the future, but I sense that something will happen, far worse than you losing his trust. You must wait, young warlock, until Arthur is King, or until you have found each of your soulmates. They may help and protect you even if he will not."

Merlin stares for a moment, wondering about the strange distance she can see deep in his eyes. "You know more than you're saying, don't you? You know what will happen if I tell him now."

The dragon stays silent for a few moments, gaze pensive and sad, before replying. "I see only a bonfire, a pyre built in the courtyard center. I hear the voice of a girl screaming in agony. The voice is yours."

That night, Merlin dreams of being burnt alive.

In her nightmare, Arthur doesn't try to save her.
Chapter Summary

Merlin makes a confession (I know what you're thinking, not THAT one), goes out to pick some mushrooms, encounters a new—again, I don't want to spoil it, and doesn't cry when things happen. Ahem. You might want to just read on.

Chapter Notes

Here's the last of the chapters already posted on FFN, so after this, posting will be at relatively similar times. Hope y'all enjoy this chapter and thanks for the support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spoilers for BBC's Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 4:

"Arthur?" She knocks on the door to his chambers hesitantly. It's been almost a week since the dragon gave his advice, and she's made up her mind. Maybe Merlin can't tell him about her magic, but she can certainly minimize the damage fore when she does.

"Come," he calls from inside. Merlin opens the door to find him sitting at his desk, reviewing the papers for the supply of provisions to an outlying village.

The room is a mess, considering she just tidied it that morning. The bed has somehow been unmade, his wardrobe is flung wide open with clothes trailing out onto the floor, the bed curtains have been let loose to hand down, and shoes are scattered across the room.

"What did you do?" she almost shrieks.

"I couldn't find my favorite pair of boots," Arthur says absentmindedly, writing something down on one of his sheets of parchment. "Didn't know you put them out for me. I was in a hurry."

Merlin crosses her arms, pointing her death glare at him. "You asked me to just after breakfast!"

"Yes, but I didn't really expect it to happen," Arthur insists, finally looking up. "You are the most incompetent servant I've ever had. Honestly, Merlin, d'you blame me for not thinking you would?"

"I blame you for somehow uncleaning your room in the space of three hours, Sire," Merlin says sarcastically, taking a seat on the edge of his desk. "But that's not what I came to say. I...I have a couple of things to tell you, Arthur. I hope you won't be angry with me."

Arthur scoots back his chair just a bit, and spreads his arms out, looking almost relieved. "Finally!
You've been quiet and, and diligent all week, and honestly, it's starting to concern me. It's not like you."

She gives a small nod in acknowledgement, twisting her hands in her lap. "I, well, how many soulmates do you have, Arthur? Just the one, right?"

He rolls his eyes condescendingly. "It's not like you don't know that, Merlin. You see me naked every time I take a bath. I wouldn't exactly be able to hide my soulmarks from you."

"Arthur!" Merlin squeaks, face flushing red. "Not helping!"

"Alright, fine. So what are you saying, then?"

"Well…I showed you your words, on my arm, you know? The first day I worked for you?"

"Yes…"

Merlin takes a deep breath. "And you know I've met two soulmates, right?"

Arthur's brow furrowed. "No, I hadn't, actually. Who's the other?"

"Gwen—Guinevere, Morgana's maid, have you met her?" Merlin asks, trying to get to her point.

"I know who you're talking about, yes, but I've never really spoken to her," Arthur admits, a pink blush creeping up the back of his neck.

It's Merlin's turn to roll her eyes. "Yes, well. I've only met two of my soulmates so far, and I really hope you're not annoyed, but, well…"

"Spit it out, Merlin!" He waves a hand in a hurry-it-up motion, looking back at his paperwork. "I've things to do."

"I've got eight!" She says hurriedly. "I've got eight soulmates."

The prince slowly turns back to look at her. "I'm sorry, Merlin, I must not have heard you right. Say that again."

Merlin swallows nervously. "I…I have eight soulmarks. Eight soulmates."

His blue eyes inspect her carefully, as though trying to discern where all her marks might be hiding. "I…see."

She has never heard Arthur sound more like Uther. "Please, Arthur, don't turn me in. I…I'm sorry, I shouldn't've told you…"

"No. No, it's alright." Arthur's scrutinizing gaze doesn't leave her. "I'm glad your trust in me extends to telling me of this."

"Thank you?" Merlin's voice tilts up, making her statement sound like a question.

"You're welcome," the prince decides, and turns back to his paperwork, possibly to process this new development.


"Oh? Some other secret you've been keeping from me?" Arthur says, a bit of ice creeping into his
Merlin winces. "Well, yes. But I...I can't tell you about it yet. I want to, and you might hate me when I do, but I can't do it yet."

"Why ever not?" his voice actually sounds curious, hardly any bite in the words, Merlin reflects.

"Just can't." She looks down. "Not a very good excuse, I know, but something really bad will happen if I tell you now."

Arthur stands up from his chair and crosses to face her where she still sits on the edge of his desk, crossing his arms and regarding her the same way he had when they first met. "And just how long, Merlin, will I have to wait?"

"Well...until I find all of my soulmates, or..." she almost loses her voice, finishing in a whisper. "Until you become king."

His jaw tightens at that, just a bit. "I see."

"Are you going to turn me in now?" Merlin quietly whispers, waiting for any warmth in his eyes to vanish, for the inevitable word to come: Yes.

"Of course not." Arthur sounds vaguely surprised. "Is that really what you think of me? No, I shall wait until you can tell me your elusive secret. Of course," his voice turns a bit more affectionate, "it had better be something truly spectacular, Merlin, or I shall be unduly disappointed."

Merlin looks up to meet his eyes. "Thank you, Arthur. I won't forget this." She slides off the table, heading away and slipping out the door before he can so much as ask her to stay and clean up his mess.

Arthur sighs into the silence, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Paperwork isn't quite so interesting now. "I won't forget it either."

It's been almost four months since Merlin arrived in Camelot, and any apprehension the warlock has about potentially meeting another one of her soulmates slowly fades away.

After all, she thinks, it's not as though she'll get saddled with all eight at one time, right? She's only eighteen and has the rest of her life to meet them, warlock or not.

Then of, course, it happens again.

Merlin is out picking mushrooms. She had a dream about something good happening if she went out to pick mushrooms, and after the dream of being burnt alive if she told Arthur about her magic, well, excuse her if Merlin feels perfectly obligated to go and pick mushrooms the first chance she gets.

Suddenly, a huge monster, seemingly half eagle and half...well, Merlin is too busy panicking and fleeing for her life to tell. She trips over a tree root, cursing her damnable clumsiness and flipping over, trying to scoot away from the beast.

This, she thinks, does not count as something good.

Then a man, a handsome dark-haired man, bursts out in front of her with a sword. He tries in vain to wound it, his sword seemingly just bouncing off. Merlin doesn't dare try any sort of magic with the stranger there, even if he just saved her life.
The man abandons his attempt to kill it, hauling her up by the elbow and pulling her after him. "RUN!" He bellows, as if she's standing still. Merlin chooses to ignore the fact that he may or may not be one of her soulmates and goes into a dead sprint, joining him to hide behind a dead fallen tree.

They stay quiet, panting, hoping it's gone away. Finally, Merlin peeks over the tree to see nothing but forest and deems it safe to speak. "You saved my life! Thank you."

His hand falls away from his side, and she sees a wound, red with blood, coloring his shirt. He seems to be close to unconsciousness.

Merlin taps his face frantically, trying to keep him awake. "At least tell me your name?"

He stirs again for just a moment, eyes widening with recognition and understanding. "Lancelot. Nice to find you…finally."

The warlock smiles, shaking his trembling hand and trying not to think about the fact that oh, yes, they're definitely soulmates. "I'm Merlin."

Lancelot falls away, eyes rolling back into his head.

She sighs. Well, this might be something better than bad, if not good. "Nice to find you, too. I hope."

Merlin sits by his bed (it's really her bed, but whatever, he can have it, he's injured) until he wakes up. "So," she starts. "Lancelot. I'm not sure if you remember me telling you, but I'm—"

"Merlin?" Lancelot croaks.

"Yes, that's right." She hands him the glass of water waiting on the bedside table.

He takes it, downing most of it in one gulp. "Oh, that's better."

Merlin suppresses a chuckle. "I'm not sure if you remember, but I know exactly what you said to me, Lancelot, and, well, I can sort of see your words. Which happen to be the first words I said to you."

Lancelot's brow crinkles, and he looks down at his chest, where *You saved my life! Thank you. At least tell me your name?* is dark against his skin in Merlin's own handwriting. "That's right, I'd…I'd nearly forgotten. We're soulmates, aren't we?"

"Seems so," Merlin tells him. "I've seen yours…do you want me to…?"

"Hmm?" Lancelot frowns, distractedly staring at her. Then his brow clears in understanding. "Oh, right. If you don't mind, of course."

"No, of course not." The young warlock grins, and hastily rolls up her left sleeve to the elbow, showing him the single word emblazoned across the inside of her wrist in all capitals and an exclamation point to boot. *RUN!*

"Oh." Lancelot has the grace to look sheepish. "Sorry about that. Must've been annoying to have something so, so…"

"Undescriptive? Nah, if you think about it, not really," Merlin says, waving a hand at him flippantly. He has no idea. "So, Lancelot, what brings you to Camelot?"
Gwen helps Lancelot and Merlin out in the blink of an eye. She can see that Lancelot is practically enamored with Merlin immediately, and she almost hopes that something will come of it, even though she has to admit that Lancelot is very handsome, herself.

"Thank you for doing this, Gwen," Lancelot says distractedly, looking down at Merlin. Gwen is measuring his chest width, and Merlin is helping by measuring his legs.

"Oh, don't thank me, thank Merlin," Gwen replies. "She'll do practically anything for anyone."

"Mmm," Lancelot agrees, staring absentmindedly at Merlin, who is apparently trying to decide whether or not Gwen might need a measure of his ankles. Gwen doesn't have the heart to tell Merlin that Lancelot is interested, she's so obviously un-reciprocal.

Poor things.

Merlin is furious about Lancelot's banishment.

"But you killed the griffin!"

"But I didn't…did I?" He counters, looking right into her eyes. Merlin knows that he knows, deep down. The question is what he will choose to do about it.

"I saw what you did," Lancelot continues, shaking his head.

"Oh, no," Merlin tries to reassure him. "That was…that was nothing, it wasn't…"

"Bregdan anweald gafeluc?" He says inquiringly, raising an eyebrow. "It was very brave of you, and I could never take the credit for what you did. That was magic, Merlin."

She flinches, blue eyes going wide. "Um, of course not, magic is illegal, I don't—"

Lancelot smiles wryly at her. "Don't worry, Merlin. Your secret is safe with me."

"Really?" Merlin breathes, looking for all the world as though he has just given her the moon. "You'd do that for me, Lancelot?"

"You're my friend." He replies. "And my soulmate, too."

Merlin can't help but grin when Lancelot puts the fact that they chose to be friends above the fact that Fate chose them to be a set of perfect complements.

Lancelot turns to go through the doors into the hall, and then pauses. He could just ask her…

"Merlin?"

"Yeah, Lancelot?"

"…Thank you. For everything."

Merlin grins at him in the way that only she can, as though she's never had a happier moment in her life, and all the way up through her too-bright blue eyes. She has obviously decided she won't cry. Lancelot's heart hurts just a little at the thought of leaving her.

If he stays, maybe one day he and Merlin…but that isn't possible.
Lancelot leaves.

Merlin knew she'd miss Lancelot, but maybe being his soulmate and being so far away makes it hurt more that it might have.

She can't help but wonder if she didn't drive him away. If she had done something wrong. Merlin wonders if she wasn't good enough for Lancelot to want to stay.

She wonders if the one friend she has who knows her secret truly thinks she is a monster. If he hates her. But even monsters have to live their lives, and Merlin ignores her dark thoughts and smiles brighter and laughs louder and doesn't know that ladies are jealous of the admiring looks men give her for the beauty that shines out from inside.

She tells Arthur a week after.

He looks at her wrist (RUN!) and listens to how Lancelot saved her life, and expresses his condolences. "I'm sorry, Merlin…but how could he just leave his soulmate like that?"

"I think he only wanted to protect me. He didn't want me banished, too." Or worse, she adds silently.

Merlin resolves not to find any more soulmates if she can help it. They might leave her, too, and she certainly won't go looking. By extension, she will have to wait for the big reveal until Arthur is King of Camelot.

Days pass, and dangers pass, and everyone Merlin knows nearly dies at least once a month. Merlin herself is in more scrapes and sticky spots than she cares to admit, even to herself. She dreams that she loses someone very dear to her, someone she hasn't seen in a while. In the dream, she doesn't know who it is, only that a fire is crackling as the body burns and smoke turns the sky gray.

Her thoughts go to her mother, but only a week later, Hunith shows up at Camelot, looking for help. She is perfectly fine, so Merlin dismisses the dream.

She goes back to Ealdor, to the place the adults hated her for being a child without a father and where the children hated her because their parents did, and where she'd had her only friend ever.

No matter the way they treated her, it was her mother's home. Merlin will help them, though it was never home to her. She looks forward to seeing Will again.

Their reunion does not go as expected.

"I loved you," Will says desperately, reaching for her arm. Merlin pulls back silently, brow furrowed in confusion. "I loved you, and you left without even saying goodbye, and now you come back with them—they are nobles and royalty and everything we always hated, Merlin! How could you?"

She can't answer, doesn't answer, wants to defend Arthur and Morgana and Gwen, but Will loved her, and she can't breathe because it doesn't make sense—"Arthur is different! You don't understand. I trust him. And the others. You give them no credit, Will."

He straightens up stiffly and suddenly. "You trust him, do you? You trust him—he knows, then? About the fact that you're a warlock?"

Merlin has to look away, and tries to pretend to herself it's only the dusty air that is making her tear up.
Will shakes his head, a dry smile with no humor. "Of course he doesn't. He's the prince of Camelot, Merlin. Soulmate—" his voice breaks, and Merlin thinks, *he loved me.* "—soulmate or not, if he knew, he wouldn't hesitate to run you through."

He dies in her arms.

"Merlin…I'm scared." Will is crying, and shaking, and almost convulsing. Blood coats his mouth and teeth.

"You're going to be alright, Will, I promise…" She strokes the sides of his face gently, oblivious to the grime and dirt and blood.

His hazel eyes are fixed on her own blue ones. "I wished…I wished, more than once…that we could be soulmates. You might've…" Will shudders, trying not to choke on his own blood. "…might've loved me then. Could you have loved me?"

Merlin tries to swallow through the huge painful lump in her throat. "I…you were my best friend, Will, my only friend. You stuck by me, always, and I'm so sorry I left, please just stay with me…stay with me, Will…"

"Merlin…." Will sighs, and breathes out. He stops shaking so violently, and looks almost peaceful in a way he never bothered or wanted to be when he was alive. His eyes stare past her unseeingly.

She remembers her dream, of losing someone dear…it was never her mother. Merlin holds him, and rocks back and forth whispering his name until his body grows cold.

Somehow, the tears don't come for her first friend, and so she doesn't cry.

Chapter End Notes

Um. Sorry?
Loyalty Joins The Crowd

Chapter Summary

Merlin hits the one year at Camelot mark. Yay! The prince himself is escorting one of Camelot's favorite knights from the Courts at Ordon back to Camelot and Merlin gets a big shock when said knight is—ahem. Sorry, almost gave that one away. Also, I'm relatively sure that no one dies in this chapter! It's a miracle!

Chapter Notes

Well, I've already posted Chapter Six on FFN, and I thought I had already posted Five here, but I hadn't. So here you go, and I'm posting Six here forthwith!

Also: for all the Harry Potter fans out there, RIP Alan Rickman. Severus Snape will forever be missed.
"The pain we all feel at this dreadful loss reminds me, and, reminds us, that though we may come from different countries and speak in different tongues, our hearts beat as one." -Albus Dumbledore

Summary: The soulmate words were seemingly the one form of magic Uther Pendragon could not best. Merlin has never wanted hers; they are sure to be a great deal of trouble on top of being a warlock. After all, soulmarks are a type of magic, and she has eight.

Spoilers for BBC's Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 5:

It's been almost a full year since Merlin came to Camelot when Arthur announces that they are riding out to the Court of Ordon.

"The who at whatnow?" she asks, perching on the edge of Arthur's table to polish his left armored gauntlet as he eats lunch. Merlin has not had another dream that doesn't feel like it's just a dream, and she's glad. Every one so far has led to a bad thing happening.

Arthur sighs and uses his Merlin-Could-You-Possibly-Be-Thicker look. "Ordon is a training court on the far side of Mercia, permanently declared neutral territory by the kings of all five kingdoms. The best knights from each court go there to share training methods and skills without fear of enmity or strife between them. It's so far out of the way that news of who is fighting which wars against each other hardly ever reach it."

His explanation is obviously meant to clear up the issue. It doesn't.
Merlin pauses in her polishing, narrowing her eyes at him. "So…why do we care?"

Arthur groans exaggeratedly, slamming his goblet back onto the table. Merlin frowns at him. The goblet didn't do anything. "I would think that it's obvious, Merlin!"

He doesn't continue. Merlin raises her eyebrow. The warlock's been watching Gaius carefully and looking in shields and swords when she polishes them to perfect the result.

"Well, Merlin," Arthur drawls, going slowly as if talking to a small child, "we sent my second in command, the senior knight of Camelot, Sir Leon, to train with them for a year, and then bring his newfound knowledge back here to teach our knight recruits."

Merlin switches to the right gauntlet, crossing her legs and frowning slightly in thought. "Sir Leon… the name sounds familiar, but he must have left before I got here."

"Yes, well," Arthur sighs, stretching out and putting his boots up on the table corner Merlin isn't occupying. "I'm honestly not surprised you've heard of him. The man is barely six years older than I am, but he has a cool head the like of which I've never seen. Leon somehow retains the ability to be calm and logical in practically any situation, though he is a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield, or if you anger him with good reason."

Merlin's other eyebrow joins the first. "He sounds…nice. That's pretty odd, coming from you."

Arthur leans back in his chair, brushing his hair back and trying to appear as though he has done nothing out of the ordinary. He doesn't often extol the virtues of others beside himself, and they both know it.

"He is a good man, an excellent knight. And a friend. He was knighted at seventeen, for God's sake, Merlin. No one is knighted at seventeen! I was only eleven at the time, and he got stuck tutoring me quite a bit, as the most junior knight. Never lost his head with me once, I tell you, and knew how to wrap me around his little finger. Very diplomatic, Leon. Best knight we have, really."

"You sound like you miss him." Merlin observes, debating whether or not to throw the gauntlet at Arthur's face in good fun as she would usually.

The prince is unusually somber and he gazes off into the distance, blue eyes cloudy with memories. "I do. Quite a lot, actually. But the point is," his tone turns brisk; "we're going out to the Spokes to replace him with Sir Invar in two days' time. I need Leon back here to help and support me, as I'll soon be taking on more responsibility as Crown Prince when I turn twenty-one. Also, the journey will take almost four weeks each way, so pack a change of clothes."

This is very annoying news. Merlin decides to throw the gauntlet at his face.

"Merlin!"

She puts on her innocent face. "Yes, Sire?"

Arthur growls and fumes for a moment before remembering that there's a reception feast for some Lady or Lord or whatnot to get ready for, and yelps. "Merlin! I've got to get ready!"

She rolls her eyes, puts down Arthur's stray bits of armor and goes to help him get dressed. "Really, Sire, I hadn't noticed."

"…and Merlin, speaking of clothes." Arthur tries to open the delicate topic sensitively. "You should probably wear a dress for the reception. Wouldn't do to have you look like a boy."
"Arthur, I wear breeches and a tunic and jacket because they are twenty time more practical than a skirt. Also, they hide my numerous soulmarks much better than a skirt or anything with short sleeves. I really don't want to be tossed into the dungeons, thank you." she trails off, helping him with his ceremonial shirt.

"Point taken." Arthur concedes, wriggling into his new trousers.

"Mmm-hmm." Victory, Merlin thinks triumphantly.

"…You wouldn't consider leaving that confounded neckerchief off, would you?"

Or not. Merlin tightens Arthur's belt a notch too far on purpose. "Prat."

The trip isn't really that bad, but Sir Invar is just a bit stiff for Merlin to be stuck with for four weeks.

Taking that into account, by the time the party of three arrive at the Spokes, Sir Invar and Merlin have formed almost a comradeship of necessity, sharing exasperated looks and trying not to laugh or punch Arthur in alternate moments. The prince of Camelot has been practically beside himself for the whole length of the trip, constantly waxing eloquent about the standard of training available there. The subject of Sir Leon has also been practically exhausted; between Invar's inquiries of the man he would be succeeding at the Court of Ordon and Arthur's willingness to extol his virtues.

They ride into a courtyard similar in structure to that of Camelot, although all the stone is of a dark brown color. Unlike Camelot, there are few or no towers and high battlements, and the walls are shorter and wider than that of their home.

Merlin privately thinks the place was positively ugly in comparison. Camelot will always be more beautiful to her—it has become her home.

But however ugly Ordon might be, the cheerful mood belays any other misgiving she might have about the place. Everywhere that you can see, men in various types and stages of training gear are talking, laughing, listening to an instructor, or sparring out on one of the many low, flat fields. The actual training accessories seem to be impressive, even to Merlin's (mostly) untrained eye. It reminds Merlin a bit of the bustle of the Camelot marketplace, only with less plump, cheery women and food, and more metal and pointy things.

The Steward of Ordon, Sir Bavarian, meets them at the door to the Great Hall. The man is rather short, and a bit stocky, but obviously in shape. He has a square jaw and short cut brown hair, but a pleasantly cheery face.

"Prince Arthur, Sir Invar," he greets them. "I received your messenger last week, with no small amount of sorrow. Sir Leon is one of the most respected knights here at the Court, and we shall all be sorry to see him go. Although," Sir Bavarian adds with a small bow in Invar's direction, "I'm sure Sir Invar will be welcomed without delay."

He is right. Within a matter of moments, a crowd of young knights around Invar and Arthur's ages come sweeping up, filling the silence with their chatter, drawing Invar in, and sweeping him away. Arthur laughs outright of the sight of his overwhelmed fellow Camelotian being pulled away by the river of young men.

The prince manages to pull himself together, half-snickering into his glove to disguise it as a cough. "I appreciate the welcome, Sir Bavarian, and I must say it's an honor to be here. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to clean up and have a chance to ride around and see everything before we make off with Sir Leon at dawn tomorrow."
Sir Bavarian bows again, obviously delighted. "Of course. And it is an honor to meet you, Prince Arthur. I only wish you had enough time to stay and show us some of your widely-known skill."

Merlin rolls her eyes, trying not to laugh. As if the prat needs any type of ego boost. They head to the rooms they have been given for the night, and Merlin orders enough hot water for two baths from a passing servant. Even she is dusty and grimy enough to warrant one today.

After they each bathe and eat, clothes sent off to be washed before the morning, Arthur heads back outside with a spring in his step, Merlin only a few paces behind. Outside, a curly-haired, handsome knight bearing the crest of Camelot on the shoulder of his red cloak is waiting for them with three horses.

Arthur immediately lights up, jogging the rest of the way to the knight. "Leon! It's good to see you, my friend."

"And you as well, Arthur," Leon replies, smiling almost as wide as his prince. "It feels even longer than it has been." They grasp elbows, and Arthur turns to mount one of the horses.

"I'm glad I got the extra horse," the knight remarks to Arthur, mounting his own. "I was told your servant would most likely wish to accompany you."

"Yes, thank you," Arthur replies, refusing to acknowledge Merlin rolling her eyes again at your servant. "Merlin here is not only my servant, but my soulmate, and would hate to be left behind."

"Prince Arthur, Sire!" Up ahead, Invar is being pushed into a sparring ring with a few other young men. "Come see this!" Arthur laughs at the young knight's enthusiasm and spurs his horse into a trot, leaving Sir Leon and Merlin walking their horses sedately behind. The silence is comfortable, almost, but Merlin really isn't one to stay quiet for long.

"It is always like this, Sir Leon?" she asks, referring to the craziness surrounding them as well as the upbeat, festive mood.

The curly-haired knight inhales sharply as though surprised, before seemingly collecting himself. "Well, yes, but you may as well drop the Sir, seeing as we're soulmates and all that."

The smooth script winding about her right ankle burns with a gentle warmth, as Merlin's head whips around to stare at him so fast her neck twinges. Flailing with the arm not holding the reins, she reeled forwards on her horse, which sidesteps nervously and eyes her distrustfully. Leon grabs her arm and stops her from falling completely, holding on until she can hook her soft leather boots back into the stirrups.

"Sorry," she mutters. "I'm really clumsy. Um, what did you say?"

"Soulmates. I mean, I thought from your words...I couldn't be sure, of course, but I thought it safe to assume..." he trails off ruefully.

Merlin stares at him, slowly breaking into a huge grin that seems to Leon to make even the sun glow brighter in the sky. "Yeah. Soulmates. We are. Sorry. I just...wasn't expecting it. Arthur is going to be..."

"Appalled? Annoyed? Shocked?" Leon supplies calmly, twitching his reins to ride in closer to Merlin's horse with a casual smile. "If you ask me, I think it's quite good timing. We'll have the full four weeks back to Camelot to get to know each other."

Merlin rolls her eyes and laughs, slightly out of breath. "Oh, you've no idea. Arthur hasn't shut up for
Leon chuckles in amusement. "Yes, I heard from Invar earlier while you and Arthur were freshening up about your first meeting with Arthur. He wanted to warn me not to get on your bad side. I think he may have witnessed the event personally."

"Did he?" Merlin focuses on her memory of the event, recalling that one of the men with Arthur at the time had, indeed, looked quite similar to Invar. "Yes, I think you're right," the young warlock decides. "He was there."

"Although he didn't quite get through his account of that bungled mace fight before he was swept off again by his new friends," the knight muses. "It sounded rather entertaining. I'm sorry that I missed seeing it for myself. What was Arthur thinking, I wonder, giving you a mace?"

Merlin huffs in indignation, turning to glare at him. "I handled myself rather well for never having touched one before," she protests. "And anyway, His Royal Pratness may have almost won, but I kneed him in the stomach."

Leon shakes his head, clearly trying not to laugh. "Oh no, that's not what I meant. I just wondered at the prince's idiocy at giving you a mace when you'd had the guts to put him right the day before."

"Oh. Well…good. Fantastic," Merlin says, beaming as she brushes one of the strands of black hair that have fallen loose from her messy bun back behind her ear. The quest, however, is futile; the black lock of hair quickly rejoins the other wavy strands framing her face.

Beside her Leon glanced sideways at her obvious joy and mentally heaved a sigh of relief. With only one soulmate he had hoped for a particularly nice one, and so far it seemed that luck had prevailed. He couldn't help cracking a smile of his own as they rode once more in a comfortable silence up to where Arthur was waiting for them, holding his horse's reins.

"What on Earth could have taken you so long?" he demands, narrowing his eyes at the matching grins on their faces. "Why are you smiling?"

"Arthur," Merlin starts hesitantly. "Something may have kind of happened…"

"It's not a bad thing," Leon cuts in hurriedly. "There's nothing to be worried about, Sire…"

"Then why am I worried?" Arthur growls, crossing his arms and adopting a rather cross expression. Merlin and Leon exchange glances, bright blue eyes meeting warm hazel ones.

"We're soulmates," Merlin blurts. "Sir Leon and I."

"Just Leon, please," he says mildly.

Her face flushes pink. She's been staring at Leon's words for only her entire life, she ought to remember. "Right. Sorry."

They both look back to Arthur, awaiting his reaction.

"Well. Of course you are," he says, exasperated. "Honestly, Merlin, nothing really surprises me anymore."
Revenge Hits Pretty Hard

Chapter Summary

Merlin has another slightly creepy possibly-precognitive dream. Also, she hates hunts. They undoubtedly leads to tears. Many, many tears. Stuff happens, a VERY big problem arises, and Merlin yells at the dragon. Also, she kills someone. Read on!

Chapter Notes

....aaaaaaannnd here it is! Chapter Six! Yay! Hope you all enjoy the tears....

Summary: The soulmate words were seemingly the one form of magic Uther Pendragon could not best. Merlin has never wanted hers; they are sure to be a great deal of trouble on top of being a warlock. After all, soulmarks are a type of magic, and she has eight.

Spoilers for BBC's Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 6:

Leon is just as nice as he seems, and doesn't even look fazed when she gets up the courage to tell him about her eight soulmates.

"I am honored beyond reckoning to be one of them," he says. "And I thank you for telling me, Merlin." Yes, Merlin doesn't really mind having Leon as a soulmate at all.

The four weeks pass quickly.

She dreams of a woman with black hair and red lips twisted into a smirk, and wakes up panting with fear in the darkness of her room. In the dream, the woman, her features too blurry to identify her, has killed someone Merlin loves. The anger comes out full-blast, and it destroys the woman.

Merlin jerks awake in her bedroll shivering, and wonders what could possibly be happening to her dreams. Mighty warlock or not, this doesn't exactly come into her area of expertise.

They arrive back in Camelot just in time for the biggest hunt of the year, arranged by the various senior knights to welcome Leon back. Merlin really hates hunts. Bad things happen on hunts. The Questing Beast, for example.

The grief on Uther's face is devastating. Maybe even kings have hearts, even if ones made of stone. But Merlin doesn't have time to grieve when she needs to be saving Arthur. No point in giving up until he's gone.
Merlin goes to the Isle of the Blessed, and trades her life for Arthur's. She's supposed to stand beside Arthur and protect him when he is king, Merlin knows, but if he dies now...well, there's no point, is there? And she could never ask anyone else to give up their life like this.

She stands before Nimueh, black hair even more disgruntled than usual, the parts that have fallen out from her messy bun curly and wayward. She feels small and insignificant in her trousers, tunic, neckerchief, and jacket next to this beautiful sorceress who looks so wild and magical with her scarlet dress, her perfectly crumpled and arranged mass of hair.

Merlin remembers her dream, the latest one, and recognizes Nimueh from it. Another shiver runs up her spine. But there is no other choice.

She gives Nimueh a single nod. Do it. The sorceress smiles, her red lips twisting into the smile from Merlin's dream, and suddenly this feels like a very bad idea. But she can't think about that now, she needs to get the water from the Cup of Life to Arthur.

Arthur doesn't die.

Before she leaves him, Merlin leans down and kisses his forehead and whispers, "I'm so sorry." She knows she won't get another chance to say goodbye.

Merlin has to say goodbye to Gwen, too. If she chooses to say 'Goodbye' instead of 'Goodnight, Gwen' like she usually would...well, the maidservant is worried about Arthur and doesn't notice. That's okay. Merlin would rather she didn't notice, anyway.

Merlin sees Leon at the marketplace, in the evening on her way home from Gwen's. The knight looks so relieved to see her that Merlin feels bad about not telling him that she's a dead warlock walking. They had become such good friends so quickly. They were platonics, they had decided. They were so comfortable and happy with just being friends with each other that they didn't need or want something more.

Merlin certainly doesn't need something more. And it isn't like she hasn't noticed Leon flirting with one of the girls selling handmade jewelry at the last market day while Merlin browsed their selection.

"Are you alright, Merlin? I hear that Prince Arthur will live?" He says anxiously, grabbing her elbow. The worry in his blue-green eyes is obvious.

"Yes," she manages. "Yes, Arthur will be fine, I promise."

Leon relaxes instantly, his shoulders slumping in relief. "Oh, thank the gods. I—we were all so worried for him. I'll go and tell the other knights that they have nothing to fear."

Merlin nods, and the ginger knight turns to walk away. The young warlock hesitates a moment, then calls after him.

"Leon!"

Leon turns, an inquisitive look on his handsome face. There is only a moment's pause before Merlin's hug knocks him back a full two paces. She wraps her arms around the good-natured knight, who, after overcoming the shock of being hit full force, wraps his chainmail-and-cloak arms around her gently.

"Sorry," she says into the red fabric, her voice slightly muffled. "I...I just..."
"It's fine," he says, and Merlin can feel the warmth of his smile. "I forgot that Arthur is your soulmate, too. You must have been as afraid for him as we were."

"Yeah." She disengages herself from Leon and steps back. "Sorry. I…goodbye, Leon." Merlin turns and flees up into the palace before he can shove aside his puzzlement to reply.

She avoids Gaius, runs up the stair into her room, and sits on her bed to wait.

Merlin came to Camelot expecting to be arrested or heading home within a couple of months. But then there was Arthur, and Gwen, and Gaius became more like the father she never had every day. Lancelot came and went, and now Leon is here, too. She loves them, she does, so much it hurts; and it hurts even worse every time she lies to one of them.

She hates lying.

Merlin wonders if this would be easier if she could just die with those she loves around her. If she could stop lying, just once, just once in her nineteen years. If she could tell them that she's doing this for them. Tell them not to be sad that she's inexplicably gone from the world.

She thinks of the four soulmates she has yet to meet, and of how her words, black on their skin, will pale and turn to gray as she breathes her last.

No one likes to talk about what it means when soulmarks fade to gray, because it means that the person who put them there is dead. Hunith used to check hers morning and night, just to make sure that Merlin's father's words were still deep black.

None of Merlin's marks are gray; all of her soulmates are alive. None of them have died before she can meet them, at least not yet.

But the warlock hates to think of how they will feel, waking up the next morning to find that a set of words has turned a pale, ghostly gray, that a soulmate is dead. That someone they might have loved, someone they never even met is gone with hardly a trace to ever show that they existed.

She avoids thinking of how Will's soulmate must have felt, when he died. She doesn't like to wonder if Be more respectful, won't you? mourned at all.

Gwen will be devastated. Arthur will brood, and perhaps pretend that her death does not hurt him. Merlin feels selfish for hoping she means enough that it might. Leon will grieve, too. Platonic though they are, they are still soulmates, and he loves her as she loves him.

Lancelot…Merlin never really knows what to think about Lancelot. But Merlin will never have a chance to learn if the others will care, if they might weep for the soulmate they never met.

She will not have a chance, because she will be dead.

The waiting is terrible.

Coldblooded.

She is so afraid.

She is so afraid, but if she does not wish to die, neither can she bring herself to regret her bargain. Merlin will die, yes, but Arthur will live.

Merlin can't remember when she stopped thinking of Arthur as an arrogant idiot she wouldn't wish to
be seen with in public and started considering him someone she will do this for. But not only he one of her soulmates, he is her destiny. If he dies, he won't be.

She lies terrified on her bed, thinking of her mother, Gaius, and her soulmates, until exhaustion from fear and dread finally takes her.

Merlin blinks open her eyes to find that the dawn light has come and gone—and she can feel every nerve in her body and the world has never looked brighter, and she is alive, she's alive—how is she alive? Merlin stumbles down the rickety wooden stairs to find Gaius, her utter joy tempered by the thought—the possibility that Arthur, Arthur might be gone…and Gaius is kneeling over a body lying on the cold stone floor.

"Gaius? Gaius, I'm ali—what's that?" she blurts out, a sinking feeling in her chest.

"Merlin, don't—!" he starts, but she's already close enough to see the figure's face.

She lets out a keening wail of despair, collapsing to her knees at the woman's side. "No! Mother—no!" Hunith's faces and arms are covered with terrible boils, and her breath is fading fast. Even through her obvious pain, Hunith smiles when she sees Merlin's face.

"My daughter," she breathes. "My light."

"You're going to be alright," Merlin says, trembling so hard she almost drops her mother's hand. "You'll be fine…"

"Of course," Hunith breathes. "You're such a good daughter. So good to me. I'm so proud of you, Merlin…"

"I'll make you better, I promise, you will be fine," the young warlock insists, but she knows in her heart that not even magic can heal Hunith now.

"So good," her mother says again, and breathes out. She does not breathe back in. Merlin bends over her head, holding her mother's body, shaking, wracked with sobs.

Gaius sits back with a sigh, letting her grieve. Nimueh did not bargain Merlin's life, he thinks, because Merlin is Magic, and cannot be bargained. The sorceress bargained her mother's.

"You knew this would happen! You had me trade my mother's life for Arthur's!" Merlin doesn't care that she's screaming, or that tears have turned her eyes red and painful.

The dragon rears back in annoyance. "You said you would do anything."

"You knew my mother would die, didn't you, and you sent me anyway!"

"I knew the price would be a heavy one, but we need Arthur to live." Kilgharrah says in his gravelly voice, as though that fixes everything.

Merlin wants to scream again. She knows Arthur has to live, thank you! "I'm not one of you!"

Kilgharrah glowers at her with his golden eyes. "We are both creatures of the Old Religion, young warlock. Your destiny is to protect the young Pendragon so that one day, magic will return to the land. Only then will I be freed."

Merlin's eyes are burning worse now, at his admission. "That was all you cared about? I thought you were my friend!"
"We are more than that. We are kin!" the dragon insists.

"My only family was my mother, and you had me murder her! I would have died, I—I would have, I was waiting! I may have been afraid—but I did not regret my choice!" The warlock shouts, the noise echoing around the cavern. She can feel the anger building up inside of her.

Kilgharrah can obviously feel Merlin's absolute rage, and tries to back down a bit. "Her life has not been taken in vain, for we can achieve great things together, you and I."

The pressure building up inside her chest stops for a half a second, and then explodes. "You will never be released!" Pointing at the dragon, she feels a slight vindictive pleasure. "For what you have done, I'll make sure you never see the light!"

Kilgharrah makes a terrible sound, writhing as if with agony. "Merlin!" Flames come streaming towards her, but she holds up one hand, and they divide around her like water for only a moment, and then she is gone.

"Arthur?" Merlin pokes her head tentatively around the door.

The prince is awake, and at his table, eating. He still looks a bit unwell, and will be sore for a while, but will recover, she knows. "Ah, Merlin. Come in."

"I...while you were sick, my mother..." Merlin has to swallow hard, eyes far too bright. They are still red, and a little puffy. "I just discovered...you know Ealdor is so far away, I didn't know, but, um, she..." she can't bring herself to say it, wringing her hands in helplessness.

Arthur seems to understand, though, the cheerful look on his face crumpling. "Oh. Oh, Merlin. I'm so sorry."

"May I have leave for a few days, Sire?" she blurs finally, avoiding what she originally meant to say. "I...there's things in her cottage I'd like to keep, and I'd like to...to bury her, if I might."

The prince is already nodding, agreeing with everything she says. "Of course, Merlin, as long as you need. Anything I can do, consider it done. Anything at all."

Merlin can barely find her voice. "Thank you, Arthur."

She turns to go, but stops. Going back to Ealdor and burying her mother is Plan B. She intends to find Nimueh and get her mother back. If she can't, she'll kill the sorceress or die trying. Merlin may not get a chance to say goodbye to her first soulmate.

"You should know...you're a great warrior," she says haltingly. "And one day you'll be a great king. I am happy to be your servant until the day I die."

Arthur regards her carefully, eyes glittering strangely in the light. "Sometimes I think I know you, Merlin. Other times..."

"Yeah, well. Just...don't be a prat." She manages an almost-smile, and then she's gone.

"I take it you were unsatisfied with our deal?" Nimueh appears around a pillar as if out of nowhere, smirk pulling at her lips.

"I bid my life for Arthur, not my mother's!" Merlin replies, clenching her hands into fists. The two
women begin to circle as though in a duel.

The sorceress laughs. "The Old Religion does not care who lives and who dies, only that the balance of the world is restored. I can do nothing for your mother now, even if I wished."

"It is you that did this, Nimueh, don't even try to deny it!"

"But with my help, Arthur will become King." Nimueh says, trying to cast the conversation onto a different topic.

Merlin's eyes blaze gold. "I will make Arthur King, and you shall not be there to see it! Atrice!" The spell pushes Nimueh back a couple of paces, and ruffles the sorceress's hair. She loses the smirk.

"You are more powerful than I expected," she admits. "But we are both creatures of the Old Religion." The smirk reappears. "You should join me."

"You think I would join forces with such a selfish and cruel magic?" Merlin scoffs, shaking her head. "Never!"

"So be it. Acwele!"

Merlin flies backwards under the weight of Nimueh's spell, a circle of steam arising from where the fireball struck her ribs. Her flesh feels like it is on fire. She groans in pain, glaring up at the other woman.

Nimueh sighs, giving a small smile to show she's not very sorry at all. "Pity. Together, we could have ruled the world." She turns to walk away.

Merlin staggers to her feet with great difficulty, anger evident. Dark clouds start subtly closing in above head. "You...should not have killed my mother." She thrusts out one hand. The spell is instinctive—elemental, as Gaius once said to her, and the elements respond to the power that shows in Merlin's eyes, flashing gold.

Nimueh turns, only to throw her head back and scream as the magical lightning arcs through her. One last shriek and she explodes in a flurry of ashes.

Merlin collapses to the ground, panting heavily. She wants to cry, but all the tears her eyes can muster have already fallen. Her mother is gone forever, but so is Nimueh.
First Love Hits Harder

Chapter Summary

Merlin has a much needed talk with one of her usually-absent soulmates, meets Soulmate Number Five, and has her first experience with lo—ahem, what? I wasn't saying anything at aaaaalllll.....

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hello, folks! I hope you've all been doing okay! I've been really busy in RL, and I looked at the date yesterday and thought, I should really update 8 For 1. And then I didn't, so I'm doing it now. I hope you guys like this chapter, and I'd like to thank all of you for the amazing amount of support I've received from everyone! Each and every comment, bookmark, and kudos makes my day a little brighter. And it's all thanks to you! I could never do this without you guys. :D

Note: I made the choice to genderbend one other character besides Merlin, and that character is that of Freya, as you will see in this chapter. Just to clear up any confusion, Frey/Merlin is NOT the the ship I mentioned in the author's note of chapter one. That, you will just have to wait and see. ;) Enjoy!

Summary: The soulmate words were seemingly the one form of magic Uther Pendragon could not best. Merlin has never wanted hers; they are sure to be a great deal of trouble on top of being a warlock. After all, soulmarks are a type of magic, and she has eight.

Spoilers for BBC's Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 7:

The dream comes only a few weeks after her mother's death, and it is how she knows that Gwen and Arthur are truly destined to fall in love.

Arthur, crowned King, is holding the hand of a beautiful woman in royal purple that must be Guinevere, although the confidence that radiates from the girl in the vision has not yet surfaced. They stand at the front of the Great Hall, and Arthur places a crown on her head, and the crowd roars, "Long live the Queen!"

Merlin has no problem with that, indeed, it makes her smile to even think of it—she just didn't expect it to happen so soon. Merlin isn't an idiot, she sees the looks they give each other when they think no one else is watching. She sees them fall for each other for good when the tournament happens. Merlin is happy for them, but wishes she could do something to help them. Anything.
Uther will never let them be together.

If they were soulmates, perhaps, but they have no matching words, with only a soulmark each, and he is a prince, and she is a servant. Merlin cannot help but feel bad that they bear her words instead of each other's. She has come between them without wishing or trying, and if their love is never allowed the opportunity to grow and blossom, it is her fault.

She can never forgive herself for that.

But there is nothing Merlin can do for now but smile, reassure them, and support them quietly in the background.

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Days pass, and Merlin saves Camelot again and again and again. She regrets some of her decisions—she still really needs to tell Morgana about her magic, but she just can't work up the nerve—but always tries to make the best of everything.

Merlin figures that the more bad things happen to or around you, the more you should smile and the happier you should be, because you're still around to enjoy the good things, too. She grins wider at every joke, and laughs whenever she can.

If she's going to do this destiny thing, Merlin tells herself, she not going to be all grim and serious. There's no point, because it won't help anything, and she will always be miserable.

Merlin chats with Gwen, and banters with Arthur, and laughs with Leon. She avoids thinking of Lancelot.

She hardly thinks about soulmates anymore, really, doesn't truly try to avoid them, but doesn't seek them out either. Merlin meets a man once who is visiting every florist's shop in Albion to buy blue carnations because of what his mark says: Blue carnations? Good choice, I love those.

She wishes him luck, and watches him walk away, full of hope and determination.

She knows that people will do similar things, going to a certain type of place or such indicated by their marks to try and find their soulmates, but she isn't interested the way she once might have been. Not anymore. If her soulmates want to find her, they'll just have to stumble across her by chance.

And then Gwen is kidnapped by Hengist, and Merlin stumbles back across Lancelot by chance.

Merlin and Arthur jump in to save them just in time. Lancelot and Gwen are tied back to back inside the cage.

"What are you doing here, Lancelot?" Merlin can't keep herself from smiling so wide her cheeks ache, even though something in her chest aches worse at seeing him here.

He left me because he knew, she thinks—and immediately squashes the thought, shoving it away to the deepest darkest corner of her mind.

Lancelot is staring at her like she's given him Hengist's head on a silver platter. "I had to help Gwen. I knew she was another of your soulmates, and I couldn't leave her to die when she'd been so kind to me. I assume you're here to help?"

"You assume correctly," Arthur says, swinging his sword in a wide circle. "Now get behind us!"
They pull a miraculous escape. Lancelot shoots Merlin a look that seems to say, *I know that was you*, but deigns to say anything until they are free and clear.

"Still up to your old tricks, then, Merlin?" he inquires quietly, sticking his sword in the ground point-first as they set up camp.

"Probably best you don't mention it," she replies, and his smile is so infectious she can't help but smile back before she shakes it off and sits down to make a fire.

Later the four are sitting around the campfire when Lancelot brings up the rescue.

"I'm surprised you undertook a rescue mission with just the two of you," he says, raising his eyebrows at Gwen, who flushes red, and Arthur, who studiously looks away. "I don't suppose your father would let you have any men to rescue a servant, yet you came anyway."

Arthur clears his throat and searches for an excuse. "Well, Morgana begged me, and she and Guinevere are such good friends I couldn't refuse, even without my father's approval."

"I see." Lancelot nods understandingly.

"I need some rest," Gwen says abruptly, and Arthur agrees. Lancelot offers to stand guard, and Merlin sits down next to him, letting her hair down out of her bun for the night. He looks sideways at her and laughs at her annoyance at the hardship of trying not to yank out the tangled hairs at the base of her neck.

"They have feelings for each other, don't they?" Lancelot asks with a smile, although his question sounds more like a statement.

"Yes," she says, nodding and smiling at the thought. "I have hopes that when Arthur is king, he will make Gwen his queen."

Lancelot studies her, something Merlin doesn't recognize glittering in his eyes as he looks at her. "You know, don't you? You've seen the future. With your magic."

Merlin lets out a breath she didn't know she was holding, tugging at a strand of hair that is bundled into a knot. "Not…not exactly. I have dreams, sometimes. I've found that it's beneficial to believe them, or to do as they tell me. Once…once I dreamt to go and pick mushrooms. That's how I met you."

"That's amazing," he admits softly. "I've never known anyone like you before."

"You think it's amazing?" she can't keep the surprise out of her voice. Merlin looks down at her leather boots, scuffed with mud. "I thought, when you left, that maybe it was because of…because I'm…"

Lancelot's quiet, steady breathing beside her pauses for a moment. "You thought I left because you had magic. That I despised you for your gifts. It isn't a question."

"Yes," she says, finally.

"Oh, Merlin. You've the kindest heart of anyone I've ever known." Lancelot's voice is heavy with emotion. "Your magic, your incredible powers, they just makes you even more unique than you already are. I could never wish for anyone else as my soulmate. And you are so brave. I am honored to have you."
Merlin looks up at him, surprised to see tears glittering in his eyes. "You mean it?" She says softly.

"Always, Merlin. Always." Lancelot wraps his arms around her, and he's warm, even through the chainmail.

She buries her head in his shoulder, speechless. He understands what she can't say.

Merlin can't tell if her lightheartedness is obvious to the others the next morning, but neither Arthur nor Gwen comments on it. Lancelot stays just long enough to help them on their way.

"I'll miss you," Merlin says, delaying mounting her horse for as long as she can. "I wish you could come with us."

"Perhaps someday, things will change, and I can return to Camelot again." He tells her, hands on his sword hilt. Lancelot looks down with a smile. "But until then, stay safe and be happy."

Her grin and happy blue eyes are bright enough to shade the sun. "And you, Lancelot."

Lancelot raises his sword to Arthur, who salutes back. Merlin notices the tiny, meaningful nods they exchange, and only has a moment to wonder if maybe she missed something before the trio rides off at a canter.

If Merlin could allow herself to laugh at the latest Camelotian calamity, the troll debacle might be funny. But she's too busy saving everyone and not dying herself to sit down and have a good laugh. Next time, she consoles herself, and then immediately regrets assuming there will be a next time.

The days pass, and Merlin's life is as disastrous as ever, but she works through it, and reminds herself to be cheerful when other people can see her. Lancelot has been smoothed out. Her soulmate record is looking quite good, she reflects, at least, far better than it ever has before.

And then there is Frey.

She first sees him on the way back from the round with Gaius and something inside her screams that he is just like her, and wouldn't she want a stranger to help her? Gaius warns her off, but Merlin's thoughts can't get away from the pale boy with black hair, huddled in rags in a cage.

When Merlin is sure Gaius is asleep, she sneaks out, determined to free her kindred spirit. The look on his face when she comes up to the cage makes any doubts she has disappear.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you," she says, and then, placing her hand on the lock, "Toespringe!"

It snaps open, and she releases his manacles before helping the boy climb out. If Merlin didn't know better, she might have thought that her words made him look more afraid than before. He's thinner even than she is, and she drapes his arm over her shoulder. He's far too light.

Once they are settled in the boy's new cave hideout, she offers him her jacket, but he shakes his head silently, declining the offer. Merlin realizes he hasn't yet spoken, not even to say his name.

"Why did you do that for me?" He asks quietly.

Oh. Soulmate.

She sits down rather abruptly, looking at him quite differently. Finally she settles on smiling and
answering his question. "Because…well, it could've been me. In that cage. I'm Merlin, by the way."

He shakes her warm hand with his cool one and tentatively smiles back. "Frey."

She brings back food fit for a prince, as she jokingly tells Frey.

"Does anyone know you have magic?" he asks curiously as he eats.

"Only you," she says, looking into his deep blue-gray eyes. "You, my mentor, Gaius, and one other person. But…” Merlin thinks of Lancelot, and his kindness and nobility. "I don't think either of them really understand."

Frey shakes his head. "I wish I was like everyone else, but…"

"You just somehow know that you're not?"

"Because I'm cursed," he says. The despair in his voice cuts her to the core.

"Don't think that, Frey. Magic can be a gift, not just a curse. Look." She insists, stretching out her fingers eagerly. The candle flames slowly float up into the air, spinning around and around. The light flickers off their faces, but they stalwartly refuse to sputter and die.

Frey's face is full of wonder. "Beautiful," he breathes.

"Isn't it?" Merlin gently lowers the candles back down, grinning so wide she thinks she must look like a doofus.

Frey shakes his head slowly, a smile turning up the corners of his mouth. "I wasn't talking about the magic."

"Anything at all. Ham. Cheese."

"…strawberries."

Merlin raises an eyebrow but nods and rubs her hands together. "Strawberries it is." She claps her hands together and whispers a spell.

Frey's eyes twinkle with mirth and something else, too, and he smiles at her. Merlin opens her hands to show a delicate red rose, grins back, and hands it to him.

"This isn't a strawberry," he says gently, but he doesn't throw it away.

Merlin shrugs, grinning. "It's…the right color?"

Frey laughs, and she laughs with him. Suddenly he soberes, locking gazes with her where she sits next to him on the floor. "Why do you do these things for me? I'm sure a beautiful girl like you has better things to be doing than spending time with me."

She flushes red up the back of her neck and into the tips of her ears. "I'm no one, really, when I'm not here. But I…I like you," Merlin confesses. "With you, I can be who I am. We don't have to hide anything. We don't have to worry."

Frey shakes his head, looking down. "You're not scared of me, are you?"
"Being different...that's nothing to be scared of." Merlin suddenly realizes how close she's sitting to Frey, and something in her belly tingles with warmth, and she leans forward, and he leans forward....

Footsteps echo off the dark cave walls.

She jerks back, eyes wide and face red, made aware of what was about to happen. "They must've followed me."

The pair has to scramble to get away, and when the hunters are gone, so is the moment.

By the time Arthur catches her nipping a set of new clothes from his chambers, Merlin is in love. She smiles wide when no one can see her, and when everyone can see her, and feels like twirling around and around and around, and wants to hold onto Frey's hand and never let go.

She and Frey are leaving Camelot to be together, and they will be happy, and Merlin only thinks of everything she's leaving behind once, when Frey reminds her; but then she puts the thought away and only focuses on the good. But they are not to get a happy ending.

"You remembered," Frey says in a whisper, looking out at the blue lake, framed by green mountains and flowery meadows.

"Of course," Merlin says, cradling his head and shoulders in her arms, their foreheads almost touching, her throat and eyes burning. "I'm so sorry for what that sorcerer did to you."

"Oh, Merlin." He smiles, the affection in his blue-gray eyes dispelling the growing cold feeling in her heart for only a moment. "You've nothing to be sorry for."

Merlin shakes her head, the burning in her eyes and throat becoming worse. "There must be some way I can save you!"

Frey coughs wetly, blood turning his mouth red. "You already have." His eyes are serene and warm, and full of something Merlin recognizes only vaguely. She has seen it in her mother's eyes, and Will's when he told Merlin that he loved her. "You loved me. And the beauty of your love made me feel less of a monster."

She brushes the fringe of his messy black hair away from his face, wishing the tears would come. "You were never a monster, Frey. I...I don't want you to go."

Frey smiles again, and he looks like he is happy. "One day, Merlin. One day, I will repay you. I...I promise." He sighs heavily, and it takes Merlin a moment to realize that he has breathed his last.

Something like a brittle piece of wood snaps inside her, where last she felt the warm tingle of love. She bends over him again, eyes shut tight. Merlin gently presses her lips to his forehead, wishing for just one more moment. Just one more.

A tear trails down her cheek and it feels like acid.

Frey is gone. Part of her heart goes with him.
Childhood Dreams Are Made Real

Chapter Summary

Merlin makes a Big Mistake, Merlin has a conversation with Arthur, Merlin learns something she did not expect, Merlin meets someone she sort of expected to (but not really), and Merlin has more than one consecutive overall bad day. Possibly, but not necessarily in that order.

Chapter Notes

Hey, folks! I realized that it's been more than a month since I posted, and I rushed to get this chapter up on FFN, and then completely forgot to doublepost here, so incredibly sorry about that, but here it is! I kind of hate this and the next one as a whole, but they had to be done. Steel yourselves, my friends, for much dialogue borrowed from "The Last Dragonlord" (2x13). Which is sort of why I hate it, because there wasn't much I could go into that was essential and wasn't already in the episode, and because I feel like I've stuck REALLY close to the episode for these chapters and I like to be original :( But I couldn't find a way around it, so I must apologize!

This chapter and the one after are centered on Episode 13 of Season 2, "The Last Dragonlord". I wouldn't usually spend this much time covering what happens in one episode, as you have seen, but I had to either make this one chapter and really long, or two chapters that I could flesh out more easily. The chapter after this one and the coming one deals with what happens afterwards (I wonder if anyone will predict the plot twist *evil laughter*), and then we're back in the free and clear.

Thank you for all the kudos, and everything else, too. I appreciate your support so much! :) Enjoy.

Spoilers for BBC's Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 8:

Frey's words curve from the top of her left shoulder blade down to the middle of her spine, once black as ink on her skin. Merlin knows without looking that they have faded to a gray, telling anyone who sees them that Frey is dead and gone.

But no one does see them, careful as she is, and she doesn't—can't!—look.

Her resolution to stay away from her unfound soulmates comes back in full force. Merlin is convinced that nothing good can really come of having soulmates, anyway. You can find them, but you can lose them, too.
Merlin has managed to leave behind the grief, for the most part, and is back to normal—*ish*, what do you call normal, for her? she's *never* normal—when she finds her father.

She is in the midst of regretting what is possibly the biggest mistake of all her almost two decades of life. Merlin let Kilgharrah loose on Camelot; on Arthur and Leon and the knights, and on Gwen and Gaius and all the other innocent people of Camelot. They are dying. Gwen has almost died at least twice. Arthur and Leon have almost died too many times to count.

And it is all her fault.

They are crouching on the battlements, Arthur just to Merlin's left, and Leon on the other side of Arthur.

"I'm sorry you're having to do this," Merlin says under her breath, needing to apologize for something when she has so much more to answer for.

Arthur hears her, and his brow furrows a little bit more. "Why? You're not to blame."

Merlin bites down on her lip so hard that she draws blood. She *is* to blame, and if everyone dies, and Arthur never fulfills his destiny, and she never meets another soulmate, she is the *only* one to blame. Not Kilgharrah, not Frey, not anyone else.

If only she had not sworn on her soulmates' lives, which the dragon knew meant more to her than her own…if only she had not needed the spell to return the soul of Cornelius Sigan. *If only*, she thinks bitterly. *If only* wishes were pieces of gold, beggars would be richer than kings.

Merlin is desperate enough to try to kill the dragon. She is no fool; she knows that Kilgharrah is the last of his kind. That if she kills him, she will practically be finishing Uther's job and committing genocide against an intelligent species. A magical race, one akin to her.

She may be desperate enough, but it doesn't work. It only makes him angry.

"Do not imagine your petty magic can harm me!" Kilgharrah roars, incensed by Merlin's attempt to kill him; turning on a dime in midair, the great dragon retreats for the night.

Furious, eyes stinging with the bitterness of failure, Merlin screams after him, fists balled up in her sleeves. "Why are you doing this? *You're killing innocent people!*"

Kilgharrah does not reply, but he turns his head a fraction, and she can read his accusation from just one magical-gold eye.

**No. You are.**

Arthur lists off the dead with a look of despair hidden in his eyes. Anyone who knows him well enough will be able to see it; the king, Merlin, and Leon not the least among them. Not even Arthur truly believes that there is a real chance of defeating the last dragon.

That scares Merlin more than anything.

Arthur never wants to give up. Arthur fights to the last man standing for as long as he can stay physically conscious. Arthur tries everything and then some and does whatever he has to. If Arthur is giving up…Merlin tunes back into the conversation, trying to ignore her bleak thoughts.
"...if there was, indeed, one last dragonlord left?" Gaius is asking. Merlin can see the hesitancy in his eyes; if he knows something, he is obviously only putting it out because they are out of options.

Uther shakes his head. "That's not possible."

Gaius pushes on. "But if there was."

The king turns to look at his physician and advisor intently. "What are you saying?"

"It may just be a rumor..."

"Go on."

Gaius takes the plunge. "I'm not exactly sure, but I think his name is Balinor."

Merlin is packing when she feels Gaius avoiding her. It's an acquired feeling that she often gets when he has information he isn't sure he wants her to know.

She pauses long enough to inquire casually, "Who were the dragonlords?" He pretends not to hear her, so she knowingly adds, "Gaius...."

He sighs. "There were once people who could talk to dragons. Tame them."

"What happened to them?" Merlin has a sinking feeling she knows exactly what happened. Gaius confirms her suspicion only a moment later.

"Uther believed the art of a dragonlord was too close to magic. He had them rounded up and slaughtered. Only one escaped."

She eyes him suspiciously, rolling up an extra blanket for her bedroll. "How do you know?"

Gaius regards her carefully through heavy-lidded eyes. "Because, Merlin, I helped him."

Merlin cants her head at him, fighting the urge to grin madly as she resumes packing her things for the road. He is such a hypocrite. "Gaius."

Gaius ignores her steadfastly, sitting down at the table where they habitually eat dinner. "Merlin..." He hesitates, and Merlin grows suspicious again. He continues with another sigh. "You have never heard the name Balinor?"

"No."

"Your mother never mentioned him?"

Merlin's eyebrows shoot up. "My mother?" This conversation is turning from strange to stranger. Gaius's words are leading up to something he thinks she needs to know, Merlin can tell.

Finally, he says it. "Merlin, I have always treated you as my daughter, but that is not what you are." Gaius seems reluctant, but finishes anyway. "The man you are going to look for is your father."

The world seems to stop. Merlin has grown up without a father, scorned in her village for being a bastard child, born to a woman whose lover disappeared into the blue without ever even knowing he had a child. They had named her a bastard, until she flinched every time the insult was used—against her, or not. Eventually, she had learnt to steel herself and hear the insults out. No one else but someone like her could ever understand how it felt, not having what every other child had.
And now Merlin knows.

Her father.

She has a father.

Balinor.

Her father is the last dragonlord.

Merlin's mouth starts working again, and she breathes out, "My father?"

She may have made a huge mistake in letting Kilgharrah loose, but now this is even more personal, this search for the man who could possibly put a stop to this. Now she has no choice.

She is going to find her father.

"What is wrong with you today?"

Merlin flops onto her other side so she can stare quizzically at Arthur. "What d'you mean?"

The blond rolls his eyes and readjusts his pillow. "Y'not being… normal. Much as it pains me to admit it, I actually enjoy your surly retorts. It's possibly one of your only redeeming features."

Merlin's pillow hits his chest. She turns on her side, facing away from him again. "Thanks," she says halfheartedly.

"See, that's exactly what I mean," Arthur protests, tossing the pillow back at her. She reaches around to the floor and picks it up, jamming it under her head absentmindedly.

"There are loads of servants who can serve, and not many are capable of making a complete prat of themselves," he continues. "But despite your particular skill at making me want to strangle you, we are soulmates, you know. What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, honestly. There's something."

Merlin doesn't reply, hoping he'll give up like normal when she doesn't want to talk.

Arthur sighs. "Alright, I know I'm a prince, so we can't really be proper soulmates. Or friends. But maybe if I wasn't a prince…"

Her interest spikes. "What?"

"Well, then….I think we'd probably get on. Sort of be more actual friends. I think I'd like that, to be friends with you like Leon and Gwen are."

"So?"

"So will you tell me?"

Merlin turns her head just far enough to glare daggers at him. "If you weren't a prince, I'd tell you to mind your own damn business."

"Merlin."
She gives a tiny shake of her head, feeling guiltier and guiltier. Merlin wants to tell Arthur, but she can't. He deserves to know that her father is the dragonlord...but he also deserves to know that she has magic, and that is another thing she can't tell him.

She sighs again. "Look, do you remember the thing that I can't tell you about?"

"...yeah."

"It sort of has to do with that, okay? And I really want to tell you, but I just...I just can't. I'm sorry, Arthur."

Silence for a moment.

"S'alright. But when you do tell me, Merlin, it had better be something unbelievable to be worth the wait."

Oh, don't worry, she thinks. It will be.

Merlin and Arthur are heading through the trees when she notices him wincing again. The wound is getting worse, she knows. He won't mention anything, but she can tell.

Arthur notices her watching him, and waves her off. "It's alright."

"I know it's the wound, let me have a look," she protests, but before Merlin can actually do anything, the sound of hoofbeats send the two diving for cover. By the time the men have passed, Arthur is unconscious.

Arthur is heavier than he looks, Merlin notes yet again. It took her nearly fifteen minutes just to get the prat across the horse's pommel. It must be all the chain mail. Merlin is glad that she doesn't have to wear it.

"Hello?" she calls, hearing her own voice echo to the back of the cave. If she can find her father, he might be able to heal Arthur.

Suddenly, a wiry hand grabs her shoulder and spins her around. "What do you want here, girl?!" The face glowering down at her is lean and brown. His nose is nobly bridged, and he has the same slightly sticky-out ears she does. His eyes are deep brown, though, instead of her sparkling blue, and his long, wild hair looks as though it might have been a similar color to hers before the gray started to appear.

Merlin is so shocked that she forgets herself and stares, openmouthed. Her father. This is her father.

"Well?" Balinor questions impatiently.

Her brain clicks back into focus. "Oh! Right, my...my friend, he's sick. He needs help!" She pleads, wringing her hands tightly.

His cold brown gaze softens the tiniest of margins. "Show me."

Her father might not be so bad.

So bad, it turns out, is relative. He is certainly not what she expected.

"Where did you go?" she asks softly, her knuckles white on the wooden bowl he gave her to use.
"There's a place called Ealdor," Balinor replies, his eyes still fiery with anger against Uther.

"Yes," she urges, hoping he will be moved to more merciful thoughts, where he might agree to help them.

"I had a life there, he continues, his eyes growing softer as he mentions Merlin's mother. "A woman I loved. A good woman. Ealdor is beyond Uther's realm, but still he pursued me. Why would he not let me be? What was it that I had done that he wanted to destroy the life I built, abandon the woman I loved? He sent knights to kill me. I was forced to come here, to this!"

He casts around the cave with disgusted eyes, shaking his head. "So, I understand how Kilgharrah feels. He's lost every one of his kind, every one of his kin. You want to know how that feels? Look around, girl. Let Uther die. Let Camelot fall."

Merlin is shaking her head now, eyebrows furrowing down. "You would wish death on the whole of Camelot?"

"Why should I care?"

"What if..." Merlin takes an even, calm breath in and out. "What if one of them was your child? Your daughter...."

He looks up sharply.

"....your son?" she adds.

Balinor's mouth creases into a thin line. "I have no children. No sons." His gaze lingers on her for half a second longer. "...no daughters. Uther took that from me."

Merlin leans forward just a little bit, eye alit with anticipation. "What if I told you...."

"Merlin...." Arthur groans from the ground, where he had previously been resting. Merlin does not try to tell her father again that night.

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"I feel great! What the hell did you give me?" Arthur does sound surprisingly chipper as he comes up behind her where she is sitting on the rock.

Merlin shakes her head, denying any part in it. "That was all down to Balinor."

"We found him then?" The prince sounds so hopeful that Merlin hates putting him down.

"That doesn't mean he's willing to help," she says loudly and pointedly at her father, who is some distance off.

Arthur rounds on her, disbelieving. "What?"

"He refuses to be persuaded."

"Does he know what's at stake?" Her soulmate says more quietly, some of his despair creeping back into his voice.

She can only give a wordless nod.

He stares out at Balinor in confusion. "What kind of man is he?"
"I don't know," she sighs, pushing a few loose hairs from her bun back behind her ear. "I thought he'd be something... more."
Childhood Dreams Part 2

Chapter Summary

There is much reflection on dancing (which is slightly strange considering what this chapter is supposed to be about), Merlin gets to talk to her father (!!) and there is another creepy, possibly precognitive dream which might lead to major mistakes. And oh, man, is that dream creepy.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, well, well, look who the cat dragged in. *coughs uncomfortably* I know it's been forever, people, and I'm sorry, but you know how RL gets in the way! Also, this chapter and the next one were giving me SO much trouble because I was trying to fit them into one, so I finally gave in and separated them. I'm posting both today, though, just so you all don't have to wait even longer.

I can't wait for the canonical year between season two and three, though. It's going to be so fun to write! Everything is original! Whoop-de-doop!

But unfortunately, "The Last Dragonlord" has managed to drag itself out over three chapters now, so I promise it's over by the end of chapter 10. I promise! Anyway, I'll quit wasting time and let you all get to the story. Also, stand by for the aforementioned PLOT TWIST at the end of the next chapter. :) And I'm positive it's not what any of you think.

Spoilers for BBC's *Merlin*, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS DESCRIPTIONS OF BLOOD.

Chapter 9:

Arthur is attempting to convince Balinor to change his mind. Merlin is attempting to skip pebbles on the quick-running little stream like she used to at the pond in Ealdor. Unfortunately, she doubts he will have any more luck than she is right now.

Her father.

Merlin throws a pebble with a little more vehemence than is perhaps required. Something more indeed. When Hunith spoke of Merlin's father, it was always with a wealth of affection; of how he would do little things like pull her chair out for her when they sat down to eat, of the warmth of his eyes when he looked at her.
However, most of the time, Hunith preferred not to speak of him at all. In truth, Merlin knew very little else about him except his soulmark, and the way they had met. She had heard that story a thousand times. She could retell it the way her mother used to by heart.

He had been the first to speak, she knew that. Merlin had liked to think that his words to Hunith implied that he was outgoing, charming. Handsome.

**Would you like to dance, lady?**

The perfect gentleman.

From what Merlin has seen, that is not the case. He is handsome, perhaps, in a rugged sort of way, but charm is something he seems to lack. Perhaps he was more outgoing and charming when he hadn't lived in a cave for longer than she has been alive, Merlin reflects. It might be enough to wear the charm off anyone.

*I'm afraid I don't know how, as no one has ever asked me before.*

Those were Hunith's words to him. She wonders, suddenly, if he can still remember how to dance. Merlin knows that when her parents first met, the very first thing they ever did together was dance. Hunith had once said that he was such a brilliant dancer that she didn't even need to learn the steps.

Merlin has always wanted to learn to dance; in Ealdor, there's no reason to know any dances but the traditional line dances or the skipping, twirling jigs that every villager in the five kingdoms could do on half a moment's notice. But the young warlock has a strange longing to know the type of dancing the courtiers do, the type she has seen them do at nearly every feast and banquet since she arrived at Camelot.

Gwen knows a little, and had been convinced early on to teach Merlin that much, but she is only a maid. She doesn't know anything past the most basic of two-steps; certainly nothing as complicated looking as a waltz. If it even is complicated, of course. Merlin wouldn't know.

Arthur knows every dance, of course, and has to dance them, too. Every time a noble or king with a daughter comes to feast at Camelot, he has to take every lady on the dance floor for a spin. He doesn't mind it, though. Not really, although he may complain about getting blisters.

Merlin could always ask him to teach her, but he would almost certainly laugh. And she wouldn't really blame him, to be honest. Merlin trips over her own feet on a daily basis; fumbles over the most simple, balance-oriented actions—like trying to hold a sword and do something with it, for instance.

Leon is a knight, and being Arthur's second-in-command, has to dance quite often as well. Merlin could ask him—he is one of her soulmates, after all—but he is always so busy, and when they do get to spend time together, he's so pleased to relax and just talk and laugh that she dismisses the idea every time.

But if she tells Balinor about being his daughter, maybe…the corners of Merlin's mouth turn up. Maybe he would teach her. Then again, she thinks self-deprecatingly, she would probably end up hurting whoever she was dancing with her natural clumsiness.

Forget the silliness of ridiculous things like dancing, he won't even help save Camelot from certain destruction, a little voice in the back of her head protests. No matter how wonderful Hunith and Gaius had made her father sound, he was just a disappointment in the end.

The crunch of pebbles shook her out of her thoughts, and she stood up hastily as Arthur made his way back over to her. "What did he say?"
"He'll change his mind," Arthur says casually. Merlin almost gapes. "He said that?"

"Just…give him a moment."

Balinor follows up behind Arthur, and looks at him for a moment, and then at Merlin for a moment longer. "Farewell, then." He makes to walk back into his cave.

"That's your decision?" Arthur's eyebrows shoot up in disbelief. The dragonlord stops for a moment, turning back slightly. "I will not help Uther."

"Then the people of Camelot are damned!"

"So be it." He turns again, and continues walking.

"Have you no conscience?!" Arthur demands, frustration and despair boiling over.

"You should ask that question of your father!" Balinor snaps.

"And you are no better than him!" Merlin shouts suddenly. Her eyes are burning angrily, and her heart is pounding. Her nails bite into her palms as he fists clench.

"Don't waste your time, Merlin," Arthur says in disgust, and turns, walking away.

Merlin ignores him, anger filling her voice. "Gaius spoke of the nobility of dragonlords. Clearly, he was wrong!"

That hits home. Balinor stops in his tracks. "Gaius?"

"Yes."

"A good man." He sounds almost surprised.

"Yeah," she agrees, voice trembling. "I was hoping that you'd be like him."

"Merlin!" Arthur yells for her angrily.

"I wanted to…" Merlin stopped abruptly, unsure of how to finish her sentence.

I wanted to tell you that I am your daughter?
I wanted to meet you for years and now all you do is disappoint me?
I wanted to ask you to teach me to dance, like you taught my mother so long ago?
I wanted to have you save Gaius and Arthur and Leon and Gwen and all the people and home I love?
I wanted to tell you why Hunith's words on your skin turned gray, and that it was all my fault?
I wanted to make Uther see that Dragonlords can be heroes?
I wanted to have a father?

"Merlin!"
She shrugs hopelessly. "Well, there's no point."

Merlin doesn't know exactly what she said to compel Balinor to come after them. It might have been the mention of Gaius, she doesn't know. She isn't sure she cares, though, because her father is going to save Camelot, and that is all that matters.

And she has another chance to tell him.

"You…spoke of a, a woman, in that village where you took refuge. What was her name?" She tried to keep her voice neutral, using one arm to hold her stack of kindling and the other to swipe a few stray strands of black hair from her bun behind her ear before picking up another piece of wood to add to the stack.

"Hunith," Balinor sighs, tapping another piece of wood against a tree to shake off the dirt, and adding it to his pile. "Hunith was her name. It was a long time ago."

"I knew her. I grew up in the village," Merlin replies carefully, wondering if she has the nerve to tell him the truth. She has to try, she tells herself. For her mother's sake, and his, if nothing else.

"In Ealdor? You truly knew her?" her father exclaims, eyebrows shooting up.

Merlin wonders if she looks like him when she does that. "Yeah, Ealdor," she says nervously. "I knew Hunith…she was my mother."

"She married, then." Balinor says quietly. "That's good."

"She never married," Merlin says suddenly, not even sure what she is going to say. "I grew up with only rare tales of my father. They were soulmates, you see, and my father—he asked her to dance," she continues uncertainly, with the air of someone retelling a story they barely knew. "But she didn't know how. And…and it didn't matter, because he was such a brilliant dancer that she didn't even need to learn the steps."

Balinor gazes at her, brow furrowed slightly, the wood in his arms forgotten. His brown eyes hold a newfound light that Merlin prays she isn't just imagining. "I don't know what it is to have a daughter."

"Nor I a father," she admits, hardly able to breathe.

A little bit away, at their campsite, Arthur snaps a long piece of wood in half to add to their potential fire.

Merlin glances in his direction worriedly. "You must not tell Arthur."

Balinor nods and gives a bit of a smile, and hands her some more wood. Merlin's grin feels like it's almost splitting her face open. It feels amazing.

"You never returned. Was it because of Uther? Why?"

"I thought her life would be better without me," her father says quietly, flicking a woodchip from whatever he is carving into the fire. The firelight flickers over his face, changing the pattern of shadows and light. He sighs, staring at his chunk of wood. "I thought she would be safe. From Uther, from everything that was so dangerous about me. I suppose I was wrong."
Merlin's gut twists in guilt. She should tell him that it's her fault. She should….

"We…we could've come with you," she says, gazing at his from across the fire.

"What kind of a life would you have had here?" Balinor counters.

Merlin suddenly smiles, blue eyes bright, imagining what might have been. "We'd have been… happy."

He looks at her hard for a moment. "I see her in you. Her kindness, her love. You have her way of telling stories. She was lucky to have you."

"I wish that were true." Merlin says, feeling her grief well up inside her again. "It…it was my fault. That she died. I couldn't save her."

Balinor is silent for a moment. The only sounds are the crackling of the fire and the soft scrape of his knife against the wood. "It is true. From what I have seen of you, you would have tried your hardest, and if you could not save Hunith, I doubt anyone could."

"I should have been able to," she whispers harshly. Merlin stretches out a finger at the fire, conscious of Arthur sleeping only a few meters away. Her eyes burn gold. A tiny dragon, made of flames from the fire, rises up, flaps its wings twice, roars soundlessly, and bursts into sparks. "I was born with it," she tells him quietly. "With magic. I could move things across the room before I could talk. Incantations help, but…I don't need them, most of the time."

"That is incredible," Balinor says softly. "But I stand by my words. If you could not save her, with such power, no one could. Certainly not me."

Merlin looks away, into the darkness of the woods. He's only saying that to be kind, she tells herself. He couldn't possibly know. "How did you become a dragonlord?"

He lets the subject change easily. "You don't choose to become a dragonlord, and it isn't something you can be taught. It's a sacred gift, passed down for thousands of years from a parent to his or her child. And now, that is what you will become."

"I'd like that."

"And like all dragonlords," he continues, "you won't know for sure that you have that power until you face your first dragon. Now, get some sleep. We've a big day ahead of us." Balinor pauses. "Goodnight, daughter."

He called her daughter. Merlin instantly forgets to tell him that she has faced the dragon. That she knows that she can do nothing against Kilgharrah. She smiles. "Sleep well, father."

For just one moment, she can believe that all will be right in the world.

The blood is everywhere. Balinor is choking on it where he's collapsed on the ground. Merlin runs a shaky hand over his wound, trying to see how bad it is. Her hand comes away red. The sword went all the way through.

"Leave it," he croaks, forcing a tight smile.

"No, I can do something. I have to! No, I…I can't do this alone," she chokes, tears threatening to spill over and obscure her vision. "Don't make me do it alone, father….
"My daughter," Balinor says. "I have seen enough to know that you will make me proud."

"No!"

The blood pours faster, pumping out his life, but it doesn't stop, doesn't slow. It keeps rushing, surrounding her where she kneels. Merlin looks back down at her hands with horror and they are soaked with blood.

He smiles, blood against his teeth as he suddenly pulls her down, close to his face. "Merlin. Merlin! Wake up," he cackles, and falls to the ground. He isn't breathing, but he is still laughing, until his uncontrollable, humorless cackling turns into Kilgharrah's crusty roar of a laugh.

"It's your fault, all your fault," the Balinor/Kilgarrah corpse laughs. "Everything is your fault! Wake up, you lazy idiot!"

Merlin jerks awake to Arthur prodding her with a boot. "Hurry up and shift your lazy rear, Merlin. We've got most of a day's walk ahead."

She staggers upright, brow creased in confusion. "What?"

The prince rolls his eyes. "Did you forget, Merlin? We're taking Balinor back to Camelot to deal with the dragon, remember?"

Her father appears around a tree, where he was dumping the cold ashes from the night's fire. He nods in greeting as though he wasn't bleeding out in her hands only a few moments before. "He's right; we'd best get moving."

Of course, the real Balinor hadn't been. It was a nightmare.

"Yeah," she says, rolling up her pack and slinging it over her shoulders hurriedly. If she wasn't ready, she'd only be holding them up. "Sorry, I just…I had a strange dream, that's all."

Balinor pauses for a moment, and looks her up and down more analytically. "A strange dream, you say? Do you have those often?"

Merlin thinks of her nightmares of being burnt alive, of the dreams where she lost someone whose face she couldn't see, of Nimueh, of Gwen's coronation, even of picking mushrooms. "Not really."

He looks at her again for a longer moment, and nods. "Just a dream, then." Balinor follows Arthur into the undergrowth of the forest.

"Just a dream," she repeats, and, going after them, tries to shake the images of his dead body from her mind.

Three hours later, Merlin is detracting from the slightly awkward silence by recalling one of the half-baked plans Arthur had come up with. "It really was a complete disaster, you wouldn't believe it—"

"It was only a disaster on your end, if I remember rightly, Merlin," Arthur interrupts, hacking his way into the clearing with a sense of irritation when Merlin suddenly stops, causing Balinor behind her to pull up suddenly to avoid colliding with her.

"Merlin? What is it?"

She gazes around the clearing, the blood draining from her face. "I…I thought I heard something."

"Where?" Balinor asks, inspecting her closely again.
"I don't know," she says nervously. "We should move on. I have a bad feeling about this."

"What, scared of a rabbit, Merlin? Or was it a woodpecker this time?" Arthur teases. He's grinning, assuming that she was being her normal paranoid self.

Merlin, however, is deadly serious this time. The instant they stepped into the clearing, she recognized it as the place from her dream, peaceful and bloodless or not.

It's all a bit fuzzy, though. How long had they been in the clearing before the attack began? How long do they have left before it? Which direction did her father's attacker come from? Why had he been distracted enough to get run through?

She can't remember…Merlin's heart beats faster and faster. Something is going to happen.

A twig snaps and she whirls around, startled. Balinor just took a step to her left, heading out into the more open clearing. Suddenly, the right images flood into Merlin's mind. He had pushed her out of the way! He had taken the sword for her while Arthur was trying to fend off multiple assailants further away.

Merlin's thoughts race.

She can't let him sacrifice himself for her, not matter what. He is the last dragonlord, and the only one who can stop Kilgharrah. Without him, Camelot will fall. Without her…well, Arthur will just have to find a new servant. And now isn't the time to be thinking about how her friends—how her soulmates—and Gaius will feel, or she'll lose her nerve.

She might not have been able to save her mother, but she's going to save her father if it kills her.
Merlin can sort of handle a sword (better than anyone expected; I think possibly Morgana gave her lessons at one point), Creepy Dreams come into play, and Really Terrible Things Happen. Seriously. Also, we actually learn what the heck happens to poor Leon. Seriously, the guy has to put up with so much, I feel bad for him.

Chapter Notes

A/N: so, here's the next chapter already, as I said! Also, did I say plot twist at the end of this chapter? I meant NEAR the end. And yes, it's more of a thing they didn't explain in the show than a plot twist, but still.

I realize I didn't thank all the wonderful people who commented, gave kudos, and bookmarked! There have been 40 comments, 325 kudos, 88 bookmarks, and 4018 hits! Simply amazing. This is my most-loved story by far, and I can't thank you all enough!

You all deserve so many hugs and cookies for sticking with it through my flakiness. HUGE thanks to all of you, and I couldn't do it without your support.

Enjoy!

Spoilers for BBC's *Merlin*, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS DESCRIPTIONS OF BLOOD/NEAR-GRAPHIC PAIN.

Chapter 10:

"Raaaaahhhhh!" An attacker's cry fills her ears. Arthur curses creatively and the ring of steel fills the air.

The first assailant is disarmed, and Arthur tosses the sword hilt-first to Balinor, who catches it and parries a blow from another bandit. The bandit thrusts his sword forward, aiming for a gut wound, but Balinor sidesteps deftly and slams his hilt down into the stumbling man's head, knocking him out cold.

"Merlin! Catch!" He reaches down, grabs the sword, and throws it to her.

She fumbles the catch only slightly and tries to get a good handhold on the grip, ducking as a bandit swings his sword wildly for her head, aiming to chop it off. He brings the sword down in a killing stroke, but she rolls to the side at the last second, scrambling to her feet and parrying his next attack.
He thrusts, she sidesteps nimbly, he slashes, she dances backwards. Merlin isn't very good with any sort of weapon, really, but if there's one thing she learnt from Arthur, it's how to dodge and defend. This rogue seems to be pretty new at his job, though, and isn't pulling all the punches experienced ones might.

And say what you like about her weapons skills, but once in a while she manages to get a good hit in. He growls and slices his swordpoint towards Merlin's legs, probably trying to disable her, but she leaps over his blade and toward his unprotected side, and with one lunge, the sword is through his side. He falls to the ground, unmoving.

Merlin doesn't even have a moment to be shocked or to recover when Balinor's voice reaches her. "No!" She knows exactly what would have happened in her dream. He would say No. Sprint forward. And push her out of the way just in time to be impaled on the end of a bandit's blade.

Time has stopped. A rush of air fills Merlin's ears. She has about two and a half seconds, but everything seems to be moving so much slower than that. Merlin can feel Balinor about to tackle her, and at the absolute last second, takes a half step backwards. He lands on the dirt a couple of yards away, the breath knocked out of him.

And the sword slides through Merlin's back.

Balinor roars, his voice filled with rage. He sounds so far away. He explodes off the ground, and two seconds later, the man behind Merlin is dead.

She sinks gently to her knees, mouth open in shock, and her eyes float down to see a steel blade, covered in the red of her blood, protruding from her torso. A puddle is spreading in slow motion and Merlin laments her favorite blue neckerchief for a millisecond before the pain hits.

It rolls through her body like a tidal wave, racking her entire frame with more agony than she has ever experienced in her entire life. Her eyes roll back and everything goes black. Merlin comes to after only two or three seconds, her entire whole body tensing up and stimulating blood flow as she tries not to scream. The sensation of a hand on her back is lost in the feeling of the swordblade rasping next to her spine as someone pulls it out.

Then she is being lowered to the ground, so incapacitated that she can do nothing but stare up at the sky through the trees and gasp vainly for air. Her vision blurs, but clears up again a moment later to see her father's face straight in her line of vision.

"Merlin. Merlin! Can you hear me?!"

She takes a painfully deep breath. And another. She doesn't remember breathing hurting this badly before.

Balinor is frantically inspecting the wound. "What did you do, you stupidly brave girl?"

It doesn't seem to be a question, so Merlin decides to save her breath. The place the blood is spreading from feels oddly cold, and suddenly she realizes exactly what is about to happen.

Merlin is going to die.

There's no way around it. Her eyes well up with tears. "I—I don't want to die," she whispers. Balinor hears her from where he's frantically muttering healing spells. "No, you're wrong!"

"And so you decided you had to save me," he says, voice becoming gravelly. "Why?"

Merlin manages a tight smile. "I couldn't," she manages, and has to stop for air, "you can save—save Camelot. I can't. I tried—" She coughs, feeling the metallic taste of blood in her mouth. The tears in her eyes spill over and roll down her cheeks.

"Lie still!" He hisses, and holds his hand over it again, starting another chant. It's only a few sentences long, and it doesn't work.

"Leave it," she says hoarsely, face crumpling from the force she has to use to make her voice work. "It's no use."

His smile is heartwrenching, and when he speaks, his voice trembles. "When I said I didn't know what it was to have a child? I think I do now. I have no other way," he tells her.

Balinor places his hands on each side of her face. Merlin looks straight up at her father, confusion making its way through the pain. His eyes are filled with tears.

The dragonlord closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and kisses her forehead gently.

A slight wind swirls around the pair, stirring up leaves and debris. Golden, magical light follows it, circling them like the wind, and growing brighter and brighter.

Inside the light, Balinor's eyes are glowing, brighter than Merlin has ever seen a magic-user's eyes light up. The pain in her stomach dulls, and then fades, and then disappears. Merlin suddenly understands. "No!" She sits up, reaching for his wrists where his hands still rest on the sides of her head.

And then suddenly, the light storm is gone. Balinor sinks down onto the ground, torso covered with blood, pain racking his features. "Save Camelot. Your friends…Gaius. Meet your soulmate and fall in love," he manages, voice scratchy, but calm.

"No, I...I can't do it alone!" Merlin chokes, face crumpled in devastation. She can't do anything to the dragon, she has already tried, but he doesn't understand that.

"Oh, Merlin," Balinor says, the corners of his mouth twitching up. His eyes are filled with something Merlin once saw in her mother's, just as she breathed her last. "My daughter. I have seen enough in you to know that you will make me proud."

"No," she says again, but it is too late. He sighs, and his eyes close, leaving Merlin leaning over him, tears rolling down her face. "No. Father, no!"

Arthur staggers up, seemingly uninjured. It takes only a moment for him to grasp what has seemingly happened. The blood has vanished from Merlin's clothes along with the injury. Whatever spell Balinor had done to transfer the mortal injury to himself, Merlin had never seen it, or heard of it.

Right now, she doesn't care, because he's still dead. She failed.

"No!" Arthur yells angrily, throwing his sword down. Rage and despair are contending on his face. "Camelot is doomed."

Gaius only has to glimpse her face, and he knows. Merlin jams a fist to her mouth, eyes watering, in order to escape weeping out loud in front of the king's whole council. Her other hand is stuffed into her pocket, wrapped around the small wooden dragon figurine so tightly it's nearly cutting into her
"I need a dozen knights," Arthur says into the dreadful silence. "Those who do not wish to fight can do so without stain upon their character. For those who are brave enough to volunteer should know," his already grave voice took on an even worse tone, "the chances of returning are slim."

No one moves.

There is a terrible, gut-wrenching moment where Merlin thinks that no one will be brave enough. No one will come.

From where he stands behind Uther's map table, Leon is looking at the floor as if coming to a difficult decision. Suddenly, he raises his head, a look of stubborn determination on his face; he steps out into the empty space. Leon's eyes meet Merlin's for half a second, and then he's holding eye contact with Arthur. They seem to be exchanging words without saying anything at all. The knight nods once.

Even is no one else is brave enough, Leon is. He will come, even if he is the only one.

He isn't.

Leon's motion of loyalty opens the floodgates, and within a few more long moments, a circle has formed around Arthur, of knights with brave hearts, red cloaks, and silver mail.

And if she can't do this, they are all going to die.

The dragon figurine that her father carved is heavy in Merlin's pocket as she rides. Arthur is to her right, and Leon is right behind her. The row of knights in a double line behind her are all each probably just as afraid as she is.

"Are you really going to face this dragon with me?" Arthur had asked, looking at her in a way he never quite had before.

"I'm not going to sit here and watch," she scoffed, trying to stay light-hearted. "It might be hard for you to understand how I feel, but…I care a hell of a lot about that armor, there's no way I'm going to let you mess it up."

Merlin has known most of these knights for a while now. She knows all their names. She doesn't want to watch them die. Somehow, she has to stop the dragon, not get the knights killed, and not reveal that she can, in fact, stop the dragon.

She puts a hand into her pocket and fingers the dragon. If only her father hadn't sacrificed himself for her, he would be here and this mess wouldn't get any worse.

Instead, Merlin's in his place.

"You dealt the dragon a mortal blow," she tells Arthur, adrenaline filling her veins. "It's gone."

"It's gone? I—I killed it?" He staggers upright, eyes full of a wondering relief she doesn't feel.

Merlin nods anyway and forces a fake smile which suddenly turns into a real one. Arthur is alive, and the dragon isn't really dead. But the knights are.

"Yeah! But…." She trails off, suddenly feeling sick. The knights. "Leon! Where is he?"
Arthur goes pale, stumbling over to one of the knights. "I don't...I don't know. This is Sir Oberon. And Sir Maece is over there..."

"No. No," she says, horrified, staggering over to the nearest body; slumped in a red cloak. Merlin turns the knight over. His face isn't Leon's. Neither is the one next to him, or the next.

There are eleven knights' bodies in the clearing, and none of them are Leon. Three are so burnt to a crisp by Kilgharrah's fire that they are barely identifiable, but one is far too tall, one still has the remnants of long dark hair, and one's boots—the only part that escaped—weren't waxed like his would be. So where was he?

Arthur puts a gloved hand on her shoulder. She spins around to face him, blue eyes wild with panicked fear. "He's not dead. He can't be!"

"Merlin!" Arthur says sharply.

"No, you don't understand—"

"Merlin, check your mark!"

Her eyes go wide. Merlin all but tears off her right boot, yanking her trouser leg up to her knee. There, wrapped around her right ankle, is Leon's flowing handwriting. The words are black.

Arthurbreathesanaudiblesighofrelief. Merlinalmost cries with relief, taking a moment to look at the mark. Its dark, inky color means that Leon is alive. But he isn't there—and neither is his horse.

It's been four days.

Merlin hasn't slept since Leon disappeared. Arthur has given her leave to search the forest surrounding the clearing, and she's done nothing else. She reluctantly comes back at nightfall, and waits until the gates to the lower town are closed for the night to trudge back to Gaius's chambers.

Merlin hardly lets an hour go by without checking Leon's mark on her ankle. It remains dark and bold, telling her that there is hope still.

She stands on the castle ramparts on the night of the fourth day, leaning on the battlements and watching the road into Camelot past the training fields where it vanishes into the forest. Merlin knows that she can hardly expect the knight to come riding up it like nothing had happened, but she refuses to give up hope.

Will is gone. Her mother is gone. Frey is gone. Her father is gone, now, too. She shudders at the reminder of his death.

She isn't losing anyone else if it kills her—Leon least of all.

"Merlin." Gwen appears at Merlin's shoulder, gently draping a shawl over her for warmth. "You're freezing. Why don't you have your jacket on?"

"Forgot it at Gaius's," Merlin mumbles. Her lips are cold, she realizes. So cold she can barely speak. She tugs the warm shawl tighter around her.

"You're going to kill yourself with worry," Gwen tells her, smooth brow wrinkled with concern. "You shouldn't drive yourself mad trying to find him. It isn't what he would want."

"I don't care about what Leon would want," Merlin snaps, scrubbing her eyes. "I care about what he
does want. He isn't dead, and I don't plan on grieving for him until he is."

"I know," Gwen says quietly.

Merlin sighs. "I'm sorry, Gwen, but I just don't know how I can keep on seeing that he's alive and not knowing where he is. What if he's dying, somewhere out there, right now, and I don't even know it?" She tugs up her trouser leg.

Well, yes, but you may as well drop the Sir, seeing as we're soulmates and all that.

Gwen sighs, gazing at the soulmark contemplatively. "I don't know. But getting yourself frozen to death won't help him. Come on, let's go and get you inside and warm."

"You're right, I should go in." Merlin turns away from the ramparts. Out of the corner of her eye, in the dying sunlight, something at the edge of the forest glints. She whirls back around, squinting hopefully. Nothing moves.

"Merlin?" Gwen asks worriedly. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I just...thought I saw something." She turns back, heart sinking. They head along the wall towards the nearest staircase.

"Merlin!"

Merlin pauses, frowning. "Did you hear that?"

"No...." Gwen says, confused.

"Merlin!"

"There it was again! Someone shouted for me!" She grabs Gwen's sleeve pleadingly. "Tell me you heard it!"

Gwen nods uncertainly. "Maybe. I think so."

Merlin wheels around and dashes back to her vantage point, straining her eyes as she looks over the battlements. The shadows are slowly growing from the darkened trees, but in the dying light, she can see the unmistakable patch of Camelot red; as draggled as it appears to be. The figure raises an arm and waves it tiredly over its head.

"Merlin!" The voice that is drifting, barely even reaching her on the wind, is unmistakable. Merlin sprints for the stairs, Gwen only a few steps behind her. She hurtles through the gates and along the dusty path to where Leon is limping along, a tired smile on his face.

He looks terrible. His face is covered with scratches, his hair is matted with mud and twigs, and his cloak is nearly unrecognizable. It is a miracle she recognized it from the battlements; and even more of a miracle that Leon's sword, which he is using to lean on like a walking stick, had caught her eye in the last rays of the dying sun.

Merlin checks her pace just before she slams into him, realizing at the last minute that it might injure Leon further. He grins at her, even though he is obviously exhausted, and probably hasn't eaten much for the last four days. Of course, it isn't as though they haven't both noticed the fact the he is completely covered in mud. "Merlin. You heard me."

"Of course I did," she says, voice strained as she tries not to cry and laugh at once, looking him up
and down worriedly. "Are you hurt? You look like you've been dragged backwards through the bushes into a mud patch!"

"Probably because I was," he replies. "By my horse, no less. my foot was still caught in the stirrup. But I'm alright, except the sprained ankle, or I would definitely have been back sooner. I was knocked out for at least a day, I think."

Merlin grins, tears finally escaping her and rolling down her cheeks. She throws her arms around him and buries her face in his shoulder, almost sobbing in relief. "Don't ever do that again, you absolutely horrible wonderful terrible idiot!"

He laughs and hugs her back gently, still leaning wearily on his sword. "I hope not."

"Come on; let's get you in to Gaius's." Gwen finally catches up with both of them, just in time to sling his left arm over her shoulders, as Merlin does the same with the right.

Now...everything might just be okay. At that thought Merlin smiles.

It would be better not to jinx it.
Honor Is A Good Penpal

Chapter Summary

Lancelot sends a letter, Merlin sends a letter and makes a decision, Gaius can't remember the difference between 'Herbs' and 'Horticulture' (Merlin can), something is stolen, Arthur yells, and Merlin contemplates. So much contemplation. So much.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Good lord, I suck. It's been six months (or more aaaahhh) but all I can do is apologize to you all! I promise I'm still actively working on this story, I just ran into some problems with the overall plot which took me a LONG time to work out.

Probably most of you noticed my tendency so far to basically ignore Morgana's overall plotline, and there were a few reasons I've done that, but the most prominent was that I never really understood why Season 2 of Merlin ended with 'The Last Dragonlord' instead of 'The Fires of Idirsholas'. It makes more sense for Merlin's character development and storyline, of course, and I loved it as an end episode, but they basically ignored Morgana's disappearance until the beginning of Season 3.

Therefore I have placed 'The Witch's Quickening'/The Fires of Idirsholas' AFTER the events of 'The Last Dragonlord'. Sorry if this screws with your mental timeline, but I liked it more plotwise and it segues easily into Uther's year-long search for Morgana which takes place in between Seasons 2 and 3.

Thank you all so much for your support, (I could never do it without you!) and the next chapter is already a few paragraphs from completion, so I will make an attempt to post it before the New Year!

Also, a slightly late Merry Christmas/Happy Holidays to y'all! Hope you have a wonderful holiday season. :)

Spoilers for BBC's *Merlin*, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 11:

Dearest Merlin,

I know we haven't really spoken in quite a while now, but I thought I'd like to try and stay in contact with you although I am still traveling. You are my soulmate, after all. I think I'm doing some good, out here, away from Camelot. I hope so, at least. I can't know for sure, I suppose.
I'm traveling through Essetir at the moment. The king here, Cenred, treats his kingdom even worse than Uther. You would hardly believe it. He is not opposed to magic, but allows slavers to run rampant, and cares not a whit for the wellbeing of his people, but only for money and power. It is truly despicable. I've heard that he is terrorizing a group of towns near the south border. I've visited there before, and that is where I'm headed now.

I've been told that it will take nearly eight days for this letter to reach you, so by then I'll be in the town of Cothromach. If you wish to reply to my letter, take it to the tavern of the Rising Sun and ask for a commissioned messenger. They run a fair message business between most of the taverns of Albion, I have found, and someone should be willing to carry your letter to Cothromach.

I hope you remain well, and I miss you more than I can say. I hope to hear from you.

Best wishes and love.

Lancelot

Merlin finishes the letter for the fourth time and grins. Every $U$, $N$, and $R$ tells her that this is indeed her soulmate's letter. She thinks wryly that she would have never thought of so clever a way to stay in contact with her friend, and that she is horribly lucky that he did.

She fingers her own letter, neatly written out on a piece of the best parchment in all of Camelot—she snagged it from Arthur's chambers. All she has to do now is send it.

"Gaius," she calls, taking the stairs down into the main physician's room at a run. "Gaius! D'you know anything about how to get a commissioned messenger? I've got a letter to send."

"Go to the Rising Sun, Merlin," Gaius replies distractedly, tapping a beaker of something vaguely green as he holds it up to the light. "And who on earth is it for?"

"Oh, just Lancelot," she says offhandedly. "We decided we wanted to write since he can't come to visit."

Gaius gives her a long look and sighs. "Be careful, Merlin. Lancelot is still a banished man. You wouldn't wish to be seen consorting with him."

"I know," she says with a hint of exasperation, shrugging on her brown jacket and tucking some absent wavy strands of hair into her bun. "Honestly, though, Gaius, since when am I anything but careful?" She trips on her way out the door and pretends she doesn't hear her mentor's smothered chuckles.

It takes Merlin hardly any time to find a messenger in the Rising Sun tavern and dispatch him cheerfully with a few coins and Lancelot's letter.

The young innkeeper, Gordon, laughs quietly from behind the bar, where he was washing out goblets. "You look like you're having a good day, lass."

"I am, thank you," Merlin replies, giving him a warm smile and settling onto a stool to chat. Arthur won't notice her being gone an extra moment, and Gordon and his family are lovely people. "How are little Millie and her mother?"

"Wonderful, thanks to you," Gordon says, abandoning his tidying and leaning on the bar companionably. "I had thought I could handle the birth myself, but with all those complications, I can only be grateful that you and Gaius happened to be available to help."
"It was our pleasure," she insists, a warm feeling tingling at the pit of her stomach at the memory of helping them out. Births were stressful, but usually so happy afterwards. Gordon's wife Laura's birth had been no different. "Send them my best wishes, won't you?"

Gordon grins, and picks up his goblet again. "I certainly shall. Good day t'you, lass!"

Merlin strides out into the street, whistling. She hasn't felt this lighthearted in a long while, and can't even find it in her to drag her feet on her way to attend Arthur for his midday meal with King Uther and Morgana.

Morgana.

Now there is a thought.

The king's ward has been acting strangely distant, and Merlin has been planning to make sure she's okay. The two black-haired girls have never been as close as Morgana and Gwen are, but in the months since the dragon's release and attack, they've barely spoken at all.

Merlin asked Gwen the day before if Morgana would be free in the evening to sit and chat like they used to so much more often, and Merlin's dark-skinned soulmate assured her she would be. Just a few more hours, and everything would be cleared up, Merlin reasons.

Morgana most likely has something on her mind—possibly something to do with the nightmarish, magic-induced visions she's been having for months. Perhaps it's finally time to tell Morgana the truth: that Merlin herself has magic, and that the ward is not alone in her feelings of being an outsider.

The warlock makes her way through the market, which, in the early morning hours, is already bustling. She exchanges a few friendly words with one of the stall-keepers, who is selling hot spiced cider, before gratefully taking a small cup offered free of charge and continuing on her way.

Of course, the noble-born lady's reaction could go either way, she muses; although Merlin doesn't think Morgana capable of actually turning her in. After all, they are in the same boat, what with being magic-users secretly ensconced in the heart of Camelot's court. If anything, she would just be disgusted that it has taken Merlin so long to trust her with her secret.

A sudden strength of resolve fills her. Tonight, Merlin decides, trotting up the stairs to the second level of the palace on her way to Arthur's rooms, she'll do it. She will reveal her deepest secret and it'll all be in the past.

The day goes by quickly, far more quickly than the warlock expects, and soon the sun is sinking into the horizon.

Merlin straightens up with a groan of soreness, observing her work proudly. The stables have never looked so clean. Lovely.

Unfortunately, Merlin seems to have transferred the muck and mire onto her own person in the process.

She puts away her pitch fork, brushes away the worst of the grime, and winces. There is no way she can visit Morgana like this, unofficial as the occasion might be. Merlin will have to stop at Gaius's chambers and clean up.

It doesn't take her that long to get cleaned up and changed with the help of her magic, but Gaius
insists on her helping him get a book down from the topmost shelf, citing old age and stiffness. She does so as quickly as possible—which is not very quick; she doesn't want to die by breaking her neck, okay—and groans quietly when he insists that it isn't the one he asked for.

"I'm quite sure I said the History of Herbs and Their Uses, not the History of Horticulture and Its Uses, Merlin. Honestly, do you have somewhere you need to be?" Gaius calls from the floor.

Merlin sighs, inching along the narrow protrusion that can hardly be called a walkway for the second time. She debated telling her mentor about her plans to tell Morgana her true identity as a warlock, but decided that he would only try and convince her otherwise again. She is determined to go through with it for once, and is certain that the revelation will only help Morgana.

Thus, there is no reason for her potential hurried exodus from his chambers. "No. I could just swear you said Horticulture. It's a hard word to remember when someone hasn't just specifically told you it three times, Gaius!"

"Well, I didn't want the History of Horticulture because I'm looking for the recipe for the monthly cramp potion! I'm certain it's in the History of Herbs, and you'd think you'd be more grateful for the use of it, what with your habit of gallivanting off with Arthur every other moment!"

Merlin closes her eyes and leans forward, gently hitting her head on the rickety bookshelf. She isn't as uninclined to falling and breaking her neck as she was a few minutes ago. "Thank you. Now where did you say it was?"

Ten minutes and three near-death moments later, Merlin, now covered with cobwebs and a healthy amount of dust, presents the huge volume of the History of Herbs and Their Uses to the physician.

Frowning, he inspects the cover. "Doesn't the cover have a selection of medicinal herbs on it? This is just plain leather."

Merlin points, speechless, at the cover of A History of Horticulture and Its Uses, which is embossed with colorful bunches of herbs.

"Ah. Well, thank you anyway, dear girl."

Merlin is on her way to Morgana's chambers, making her way through the mostly darkened castle, when she hears the voice.

... take the north door straight ahead. Keep going!

She stops in her tracks. It's in her head. And it sounds familiar. The only time she's heard this voice…but that couldn't be right!

Keep going. Hurry!

Mordred?

Merlin only has a moment to wonder why on earth the Druid boy would be back in Camelot—she and Morgana and Arthur had worked so hard to get him out in the first place—before she takes off running.

Keep going. It's not much further now.

She swallows with difficulty, changing direction to head towards the voice. Definitely Mordred,
even if he sounds a little older.

Be careful. At the end of the corridor. Morgana's chamber is next.

Of course. Merlin fights down the urge to curse like a crude farmer she once knew in Ealdor. Morgana. He wants to speak to Morgana.

She rounds the corner, intent on intercepting the boy and whoever his accomplices are—thud.

"Merlin?"

It's Arthur's arm against her throat pinning her to the wall, and Merlin gives a silent prayer of thanks that, caught off guard, she hadn't inadvertently used her magic against him.

"Morgana's chamber," she chokes out. "Arthur, c'you let…?"

"Oh, sorry." Her soulmate releases her with a scowl. "What are you doing out this late, anyway?"

"On my way to see Morgana and Gwen," she explains. "The intruders! I was almost there, and I heard them heading to Morgana's chambers!"

Arthur dashes off without another word. Merlin follows, the squad of guards on her heels.

By the time they arrive, there appears to be no one in the king's ward's room, and Arthur glares furiously, tells her she's tired, and sends Merlin off to sleep. Not that she's complaining (she is exhausted) but she was sure that Mordred has been guiding someone to Morgana's rooms.

Why weren't they there? And more importantly, what was so important to them that they would risk getting caught? The questions are still swirling around in her brain when she flops into bed, and she sleeps restlessly until morning.

Gaius has even less of an answer that Merlin does the next morning, and the young warlock goes about her duties absentmindedly pulling at her new red neckerchief and wondering why not knowing what is happening is bothering her so much.

She forgets that she was meant to tell Morgana that she had magic.

When Arthur sends her back up to his rooms to fetch his training gloves—which he forgot again, it wasn't her fault—Merlin is not expecting to run into the beautiful witch.

Morgana looks startled. And…maybe a little guilty. "Merlin! I was looking for Arthur."

"He's out training," Merlin said hesitantly.

"Of course," Morgana says, nodding like she forgot. Why would she forget? Arthur spends literally almost every day out training when nothing disastrous is occurring and there are no special occasions.

"He, er. He trains every day," Merlin adds, confused. "Same time, same place."

Morgana falters. "I…I just wanted to apologize. For last night. Another time, perhaps."

She flees the room like she's done something wrong, and Merlin can't stop frowning, not even when
Arthur says she looks like she's been eating live frogs. Who would eat live frogs? Fried, Merlin knows from experience, is the way to go.

The warning bells sound that night and somehow, Merlin isn't as surprised as she should be.

"Whoever it was knew exactly what they were looking for," Arthur fumes, glaring at the empty case which once held the Crystal of Neahtid.

"Apparently," Merlin says, because Arthur sounds like he thinks she should be saying something.

"Apparently? Tell me, Merlin, whose job is it to ensure that my chambers are locked so that no one can steal my keys? Whose job is it to make sure that something like this never happens?" The prince practically yells, throwing his hands in the air.

Merlin winces. She doesn't remember forgetting to lock his chambers, but… "Sorry?"

The king is not happy.

"Arthur?" Merlin is taking twice the amount of steps as Arthur, trying to keep up with him. "Thank you."

"For what?" Her soulmate snaps crossly, turning and stopping on a dime. She nearly runs into him as he glares down at her. "For lying to my father to save your miserable hide?"

She grimaces. "Yes."

"Well, I didn't really have a choice, did I!" Arthur sounds actually upset. "We had better find that stupid crystal. And if you ever put me in that position again, I'll clap you in irons myself, soulmate or not!"

He keeps walking like the floor insulted him, and Merlin falls behind before he even rounds the corner. She remembers her plans to tell Morgana about her magic. She thinks about how if she told Arthur about her magic, he would have to lie to his father on a daily basis. She recalls Morgana's guilty look the day the keys must have been stolen.

She wonders, not for the first time since she came to Camelot, what on earth she is supposed to do. She wonders if, with choices like these, if there is even a right thing to do, and if so, how is she supposed to know?

That night, Merlin reluctantly traipses through the woods to a clearing far enough away from the city that Camelot will not be disturbed. She is incredibly hesitant, with the memory of Camelot burning resting heavily on her mind; but she also remembers Kilgharrah's warnings about Mordred, and roars words in another language to the sky.

"So, you have finally decided to call on me, young warlock."

"I didn't want to. Not after what you did," she says bitterly. "Those knights were good people. Good men. Some of them were my friends."

"I left your soulmates alive, did I not?" The dragon replies lightly. "Arthur, and your other life companion, the knight with the curly hair. Leon, wasn't it?"

"That's no excuse! You shouldn't have killed any of them at all!" Merlin protests. "But that's not why I called you."
It takes her only a few minutes to explain the situation to Kilgharrah, and to ask for advice concerning the powers of the Crystal of Neahtid, and why it was wanted. And whether Mordred was dangerous.

She doesn't like his answer.

She likes what she finds when she follows Morgana the next night even less.

Merlin and Gaius decide to bring the matter of Alvarr's encampment before Uther under the pretense of Gaius being informed of it through an anonymous source.

The young warlock realizes that she isn't sure how only three nights ago, she was going to trust Morgana with her life, and now, she is trying to hinder the same person from working with other magic-users.

Is she really so bad a judge of character that her opinion of the witch had changed so drastically so soon? Morgana is a good person, Merlin believes that with all her heart. She is being misled, she is being duped and manipulated by her bond with Mordred. If Merlin can stop her from going down that path, then all of Kilgharrah's warnings about Morgana and Mordred's dire future won't come to pass.

Lying in bed, Merlin wonders who put so much responsibility on her shoulders. Who is she, to try and change the future? To determine the outcome of events?

After all, look what happened when she tried to save her father. He died anyway. If the outcome will be the same no matter what, then what is the point of it all? Why does she feel such a compulsion to fix things?

Emrys.

A lofty title; a weighty name to bear, and yet, how can she deserve it?

Merlin sighs, shifting onto her back.

How can you live up to something, even when you sometimes don't want it? Like magic, or a powerful destiny, or the promise of eight soulmates?

She drifts off to sleep, restless with unanswered questions.

She does not know, but it is because Merlin does not aspire to be Emrys that she deserves it.
Loyalty Goes On A Field Trip

Chapter Summary

Merlin does a stupid, stupid thing (apparently this story's running theme), she sees some things she would really like to unsee, Leon decides a field trip to meet some special people is in order, and Merlin figures out some really obvious stuff she should have figured out before in the process.

Chapter Notes

Welp, here I am in the middle of February. This chapter got on my nerves. I was nearly done with it, and then it wasn't long enough for my liking, so I just kept going, and then Leon decided he was important, and that was where I was last time I updated. Then he couldn't decide where the heck he wanted to go, and when he did, it took forever to end the chapter on any type of a proper note. Thank you all so much for your notes of encouragement! As always, they mean a lot, and the helpful kick in the butt that PenAndInkPrincess supplied yesterday gave me the motivation to sit the heck down and work it out!! :D I always appreciate everything you all say, and you are the reason I get any of the inspiration I do. Sorry again for my sad delayedness, and hope you all enjoy!!

Spoilers for BBC's Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 12:

The attack on the camp goes as well as can be expected, although she has to magically make some footprints leading to the camp to get Arthur and the assortment of knights to go the right way. Merlin has been quiet and lost in thought all day, so much that even Arthur notices.

He probably isn’t too concerned though, because he presents her the Crystal of Neahtid to guard during the night, and unknowingly gives her the opportunity to attempt to use it. Merlin spends hours staring at the pouch, which is lying near the fire, in front of the log she is perched on to warm her toes.

*It probably won’t hurt to take a look*, she thinks. *After all, what could happen?*

*Famous last words*, she reminds herself.

*Then again, it’s right there. It would be so easy.*
What if Arthur or one of the knights wakes up and sees me? Merlin wonders. That could ruin everything.

But it could help me, too! It could show me so much.

She put her head in her hands. But at what cost?

It could show me what to do. And I need to know what to do.

It’s nearly midnight before she works up the courage to slide it out of its pouch, and suddenly, she can’t wait a second more. Merlin scrambles for the pouch, not a thought in her head except for the strong need to see the Crystal for herself. She stares at it, waiting for any hint of the famed visions of the future which legend says it holds.

Nothing.

Abruptly, shadows begin to flicker across the surface, refracting in the firelight. Figures dance across it, wreathed in fire and dark mist. Merlin realizes with horror that they seem to be fighting; and that although one side is fighting well, when the other side goes down, they just seem to get right back up.

They must be immortal. An entire army of the undead.

They would be unkillable. She feels slightly sick.

The images change, and show Morgana, lying unmoving and pale as death on a stone floor. Merlin is kneeling over her, tears silently running down her face. The shadows near the edges of the phantasmal versions of the two young women shift and flow and twine over them until the Crystal has turned dark with the unnatural mist.

A mistake, Merlin thinks frantically. This was a horrible, horrible mistake. And somehow, she can’t bring herself to put the Crystal down. Her eyes are glued to it, unable to look away.

A single figure slowly appears in the center of the black mist. Short and slight; a simple silhouette of light with her back to the viewer. A woman in baggy, unassuming male clothing. Merlin instantly recognizes herself as the white figure, glowing stark against the curling shadows.

She stands alone, alone in the dark, and her light seems to grow weak; to flicker and begin to die. The shadows are threatening to overwhelm her, and just when the real Merlin begins to be certain that this manifestation of herself will lose the battle, she is joined by two more radiant silhouettes.

One of the figures is petite; the other, broad-shouldered. They clasp hands with her, and as they do, her light flickers again, and this time, grows stronger. Gwen and Arthur, Merlin realizes with a jolt.

One by one, more and more shapes filled with white light step out of the shadows and join hands, until the line is nine long, with Merlin in the very center. She knows somehow that these people, some whom she has met, others who she has not, are her soulmates.

Eight soulmates.

And Merlin, binding them all together.

Their combined light continues to grow and grow until they are so bright that their figures have started to become indistinguishable, and Merlin is forced to look away from the Crystal because of its brilliance.
A sudden headache explodes within her head, and she drops the stone like a burning coal, clasping both hands to her temples. And just like that, the light is gone. She blinks for a few moments, trying to regain her night vision, before gingerly picking the Crystal of Neahtid up from the dirt and replacing it in its pouch, while attempting to avoid making eye contact with the surface.

With the pouch safely tucked away under her bedroll and a constant throb pounding her skull, Merlin decides that looking at it was definitely a major mistake.

It had predicted all the things she did not want to anticipate. Another huge battle, with Merlin’s own side on the losing end. The both troubling and devastating death of Morgana, misguided though she may be. The even more troubling prospect of Merlin being present and yet still unable to save her.

And the prediction of her soulmates united with her and standing at her side has a deeper meaning, too.

Merlin can’t tell Arthur the secret of her magic unless Uther dies, or she finds all of her soulmates—with the assumption that they will protect her if Arthur will not. This picture in her mind’s eye, of the nine glowing figures bound together with light, implies that the arrival of her soulmates will prompt that revelation, even though that would force Arthur into the position of keeping secrets from his own father.

Which he made her swear never to do again.

Merlin groans aloud and rolls over on her bedroll. She isn’t sure she can deal with all this, now or at any other point in time.

Stupid destiny. How typical.

The next morning, she delivers the Crystal back to Arthur with a sigh of relief.

“What, are you scared of a rock, Merlin?” He teases lightly, swinging up onto his horse. “Hardly surprising.”

She follows on her own horse, patting the mare on the neck gently. “A rock? Don’t you mean ‘a creepy magic rock that is supposed to be incredibly powerful and dangerous, and which I had to keep company all night at your insistence’?”

Arthur rolls his eyes with a huff of laughter. “Okay, that may be true, but it can only be used by those with magical powers, so it’s not as though it’s going to come alive or anything. You shouldn’t be so worried.” He tosses the pouch up and down in one hand lightly.

Merlin grimaces and looks away. “Whatever you say, Sire.”

The ride back to Camelot and Alvarr’s trial both pass in a blur.

Merlin walks by the Great Hall afterwards on the way from Arthur’s chambers to Gaius’s, and she hears Uther and Morgana having a conversation, which turns to shouting. She hesitates for a moment, and gives the pair of guards outside the door a half-hearted friendly smile before continuing on her way.
She is only a servant, after all, and trying to help would only make it worse. Merlin hopes fervently that Morgana is okay.

Gaius has made soup, and Merlin is starving, but staring into her wooden bowl, she can’t bring herself to eat. The visions from the Crystal of Neahtid keep flashing through her mind.

“Merlin?” Gaius carefully interrupts her thoughts. “Is there something interesting in there?”

“Sorry?” She looks up, her focus snapping back to him.

He heaves a deep sigh. “What’s the matter?”

She grimaces. “The Crystal. It harbors a terrible power, Gaius.”

“It’s locked away now,” he reminds her, setting his spoon in his mostly empty bowl. “It can do no harm.” Gaius folds his hands on the table, suddenly suspicious. “Unless the damage has already been done.”

Merlin looks away, flushing. “I held it. I knew I shouldn’t! I knew no good would come of it, but it compelled me to look. I…couldn’t resist it. I saw…things.” She remembers Morgana’s pale face in the vision, and then the fight that Merlin just heard the king’s ward having with Uther. “Terrible things.”

Her mentor speaks with a hint of disappointment. “Then you have already paid the price.”

“But what I saw…” Merlin hesitates. “It has not yet come to pass, and I’m scared. I’m really scared about what the future might hold.”

“There is nothing on this Earth that can know all possible futures, even the Crystal,” he says comfortably, but she shakes her head violently.

“What I saw…it was so real.”

“It was real, but it was just one reality. The future is as yet unshaped. It is we that shape it. It is you, Merlin. The decisions you make. The actions you take. Remember that,” Gaius says, placing a warm hand over her own, where it is clenched into a fist on the table. He smiles. “Now eat your soup before it gets cold.”

Merlin eats her soup.

The next day, she is on her way to the training grounds with Arthur when Leon jogs up to them, slightly breathless and in street clothes.

“Sire! Good morning, Merlin.” He smiles at her widely.

“Leon!” Arthur greets him jovially. “What do you think you’re doing, my friend? You have the day off, if you don’t remember. Your first in four years, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is, Sire,” the curly-haired knight agrees. “I was wondering, however, if I might take Merlin along with me for today. I’ve been itching to spend some time with my soulmate, as long as you won’t be inconvenienced.”

Arthur takes a quick look at Merlin and sighs. “Well, it’s that or suffering disappointed glares all
week, so I suppose I have to approve. She’ll probably sneak off and join you anyway when my back is turned if I say no.”

Merlin grins unrepentantly, making no attempt at hiding her excitement. Leon is one of her favorite people in the whole world, and she does not spend enough time with him. “Of course I would, you cabbagehead.”

To his credit, Leon makes an attempt to look as horrified as he used to be at Merlin’s regular interaction with Arthur. Merlin suppresses a laugh. The knight really is quite a good actor, but the twinkle in his eyes completely gives him away.

Arthur looks back and forth between them and sighs again.

“Your final decision, Sire,” Leon prompts, although the crown prince has basically already said yes. Arthur rolls his eyes. “Yes, fine! Go and make flower crowns or whatever. Merlin, I’m expecting you tomorrow, do you hear?”

“Yeah, course,” she replies, already bouncing over to Leon and taking his pre-offered arm excitedly. “Let’s go!”

“Have fun!” Arthur calls after them loudly. “Take care of her, Leon! She’s a walking disaster!”

“My thanks, Sire,” Leon calls back over his shoulder. “But I’ve a feeling it’ll go just fine!”

Merlin shakes her head with exasperation. “So, now that you’ve helped me escape, where are we going?”

“I had wondered if you might ride out to the Castle de Bouclés with me and meet my parents,” Leon admits, strolling along the cobbles at a relaxed pace. “They’ve always had a great deal of interest in meeting my soulmate.”

Merlin’s eyes widened, and she resisted the urge to bolt. “Your parents? You mean Lord and Lady de Bouclés, renowned for their Moonlight Balls? I’ve heard things about the amazing quality of the catering they hire, you know. Second only to the king! You think they’ll…want to meet me?”

Leon looked down at her, a slightly puzzled expression on his face. “Of course. Why wouldn’t they? They’ve been excited for years about my soulmate. They won’t mind that we don’t have a romantic connection, I promise.”

“It’s not that,” Merlin says quietly. “Just…Leon, I’m…well, a servant. And you’re a noble. And a knight. And your parents are nobles, and I’d bet your father was a knight. And they just. Probably don’t want to meet me.”

“And what does that…oh.” Leon slows abruptly. “Merlin…”

She looks away steadily, suddenly aware of what a pair they must make, standing in the middle of the market. An accomplished, well-known, well-loved knight in just his trousers, boots, and a red tunic; with a short, slightly awkward female servant in men’s clothes and a neckerchief on his arm.

Merlin can feel her neck suddenly going red, the flush creeping up into the tips of her ears.

“Yeah, you’ve got it now,” she says even more quietly, disengaging her arm from his. “I’ll just…go back to the training grounds. See you later, okay, Leon?” She attempts to discreetly turn and walk (run) away, but he stops her, one hand on her shoulder.
“Merlin,” her fourth soulmate says gently. “Look at me.”

She stays turned away stubbornly, but doesn’t make any further attempt to pull away.

“Look at me,” he says again.

Merlin slowly turns to face him. Her ears are still red, and a spot of color burns high on each cheekbone, but she looks him straight in the eyes.

“You don’t honestly think that they’re going to care one whit about the fact that you’re a servant, do you?” Leon asks, his hazel eyes meeting her blue ones searchingly.

The spots of color intensify. Merlin doesn’t answer.

“I don’t care that you happen to be a servant, Merlin,” the knight says with conviction. “I’ve never cared. Not for a moment. You are my soulmate, and my friend. That is what matters. And my parents taught me that. They won’t care, either.”

Merlin lunges forward and hugs him. Leon’s hugs, she decides, are the best. Leon is the best platonic soulmate of all time. Just. Leon.

If her eyes are just a little watery when she pulls back, Leon doesn’t mention it.

He offers her his arm again. “Shall we?”

“I can’t go like this, at least,” Merlin says decidedly as she takes it, her voice only a little shaky. “I might have some nicer trousers. And a shirt, maybe. And my new neckerchief.”

“If they’re nicer, why don’t you wear them normally?” Leon asks curiously.

“Because Arthur got them for me to wear to banquets. To substitute for how I don’t secretly have stocks of pretty dresses, and so I don’t,” she replies, as if that makes sense. Leon thinks about it for a moment as they walk. It sort of does.

He escorts her to the palace, and they separate, Merlin to go and change, and Leon to go and get his jacket and cloak, even though he’s not wearing chainmail and armor on his day off.

A frantic fifteen minutes of rooting around in her room provides Merlin with a brand-new pair of brown trousers—the ones Arthur had given her for banquets. She decides to forgo the stiff, embroidered red tunic that was supposed to go with it, however, for a long-sleeved, vivid purple shirt which has only been worn once or twice.

Her new neckerchief is rich Camelot red, and contrasts with the purple, which is probably okay, Merlin thinks. Or something. She doesn’t know about fashion, anyway.

The ride out to Leon’s family’s small castle is a pleasant one. The weather is fair, the meadows and forest are green, and the birds are singing.

“My father, Lord Gervaine de Bouclés, is a man with quite a dry sense of humor,” Leon tells Merlin with a hint of his own wry amusement. “And before I met you, I did not think that another woman existed who is as quick-witted as my mother, Lady Meliane. You will like them, I think.”

“They sound amazing,” Merlin confesses. “I hope they…like me too.”
“Don’t worry so much,” he promises. “They will love you. I’m absolutely sure of it.”

Merlin worries anyway, but tries to forget about it until they arrive.

Leon’s parents live in a small family mansion to the west of Camelot in the woods. The ride takes until the early afternoon, and it’s past lunch when the unlikely pair arrive.

Leon must have sent a message on ahead to warn his parents in advance, because as they ride up, Lord Gervaine and Lady Meliane descend the stairs to their relatively small courtyard to greet them as if they have been waiting for this exact moment.

Lord Gervaine is a tall man, with curly salt-and-pepper hair reminiscent of Leon’s, apart from the black base. Although no longer in his prime, the former knight is still relatively fit, and has aged very well. His wrinkles are laugh lines, and he has a ready smile.

Lady Meliane, meanwhile, is only an inch or so taller than Merlin, and her pinned-up hair is the exact same rich, layered caramel as Leon’s, apart from the few gray streaks. She is slight, for her age, and still curvy. She, too, looks pleased to see them.

They make an attractive couple, dressed finely and carrying themselves with dignity as they step down the stone staircase in perfect time. They look…noble. And kind. And dignified.

Merlin can see how much Leon resembles them.

And in an instant, the horses have trotted up to the base of the stairs, where Leon’s parents are waiting. Leon dismounts, and Merlin is about to do the same, until he offers wordlessly to lift her down.

Merlin has been riding horses ever since her arrival in Camelot, wearing trousers, of course, as she is doing now, and it is always her job to be the first on the ground to take the reins of the nobles’ mounts. She holds them still while the knights help any ladies dismount, gently grasping their waists and lifting them down.

No one has ever offered to lift Merlin down from her horse (she thinks it’s probably the lack of skirts, since it happens to Gwen on a daily basis) and she has no idea what to do. Leon’s arms are out and he is facing away from his parents. Merlin is panicking a little bit.

“Just slide forward a bit and I’ll do the rest,” he says under his breath, noticing her hesitation.

Knowing her luck, she’ll probably slip and fall on top of him and knock him over, and be so embarrassed in front of his parents that she can never speak to her soulmate again. Merlin slides forward a little bit.

And suddenly, she’s weightless for a moment before delicately touching down on the ground just like every other girl she’s ever seen get off a horse. Add some skirts, and no one would ever know the difference.

It only takes about four seconds in all, from the realization of her own incompetence to her feet hitting the ground, and Merlin and Leon turn to face Lord and Lady de Bouclés as if everything had been planned. Merlin is so pleased that she didn’t fall on her face that she beams her brightest smile at them.

“Mother, Father,” Leon greets them naturally. “This is my soulmate, Miss Merlin of Camelot. Merlin, these are my parents, Lord Gervaine de Bouclés and Lady Meliane de Bouclés.”
Merlin opens her mouth to say something, and can’t think of anything, and her smile suddenly threatens to drop away like it had never been there.

Leon’s mother takes one look at her and laughs. “Oh, honestly, Leon. What have you been telling the poor thing? She looks terrified.”

Merlin frowns indignantly without thinking. “I’m not terrified!”

“Of course not, dear,” Lady Meliane says understandingly. “You’re Merlin, not ‘terrified’. And I’m Meliane. And this is Gervaine.”

“Why do you always introduce me as Gervaine?” Lord Gervaine rumbles. He looks slightly amused. “No one calls me that. Just Ger, please. I mean it,” he directs at Merlin. “Just Ger. Gervaine makes me sound like my father. I’m not that old.”

“I only introduce you to people like that because you make such a scene about it, love,” Lady Meliane replies, her eyes twinkling. “And I believe you’re just a little in denial. You’re graying, dear.”

Lord Gervai—Lord Ger looks at his wife askance. “And you choose now to tell me, Mel? My pride shan’t ever recover.”

Merlin looks at Leon pleadingly. “Lord Ger?”

“It’s fine,” he says just as quietly, smiling. “They like you already.”

Merlin gives the couple another look. They are the picture of distinction and grace. And they are trading affectionate (?) barbs like there’s no tomorrow. “How do you know?”

“Because,” Lord Gervaine breaks away from their debate. “We just do. Don’t worry a bit, Merlin. You’re family. Pleased to meet you, by the way.”

“The…pleasure is all mine,” Merlin says hesitantly, her grin suddenly making a comeback.

Lady Meliane beams. “Fantastic. Would you like some tea?”

Slightly encouraged, Merlin nods decisively. “Tea would be great.”

The rumors about Lord and Lady de Bouclés’ catering are about four hundred percent true. The tea is magnificent.
Courage Hires A New Caterer

Chapter Summary

Arthur makes a somewhat unpleasant discovery about Camelot’s usual catering service and has to entirely rewrite the castle cleaners’ payroll (these incidents are mostly unrelated), Merlin causes Arthur to cause the death of an innocent inkpot and quill, Merlin (mostly) (sort of) deals with a stupid leery pervert (for now), Gwen attempts to give advice on a variety of topics, and Merlin has a foreboding feeling which proves to be totally right. She should always listen to the feelings.

Chapter Notes

“Back again?” You ask.
“So soon?” You ask.
“Welp, what can you say,” I reply sheepishly. “The muse hits when the muse hits.”
I actually wrote this entire chapter today, if you can believe it. Anyway, there was slightly less of me dithering over spelling than usual, so if you catch anything, give me a nod and let me know. Hope you enjoy!

“You’d think I had better things to worry about than writing up the castle cleaners’ payroll or listening to you carry on, what with Alvarr’s escape last night, but we’ve no idea where he’s gone. And apparently that means I don’t have anything better to do. So, since I suppose you’re dying to tell me, how was your day with Leon?”

“Oh, well, since you asked, it was great!” Merlin rolls her eyes. “His parents are wonderful. And their tea is fabulous, Arthur, you would not believe it. The catering service they have on semi-permanent hire is nearly as good quality as the service we get for banquets. And nicer, too. That company’s cooks don’t whip their underlings for burnt pastries or anything,” she adds, poking her head around new bed curtains she is hanging.

Arthur suddenly spills ink on the cleaners’ payroll. “Hold on a moment. Are you saying ours do whip their subordinates for burning food? Since when has that been condoned?”

Merlin gives him a funny look, retying the cord to hold the curtains in place. “Since never? Everybody knows that they do it anyway, though.”

“Everybody knows?” Arthur repeats, his voice climbing an octave. He notices the ink spill a second later with a pang of dismay and frantically tries to scrub the ink out of the parchment.

“It’s not like anyone who’s normally at the castle does it, just that one catering group when they come in to help prepare feasts. They keep mixing up our servers and kitchen servants with theirs, and belting them for the tiniest things. Cook Audrey keeps trying to catch them at it when they’re here, but they’re too terrified of her to do it to her face.”

“I can understand why,” Arthur agrees. Audrey, mistress of the kitchens, is one of the scariest people
in the kingdom. His attempted cookie thefts as a child left him scarred by more than Leon’s disappointed looks.

He pulls out a pocketknife and scrapes at the ink-covered paper. It seems to be ruined. “But go back, you’re telling me that everybody knows that the food company we hire to supplement our own kitchens mistreats the servers? And not just theirs, but ours, too?”

“Mmm,” Merlin says eloquently, moving on to shaking the dust out of his pillows. “Poor Agatha—do you know Agatha? Pretty, blond, getting married to Magellan the wainwright next month?”

“Yeah, yeah, Agatha,” Arthur says impatiently, finally giving up his battle with the cleaners’ payroll and shuffling around for a new piece of paper. “Assistant confectionary, her cream pies are divine. What about her?”

“She had bruises across her shoulder for three weeks, was too sore to roll her pastry, and nearly got fired until Cook found out why,” the warlock tells him indignantly, waving a pillow furiously. “You know, Arthur, its high time we hired another caterer.”

“Apparently!” He sputters, slamming the third desk drawer. Where had all the fresh parchment gone? “Why did no one ever tell me this was going on? How long have we been hiring them?”

“Oh, two years, give or take,” she says. “Just after I was hired on, I think. You’d think you’d have just figured out that it was happening by now, Your Omniscient Highness.”

“Do you even know what that word means?”

“Do you know what it means?”

“Of course I do, Merlin, I’m the prince!”

“So…what does it mean?”

“It means that you, Merlin, are an utter moron!”

She gives him an offended look. “You’re a moron. And a prat. Are you going to find another company to help our cooks out when we have banquets or not?”

“Of course I am,” he rolls his eyes. “Just after I find a single blasted piece of parchment for the cleaners’ payroll.”

“I thought you had nearly finished that,” Merlin says innocently.

“Shut up, Merlin,” Arthur groused, searching through one of the stacks of paper on his desk, hoping for a blank page.

“Didn’t you—”

“I said shut up!”

“But you—”

“Shut. Up!”

Merlin pushes him out of the way, exasperated, and yanks the second drawer open. A whole stack of new parchment is lying quietly inside.
She stares at Arthur silently.

“I…I thought that drawer was jammed,” he says lamely. “It’s been jammed for years. Wasn’t it jammed last week?”

Merlin shrugs, not saying anything. Her face reads, *You told me to shut up. Sire.*

Arthur throws his hands up. “Fine! You can talk.”

“It was jammed. And then I finally got someone in to fix it. Magellan owed me a favor. And then you decided that was where you were going to keep all your new parchment,” she pauses for a moment, savoring the words, “because you didn’t want to have to go looking for it.”

Arthur very crossly says nothing for a minute. “…who is Magellan, and why did he owe you a favor.”

“The wainwright. He’s pretty good with carpentry. And he owed me a favor because I got his fiancé to tell the cook why she couldn’t roll her pastry, which saved her from being fired. By the way, Arthur?” Merlin says smugly.

“What.”

“I think we need to hire a new food service.”

“I think I’m going to need to hire a new servant!” Arthur throws the nearest object, which happens to be his inkpot, with his favorite quill still inside. Merlin ducks quickly, and it sails over her head to collide with one of Arthur’s bedposts and splatter all over the new curtain. She calmly surveys the ink-covered curtain, the smashed inkpot, and the broken quill on the ground, and then makes a tactical retreat.

“MERLIN!”

As she strolls along the road leading down to the market to pick up a set of ceremonial belts Arthur forgot to yell at her about, Merlin considers their conversation about the caterers. Not so long ago—had it really been two whole years?—Arthur had been the one throwing knives at servants and laughing.

He really had been an absolute prat, she reminisces. If anyone had asked her back then if she thought that her first ever soulmate would ever turn out to be anything but a pompous pig, she would have laughed in their face and gone to clean the rotten fruit out of her hair. Most of Camelot had agreed, too. Gwen had said once that Arthur was a bully, and that a lot of people thought Merlin was very brave to stand up to him.

Now, the prince was the one getting frustrated about servants being mistreated and occasionally letting tiny children stick flowers behind his ear.

(That had been a sight to see. He had been at training, and was practically forced to leave the flower for the rest of the day for fear of hurting the onlooking child’s feelings. Merlin wishes she could have a portrait of that.)

He had come so far. And although she’d never say it aloud, part of the time, he’s very nearly tolerable.
Merlin laughs quietly to herself at the thought, but the smile drops from her face as she turns into the leather-shop which is housed in the lower town and market area of Camelot.

The proprietor is Naeman the leatherworker, who is renowned for his famous detailed designs in leather. Many call him the best leatherworker in the kingdom. He is, however, more than a bit of an arse. And far worse than Arthur ever was, for lots of different reasons.

“Mornin’, beauty,” he calls, practically leaning over the counter with an ugly leer. “Never been happier to see your pretty face, if I do say so myself.”

I wish I could say the same, Merlin thinks viciously. She doesn’t dare say it aloud, though. The last time she got in trouble for mouthing off at a moron salesman—the temporary blacksmith, wasn’t it? —Arthur yelled for so long that her ears hurt. Arthur had threatened to put her in the dungeons for a week if he heard another complaint. It wasn’t worth the trouble, so she had shrugged it off.

Merlin has a general habit of being snarky at just the wrong moments, but Arthur had been genuinely mad about it. Probably because it would put his reputation at stake if anyone found out that there had been a complaint against his servant. Which, she reflects, is stupid anyway because nobody would care.

Now, though, she hesitates to resort to her usual snarkiness when she knows that Naeman will be the first in line to complain and to spread that fact around. He isn’t as ugly as his personality, though—tall, blond, muscular, and barely thirty—which makes it worse, because he thinks everyone should be falling down at his feet with attraction.

But the point is, it may be unpleasant, but she can handle it. Merlin once defeated a priestess of the Old Religion on the Isle of the Blessed. She can handle it.

“Good morning, Naeman,” she replies stiffly, ignoring the rest of his comment. “I’m here to pick up Arthur’s new set of belts.”

“Ah, ah, ah.” He tuts, a despicable glint in his eyes. “That won’t do. That won’t do at all. You may be a pretty little thing, but just cause you share the prince’s bed don’t mean you aren’t still a servant, beauty.”

Merlin flushes dark red with indignation. All of Camelot knows that she and Arthur are soulmates, but even when they think that the prince’s only soulmate bond verges on romantic, they would never dare imply that the prince would associate with a servant on an intimate level.

Except Naeman. He just has a record low. She hates coming to pick things up from him.

You can handle this bastard, she tells herself.

“You should act your standing, lovely,” he continues, oblivious to her inner dialogue. “You call me ‘sir’, you say ‘his highness’ or ‘Prince Arthur’. You ain’t got a right to call royalty a thing cept what the rest of your kind do. Now try again from the beginning.”

Ignore, ignore, ignore….She grits her teeth and fights back the impulse to hit him upside the head with all the force her magic can muster. How dare he? But she’d rather not have Arthur pissed off at her, and she can handle it anyway, so it’ll just have to be ignored and piled into the stack of things Merlin would rather not deal with.

“Good morning, sir. I’m here to pick up his highness’s new set of belts,” she says, as pleasantly as she can manage. When had her good day turned into a bad one?
“I see, love, I see,” Naeman says, grinning at her. ‘I’ll see what I can do for you. Might take me a while to remember where I put ‘em, though. Make yourself comfortable.’ He pats the counter as if inviting her to go and sit on it before disappearing into the back.

Merlin looks around the tiny antechamber to his workshop. There are no chairs, and she isn’t about to take him up on his offer of sitting on the counter. She shakes off a shudder of disgust. The sooner she can leave, the better…which is probably why he’s going to make her wait, she realizes.

What an unpleasant man; not that she hasn’t run into her fair share. Back just after she first came to Camelot, Knight Valiant…ugh. That was an encounter Merlin would rather forget.

She stands, leaning against the doorframe, and stares out the window, which is nearly obscured with merchandise.

Citizens of Camelot wander by, looking into various shop windows, sometimes going in. A patrol of eight or so soldiers ride past on their way to the gates, probably to relieve the guards already there. Uther had ordered the rotations to switch more often so that they had less time on watch, and therefore more of a chance of staying vigilant.

Merlin sighs. If only Uther could understand that now that the Crystal of Neahtid has been recovered, there will be no more attempts to steal it unless from within the castle. The young warlock is still slightly suspicious about Alvarr’s apparent escape before his execution, but even if Morgana had helped him, Merlin can’t really blame her.

How many times had she helped someone escape the dungeons when she thought they didn’t deserve it? Merlin sighs again. Too many times. The day when Arthur was king and justice for those who had magic came would never be close enough.

“See somethin’ you like?” The sudden breath on her neck nearly makes her jab the leatherworker in the stomach with her elbow as she spins around.

Naeman smirks innocently down at her, one arm on the doorframe above her head. She is nearly boxed in against the wall, but she takes only a moment to deftly maneuver around him toward the counter.

“Um, what? Oh, the display. No, I was looking out the window,” she says, continuing to face him.

Naeman clicks his tongue reprovingly, moving forward again. “‘Sir.’ Not a bit o’ respect, and I even came back out to keep you company while my apprentice finds the belts. Couldn’t let such a pretty girl wait alone. Do me a favor, and make yourself comfortable.”

Merlin takes two steps back, and holds her ground. If he gets any closer, he will definitely have crossed a line, and she will not hesitate a second longer to kick him in a painful spot.

“I’d rather not,” she says quietly, hoping she sounds at least a little like she’s warning him.

“Sir?” Naeman’s apprentice—Merlin struggles to remember his name, Red? Rod? Roderick, that was it—appears from the back of the workshop, carrying a box, carefully wrapped. “I found the belts, sir. They were under Sir Vailyan’s new saddle. I could have sworn you said you already looked there.” Rod narrows his eyes with a hint of accusation.

Naeman is instantly over inspecting the box to ensure the right product has been located.

The apprentice is a good kid, even if Naeman is disgusting, Merlin thinks. The boy can’t be more than fifteen or sixteen, and he’s avoiding her gaze, but he obviously knows that this isn’t the first
time his master’s been way out of line. He probably keeps an eye out for it if he can.

Rod managed to interrupt at exactly the right moment, and he stays in the front of the shop until Merlin leaves with Arthur’s commission under the guise of learning how the transaction takes place.

She breathes a sigh of relief and appreciation for the nice apprentices in the world when she’s out in the open air, and hopes to high heavens that she won’t have to go back to the leathershop for a long, long time.

On the way back, Merlin’s mood is lifted when she runs into Gwen on an errand to buy a matching necklace for one of Morgana’s dresses, and the two spend more time than they probably should wandering through the marketplace.

“There are always men like that,” Gwen says sympathetically, at Merlin’s resigned complaint about the leatherworker. “Even women, sometimes. I know we’ve both had our fair share of messes with them.”

“Yeah,” Merlin sighs. “It’s nothing I can’t handle by now, but it’d be nice to not have to, you know?”

“I know,” Gwen agrees.

They inspect a set of fine quality jewels, amethysts set in silver. The craftsmanship is exquisite. At least, that’s what Gwen says. Merlin knows almost nothing about jewelry, or what makes it exquisite.

“How do you tell?” The warlock asks plaintively, her trouble with Naeman put aside. “They all look —”

“If you say ‘the same’, Merlin,” Gwen huffs. “I will have problems.”

“—similar,” she finished sheepishly. “I can tell the difference between silver and gold and the different gems, you know.”

“Of course you can.” Gwen tries to suppress a smile, brushing a curl back from her face.

Merlin has a moment of longing to be as pretty as Gwen, and to wear dresses and jewelry instead of trousers and neckerchiefs, and know the difference between ‘prismatic’ and ‘faceted’ gems.

She pushes it aside, though, as always, for a firm reminder that dresses could get her killed by showing off her soulmarks, and that trousers were more comfortable anyway. Her neckerchiefs are important because they cover up two different sets of words, and while she wears them, there’s no point in wearing jewelry anyway.

“Do red and purple go together, Gwen?” Merlin asks on impulse.

Gwen pauses in her scrutiny of the amethysts and slowly looks up at her. “Do I want to know why you’re even asking that?”

Merlin thinks of how she wore her bright red neckerchief with her purple shirt to meet Leon’s parents, and grimaces. “Uh, no. On second thought, please don’t tell me. I’d like to reserve some of the tattered shreds which represent my dignity.”
Gwen laughs and shakes her head. “Oh, Merlin.”

Merlin shrugs. “Well, it’s too late now, so I don’t think I want to know!”

Gwen laughs harder, and hugs her. “I think anything would look good on you, Merlin. You just have that type of personality. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s just that I know more about men’s clothing than women’s,” she protests. “Because of Arthur, you know? And all they wear are trousers and tunics. And jackets. There’s not much color except for red and…dark green. Maybe blue.”

Gwen grabs her hand and pulls her along to the next table, still chuckling.

Merlin makes it back to Arthur’s chambers with the belts and, as usual, he forgets to thank her or basically acknowledge her existence in any way except to growl about the ink stains on his curtain.

“There are no ink stains on your curtains, Arthur,” Merlin points out. The curtains have been immaculately cleaned, thanks to a handy bit of behind the back magic.

“What do you mean there are no—!?” Arthur pokes his head around his changing screen. “Oh. When did you do that?”

“In between going to get your belts and now, obviously,” she replies. “How did you not notice?” Merlin is getting better at the cover-ups, she thinks victoriously. Ha. He will never suspect a thing.

“I don’t know, that seems pretty suspicious, Merlin. You’d have to have magic or something to get them clean that fast,” Arthur calls from behind the screen, unaware of her sudden alarm. “I bet you just switched them out and haven’t cleaned the first ones yet.”

She breathes a sigh of relief. Never say never. “Where would I even get more curtains?”

“I don’t know! Pass me my other shirt, will you?”

“How one?”

“I don’t care, as long as it’s not this one!” A damp, sweaty shirt, wadded into a ball, narrowly misses Merlin’s head.

“So picky,” she snipes, and throws a clean red one over the screen.

He emerges a moment later, fully dressed, and grabs his jacket on the way out of his rooms. “Come on. A herder from the northern plains has a hearing this morning with my father. I’m supposed to attend, and if I’m stuck in there when we could be training, you’re coming with me.”

Merlin sighs and follows.

The herder’s name is Joseph. He seems like he’s probably a nice guy, if a little superstitious.

“While we were camped beneath the walls of Idirsholas, we, we saw smoke rising from the citadel, Sire,” Joseph says.
Uther frowns, leaning back on his throne.

“Did you see anything else?” Gaius asks carefully.

“No.”

“Did you go inside?” Uther inspects him carefully for signs of honesty.

Joseph looks appalled. “No! Nobody has stepped over that threshold for three hundred years! You must know the legend, Sire.”

Gaius looks grim. Merlin feels chills suddenly from where she’s standing beside the pillar in the throne room.

“When the fires of Idirsholas burn, the Knights of Medhir will ride again,” her mentor says quietly. The words hang in the room with a sense of dread.

Merlin has to fight to swallow.

This can’t be good.

It isn’t good.

On the ride to check out the supposedly abandoned citadel of Idirsholas, Merlin can’t shake off the feeling of foreboding, even with all of Arthur’s taunts about bedtime stories. She’s met things her soulmate doesn’t believe even exist, so she’ll give herself a little slack for believing Gaius when he’s usually right.

But that doesn’t mean she isn’t hopeful that he’s wrong, just this once.

He isn’t.

When the Knights of Idirsholas appear, her heart sinks.

When Arthur lands a killing blow, and the knight just keeps coming, all she can think of is her vision in the Crystal of Neahtid, about the army that couldn’t die.
Loyalty Is That One Little Bright Spot In This Whole Stupid Thing

Chapter Summary

Merlin and Morgana hash out some stuff that desperately needed hashing out, but at the worst time possible, Uther snores, Arthur is totally somewhere else for the whole chapter, and Leon is the only reason the author writes this stuff anymore.

Chapter Notes

Whew! Soooo, yeah, it's been a while. I think I'll stop apologizing for my awfulness, say that hey, exams are over now, yay, and get on with the story. :) Thank you all so much for every bit of support. It means a lot!!

Spoilers for BBC’s Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 14:

Merlin doesn’t know how to feel about Arthur’s readiness to tear his nice, clean red shirt without a second thought to bandage her arm. She decides on simultaneously slightly touched and slightly offended because she is going to have to mend that shirt, dammit.

“Did anyone else escape?” Arthur asks, tucking the ends of the cloth strip around her arm firmly.

Merlin shakes her head, surveying the prince’s work with a keen eye. “Those knights…they seemed to be unstoppable. It’s a miracle we managed to get away.”

Arthur stands and lends a hand to pull her up. “We need to get back to Camelot, gather reinforcements.”

There are no reinforcements, because everyone is asleep.

Everyone except Morgana.

“Don’t worry, I won’t say anything,” Merlin says quietly. They are walking a good distance behind Arthur; he won’t hear them from up ahead.

“About what?” Morgana is defensive.

That seems to be her default these days, Merlin realizes. Defensive. Cold, when she thinks no one is watching. Lonely, even when they are, sometimes. It’s like she just can’t help projecting that
particular emotion.

“The illness,” the warlock says belatedly.

“That has nothing to do with me.” Morgana’s barriers go up another notch or so.

“No, of course it doesn’t, but you have magic,” Merlin replies gently. “That must be what’s kept you awake.”

“You haven’t told anyone that!” Morgana whirls on her, eyes blazing with fear. She is trying to look intimidating, but it doesn’t work. She’s too terrified.

“No. And I won’t tell Arthur.” Merlin’s voice is reassuring, but her emotions do not match.

Something deep inside the servant weeps at the look in the witch’s eyes. She has felt that too many times not to be sympathetic. Merlin remembers yet again how there was at least one moment when she was going to tell Morgana about her magic. How she later decided that perhaps the other girl was too much of a danger.

“Why?” Morgana demands, her voice cracking.

Merlin throws caution to the wind.

“Because…well,” her own voice breaks. Moment of truth. “I have magic too, Morgana.”

The king’s ward draws back, her eyes wide. “No. You’re—you must be lying.”

“Why would I lie?”

“You’ve never mentioned that before!”

Merlin rubs her hand across her eyes. “It’s not exactly a great conversation starter! ‘Hello, Morgana, ward of the person who hates magic most in the entire world, did you know that I’m breaking the law by even existing? How are you?’ I might have died!”

“I might have died,” Morgana says softly, but violently. “Because I didn’t know who I was, or what I was. Or how to control it.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but I just.” Merlin swallows, and meets her friend’s eyes. “I just couldn’t. You know what that’s like. But I’m telling you now, and if you want to…to tell Arthur, I guess you can. He’s just around the next corner.”

Morgana stares deep into Merlin’s eyes for a few moments. Silence. Merlin prays to any powers that might be listening that she hasn’t made the biggest (the last) mistake of her life.

Morgana surges forward and hugs her.

Merlin stumbles backward a half-step at the impact, breathless for a moment before she recovers enough to wrap her own arms around the other magic user.

“Thank you,” Morgana whispers, voice trembling. “You don’t know how much you’ve just done for me.”

“I’m sorry it took so long to do,” Merlin says, her throat tight. They would make a funny sight, if anyone was still awake to see them.
The king’s ward, resplendent as always in one of her favorite green bejeweled dresses, embracing a servant in trousers and a worn jacket: to all appearances, totally different, but with more in common than anyone could suspect.

Morgana pulls back, her hands resting on Merlin’s shoulders as she studies the other woman’s face.

“Merlin, I think…I think I need to tell you something too.”

“What are you two doing?! I thought you were right behind me!” Arthur appears around the corner.

“We, uh, we were just—” Merlin stammers, but Arthur cuts her off before she can get too far.

“It doesn’t matter, just come on! I found my father.”

They are dragging Uther through the castle, frantically heading for Arthur’s chambers. The Knights are coming, and probably nothing could be worse. Merlin can’t get advice from Gaius, who is asleep, or Kilgharrah, who is far away.

She has no idea how to fix any of this.

Uther makes a peculiar noise and then starts to snore.

Merlin can’t help but grin.

“It is not funny, Merlin,” Arthur snarls. “Did you find the potion you said Gaius must have given Morgana?”

“Er…no,” she says. There is no potion, but they had to come up with some reason for why Morgana wasn’t asleep.

They reach Arthur’s chambers and Merlin and Morgana let go of Uther’s legs, straightening with a groan.

A short debate and two pillows under the king’s head later, Merlin heads off to find servants’ clothes to disguise Uther. She feels tired, and Arthur does too. They are getting sick as well, and Merlin is not sure why. She expected it to catch up to Arthur at some point, but her too?

She has magic—magic more powerful than Morgana’s. How could it be that Merlin is falling asleep when Morgana is not?

The warlock stops at Gaius’s chambers again, frantically flipping through his magic books.

“Sleep spells, sleep spells…” she mutters, running her finger down one page after another. “Come on…yes!”

**Magickal Enchantments of the Deathlyke Sleepe**

*To place those so desired in a sleepe akin to that of death, without truly hastening their demise requires power great indeede. To cast it is foole’s play, but to sustain it is foolhardy. A vessel must be obtained, a living vessel which may give the spelle strength, and yet remain aparte from its effect. And if more than mere wordeplay is needed to fulfill the enchantment’s potential, just so to break it and render it corrupte. The vessel and source of the magick must be destroyed.*
"Merlin! I was worried," Morgana exclaims as the warlock rushes into Arthur’s chambers. The king is still out cold on the floor.

“They’re here! They’re in the castle,” Merlin says breathlessly. “I ran into Arthur and we nearly ran into them. It’s Morgause! She’s behind this.”

“Morgause!” Morgana’s eyes go wide, before narrowing thoughtfully. “Where’s Arthur?”

“Gone to find somewhere safe to move to.”

“Right. Merlin…” The dark-haired witch looks troubled.

Strangely troubled, beyond just there-are-unstoppable-knights-in-my-home-and-we’re-probably-all-going-to-die levels of trouble.

“Is something wrong?” Merlin asks after a moment of waiting.

“I—”

Arthur bursts through the doors, cutting her off. “We have to move!”

They narrowly avoid death by undead Knights. Morgana slips and falls and Merlin is about to go after her, when bizarrely, the Knight stops, looks at her, and then turns to go after Merlin. Arthur jumps in and kicks it down the stairs.

They take refuge in the throne room, which has slightly better fortification.

“Merlin, help me!”

Merlin lets go of Uther and helps Arthur heave the bar up in front of the door just in time. She is hit
with a wave of nausea, and slowly slides down the door. The pounding in her head is making it hard to think, and she tunes out of the conversation, wondering if her friends are safe.

Gaius is asleep in his chambers. Gwen and Leon…they could be anywhere. Merlin hopes desperately that they are okay.

She forces herself to focus. She tunes back in to hear Arthur and Morgana snapping at each other.

“I don’t see how we’re going to hold out,” Arthur says, shaking his head. He’s sweating. The sickness which preluded the sleep must be affecting him as well as her.

“We have to destroy the ves—the source of the magic,” Merlin says wearily.

“What is?”

“I don’t know,” she replies helplessly.

Arthur shakes his head again. He looks like he’s trying to shake off the weariness settling deep in his bones.

“Our only chance is to get out of Camelot. Help me with my father. You cut the blanket up. We’ll tie it to him, and we’ll lower him onto the cart.”

“Arthur….” Morgana doesn’t seem to know what to say.

“I’ll fetch the cart ’round to the window,” the prince continues, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. This takes Merlin a moment to process. She blinks a few times, and shakes her own head, hoping to clear it.

“You're going out there? I'll come with you,” she announces.


“You won't reach the cart alone,” Merlin protests, staggering to her feet. “It's suicide.”

“We have no choice.”

She considers for a moment. He’s right. She has to block out a wave of hysteria as she admits to herself that she has no idea what the vessel is. Merlin shoves that away violently.

“How you feeling?”

“Not bad.”

“You sure?”

Arthur huffs a laugh tiredly, leaning against the door. “Yeah, you?

“Never better,” Merlin shoots back with a grin.

He begins to fall asleep, and she has to slap him across the face to wake him up. He splashes water on his face and readies himself to dash out when she raises the bar.

How do these things even happen to her? This might be it. Her best friend—one of her soulmates—may be about to die. Again.
“If I need a servant in the next life….” Arthur leaves the words open-ended. Merlin chuckles wearily. Only Arthur, the prat. “Don’t ask me.”

Her soulmate laughs again, and the moment after she heaves the bar up, he is gone.

“Merlin?”

The young warlock turns to face Morgana. While Merlin is more and more exhausted, Morgana still seems fine.

“Are you still all right?” Merlin asks.

“Yes, fine.” Morgana looks troubled again. “You have magic.”

“I know,” Merlin says, confused.

“You said that my magic must have been stopping the illness. Why isn’t yours doing the same?”

“You’re right,” Merlin admits, “and I don’t know, but that was the only thing I could think of.”

“Earlier, I was going to tell you…I said I had nothing to do with the illness, but I’m not sure that’s true.” Morgana looks up at her, eyes full of something unidentifiable.

“Why would you say that? You wouldn’t wish any harm on the people of Camelot, would you?” Merlin sinks down to sit on the floor, ignoring the sounds of Arthur fighting outside.

“No!” Morgana says sharply. “Never! Not to them.”

Merlin looks at her more closely. “Then who to?”

“Uther,” the king’s ward admits softly. “I…I’ve been meeting with Morgause.”

“Morgana!”

“She’s been good to me! She gave me direction and understanding when no one else would,” Morgana defends. She gives Merlin a sharp look. “You cannot say that if you were as lost as I was, you would not have taken what consolation you could.”

“You’re right, I can’t,” Merlin agrees. “But why Uther?”

“I would think you would understand more than anyone! How can you bear to live in the midst of a people who hate you for what you are? How can you serve a king whose only concern would be to see you dead if he knew the truth?” Morgana rages.

“I believe in the world that Arthur will build,” Merlin replies softly. “He will be a great king. And then, someday, we will all be free.”

“My only goal was to let that day come sooner for all of us,” the witch points out. “I said I would help Morgause, but Arthur is going to die unless we do something, and I never wished to harm innocent people, only to prevent death.”

“What can we do? We need to destroy the source of the power for the spell, the vessel,” Merlin says, wiping sweat off of her own forehead.

She is growing more weary by the minute. The sounds of fighting have receded down the corridor,
but Arthur must not be able to hold out much longer.

“And I don’t know who—” Merlin breaks off suddenly. “You said that you would help Morgause—what did you say to her? What exactly?”

Morgana looks confused. “That…I would do anything to ensure Uther’s death. Why?”

Merlin shoots to her feet. “Oh, no. No, no, no, no!”

Morgana follows. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Merlin turns to face her, stricken. “It’s you. The vessel is you.”

“What?!” Morgana turns pale.

“It must be! It makes sense! For these types of enchantments, the power must be provided by a living vessel, which is not affected by the spell itself. Morgause made you the vessel, and now—” Merlin breaks off. “There must be another way to—to siphon the spell’s attention on you away. Something!”

A cry of pain echoes from the corridor.

“Arthur!” Morgana steps towards the door involuntarily.

“We can’t go out there, it won’t do any good,” Merlin says despairingly.

Morgana is silent for a moment. “What could I do? To stop it?”

“You could die.”

“Would it—would it stop them for sure? Save Arthur?” The witch tugs at the ends of her green velvet sleeves.

“Yes,” Merlin says softly.

“Then I have to do this,” Morgana says firmly. “It’s my responsibility. Do you—do you have….”

“A poison,” Merlin tells her reluctantly. “And a waterskin.”

“Can you…?”

Merlin turns away, and pours the hemlock into the water with shaking hands, swishing it around. This is the only way.

The only way.

She can’t quite look Morgana in the eye as she hands her the waterskin. “It will just taste like water. I’m sorry, I—”

“Merlin.”

Merlin looks up at Morgana, whose eyes are wet.

The witch tries to smile. “You’re a good friend. I brought this upon myself.”

The warlock shakes her head. “If I had known it was you, I would have tried to kill you.”
“But you didn’t. Thank you.” Morgana takes the water, and Merlin turns away, ashamed, as she takes a long drink.

She reaches up and wipes her eyes harshly.

The choking sound which follows only moments later makes the servant spin around, but not fast enough to catch Morgana. She collapses to the ground, the back of her head hitting the stone floor with a dull thud.

“Morgana!”

She stares up at Merlin, panicked, choking and choking and choking. She looks so betrayed. Merlin reaches out for her, tears spilling down her cheeks, but Morgana pushes her away. Merlin persists, and the servant cradles the king’s ward as she dies.

“What have you done?!” Suddenly the doors slam open. Morgause pushes Merlin away from Morgana with a burst of magic.

“I had to,” Merlin chokes out.

“You poisoned her!”

“You gave me no choice!”

“Tell me what you used and I can save her!” Morgause demands.

Merlin dashes away the tears violently and clenches her fists. “Stop the attack.”

“You can’t order me around, girl! You’re nothing but a lowly servant!” The blond witch snaps.

“Undo the magic that drives the knights and let the people of Camelot wake!” Merlin shouts.

“Tell me the poison or you’ll die,” Morgause snarls.

“Then she’ll die with me! I don’t want this any more than you do. Stop the knights and you can save her.”

Morgause growls, and rattles off a string of magical words. Merlin thrusts the bottle of hemlock poison at her, and she starts to mutter over Morgana’s limp body. Her eyes have slipped shut.

Arthur bursts through the door. “Morgana!”

“Keep away from her!” Morgause thunders. “Bedyrne ús! Astýre ús panonweard!”

A huge cloud of smoke erupts, and when it clears, both Morgause and Morgana are gone.

“How’s Gwen doing?”

“Not good,” Merlin tells Leon. “She doesn’t know what to do with herself. She’s started helping Uther through the day, just to have something to do. Arthur seems so lost. And the king, he’s just…I wish I could fix all of this.”

They are standing on the parapets, leaning on the sturdy wall and gazing out at the forest as the sun
sets. Once, Merlin stood here and wondered if she would ever see Leon again. He made it home, and now she wonders if Morgana will ever be so lucky.

Leon sighs. “I know you do, Merlin. That’s just the kind of person you are.”

She shivers. The twilight air is cool, but that’s not all it was.

The knight reaches out. “Here, my cloak is warm.”

Merlin shuffles sideways so that she’s standing with his arm around her shoulders, the cloak blanketing her. His presence, solid and warm, is comforting. “Thanks, Leon.”

They stand in silence, watching the last rays of the dying sun.

Merlin sniffs, and scrubs at her eyes. “It’s only been a week. I miss her.”

“I know. We’ll find her,” Leon says.

Merlin forces a smile, and thinks of Morgana choking on poison. “Yes. We will.”
Chapter Summary

A visiting royal party comes to town, some of the more questionable knights are getting into trouble, the prince of the visiting royalty is both clumsy and suspicious, Merlin tries to run literally everything, and Leon is just not having a good day.

Chapter Notes

Welp...this sure was a long time coming. Trust me, these "original plot" things are kicking my butt. The first of an original "episode style" arc is now here!! Written with much love and annoyance, by yours truly. In case you were wondering, the crosspost on FFN is now up and running again for the first time in seven or eight months. Yay! Hope you all are having a fabulous fall!! I'm excited for Halloween. Candy and cosplay, y'all. Thank you so, so, so much for the support!! Know that I read each and every comment and I appreciate each and every kudos!! You guys are the actual best and I owe a lot to you. Thank you!! <3 Enjoy. :)

Spoilers for BBC’s Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 15:

Dear Lancelot,

Thank you for your most recent letter, and your promise to write me if you hear any news of Morgana. Both mean a lot. It’s been a while since she disappeared with Morgause—a month, maybe—but I still feel like I saw her only yesterday. At the same time, I feel as though she’s been gone for years.

You asked how Gwen and Arthur were; their relationship is taking the stress reasonably well, from what I understand. They are both still grieving for the loss of Morgana, though, and we ride out in search parties more days than not. No one in court will say she is dead, but that’s how they behave, all the same. It’s...draining, to say the least. Leon has been taking over some of Arthur’s training responsibilities so that Arthur can lead the searches, but I’m not sure how long he can keep that up on top of his other duties, especially since some of the more rowdy knights are getting restless. The raids for magic-users that Uther sent out monthly have been repurposed into search parties, and a good few of the men don’t like it. Leon is exasperated, and he tries so hard to help run things that he never considers his own well-being.

You’re wonderful for letting me load off so many of my problems on you through my letters, and you give wonderful advice. All the same, I still miss you. I was wondering if we could plan a picnic or somewhich just beyond the borders of Camelot and meet up. It wouldn’t be for a while, though. I need
to be here to support Arthur, Leon, and Gwen. Not to mention Gaius.

It feels like it’s been forever since I’ve seen you, and I could honestly use a day off, but I suppose it will have to wait until I can leave Arthur on his own for a day. He calls for me so much now that I’m afraid I’d be sorely missed.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Stay safe.

Merlin

Merlin sighs and puts down her quill. The candle on the desk is almost burnt down. It’s the middle of the night, and she can’t sleep, so her go-to is writing to Lancelot.

Her eyes feel like they have sand in them. She grimaces, grinding the heel of her palm into her eyes. Merlin is exhausted, moreso even than Arthur or Leon. She’s just tired, and when she tries to sleep, all Merlin can see is the look on Morgana’s face as she dies.

Merlin folds up her letter and addresses it. She’ll take it to the tavern tomorrow. She collapses on her bed with a groan. The delegation from Forgais arrives tomorrow, including Omarr the king, and his son Osmund.

Merlin wishes not for the first time that the annual visit from their kingdom, a coastally centered area, happened at some other point in the year. But they are convinced that tradition must be followed, and Uther is in no shape to stop them. Arthur will have to represent Camelot on the pretense that Uther is ill.

He is ill, Merlin thinks. Just…not the kind of ill that Omarr will assume. And if he decides to push the matter….well, she doesn’t really want to see the end result.

The upside is that Omarr is relatively friendly to magic, compared to the Five Kingdoms (the giants of Albion) and some of the other ruled lands. The downside is that ‘relatively friendly’ translates to ‘only kill the particularly evil-looking ones’. Which could be much worse, of course, but Merlin isn’t really sure how they judge which ones look evil. And Uther and Omarr always manage to get into quarrels over the issue, too. Hopefully Arthur will have the sense to leave it alone.

There will be time to deal with that tomorrow, she decides. Now…her time is best used trying to sleep.

She dreams of fire, red and crackling and filling the air, and a child screaming.

“Rise and shine, soulmate mine!”

“Ughhhhhhh.”

Merlin frowns, turning away from the curtains to give Arthur an offended look. “What, you didn’t like my rhyme?”

“How long did it take you to think that one up?” The crown prince glares back from his bed.

“Not as long as it would have taken you,” she shoots back cheerfully. “Come on, get up! The Forgaians will be here in a few hours.”

Arthur groans, pushing his face into his pillow. “I forgot.”
“No, you didn’t. You just wanted to forget,” Merlin corrects him, pulling his bedcovers off.

“Hey!” Arthur makes a grab for them and misses.

“None of that, let’s go!”

An hour later, Arthur is dressed, fed, and ready, but he still isn’t happy about it. Not that she expected anything less.

“It just doesn’t feel right,” he complains to Merlin. They are standing on the steps to the castle, where guests of equal standing to the king are traditionally greeted. The rest of the retinue is still scrambling, but Merlin has managed to get the prince into position. Everything else isn’t her problem until five minutes before the delegation arrives—then she will decide that everyone needs to get their act together and corral them just in time.

If Gwen was still Morgana’s maid—and unofficially running half the palace—they would be slightly more in order, Merlin muses, but her curly-haired soulmate is off in Uther’s chambers trying to convince him to eat. Merlin will have to make do.

“What doesn’t?” She asks.

“This! This whole thing. Standing in for my father.” Arthur rubs a hand over his sword hilt absently. He looks a bit more disheveled and uncomfortable than a crown prince is supposed to, but Merlin mentally dismisses it. Chances are no one else will even notice.

“You’re doing your duty,” she reminds him. “While the king is ill—”

“I know, Merlin, I know! I just feel like…something is going to go wrong,” Arthur says uncomfortably.

“Welcome to my life,” Merlin replies dryly. “While we’re switching our usual positions on the matter, shall I ask if your knees are knocking from fright, or…” she peers around, licking a finger and holding it up to test the air. “…is that just the wind?”

“Oh, shut up, Merlin.”

“What could possibly happen, Sire?”

“I said shut up!”

The greeting of the visiting royalty goes smoothly. King Omarr accepts Arthur’s apologies for Uther’s absence graciously, if with a slightly puzzled air. Prince Osmund, who is around eight, looks horribly nervous for no reason that Merlin can ascertain. The royals and the rest of their escort are ushered into their rooms, and Merlin takes a ten-minute break in the midst of the hustle to dash down and leave Lancelot’s letter at the Rising Sun. It will be the last opportunity that she has any semblance of time until the Forgaians are long gone.

The castle is the busiest it’s been since Morgana’s kidnapping, and all the citizens of Camelot are putting on a good show of being cheery, even though the shadow of her disappearance hangs over them like a heavy cloud.

Merlin makes her way back through the palace, heading to the guest wing, where the Forgaians
royalty should be settling in nicely. This section especially is full of life, servants ducking around each other expertly as they carry fresh sheets, curtains, candles, dishes of fruit, and luggage.

Merlin takes a moment to be relieved that Arthur didn’t think to make her carry bags. *Haha, yes. Free from the slavery of suitcase delivery.*

However, as the crown prince’s personal servant, she should take the time to make sure the foreign royalty have everything they could possibly need, on top of all her other duties. Merlin is even accustomed to acquainting the guests’ own servants with the workings of the palace if the Camelotian head servant, Ilkim, doesn’t bother.

All too often, the man shirks his job, but even though Merlin has complained that Gwen could more efficiently run the royal household than Ilkim might ever dream, Arthur refuses to do anything, citing it his father’s place to dismiss or hire such important servants.

The dumb prat. Merlin wishes he would just figure out that he is, in fact, in charge here, and just *do* things already.

The young warlock rounds the corner into the guest wing at a fast clip, her mind on her thoughts, only to come to an abrupt halt in an attempt not to slam headfirst into—

“Aaaagh!” Prince Osmund cries, his eyes going wide. He slips from his own sudden halt in momentum and lands firmly on his behind.

“Hup!” Merlin waves her arms to regain her own balance. “Sorry, your Highness!”

Osmund recovers swiftly from his moment of terror and glares at her with all the gravitas an eight-year-old sitting on the floor can muster. “Sorry? *Sorry?* I’ll show you sorry, you—you wench!”

“Language, your Highness!” Merlin gasps out without thinking.

“Language?” The young prince gives her a strange look, still sitting on the floor like he’s decided it isn’t worth getting up. Merlin recognizes the look of someone who figures they’ll just manage to fall over again anyway, so they may as well save themselves the trouble.

“Well—” She thinks fast. Merlin can’t exactly say *You’re eight! Therefore swearing is bad!* “No royalty should swear! It’s really not suited to your station. It could make an awful impression on people.”

He narrows his eyes suspiciously. “Really? Like what?”

“Well, um, they might assume you were a—a blacksmith, or something.”

“A blacksmith?” Osmund’s eyes widen.

“Yup!” Merlin decides. “Or a stable-mucker-outer!”

“No!” He gasps.

“Yes!” She declares triumphantly. “So you don’t want to go around calling people wenches, right? Especially lowly servants who are just trying to help, right?

The eight-year-old nods vigorously. “Right!”

“Good. Now, you’d better stand up before somebody else gets here and wonders what you’re doing on the floor.” Merlin offers him a hand up, smiling.
Osmund sighs. “I guess. I’ll probably just fall down again, though. I bet people think I’m a…a floorscrubber or something because I’m so clumsy.”

“Nah, they don’t,” Merlin reassures him cheerfully. “They’d only think you were a floorscrubber if you act like one! You don’t seem like a floorscrubber to me.”

The prince eyes her warily, and then takes her hand to stand back up. “Well, you don’t seem like a lowly servant to me.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Merlin huffs out a laugh. “Well, I’m sure you have things to do and places to be! It’s not every day you get to visit a new kingdom.”

“Oh. Yeah, I—I forgot.” Osmund tenses up visibly. He darts a couple glances around, as if looking for something lurking in the shadows.

“Are you alright?” Merlin frowns, looking around as well. Nothing is hiding in the corners of the well-lit hallway.

“Uh—I have to, um, go. You’re dismissed!” Osmund looks behind him, and sprints back down the hallway and into his room, slamming the door behind him.

“So much for not being a lowly servant,” Merlin mutters to herself.

Well, strange anxious prince aside, she herself has things to do and places to be. Running interference for half the castle is hard.

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After being yelled at by Cook Audrey, Arthur, the head of the stables, Arthur, the linens supplier, Arthur, the head of waitstaff, and Arthur for the next several hours (although not exclusively in that order), Merlin is ready to do some swearing herself. Arthur has been incredibly tense, and is taking it out on her in lieu of yelling at the King of Forgais, with whom he is trying to review a treaty.

Meanwhile, the various divisions of servants around the castle are trying to settle in an entire delegation, before serving up a lavish banquet to celebrate their arrival.

Merlin herself is a personal servant, answering technically only to Arthur, or to visiting royalty of the same rank or higher. Gwen fell under the same umbrella before Morgana’s disappearance, but has now taken over as Uther’s personal servant. Only the members of the royal household have servants devoted entirely to them, which has somehow always landed Merlin and Gwen at the top of the chain of command.

The only other with quite as much power is Ilkim, the head servant, who is constantly mismanaging everything, if he even bothers to try and manage it at all. Gwen had a habit of keeping things mostly organized when she wasn’t attending Morgana, but now her time is fully monopolized by Uther.

That leaves Merlin with the unfortunate task of trying to run things smoothly. She has to make sure the kitchens know how many people to feed, who in the delegation will attend the banquet, and who will be feeling ill or travel-weary and need their dinner delivered to their rooms.

She needs to confirm that rooms are chosen for the correct number of people in the party, and that clean linens and fresh water are ready and available for use. The waitstaff have to be informed of how many people must be served at the banquet, and whether the visitors’ personal servants will wait on them, as Camelotian personal servants do, or whether waiters must be supplied.
Merlin also has her own duties, like getting the visiting servants in touch with their counterparts in the castle, keeping Arthur mostly calm, and redirecting any potential yelling to her so that no one blows up at each other.

Needless to say, it’s exhausting.

The banquet, however, is the last straw.

Merlin has managed to keep everything on track up until nearly two-thirds of the way through the welcoming banquet. Arthur is presiding at the head table, shoulder to shoulder with King Omarr. The conversation has stuck to trade and hunting, and even preferences in weaponry. All relatively safe topics. Merlin is waiting on Arthur, and Omarr’s personal servant, who is waiting on him, isn’t as much of a snob as many are. They’ve exchanged several eye rolls and stifled snickers at their respective rulers.

The crowd of nobles, knights, and ladies from both kingdoms are intermixed at the tables, conversing freely as they enjoy the delectable spread. Prince Osmund sits on his father’s other side at the head table, still looking like he thinks someone is going to bite his head off at the slightest opportunity. Merlin sees Leon’s parents, Lord Gervaine and Lady Meliane de Bouclés, a table or so down, easily making small talk with various other members of the nobility.

She hopes that the shadows behind Arthur’s and Omarr’s chairs will hide her. Merlin would hate to be recognized by her soulmate’s illustrious family while waiting on tables. The warlock’s gaze travels down the hall. Everything seems to be going smoothly, and Merlin finally manages to breathe out the last of her anxiety over the visiting delegation. Perhaps with enough effort, nothing will go wrong after all.

The doors to the hall slip open. Four or five knights stumble in, obviously at least partially inebriated. Over the loud conversation, they go nearly unnoticed, but Merlin, who is standing with her pitcher of wine facing the doors, is immediately on edge. Those knights are the ones most involved in the troublemaking about the halt on magic raids. Their sudden appearance can’t bode well.

They are laughing raucously, and she notices that none of them are wearing their cloaks. They must be off duty. One of them loses his grip on his fellow’s shoulder and without the support, topples toward one of the tables. Horrified, Merlin watches the fall as if in slow motion. He collides with two of the nobles from Forgais, clutching at their tunics to try and stay mostly upright.

“Pardon me!” One, an older gentleman with a distinguished gray beard exclaims, alarmed.

“What d’you think you’re doing?” The other cries. He is a younger, brown-haired man.

“Ahhhh, my sinceeerest apologies to you, sirss,” the knight slurs, grinning. He pushes himself off their backs and tries to execute a bow, but sits down rather abruptly.

“Look at the fool you made of yerself, Cerdic!” One of his companions guffaws, not seeming to notice the attention that is slowly starting to focus on them.

“Ssss’alright,” Cerdic snickers. “They’re just magic-lovers, anyway. If Uther were still in his right mind, we’d be out chasin’ the bastards down, not havin’ ‘em over for dinner!”

His friends laugh in agreement. One of them takes a swig from a hip flask, before pulling Cerdic back up.

The hall is nearly silent. Leon has appeared from who-knows-where to intervene, the hall guards right behind him.
Arthur is as motionless as a statue, but Merlin can see his jaw tensing in anger. Hopefully he’ll let Leon deal with it. While he’s standing in for Uther, he can’t be leaping into fights left and right.

“Gentlemen, I must ask you to leave,” Leon says quietly, his hand hovering over his sword.

“Orrrrrr…what?” One, the strange light of intoxication in his eyes, dares to challenge the curly-haired senior knight. “You gonna send us to bed without dessert?”

“I must ask you to leave,” Leon repeats dangerously. His hand closes on his sword hilt carefully. “This disorderly conduct is no way to impress our guests.”

Cerdic snorts like a pig. “Hah! Like we aim t’impress these salivating magic-lov—”

Leon draws his sword and brings the hilt down on Cerdic’s skull halfway through his sentence, knocking the sorry excuse for a knight out cold. Cerdic’s compatriots quiet instantly.

Merlin silently cheers.

“I will not ask again. You have no place to insult our guests and friends while they are under our roof, and you will already face investigation if I have anything to say about it.” He gives them a hard look. The hall guards haul Cerdic’s limp body up, and remove him from the banquet room.

The drunken knights follow, still directing resentful glares at both Leon and the Forgaians. The hall remains silent, no one sure what to do. Leon shuts the doors to the hall quietly behind the retreating troublemakers.

Arthur, still seated in front of Merlin finally starts breathing again. “Quite right, Sir Leon. Thank you for your prompt defense of our esteemed guests. I will call them up for investigation of character.”

Leon nods in deference, face carefully blank and disappears through the door himself. Merlin kind of wishes she could see him reaming out those knights. Leon, furious? Truly a sight to see.

Then again…she mentally reviews the look on his face. The loyal and steadfast knight is probably reaming himself out for not stopping the encounter sooner. She should probably find him as soon as possible.

Arthur turns to King Omarr, on his left. “My deepest apologies for the rudeness of my knights, your Majesty. I am ashamed that they wear the colors of the Knights of Camelot.”

“Apology accepted. No hard feelings for a mistake by some of your knights, my friend,” King Omarr replies, giving Arthur an approving nod. “Now, let’s have some dessert!”

The tension in the air dissolves and the hall applauds appreciatively. Chatter once more fills the large chamber as everyone returns to their food before dessert actually can be brought out. Merlin fights the urge to give an almighty sigh of relief, scanning the room for any other sources of disturbance.

Everything seems normal again, apart from that the common topic of discussion is probably how rude the knights were. At the head table, conversation has lapsed into riding and horsemanship.

Arthur gestures for more wine. As Merlin leans forward to pour from her pitcher, she glances down the table and frowns.

Prince Osmund is unnaturally pale, his fists clenched in his napkin. The boy taps his father on the arm, speaking quietly into his ear. The king looks slightly worried, but nods.
As Merlin returns to her former position, the heir to Forgais’s throne slips off his chair and, accompanied by his servant, vanishes through the back door of the hall.

Arthur continues to talk with Omarr, completely oblivious.

_Hmm._ After a moment’s thought, Merlin dismisses the occurrence. It’s late for a young boy’s bedtime, anyway.

As the banquet winds down, and tables are moved so that there is room for the guests to dance, Merlin relinquishes her waiting duties and follows Arthur across the room to the end of the room where those who are not dancing will congregate to make small talk.

“Arthur,” she quietly beckons him away for a moment. “I’m going to let George take over my duties for a while. I need to go find Leon.”

“Ugh. George? Really?”

“It’ll be fine! He’s the most competent servant in the castle.”

“Yes, he is,” Arthur mutters. “To a fault.”

“Arthur!” Merlin protests. “Now is not the time.”

“Yes, all right,” Arthur agrees quickly. “I’ve never seen Leon that angry, and rightfully so. But try and hurry—don’t think I don’t know that you managed most of the setup. We need you here.”

“Yeah, okay,” she replies resignedly. So much for any sleep at a reasonable hour. Not that she’d be able to drift off anyway. “I’ll come straight back.”

“Good, you’d better.”

Merlin finds Leon in the armory. He is sitting on one of the wooded benches, waxing crossbow strings with the utmost precision, his blue-green eyes fixed indelibly on his task.

She purposely lets her footsteps fall on the flagstones so that he can hear, but he doesn’t look up. Merlin wordlessly sits beside him, picking up one of the unwaxed strings and a block of wax. She falls into the task with easy rhythm.

Waxing crossbow strings is a job usually meant for servants. If he wanted, Leon would never have to so much as touch a block of wax. Merlin knows this because she often does Arthur’s strings if he doesn’t have time.

The wax isn’t sticky, but it does get ground into the pads of the fingers after a few minutes, and it takes scrubbing them raw to get it out. And even when being careful, the strings can leave thread-burns that stay for days. No one likes the job, even when compared with shining boots (the oil smells awful) or polishing armaments (with the constant danger of accidentally slicing yourself open).

Leon always waxes his own crossbow strings.

That’s just the kind of person he is.
They sit in silence, waxing strings, for a long time. Merlin doesn’t bother to keep track of how many she’s finished. The pile of those that are left doesn’t seem to get smaller.

Finally, Leon sighs and brings his head up, dropping his string onto the pile of those already waxed. Merlin follows suit, waiting. Their shoulders brush gently. She hopes he understands that the silent gesture means ‘I’m here’.

“We take an oath,” he says softly. “An oath to be chivalrous, and courageous. To protect the weak, to live with honor, to die with honor if we must. To remain loyal to that which we serve, and only to serve that which is just and right. We fight for the welfare of all, and accept that glory which we have truly earned, but despise reward. We guard the honor of others, and we do not lie. We respect others, keep faith, and eschew unfairness, cruelty, and deceit.”

He is silent for a moment, then shakes his head.

“I took that oath when I was seventeen. There were many who doubted that I could remain true to it, and perhaps there were moments when I doubted myself as well. But I have done my best to fulfill that oath every day since, and I will do so until the day I die. The way those men acted…I have never been more ashamed in my life, Merlin,” he admits.

“Leon…” Merlin sighs. “You know their type. They care only for the glory of battle and they see chivalry only in nobility. Their foolishness isn’t your responsibility.”

“Chivalry only in nobility,” Leon muses, his eyes tired and deep. “While I was gone…that peasant knight. Lancelot, wasn’t it? He killed a griffin, and they banished him for his trouble.”

“Yes,” Merlin says after a brief moment of hesitation. “I knew him.”

“I sometimes think we would be better off with Lancelot the commoner,” Leon says tiredly, “than the likes of Cerdic and all his kind.”

Merlin leans into him. “I sometimes think you’re right.”
Chapter Summary

Things go even MORE wrong with the visitors, somebody goes missing, the plot thickens, Merlin has to cleanup a lot of wine, and pretty much nobody sleeps at the end of the day, which is pretty r.

Chapter Notes

It is...almost Halloween again. Whoops. I'm still alive, folks, and I'm still working on this, of course! I HAD to update today, though, even though its been so long, because today, SEpt. 20, 2018, is BBC’s Merlin's tenth anniversary! Amazing, huh? So here ya go, and in honor of the 10th, for the first time ever, additional content for The Price Of Eight For One will be available in the form of short stories from Merlin's soulmates perspective's. It will be published tomorrow under the title What To Expect When You're Expecting (One Soulmate But It Turns Out She has Seven More), shortened to What To Expect When You're Expecting (One Soulmate).

Enjoy this chapter and go check out the bonus content sometime in the next couple of days if you want!

Spoilers for BBC’s Merlin, Seasons One-Five

Warnings: Slight Angst, Multiple Canonical/Non-canonical Character Deaths

Chapter 16:

The sweet scent of flowers fills the air. Winter is giving way to spring, and the green things of the earth know it.

Merlin breathes in the delicious air, turning her head over on her pillow contently. The little magic which still lives in Camelot's air sings, making her feel a contented buzz of happiness. Her stiff, narrow bed has never been so comfortable.

Her eyes shoot open. Light is streaming in through the window; the sun is warm.

It's the third day of the Forgiaians' visit, and the second morning since the fiasco at the banquet. Arthur and King Omarr are supposed to review their treaty this morning, and Merlin is late.

She practically flies out of bed, throwing on her clothes, and barely sparing a moment to ensure that her nice blue neckerchief is securely tied. She bolts down the stairs, throwing her bag over her neck in a beeline for the door.

"Merlin, where are you g—?" Gaius's voice is cut off by the door shutting behind her.
"Sorry, I'm late!" Merlin calls over her shoulder.

She arrives at Arthur's chambers in record time, stifling a laugh at the prince's attempt to dress himself. They arrive at the meeting room only a minute or so late, and Arthur is forced to grumpily apologize for his servant's tardiness.

Merlin keeps her eyes down and tries to look sorry and meek.

"No matter, Arthur," booms King Omarr. "Actually, I wonder if your servant wouldn't mind taking my son and his guard around the city for a while to see the sights while you and I discuss the treaty."

"Of course," Arthur acquiesces. He waves his hand at Merlin. "Go along then. Take your time showing Prince Osmund all the best sights."

"As you wish, sire," Merlin says, sketching a light, mocking bow, knowing only her soulmate can see the light of mischief in her eyes.

Arthur ignores her with a herculean effort, turning to King Omarr to add, "I'm sure His Highness will enjoy the tour. Camelot is a wonderful city."

"So I have witnessed," the Forgaian king agrees graciously, and then addresses Merlin, "my son may be found in his chamber, and the knight posted at the door, Sir Enten, is his personal guard."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Merlin says.

Arthur makes a shooing motion behind his back. Merlin shoos.

She arrives at the young prince's chambers to find a knight in a deep blue cloak guarding the entrance. He is extremely tall, with brown hair down to his ears, a hooked nose, and a haughty expression.

"Sir Enten?" She sketches a slight bow. "His Majesty the king sent me along to take Prince Osmund on a tour of Camelot. I was told you are to accompany us."

"My lord duke," said Sir Enten coldly.

Merlin blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"My proper title is 'my lord duke'," Sir Enten clarifies, his back straight. He looks down at Merlin with a sniff of derision. "You will address me properly or not at all."

Merlin fights not to roll her eyes. Duke of what, exactly? "Understood, my lord duke."

"Good. And you will address the prince as 'your Highness' or 'my lord prince'. In Forgaia, we do not tolerate disrespect," he warns her sternly.

Merlin wonders why Arthur gave her this job. Is it because she was late?

Sir Enten—she refuses to call him 'my lord duke' in her head—knocks on the door. "My lord prince? The guide has arrived. Are you ready to tour the city?"

"Yes, one moment, Enten!" Osmund's young, high voice chirps through the door. "I'm coming!"
It opens a moment later. The young prince looks suitably excited, and not nearly as nervous as before. His eyes go wide when he recognizes Merlin from the hallway encounter.

She gives him a quick grin and a wink, hoping that he won't mention it. As Sir Enten turns back to close the door, Osmund returns the wink, looking thrilled to be in on a secret.

"My lord prince, this is King Regent Arthur's personal servant...." Sir Enten trails off.

"Merlin," Merlin supplies readily. "I'm honored to show you the best of our fair city, your Highness."

"And I am honored to see it," Prince Osmund returns, though he looks bored of the pleasantries. "Shall we?"

Merlin spends most of her day escorting the prince and his guard through the city. She shows them the different marketplaces; the farm area with its produce and the fine wares of all the vendors. They visit the smithies and the jewelry makers, the clothiers and the stalls with piping hot meat pies.

Street performers are a dime a dozen because of the visiting royalty. Some do acrobatics, backflips and pretzels. Other play their instruments or sing, even acting out skits with puppets. They all have hats or tins for tips.

Osmund insists on trying a pie, and buying apples in the farm section, and tips a minstrel who played his favorite tune on a harp. The young prince has a grand time, not encumbered in the least by his scowling guard, who seems to disapprove of everything as disrespectful as laughter.

Merlin is about ready to call it a day and retreat to the palace with her charges when Osmund scurries through a tight spot in the crowd toward a candy seller and disappears in the crush of bodies. Sir Enten is highly dismayed, and Merlin can't help but feel a pang of worry. It takes them several minutes to find him, sitting on a barrel and looking around as though only just realizing he had gotten lost.

"My lord prince!" Sir Enten exclaims, grabbing his elbow as though he could disappear again any second. "What were you thinking—"

"Shhhh," Osmund cuts him off suddenly. "Listen!"

Where he is sitting on a spare empty barrel, he is directly adjacent to a vendor tent which seems to have just closed for the day. The purple curtain is shut, but voices can still be heard faintly through the din of the marketplace.

"—on't tell me it ain't trouble! Mark me, when knights of the realm are punished just for wanting to seek out dirty magic-users, it ain't long til those filthy creatures take over the whole kingdom, and Camelot too!"

Merlin listens, her heart in her throat. Sir Enten's hand drifts onto his sword hilt. Osmund seems to have lost all his color.

"It's those rats they call royalty," a different voice replies. "They harbor magicians and witches, no doubt. They ought to be stomped on, just like the vermin they're protecting."

"Oh, we'll see that they are," the first voice says, snickering.

Osmund lets out a tiny squeak of fright. Sir Enten's hand claps over his mouth, his other hand beginning to draw his sword from his sheath.
The voices move on to talk about the price of silk as though they hadn't just been discussing murder.

"No," Merlin whispers, stopping Sir Enten's wrist with her hand. She shakes her head. "Osmund needs to get back to the castle."

Sir Enten doesn't even bother correcting her form of address. He nods curtly. Osmund slides off the barrel quietly, and they slink away from the tent, only daring to hurry once they're farther off. They make their way back to the castle quickly, going straight to Prince Osmund's chambers.

"I need to tell Sir Leon," Merlin informs Sir Enten. "He'll know what to do. And then Arthur and your king will need to hear as soon as they're out of their talks."

"Then do so," he orders brusquely. "I will see that my lord prince stays safely in his chambers."

Osmund slips inside his door without saying anything. He glances back just before the door shuts, and Merlin sees a sliver of his face; full of fright and very pale.

Merlin speeds off toward the armory without a second glance. When she can't find Leon there, she checks his castle chamber, and finds him writing out guard schedules.

"Leon, someone wants to murder the Forgaians!" She blurts, skidding to a halt, her hand still resting on the door handle.

Leon closes his eyes slowly, not moving from where he sits at his desk, the schedules spread out in front of him. "Of course. How could this visit get any worse?"

Merlin stares openly, wondering why Leon can't seem to be bothered to move. "Leon? Did you hear what I said? Possible murder? The visiting Forgaians?"

Leon stands suddenly, as if galvanized into action. "Of course. What did you hear? We need to inform Arthur and King Omarr right away."

Merlin describes the overheard conversation on their way to the throne room where Arthur and King Omarr have been going over treaties all day. Leon listens gravely, and asks a few questions about which tent, where in the market, etc., the details of which Merlin gladly supplies.

They arrive at the throne room, and Leon strides up between the guards stationed at the huge wooden door and raps on it smartly.


King Omarr and Arthur seem to be in good moods, seated comfortably at the table and enjoying a light dinner, courtesy of the fine Camelot kitchens.

"What is it, Leon?" Arthur asks, ignoring Merlin.

She rolls her eyes. He's probably still miffed that she was late.

"Sire," Leon reports solemnly, his hands clasped behind his back, "there has been a death threat against His Majesty King Omarr and His Highness Prince Osmund."

"Excuse me?" Arthur drops his fork. His good mood vanishes like a gust of smoke on a windy day.

King Omarr's jaw drops. He stands hastily, knocking over his goblet of wine, which spills across the table. Merlin makes a beeline for the nearest towel.
"What is this nonsense? A death threat? Do you mean to tell me my son is in danger?"

"Possibly, Your Majesty," Leon allows, frowning. "But within the safety of the palace—"

"Safety—what rubbish! Girl!" King Omarr turns on Merlin, who is mopping up the spilt wine. "What have you done with my son?"

"I escorted His Highness and Sir Enten back to the palace, and when Sir Enten assured me he would take the prince to his chambers, I went straight to Sir Leon, Sire," Merlin explains, pausing in her wine-cleaning duties. "Your son is in his chambers, guarded by your own knight."

"Ah. Well...good." King Omarr says, nonplussed. "That's good. Although I request that you address my knight with the respect and title he deserves. He is properly referred to as 'my lord duke'. More to the point, what do you plan to do about this...threat, Pendragon?"

Merlin tries not to roll her eyes. 'My lord duke' indeed.

"Investigate its authenticity and potential danger, of course," Arthur responds quickly, having regained his decorum. "Sir Leon, get to it."

The Forgaian king nods, but he seems to have completely lost his good humor, his face slowly turning splotchy and red with anger as he fondles his sword hilt. Merlin had assumed it was ceremonial and strictly decorative, but now she keeps one cautious eye on it.

"Right away, sire." Leon sketches a bow to both royals and exits hastily, leaving Merlin to find another towel and hopefully prevent King Omarr from stabbing Arthur.

She can understand the urge; honestly, she has it often enough herself. But on the off-chance that something goes wrong and things get ugly, she doesn't look forward to stopping the big, bulky Forgaian king without flaunting her magic.

Merlin sneaks off into the corner when she's done cleaning up the wine, watching as Arthur and King Omarr make stiff conversation that has nothing to do with death threats. She eyes the parchment strewn across the table and wonders how close they were to signing the treaty.

Almost half an hour later, both royals have relaxed slightly, sitting more comfortably and resuming their meal. Merlin is playing waiter and wondering if she can reasonably sneak off and get some hot, calming herbal tea to the prince with his own dinner, since the crisis seems to be, if not resolved, probably contained.

In fact, she'd be unsurprised to learn at any moment that Leon has already taken the culprits prisoner, given his recent understandably bad mood.

Merlin has quietly made her way nearly to the serving door of the throne room to find some of that tea—if she's right, it'll do the poor scared prince some good—when the double doors to the hall burst open.

Surprisingly, it's Sir Enten skidding through them without a hint of decorum. His face is red and sweaty, and he looks horrified.

"My lord king, Sire," he stammers, stumbling to a halt and sketching a perfunctory bow. "The prince..."
King Omarr rises to his feet, alarmed. "What about my son?"

Merlin squeezes her eyes shut for a fraction of a second. This can't be good.

Sir Enten seems to choke on his words. "He's—he's gone!"

King Omarr's eyes bulge. "What?!"

Pandemonium erupts.

Only two hours, five frantic searches of the palace, and about sixteen threats from King Omarr later, can any sort of calm be established.

Arthur has officially lost his cool about two searches ago, and Merlin, who left for fifteen minutes to more quietly coordinate the castle servants into checking all the serving passages and staircases, almost regrets leaving at all.

The Forgaian king drew his sword and waved it in Arthur's direction more than once before she made her exit, but with a plethora of guards in the room—both Forgaian and Camelotian—she decided it was probably safe.

She sneaks back in and is pleasantly relieved to find that somewhere in the chaos of nearly fifty guards from two cities tearing the palace apart looking for the prince, Gaius has figured out what is happening and come to mediate.

"—don't know for sure that this is indeed a kidnapping, Sire," he says placatingly. His arms are folded securely into his red robes and unlike most of the occupants of the room, his face is calm.

"Gaius is right," Arthur agrees, looking both stressed and thankful to have a voice of reason.
"Perhaps the prince—"

"What, ran away?" King Omarr booms derisively. "When he knows of the danger that could await? Hardly! Who is this old fellow anyway—"

Merlin lets out a barely audible squeak of protest, but thankfully, at the back of the room as she is, no one hears her.

"I would thank you to address my trusted adviser with respect, as you commanded my servant to address your knight with respect, Your Majesty," Arthur says, his voice holding a note of warning.

King Omarr flushes and draws himself up proudly, reminded of the respect that is so vital for figures of importance in his own culture. "You are right, Pendragon, that was wrong of me. I admit that I am harried by worry for my only son, and have failed to remember myself. Your forgiveness, grandfather, and your title?"

Gaius blinks. "Ah…yes. You have it, Sire. I am only a physician who offers advice, but Gaius is my name."

"Thank you, Gaius." King Omarr inclines his head. "If we may return to the pressing matter of my son's untimely disappearance?"

"Of course," Arthur retreats, accepting the olive branch for what it is and moving forward. "We are expanding our searches, and Sir Leon is personally investigating the threat in the light of Prince Osmund's disappearance. However, there is no way to be certain whether….."
Merlin tunes out, inspecting King Omarr’s face, which is rugged and flushed an angry red, but still noble. She is struck by the man's humility. In the midst of a roaring fit on behalf of his missing son, he had the decency, when admonished—however gently—to apologize to a figure below his station and even ask for forgiveness. Loud and demanding he may be when it comes to his child's safety, but he still tries to keep the traditions of respect he follows even in his anger.

With night coming on fast and nothing left to do but continue the searches, the royal parties in the room retire to wait, although King Omarr is obviously unsatisfied. Merlin doesn't blame him; if someone she cared for suddenly disappeared she would be angry too.

This makes her remember that she is angry.

She tries not to think of Morgana.

"I just want to get out there and find him," Arthur grouses. He sits at his desk in his nightshirt, picking at an old, tattered quill. "The entire treaty hinges on Osmund not being harmed. Omarr has already threatened to dissolve the treaty once. I believe he may actually do it! And I just can't believe that an intruder could have stolen the prince out of a guarded room in the middle of the palace!"

"You're needed to run Camelot, you can't exactly miss a night of sleep to join the search. And maybe he wasn't kidnapped after all," Merlin reasons from where she is retying his bed-curtains.

"Right, but then, what—he just ran away?" Arthur scoffs. "Omarr is right, that isn't exactly very likely. He had no reason to run. Why wouldn't he stay where it was safe?"

"Hmm. I dunno, Arthur." Merlin frowns, staring at the red silky cords binding the curtains to the bedpost. "Maybe he thought it wasn't safe?"

Arthur actually gives that a moment of that. "But why?"

Merlin groans. "I don't know, you prat! You figure it out for once!"

"For once?" The future king of Camelot looks offended and takes this moment to throw the end of a candlestick at his unsuspecting servant.

"Ow! Arthur!" Merlin rubs her ear, where the candle end glanced off and fell to the ground. She bends down to pick it up and tosses it back casually.

"All I'm saying, Merlin, is when have you ever figured something out before me?"

Merlin turns away to hide a smile. When indeed.

She points Arthur toward his bed and leaves for her own, hoping he actually ends up there. She goes by Uther's chambers next, to see Gwen.

The dark-skinned maidservant is just shutting the door to Uther's chamber when Merlin turns the corner. The guards on each side of the door nod to Gwen and she starts down the hall toward Merlin, perking up when she sees the familiar face of her soulmate.

"Merlin!" Gwen exclaims, careful to keep her voice soft. "I was just about to head out. I heard all the commotion in the palace, but all I could find out was it's something to do with the visitors? I'm sorry I haven't been more helpful with that, I've just—"
"Gwen." Merlin stops her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "It's fine, I promise. You've been running yourself ragged trying to take care of the king."

It's true. Gwen's hands are twisted into her apron, and she has dark circles under her eyes. Her hair is a little more frizzy than normal, and is falling out of her bun.

"I know," Gwen admits, shrugging a little. "But still. I feel bad."

"Don't," Merlin insists. She steers Gwen toward the hallway with the hand on her shoulder. "You need to go home and rest. The visiting prince has disappeared, that's what was happening. We need you to be as alert as possible tomorrow to make sure no one gets to Uther."

"But tonight—" Gwen moves as if to go back to the king's chambers.

"The guards can handle it," Merlin tells her confidently. "Your job is to go home and sleep."

Gwen sighs. "You're right. I should go."

"I'd walk you there, but I want to go by and try to see Leon," Merlin says sheepishly. "Will you be alright alone? It's late."

"I'll be fine, Merlin," Gwen says fondly. "I've waked home alone plenty of times."

They part ways with a quick hug and Merlin sets out for Leon's quarters.

When she arrives, the room is dark and empty. Leon must still be out coordinating the searches, as they spread throughout the marketplace and homes. Merlin hopes he'll get at least some sleep, but she doubts it.

Unlike Gwen, who is a servant, Merlin can't exactly track down the head knight and tell him to go to bed, so she resigns herself to making extra eye-opener tea and giving it to Leon for the next few mornings. Her soulmate will need all the support she can give him.

All her soulmates will.

Merlin shuts the door to Gaius's chambers behind her with a tired sigh.

"Finally came home for supper, I see," Gaius remarks from the table, where he seems to have been waiting up. "I'm afraid it's quite cold."

"Gaius, I'm sorry," Merlin apologizes, sitting down across from him. "I've just been so busy. Arthur is too stressed about the treaty to sleep, Gwen is too stressed about Uther to remember to sleep, and I don't think Leon plans to sleep at all in the near future."

She picks up the bowl of lukewarm soup and starts to slurp it down hungrily.

Gaius watches her eat, his hands clasped on the table. "And how is the king? He seemed no worse this morning when I saw him."

"No better either," Merlin agrees, scraping her spoon on the sides of the bowl. "That's the trouble. I don't know how long Gwen can keep him alive like this; he's barely coherent."

"Yes," Gaius muses. "He's suffering from a malady of the mind, not of the limb, Merlin. He misses
"I know." Merlin swallows her last bit of cold soup morosely. "I do too. We all do."

Gaius sees the look in her eyes and reaches out to catch her hand. "Merlin. There was nothing you could have done."

"No, I…I know," she says, not quite able to meet his eyes. "I know."

Merlin stands abruptly, leaving her bowl behind. "I should sleep. Thanks for waiting up, Gaius."

"Of course," he says, watching her retreat up the stairs.

Merlin lies in bed that night and can't sleep either. When she finally does fall asleep, she dreams in color, and hears a familiar child. He used to scream, but now he cries, tears quiet but deafening in the silence of her dreamworld.

He is afraid.

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