The Patter of Tiny Feet on Cold Stone Floors

by TheAvalonian

Summary

When Guinevere finds that she is unable to bear Arthur a child, Merlin offers her the perfect solution: an ancient spell which can create new life out of love, if that love is pure and powerful enough. But after the ritual, it becomes increasingly obvious that while Gwen has indeed become pregnant, the child she carries might not have been created from the love between Arthur and his wife - but rather from the love between Arthur and his Court Sorcerer. Merlin/Arthur romance.

Notes

This idea came to me while I was trying to think of a way to give Arthur and Merlin a baby without mpreg (which I'm not a fan of) being involved – and suddenly, it seemed so obvious, I couldn't believe I hadn't thought about it before! And once I had the idea, I couldn't not write it.

This story starts at the beginning of season 5, and veers off from there.

There is now a trailer for this fic! Watch it on Vimeo or on YouTube.

If you would like to read the Spanish translation of this story, Jake91 is currently working on it! Read what has been posted so far here: El tamborileo de unos pequeños pies en el frío
suelo de piedra.
Guinevere's life was perfect.

She had the most beautiful gowns in the kingdom, more precious jewellery than she knew that to do with, and a castle full of servants that were hers to command if she chose.

She had a place at the Round Table, and her opinions mattered - in a way that few women's opinions did.

And, most importantly, she was lucky enough to find herself married to Arthur Pendragon; her best friend, the King of Camelot.

Guinevere the Queen had everything which Gwen the Servant Girl would never even have permitted herself to dream of, back when her nights were spent in her father's smithy and her nightclothes were made of scratchy wool, not the finest silk in all of Albion.

Back then, she had looked up at her golden prince with the same awed reverence as all her peers, and had been content to serve in demure silence; loyal to a fault and instantly deferential to anyone whose rank commanded her respect.

These traits, incidentally, were what a lot of people attributed to her ability to serve Camelot and its King not as a fine handmaiden, but as a great Queen.

Holding this title, when at birth she had held nothing, and proving every day how capable she was as a co-ruler of the kingdom, Gwen was slowly making a difference. She knew this, saw the subtle changes in the ways in which servants were now being treated by their masters. And humble as she was, this was one of the few parts about her life which she allowed herself to revel in. She was making a difference, just by being Queen and being good at it, and she was content that this would be her legacy.

However, it was no secret that Guinevere was also hoping to leave Camelot a different kind of legacy; a far more substantial proof of her existence, and of her and Arthur's star-crossed romance.

Ever since she and her King had wed three years ago, Guinevere had dreamed of a child. A beautiful child with Arthur's smile and her eyes, and Arthur's nose and her hair; the picture in her mind was so clear that she could almost imagine it to be real.

But Gwen was not Morgana, and her dreams were not destined to come to pass.

During the three years that had passed since they had become man and wife, she had waited and she had hoped. And Arthur, too, had begun smiling more fondly at the children playing in the market square, and regarding her hopefully whenever he saw her hand stray towards her stomach.

Although he had been understandably preoccupied with his new and overwhelming responsibilities since taking the throne - often having to depart the castle to negotiate peace treaties with other kingdoms for weeks at a time, and spending most of his time when at home working to diplomatically move away from his father's ways - Arthur had kept up his visits to her chambers, too, even after the initial thrill of being newlyweds had passed.

When they had just been married, of course, Arthur and Gwen's individual chambers had been left
unused, the pair spending every night together in their shared rooms. They had reveled in the freedom of finally being able to be together, and she still shivered at the memories of the ways in which Arthur had worshiped her body, unlocking new and unfathomable realms of pleasure within her.

But it quickly became apparent that Arthur's duties and routines required him to wake early and sleep late, and he had insisted that it would be easier on her, really, if he did not disturb her sleep by crawling in and out of bed with her at all hours. Plus, he had joked, poor Merlin never knew where to look when he arrived with breakfast in the mornings.

So, after it became apparent that Arthur was insistent on this act of chivalry, Gwen had acquiesced with a fond roll of her eyes. And while they had eventually moved most of their belongings into their individual private rooms, Arthur had promised to visit her in their joint chambers as often as he could.

Gwen did not subscribe to court gossip, especially not about such private matters as what happened between a husband and his wife in the bedchambers, so she did not know how often married couples would usually come together in this way, after three years of being together. But, even if she spent more nights than not missing the feel of holding her husband in her arms, Guinevere thought she and Arthur had a wonderful, comfortable bond - and she would not trade that for any amount of passion or excitement. And even during the months when Arthur only visited her bed a couple of times, Gwen never felt her love for him waver.

But still she was beginning to worry, because even if their couplings were not as frequent as a small part of her may secretly have wanted them to be, she knew how this was supposed to work. By all accounts, she should have found a quickening in her belly already within their first year of marriage. And with every moon cycle that passed, she grew more concerned when the quickening did not come.

Then, on one otherwise unremarkable day, Guinevere woke up in her bed (alone, of course) after yet another dream of holding a child in her arms. And as her hand fell automatically on her flat stomach like it had done every morning for the past several months, a strange feeling came over her.

Because, without being able to explain to herself how or why, in that moment she just knew that she was not able to bear Arthur a child.

Guinevere got out of bed, quite calmly, and went to Gaius's chambers - trying not to feel as if she were walking to the gallows.

A few hours later, it was with a grave expression that Gaius confirmed the heartbreaking news: that Guinevere could indeed not have children. But even as he patted her shoulder (a little awkwardly, but she appreciated the sentiment), Gwen did not cry - because really, she had suspected for a long time that she could not bear children, even if she had not let herself believe it until now.

If she had looked towards Merlin's room at that moment, she would have seen her old friend watching them silently, mournfully; standing frozen in the doorway after having unwittingly intruded on a very private moment and being unable to think of a way to make his escape without being noticed.

And had she watched him very closely, Guinevere would have noticed the myriad of conflicted emotions dancing across Merlin's face, as an old memory of a story he had once been told about another King and his barren Queen resurfaced in his mind, and the shadow of an idea began to form there.
In an uncharacteristic act of selfishness, Guinevere did not tell Arthur about any of this, and she made Gaius promise that he wouldn't, either. She had never doubted her husband's love for her, but she worried that his duties – which were already keeping him from her for so many nights – would begin to take precedence over her completely, now that there was no longer the same shared goal between them of ensuring that the Pendragon line would live on after they were gone.

She also felt deeply, helplessly ashamed, as though she had let Arthur down on purpose. It was irrational, Gwen was level-headed enough to understand this, but it didn't make her self-loathing any less substantial. Arthur had married her, a lowly servant girl; he had defied his father and denied himself all the tactical advantages that would have come with marrying a noble woman, and for what?

Nothing, she thought bitterly. Less than nothing: the destruction of the Pendragon line, all because of her and her lowly, unworthy body.

This, she thought with growing despair, as the weeks grew into months and she found herself slipping further and further into apathy, more often than not denying Arthur's advances even when they did come, this is what they will remember me for. History would not record her as Guinevere, the baseborn Queen who flowered from withered earth and helped unite all the peoples of Albion, no, but rather as Gwen the peasant girl who selfishly ensnared the noble King and knowingly led his line into ruin.

Slowly but surely, Gwen began to truly hate herself. And noble and brave and dutiful to her King as she was, Gwen couldn't help but hate Arthur a little bit, too, for putting this burden on her; this pressure which her body was unable to live up to.

Guinevere lived in this bubble of numbing despair for a long time. Everything began to feel hopeless, pointless; talks of peace and the daily tasks of the knights lost their meaning for her, and she found herself drifting away from everything and everyone she had once taken pleasure from.

But then came the fateful day (which to her had been as ordinary and as despairing as any other), when Morgana sent a spy to Camelot to assassinate Arthur. Only, Merlin saved the King's life – with magic – and was promptly thrown in the dungeons.

And Gwen, who despite her own pain still instinctively put the suffering of those she loved above her own, had gone straight to Arthur's rooms to demand that Merlin at least be given a fair trial – only to find Merlin already there, sobbing into Arthur's shoulder that he should have told him sooner, would have, but he couldn't bear for Arthur to not trust him, couldn't bear for Arthur to think that he had ever meant him or Camelot any harm; that he couldn't help what he was, that he had only ever wanted to serve his King.

The two men had been too wrapped up in each other to even notice her arrival, and Gwen had watched unseen from the doorway as Arthur ran his hand hesitantly up and down Merlin's back and reassured him that he knew why Merlin had done it, that he understood, and that he only wished Merlin had trusted him with this sooner.

And Gwen had felt a deep kinship with Merlin at that moment, mixed with a by now familiar pang of bitterness that it was not her in Arthur's arms being promised forgiveness and loyalty and love, despite what she had come to consider as heinous of a crime against Camelot as sorcery.
A month later, with very little fanfare, Merlin was appointed Court Sorcerer (much to the outrage of the members of Arthur’s council who had sat in his father’s court too - following which Arthur had politely informed them that they could shut up or leave, with the promise of Merlin making the door hit them in their backsides on their way out). And the very next day, her old friend came to visit Guinevere in her private chambers.

These days, Gwen was hardly seen at official events. She took her meals in her room, she usually begged ill if requested at the Round Table meetings, and visiting nobles often found themselves leaving disappointed, having not caught as much as a glimpse of the fair Queen they had heard so much about.

Arthur had noticed her behaviour of course, but had wrongly attributed it to an illness of the body rather than the mind. He would now come to her chambers in the evenings much more frequently than he ever did before, but only to sit and talk with her. Sometimes he would lie with his head in her lap as she stroked his hair and he told her of the goings-on at court, and other times he would just come and sit with her in silence, busying himself with maps and scrolls.

Staying with her, she knew, was meant to be a reminder of his unwavering love for and devotion to her, and showed how deeply worried he must be. And it only made her hate herself a little bit more, because how had she ever thought herself worthy of Arthur Pendragon?

Even after Gwen had called for him to enter, Merlin stayed in the doorway, smiling hesitantly at her. She found herself smiling back; it was not as warm as it once would have been, but it seemed to be enough encouragement for Merlin to move into the room, looking relieved.

"Gwen," he said, seeming shy and not at all like the man who had proudly, defiantly stood up last night at the Round Table and taken his place at Arthur’s right-hand side, accepting his rightful place after all these years.

"Merlin," she replied, keeping her voice calm and pleasant, "to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

It was a sad truth, Gwen reflected, that the appearance of Merlin in her chambers really was a rare occurrence these days. The two of them used to be so close, once – but ever since she had married Arthur and become Queen, Merlin had treated her differently, even though she had done her best to discourage him from doing so.

At the time it had bothered and confused her, because he never seemed to have a problem being familiar with Arthur, despite him always having been royalty. But over time she had come to regard it as just another one of the inevitable changes which her alleviated status had brought with it. Guinevere had few enough friends amongst the servants these days, and there were even fewer noblewomen who were willing to accept her as one of their own.

And that Merlin only came to her now, after his own status had been raised, too – when their positions at the Round Table was at the right and left hand of the King, respectively – did not go unnoticed by her. But Gwen was too polite and unassuming to say anything about it.

Merlin was still regarding her hesitantly but he moved closer to her still, coming to sit in the adjacent chair by the large window overlooking the forest and the far-off mountainside.

"We missed you today, My Lady," he said, in that soft, careful tone everyone had been using around her lately. "At the meeting."

Ah yes, there had been another Round Table meeting today. She had gone yesterday for Merlin's
sake, of course, after Arthur had practically begged for her support when he was about to break down the last, most important part of what his father had stood for (and how could she deny her beloved King anything, especially now?), but watching all of Camelot's court regard her with such respect and adoration which she now knew she did not deserve had exhausted her, and it was not something she was anticipating doing again anytime soon.

"Yes, I was sorry to miss it," she said gracefully, "sadly I was feeling rather too unwell to leave my chambers today."

There was an unreadable expression in Merlin's eyes as he said, "You seem to be feeling unwell a lot these days, Gwen."

Gwen gave him a tight smile, which she hoped communicated her unwillingness to discuss the subject without her having to speak the dismissive words on the tip of her tongue.

But Merlin, being Merlin, of course didn't take the hint. "Will you not tell me what is ailing you, Guinevere?" he asked quietly, searching her eyes.

He looked so kind then, so open and trustworthy, and for a moment she let herself imagine what a relief it would be to finally tell someone, to have someone know, and maybe not even judge her that much. Because Merlin himself, after all, had been keeping a deep, painful secret for so long...

But no. She couldn't. No one could know the truth of her condition, or they would see her for the fraud she was. Gwen broke Merlin's gaze and turned her head slightly to regard the mountains in the distance, knowing that she was being rude now but no longer finding the energy to care.

"Gwen," came the sad, yet insistent voice, "please. Look at me."

And she did, of course she did, because it was Merlin, and they had been friends for too long for her to be able to shut him out now.

"I think..." and there was that hesitant tone of voice again, which despite herself had Gwen vaguely intrigued. "I think I know what has been on your mind, what it is that causes you so much distress. And I think... I think I can help."

***********MERLIN***********

Merlin had thought long and hard about his decision, and still he had hesitated before approaching Gwen.

He had felt his heart break for her, that morning in Gaius' chambers when he had heard her voice and come out of his room to greet her, only to find her sitting on the bed reserved for their patients with a shuttered expression on her face as the old physician conveyed the tragic news that he was not meant to hear.

And Merlin's heart had broken for Arthur, too, and maybe a little bit for himself. Guinevere could not bear Arthur a child. Not only did this mean that she would not be able to give Arthur the one thing which Merlin knew Arthur secretly wanted more than anything else in the world, but it also meant that everything which Merlin and his King had been destined to build together, whatever peace and prosperity they would bring to Albion, it would all end with them. Who knew what the next King or Queen would do with Camelot, once the Pendragon line had ended?

Merlin didn't even know who would take the throne, he realised, once Arthur and Gwen were gone.
Morgana would certainly try, if she were still alive, but he was confident that Camelot's knights and subjects would never allow it – and that he would never allow her to tarnish Arthur's legacy.

He thought that some long-lost family members of Uther's would probably make themselves known, conveniently, after the Pendragon line was broken. He didn't really care. It wouldn't be Arthur; they wouldn't know Arthur or share his vision for a peaceful, united Albion, and their reign would once again lead Camelot astray. It was a crippling thought.

And as he grappled with this knowledge over the coming weeks, Merlin realised two things: one was that Guinevere had come to all the same conclusions that he had, and that the knowledge was destroying her. The second thing was that Arthur was being way too optimistic and cheerful, and could therefore have no idea of what his wife had learned.

If this had been the old Gwen, the servant girl who had been Merlin's friend and accomplice, who had stood beside him watching with poorly contained awe as Arthur moved with that unearthly grace that only the ruler of the kingdom could possess, then Merlin would not have hesitated in going to her, admitting what he knew and doing everything in his power to alleviate her misplaced guilt.

But this was Guinevere the Queen, Arthur's wife, who now moved with the same air of regality around her as her King, and Merlin was now left alone to watch both of them from afar. And so he hadn't approached her, because this Gwen was half a stranger to him, and he no longer felt like he was in a place to question or confront her with something as personal as this.

And even standing before her now, as Court Sorcerer, free to pose his solution to her without fear of retribution... Merlin still hesitated to broach the subject. Yes, Arthur had discovered and accepted his magic – a fact which Merlin almost couldn't let himself believe, but he knew it was true, because some part of him had always known that Arthur would react this way – and he was at Arthur's side where he belonged. But Gwen was still a Queen, and more importantly, she was Arthur's wife.

But his reservations had only kept him away for a day, because the knowledge that his old friend was hurting so deeply, that her suffering had gone on for so long and was causing Arthur so much worry and so many sleepless nights as well, was threatening to suffocate him. Especially because since the moment when he learned that Gwen couldn't bear children, Merlin had been quietly researching, reading, searching out whispers in the woods and, without even really realising what he was doing, begun to come up with a plan.

It was with this knowledge that he went to Gwen at last; when he was finally able to approach her and Arthur freely about matters involving his magic, and when he knew that his plan was substantial enough that there was a good chance that it would actually work.

"I heard you, that day, with Gaius," he confessed to her now, shameful but keeping his eyes level with her shocked ones, ignoring the flash of anger and betrayal he saw there. "I know that your body cannot give Arthur an heir, as much as you want it to," he said, and he felt his voice waver when Gwen's eyes filled with tears that began silently rolling down her cheeks as she stared at him in frozen panic. Like the deer she had once been, he mused distractedly. "But there is a way... Gwen, I think there is a way that I can help you, both of you. Help you give Arthur a child. With my magic."

And Merlin explained to her what he knew of Arthur's conception, what Nimueh had done to get the barren Ygraine with child and what he believed she had done wrong, why he believed that he could do the same for Arthur and Gwen now, without taking the same risks and making the same horrific sacrifice which Nimueh had done.

It was a testament to Gwen's lingering trust in her old friend that she did not stop him once, did not even question his plan – or maybe, Merlin thought with a pang of sympathy, she was just desperate
enough not to care, not to even really listen past the point of, "help you give Arthur a child." Her eyes were shining with a fervent desperation he had never before seen on her usually so mild and collected face, but he thought it looked a little bit like hope, and chose to see it as an improvement.

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GUINEVERE••••••••••

Gwen was not surprised when Arthur came to her room that night – their evenings had become a safe, trusted routine that even in her diminished state she had come to look forward to. She knew it had been selfish of her, to come to expect this comfort from Arthur even when she was keeping such a hurtful secret from him, but in those hours when they would sit together and she would feel his love for her fill the room she had willed herself not to care.

She was, however, surprised when the first words out of his mouth were, "Merlin told me to come see you."

Of course, leave it to Merlin to be too eager to want to wait another moment, Gwen mused, but she was in too good spirits to let that put her off. She merely rolled her eyes fondly, a gesture which felt oddly foreign on her face after having been lost in despair for so long.

"Are you feeling better?" Arthur said hopefully, cautiously moving towards her as if she were a wild animal easily frightened away, and she felt her heart break a little as a fresh wave of guilt filled her – how much more pain had she caused him, letting herself slip further and further away from him? Still, this new guilt was easy to handle now that she knew what she could offer him. What Merlin had given her to offer.

Merlin had presented his plan to her, and while she knew that she honestly would not have hesitated in giving up her own life for her future child as Ygraine had done, Gwen also knew Merlin, and she knew that he would not have come to her without being sure that his plan would work. But Merlin had made one request, which he had presented as a non-negotiable factor before he would proceed: that she tell Arthur, tell him everything, because he would never go behind his King's back again like when he had hid his magic. And as much as she would rather have kept her own body's shortcomings from her husband forever, Gwen had acquiesced, because no price was too big to pay for Merlin's help.

Gwen smiled at Arthur then, and rose to meet him halfway, threading her hands through his hair and kissing him softly. Arthur wrapped his arms around her tentatively, staying cautious, careful.

"Yes, Arthur," she said, pulling away from him. "I am now."

And she told Arthur everything. From when she had first learned of her predicament (which had made Arthur sag down on the bed, his face a study of unhappiness, and Gwen had to keep telling herself that it was okay, that it would be okay, she just had to get through the story), to her own growing despair and guilt.

Arthur had taken her hands at that point, and she thought that just maybe he would have managed to love her anyway, even without Merlin's solution – but that didn't matter now, anyway, because she had finally reached Merlin's proposition.

As he listened to her relay Merlin's plan, a shadow crossed over Arthur's face, but he only nodded his understanding, ensuring her of his love for her and that he never wanted her to do anything she did not want to do, that he would need time to think about it, and that he wished she'd come to him with this sooner.
They stayed sitting together for a while longer, and Gwen had perhaps hoped that it might lead to something more this time, knowing what they now both knew – but suddenly Arthur was getting up, still looking vaguely distracted and murmuring about having things to do. But he kissed her hairline tenderly and told her once again how happy he was that she had confided in him at last, and that he hoped to see her the following day for a walk along the battlements.

When he left her, Gwen felt a little bit disappointed. She had expected more... joy, from Arthur, somehow, being assured that Camelot's future was ensured after all. But then again, Arthur hadn't been struggling with the same knowledge that she had for the past months, so she reasoned that he probably just needed some time to process and accept it all. She went to bed feeling lighter than she had in months, with a hand on her belly, full of the promise of the life that would soon be growing within.

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When Arthur stormed into Merlin's new chambers, slamming the door shut behind him so loudly the whole castle must surely have heard, Merlin was not altogether surprised.

He merely looked up from the heavy tome he had been studying and steeled himself for the anger he knew was coming.

And sure enough, Arthur had him by his collar, slammed up against the wall so fast that Merlin wouldn't even have had time to utter a defensive spell if he had wanted to.

"What ideas," Arthur snarled into Merlin's face, his eyes stormy and inches from Merlin's own, "have you been filling my wife's head with, Merlin?"

Merlin, feeling a little dizzy from the motion and the close proximity of Arthur, merely kept his gaze steady as he looked into Arthur's dark blue eyes, trying to convey all of his trust and devotion. Arthur just needed a moment to remember this, what he himself had promised Merlin about mutual trust and friendship.

And Arthur did relent, after a few more seconds, loosening his hold on Merlin a little. And when Merlin saw his eyes soften minutely, he knew that nothing had changed between them after all. Arthur knew that Merlin would never hurt Gwen. He let out a relieved breath he didn't realise he'd been holding in.

"You spoke to Gwen." It wasn't a question.

Arthur's eyes narrowed at the mention of his wife's name, and he stepped back a few steps now, letting go of Merlin's collar completely and shifting his gaze, nodding once.

"This time it wasn't my secret to tell, Arthur," Merlin said quietly, staying where he was even though he wanted to follow Arthur, reach out and bridge that gap with softer, more reassuring touches. After so many years of being master and servant, he and Arthur were used to being up in each other's personal space, but at this particular moment he thought it best to keep his distance, as Arthur took in all of this (to him) new and unsettling information.

"This isn't about the secret, you idiot," Arthur grumbled, but there was no heat to his words. He sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair and sitting down at the foot of Merlin's bed, looking so defeated that Merlin really wanted to do something then, lay a hand on his shoulder, or... something. He didn't really know how this whole thing worked, touching-wise, now that it wasn't his
job to dress the King anymore. And even though he'd never admit it out loud, he found himself strangely lost without the comfort of that routine.

"I know," Merlin said instead, leaning back against the wall. Arthur's eyes shot up to meet his again, and the pain reflected there was evident, heartbreaking. "Look, Arthur..."

Arthur shook his head, raising his hand and Merlin clamped up at once. "Under no circumstances are you to lay a hand on Gwen, do you understand? It is too dangerous."

This surprised Merlin. "What? Arthur, I already told Gwen, I can help-"

"No!" Arthur's face was still pained, but the tone was commanding, every bit the King now. "I will not risk Gwen's life, Merlin, you must know this." Only the hint of a plea in Arthur's voice gave him away.

"I know," Merlin said again. And then he did move closer to Arthur, slowly, and Arthur steadily followed his progress across the room as Merlin came to stand in front of him, looking down at his friend. "And you know that I would never do anything that would put Gwen at risk either. But... this, what I can do? You know that my powers are nothing like Nimueh's." He paused, but Arthur only continued to look up at him brokenly, saying nothing. After a moment, Merlin added quietly, "don't you trust me?"

Of course that was a low blow, Merlin knew this, and by the way Arthur's eyes narrowed he knew it too. But he only nodded again, if a little grudgingly.

"Gwen explained it to you, didn't she?" Another nod, and Arthur was pouting now, which Merlin knew to take as a good sign, showing that he was seeing sense even if he would never admit it. "What Nimueh did, with your mother..." he ignored Arthur's look, because the time had long passed for Merlin to need to check himself in front of his King and they both knew it. "It was dark magic. Nimueh created life where there was nothing, out of nothing. That life, your life, it was never meant to exist. You know it's true. There was an imbalance then, an imbalance which needed to be restored, and it cost your mother her life."

Arthur knew all of this already of course, the truth of his birth having been a painful but necessary revelation after Arthur had learned of Merlin's magic. But still Merlin saw the unguarded expression of pain which stole over Arthur's features, and more than ever he felt the desire to just reach out, just this once, and it was so strong that he found the need to close his eyes for a moment to escape Arthur's intense gaze. And he hoped that Arthur would take Merlin's expression for one of shared pain at his friend's suffering.

When he felt Arthur's hand covering his own, Merlin opened his eyes to find Arthur's gaze softer but no less pained, and he allowed himself to pretend for a moment that they were talking about something very different.

"My mother died, Merlin," Arthur whispered after a beat, breaking the moment. And Merlin smiled sadly, letting his hand slip out of the other man's.

"Yes, she did. But Gwen won't." It was a promise. Merlin was no longer a scared child unsure of his powers, not after everything he had been through.

"How can you be so sure?" And that was really the crux of the issue, Merlin realised. Arthur trusted him so implicitly, with his life, with everything, of that there could be no doubt anymore. But as much as he had tried to, ever since finding out about it a month ago, Arthur still did not completely understand Merlin's magic – whatever he would tell anyone who dared to question him about it. And
how could he, after having lived in ignorance of it for all his life and only ever seeing it bring death and corruption, before Merlin had entered his life?

"Because I am not creating this child out of nothing, Arthur," Merlin said, and if his smile was a little sad, then so be it. "There is a love between you and Gwen which never could be between Uther and Ygraine-"

"My mother and father loved each other," Arthur interrupted, the defensive words coming almost automatically.

"Yes, they did," Merlin assured Arthur, "as much as any lucky couple brought together by politics but finding themselves growing fond of each other ever could. But you and Gwen... you are something else. You defied everything you had ever been taught for her, Arthur, your bond was forged despite all reason and convention, not because of it. And that makes it stronger than any magic. I see it in your eyes, every day. And nothing less will work for this spell."

Arthur was watching him so intently now, so completely focused on him, an odd expression on his face. And Merlin had to swallow and take another deep breath before continuing. "Even with the love of Ygraine in his heart... Uther still strayed, Arthur, and that was their undoing. Your life was formed by magic alone, whereas the life I will help you create with Gwen... in the case of a love so strong, there is life already there, within you both, waiting and wishing with all that you are to be joined. All it needs is a little push, but it is the love between you which will create it, in the end, not magic."

Arthur kept his eyes trained on Merlin, his face displaying a mix of growing conviction and something else which Merlin couldn't identify. "It is true, I have never loved another woman," Arthur said finally, slowly, looking at Merlin closely as if trying to judge his reaction. "And Guinevere... well, I fully believe that I am the only man alive whom she truly loves. Now." He shot Merlin a significant look.

Merlin shook his head, dismissing what he believed must be Arthur's worry about Gwen's feelings for Lancelot. "The past is not important, if your hearts are true to each other now."

When Arthur still looked a tiny bit uncertain, even as Merlin knew that he was convinced that Guinevere was not in any danger, Merlin crouched down in front of his King, tentatively placing his hands on Arthur's in a gesture of intimacy which he would never normally risk - but knowing that Arthur needed his complete assurance at that moment. "This will work, Arthur. This spell only works with the truest of loves, and I know that this is what you and Gwen have. I have seen your love for her grow since the moment I met you. This will work."

Arthur visibly swallowed then, glancing down at their joined hands before looking deep into Merlin's eyes. "And if it doesn't? If our love... if it's not enough?"

Merlin shrugged. "It is."

"Merlin."

"Fine. In the recorded instances where a child has not been created from the spell, no harm has come to the mother. Nor the spell-caster," he added with a fond grin, already seeing the question form on Arthur's lips.

After a moment, Arthur tightened his grip on Merlin's hands, and nodded. "I trust you, Merlin."

Merlin's grin widened then, and Arthur only hesitated a second before returning it, as they both
began to take in the reality of what they were going to be setting out to do. Ensuring that the Pendragon line would endure, and that all their work would not end with their own deaths. The knowledge made Merlin feel so infinitely small, yet he thought he finally understood his own importance, his destiny and why it was tied to Arthur's.

And it felt a lot like happiness, sitting there with his hands still clasped with Arthur's and knowing that his friend trusted him with something as important as this.

---GUINEVERE---

Ever since speaking to Merlin, Gwen had found herself in never-wavering good spirits, even as she learned that Merlin would need time to prepare the ritual, that everything needed to be just right. All that was only helping seal her certainty that this would work, and that she and Arthur would be parents soon. That knowledge stayed with her in every waking moment, her constant companion.

Her nights were filled with dreams of holding her future child in her arms, and Arthur had begun coming to her again, too, whispering about the future they would soon create together as he moved in her; of the love they shared which would create a brand new life. Assuring her over and over again of his devotion to her and his affection, and how much he would love this child, too.

Even if Gwen found his need to constantly remind her of his love for her a little too insistent, she allowed him all of it and more, reaffirming her own affections for him as well as they lost themselves in the slow, comfortable movements of lovemaking.

She found that with the promise of a child resting between them so prominently, so certainly, she had never wanted her husband as much as now, and so she could hardly blame him for feeling that same way about her, too – awed at the power of the love they shared and all it could do, even if that awe perhaps overshadowed the simple act of just loving each other.

She was sure that her abrupt change in mood and behaviour did not go unnoticed by the court, but if anyone noticed, they wisely kept it to themselves. Only Gaius, whom she had been purposefully avoiding even when he had tried to approach her about the true reason for her feigned illness, seemed suspicious of her sudden cheer. She did not realise until he cornered her after a banquet one night and questioned her that he knew nothing of Merlin's plan; that he had been assuming that her good mood had been a front for an even deeper sense of despair, and had been worried that she was thinking of harming herself.

But Gwen had done her best to assure him that she had simply chosen to be optimistic, that she was not above believing in miracles and that she would continue to pray to the gods and ask them to grant her what she so desired. Gaius looked like he wanted to protest – ever the man of science that he was – but thankfully he did not. And as Gwen walked away, she imagined his face when he next examined her to find her with child, and allowed herself a small, private grin.

When she received the summons to Merlin's chambers, and arrived to find Arthur already there, an overwhelming sense of happiness overtook her. She didn't need to see the hope in Arthur's eyes, or the confidence in Merlin's; she knew it without a doubt, every fibre of her being buzzing with anticipation: it was time.

---MERLIN---
Merlin had never been so certain of anything in his life.

Not only was he absolutely confident that he would not make Nimueh's mistake, that he was incapable, in fact, of the kind of dark magic which she had forced upon Uther and his wife all those years ago, but he could also feel it, deep within his bones: there was a love here in this room, so true, so complete, and so unlike anything that he knew anyone had a right to expect in life. He'd felt it the moment when Arthur entered the room after Merlin had made everything ready; so all-consuming that he almost staggered, as the magic he had already pored into the circle he had created responded to the power of it. This love would be enough.

And when Gwen had entered the room a little later, that force he had felt had only increased, as the life force that wasn't yet there stirred within the fabric of the universe, straining to be released. Merlin knew without a shadow of a doubt at that moment that he was unbalancing nothing; that a love like this existed for the purpose of creating life, and that he was merely righting a wrong, not upsetting the natural order of anything.

He told himself that this was why he had not consulted Gaius about this. Gaius wouldn't understand, because Gaius didn't feel what he felt. Gaius had been around to see it all fall apart so spectacularly the first time, and he would not be able to understand that this was so very different. And Merlin didn't need Gaius' permission anymore, anyway. He was the Court Sorcerer, Arthur had entrusted him with all affairs of magic, and for the first time in his life Merlin knew without a doubt that he knew best. It wasn't arrogance, no; it was simply acceptance of the fate he had fought against for so long. He was finally accepting that he was so much more than just Merlin: he was *Emrys*, and he was everything which he had been prophesied to be.

For so long, Merlin had believed that he had been put on this earth to protect Arthur, to ensure that Arthur would live to see Albion united and the world righted again after all the wrongs which Uther had done. But ever since hearing of Guinevere's plight, he had begun to understand his true purpose: yes, to stand at Arthur's side as Arthur fulfilled his destiny – but all that they would do together would mean nothing if not for this child, this legacy which would keep their work going beyond their own passing. This child was his and Arthur's true destiny. And Gwen's, Merlin remembered suddenly, briefly wondering why he'd had to remind himself of her presence in the first place. Wasn't that why he had fought so hard for Arthur and Gwen to be together, because he'd felt the first stirrings of the life that was to be created from them, even then? Yes, of course, that must have been it. Gwen and Arthur would have the child which would have been denied them if not for Merlin. The three of them would set the future right, together.

He took both Gwen and Arthur's hands in his own, and once again felt that inevitable pull of destiny; his knees did buckle, then, and he felt Arthur's hand tighten around his own in response. Merlin smiled at Arthur reassuringly and Arthur smiled back, so trusting, so believing, and he felt his heart clench as he recognised the same certainty he felt reflected in Arthur's eyes.

"Cléne lufræden, cennan feorhlíf. Gást ge ét, ëlíf, gadertang," Merlin chanted, his eyes never leaving Arthur's as he spoke the ancient words. In fact, he didn't think he could have looked away even if he'd tried, and Arthur's eyes seemed locked to his as well. The air felt charged; Merlin thought he saw thin strands of colour floating through the air, a deep gold and a shocking red, weaving together beautifully in his peripheral vision.

Gwen, meanwhile, was looking between Arthur and Merlin in slight confusion, but any misgivings she may have felt were drowned by the feeling that was spreading through her now, more powerful than anything she had ever felt, and she knew that life was growing within her, she felt the force of it.

"Cléne lufræden, cennan feorhlíf!" Merlin shouted beside her. "CENNAW FEORHLIF!"
Gwen felt her knees buckle; she fell to the ground but her hands still clasped Merlin and Arthur's firmly and she gasped. The gasp turned into a moan, and it wasn't in pain; it was pure pleasure unlike anything she had ever felt, and Merlin knew this because he was feeling it too, and it felt like Arthur, within him and all around him, a feeling of love so powerful that Merlin felt like he was going to pass out, except he was still standing strong, the words of the ritual spilling from his lips completely without his knowledge now as he lost himself in Arthur's eyes.

And then, as if waking from a dream, he heard Gwen's surprised intake of breath to his right. And he knew that it was done.

Merlin blinked, once, taking a deep, shaky breath and this seemed to wake Arthur from his trance, too. He shook his head as if to clear it, and Merlin was surprised to find a slight blush gracing his King's cheeks. But he ignored it, letting himself smile tentatively instead and finding Arthur return it, reveling in their shared happiness.

Only then did Merlin let go of Arthur's hand, turning instead to Gwen, who was kneeling on the floor holding her belly with an awed, faraway look in her eyes. Merlin gave her hand a squeeze and knelt in front of her, and after a moment her eyes found his, wonder and gratitude swimming within them. "You did it," she breathed. "I feel the child."

And it was done.

**********ARTHUR**********

It was done.

Arthur had never felt anything like this in his entire life – giving himself over to this magic so completely had not been easy, and once he'd done it, it terrified him how much he regretted having to let it go.

For just one moment in time, Arthur thought he could feel *everything*. The stones of the castle, the patterns of the wind, and the steady thumping of Merlin's heart in his chest as though it was his own. All of it filled him, consumed him, and when it was gone, Arthur felt strangely empty. He thought now that he finally understood what it truly felt like to lose a limb.

But after a moment, in which Arthur, Gwen and Merlin stared at each other in shocked silence, Arthur realised that he still felt... *something*. A tingling, an imprint of the magic which still lingered.

The ritual was completed, and Gwen was with child – and Arthur realised with a start that he knew this, because there was something, something real and tangible and alive, and he could feel it as certainly as he could feel himself breathing.

His eyes found Merlin's, even though some small part of him tried to tell him to look at Gwen, instead; after all, she was the one he had been doing the ritual with. Merlin was just... just...

*No*, Arthur thought, there was nothing *just* about what Merlin had done. Merlin had done this for him, for *them*, he had given them a child. There was nothing wrong with being grateful for that.

Only, Arthur had to admit to himself, grateful was perhaps not the right word to describe what he had momentarily let himself feel for his former manservant, as the magic had swept through him and left him defenseless, unable to control his thoughts and feelings the way he had been trained to do all his life.
During the ritual, when Merlin's magic had poured into him, twining into the very essence of Arthur's being – that hadn't been about Gwen at all. Arthur had felt something which he could only describe as golden touch his very essence, and it had been the most perfect sensation he had ever felt.

And he had known that it was Merlin he had felt then. And even more importantly, it hadn't felt wrong.

Arthur tore his eyes away from Merlin with great difficulty to help his wife up, ignoring the emotions he saw playing across the other man's face. It had just been the ritual, he told himself. It must have been. His wife was pregnant. This was what he wanted. Who he wanted.

Gwen's smile was shaky and her eyes shone with tears, but she looked better than Arthur had seen her look in months. "We did it," she whispered, hugging him tight, and Arthur hugged her back, trying to feel her, not just the baby inside...

When his eyes began to stray towards Merlin again, who had quietly begun gathering up the candles and seemed to be trying to make himself seem as invisible as possible, Arthur shut his eyes, burying his face in Gwen's hair, trying to shut down all the emotions that were threatening to overpower him.

Two months had passed, and news of Guinevere's happy condition had spread through Camelot in record time. Merlin could not go anywhere without hearing whispers of the happy news, and the bolder servants even approached him to ask for any news or updates he could offer (forgetting for a moment that Merlin was no longer one of their own but rather an esteemed and still slightly feared sorcerer, a fact which Merlin was secretly thankful for).

No one knew, of course, of the part which Merlin had truly played in the child's conception, and if it was up to him, they would never find out. He had simply, as he had told Arthur, nudged destiny along.

And the child growing in Gwen's belly, he had to keep reminding himself, was for Arthur and Gwen to happily anticipate alone now. Merlin had played his part. He felt a deep sense of relief and as if he had accomplished something truly great... but he had not, he thought, prepared himself for how deeply connected the ritual would make him feel to this child.

Initially Merlin had thought it made sense, really, as he had in some ways done as much to conceive this child as Arthur and Gwen (although that would sound very wrong if he tried to explain it to anyone). But that didn't explain the strange lurch he felt whenever he was in the same room as Gwen these days; the powerful surge of love and protectiveness – and strangely enough possessiveness – which the proximity of the foetus brought out in him.

Merlin was pretty sure it must be his magic, responding to the life it had helped bring about and would forever be tied to... he was pretty sure that explained what he was feeling, anyway.

There was only one person in the castle who did not rejoice at the news of Gwen's pregnancy. Merlin had known that Gaius wouldn't be immediately pleased by the fact that Merlin had kept him out of his plans, but he hadn't expected the looks of crippling disappointment with which his old mentor would regard him now, or the overwhelming concern for Gwen's well-being which he seemed to be displaying.

Merlin had tried to explain, many times, that this was nothing like what Nimueh had done, that he
would never have done this if there had been any reason to think he'd be putting Gwen's life in danger as a result. And Gaius had insisted every time that this was not the issue at all, that Merlin was an untested child, and that magic always had consequences, even if he did not yet understand what they were. Merlin would just sigh sadly and watch Gaius walk away, because what could he say to convince his old mentor otherwise?

At least Arthur shared none of Gaius' misgivings about Merlin's abilities, and for that, Merlin was infinitely grateful. He and Arthur had, if possible, grown even closer since the conception of the child; in fact, Merlin found himself drawn to Arthur as much as to Gwen's growing belly these days, and he had noticed a change in Arthur's behaviour as well which made him sure that Arthur was feeling much the same way about him.

As such, the three of them would find themselves together as often as they could, taking all their meals in Arthur and Gwen's chambers and sitting around the fireplace long into the night, none of them seeming willing to depart from the others – until Merlin would dutifully express his desire to retire for the night (even if every part of him was desperate to stay), leaving Arthur and Gwen alone to enjoy some privacy. And he would be lying to himself if he said that he only felt regret for leaving the child; his newfound inability to leave Arthur's presence was just as powerful. But he must, of course. And so he did, every night, ignoring Arthur's pained expression.

It was made even harder by the fact that not only could he feel, somehow, the foetus respond to him leaving its immediate presence, but he could feel Arthur's reaction, too. It was a gradual realisation for Merlin, that the two had somehow been linked by the ritual, and even though they never spoke of it, there was no denying the fact that not only did Merlin yearn for Arthur, but he could feel Arthur's yearning, too. Which only made everything so much harder.

Merlin had long ago come to terms with the fact that he loved Arthur. As a subject loved a King, as a friend loved another... and as much, much more than that. More than anything. But he had long since put aside those feelings, had even helped Arthur find a wife he loved... so why were they resurfacing now, of all times? And they were so much harder to ignore than ever before, because now he was pretty sure he could feel Arthur's yearning, too, and it killed him a little bit every time he had to feel the other man's disappointment as he slipped out of the King and Queen's chambers and made the slow, torturous trip back to his own.

This link between them, when by all rights it should have been between Arthur and Gwen, was the only part of this entire ordeal which Merlin felt a slight, nagging doubt about. And if Gaius had not become so distant and dismissive with him, he would have been tempted to ask the physician about it. As it were, Merlin could only look for the answers in his recently acquired magic books, but two months into Gwen's pregnancy, he was coming up with nothing. By all accounts the ritual had been performed perfectly, and the pregnancy had so far gone without a hitch; both Gwen and the baby were in perfect health.

But the books only spoke of the deep bond which would form between the parents of the child, strengthening the love which had brought the child about in the first place and weaving into its growing life force and presence, connecting all three in a bond more powerful than any spell.

There were no accounts of any lingering bond between the sorcerer involved with either the parents or the foetus, and Merlin had no way of making sense of it, no matter how much he tried. He was only glad that Arthur did not approach him about it, because it was the one question he would not be able to come up with an answer for.
Arthur ran a hand over his face, trying to concentrate on Sir Leon, who was once again reporting the border patrols' updates in his usual, monotonous tone.

It'd been hard enough to pay attention to Leon's droll reports under normal circumstances, but for the past four months, Arthur had been finding it increasingly more difficult to concentrate on anything whenever he was in the presence of his wife or his manservant—no, his sorcerer, now. Somehow that distinction didn't mean as much to either of them as he'd thought it would do, but he was glad of that fact. Merlin was still just Merlin, and still looked at Arthur with the same trust and unadulterated friendship as he always had.

Even if these looks had begun to linger, now, ever since that night. But then, Arthur was sure that his gazes were lingering, too. He knew that Merlin was feeling it, this thing which Arthur was also feeling, but he also knew that it was something which they did not talk about, because that would just open up so many floodgates that Arthur didn't think he'd ever be able to close—and, worse, he wasn't even sure he wanted to anymore. The ritual and the baby's constant presence in his mind had changed everything, somehow, though he wasn't exactly sure how or why.

He glanced to his left, where Guinevere was sitting tall and proud beside him, a content little smile on her face as she listened intently to Leon's account, absent-mindedly stroking her belly.

Arthur frowned. He thought he should feel... different, looking at his wife, but there was nothing between him and Gwen that hadn't been there before. Of course he felt something—he felt love, devotion, and gratitude towards her for once again being by his side. He felt pride, and joy and excitement at the fact that she was carrying his child.

But as much as he pretended that it was otherwise, the pull he felt towards her these days was purely because of the life growing inside her. It was an odd feeling; before the pregnancy, looking at Gwen had always grounded him, made him feel a comforting sense of trust and devotion, and he had sought her out whenever he needed that safety. He still felt all those things... but these days, more than anything, he felt a confusing, off-putting pull in to different directions: towards the baby growing inside his wife's belly, and towards Merlin.

It was always most pronounced when they were sitting at the Round Table. Arthur was in the middle, with his wife and friend at equal distances from him on either side. Arthur wanted to move in both directions at once, and the strangest thing was that he felt a deep wrongness about that fact within him; a sense that both of these directions were in fact the same direction... or should have been. And so he was always careful not to move at all.

Of course he would be lying if he said that he had not felt a pull towards Merlin before all of this. Any fool could see that he'd always spent far more time with his manservant than was strictly necessary, somehow managing to be constantly annoyed with him while simultaneously never tiring of his company.

But Merlin was his servant, and his truest friend (he used to admit that only grudgingly, but it had become such an undeniable truth between them over the years, there was no point in not acknowledging it anymore), and Arthur had always been very good at categorically separating the feelings he had for Merlin with those he had for Gwen. He was the King of Camelot—if he did not
have his self-restraint, then he had nothing.

But after the ritual, all of that had been shot to hell. Over the months that had passed since that night, Arthur's desire for Merlin had become not only undeniable but completely irrepressible; the feelings that once only arose unbidden whenever he let his guard down, whenever Merlin snuck through his defences with words of love and devotion or when either of them found themselves on the brink of death, were suddenly a constant presence in his mind. And they were slowly wearing down his self-control and driving him mad.

Arthur knew it was somehow connected to the ritual and the child, of course, but he did not understand how. He was pretty sure that Merlin would have told him about any... unfortunate side-effects of the magic they had performed, and Merlin had seemed so sure, and so powerful. And the thought that Merlin may have done this to him – to them - intentionally, was so ridiculous he didn't even entertain it for a second. Not only because Merlin obviously was as distraught by this as Arthur himself was, but because Merlin simply wasn't capable of such deceit. Arthur never would have trusted Merlin, or allowed magic back into Camelot because of him, if he'd had even the slightest doubt about that fact.

He was still desperate to talk to someone about it though, but if not Merlin then who? Gaius? It was a possibility – but Merlin had made it very clear to him that the physician was less than pleased by what they had done, and Arthur did not wish to upset the man even further. Especially with something like this, which Arthur wasn't even sure he could explain, if given the chance.

And speaking to Gwen about it was out of the question. He was almost certain that she herself was feeling none of the same things towards Merlin that he was, even though she had remarked that the baby seemed to thrive in his presence, whatever that meant... and aside from being ecstatic about the pregnancy, Gwen seemed to feel no different towards Arthur, either.

For Gwen, it was all about the baby growing inside her (and really, Arthur thought, he could hardly begrudge her this), and while she was more than willing to share that joy with him, she felt... strangely absent from his mind, compared to the constant presence of Merlin and the baby. It was an unsettling feeling which Arthur didn't like to dwell on.

After the council meeting finally ended, Arthur made his way out of the chamber and was not surprised to feel Merlin's presence behind him; he automatically slowed his step to allow Merlin to catch up. The two walked in silence up the stairs, and Arthur wasn't even sure where they were going until they got there: Arthur's chambers, the ones he kept for him alone, the ones that were now adjoining the chambers of his Court Sorcerer.

Once they entered the room and closed the door, Arthur breathed a sigh of relief, sinking into a chair and watching Merlin do the same, a similar expression of relief on his face as he offered Arthur a small smile.

These moments alone with Merlin were the only ones that brought Arthur any kind of peace these days. Of course, he knew that they both felt the constant need to be with the child, too, but whenever Arthur was with both Gwen and Merlin that same feeling of being torn in two crept up on him again. And whenever he was alone with just Gwen and the baby, his sense of feeling incomplete felt ten times worse than it did at any other point. So, all in all, being with Merlin was the lesser of three evils.

No. Who was he kidding? Being with Merlin felt in no way evil. Arthur sighed – and didn't realise he'd made any visible motion of distress at all until Merlin's worried eyes met his own.

"Are you feeling..." Merlin stopped himself mid-sentence, and Arthur found himself really wanting
to hear the end of that question. "Are you feeling alright?" Merlin asked after a moment, though Arthur was sure that wasn't what he'd been about to ask.

"I could ask you the same thing," Arthur said levelly, raising an eyebrow, almost like a silent challenge – though of what exactly, he wasn't sure.

Merlin drew his lips into a tight line, the most obvious sign he could make to show how much he did not want to talk about this. For some reason, Arthur felt goaded by Merlin's hesitancy.

"Really, Merlin," he said, "you must admit that things have been... different, since that night." He'd meant it as a challenging statement, he'd meant to sound aloof and teasing, really, he had. But what came out was more raw than that, and Arthur cringed at the sound of his own voice, almost pleading for Merlin to acknowledge that he felt something, too.

Merlin just regarded him silently for a long time and, to Arthur's further embarrassment, he found himself heating slightly under Merlin's unwavering gaze.

Just when the silence was becoming unbearable, when the pull of Merlin's eyes felt so strong and Arthur was beginning to feel that iron resolve slowly, carefully, tentatively give way, Merlin broke eye contact, his own cheeks looking a little flushed. Arthur found his gaze slipping down to Merlin's exposed neck before looking away abruptly, himself.

"Perhaps," Merlin said then, quietly, sounding oddly hoarse. "Perhaps it is a bit... strange. This."

Arthur didn't have to ask what Merlin was referring to. He was still staring at a point just to the left of Merlin's ear but he could see the other man's eyes darting back to his face, he could feel that deep need twisting within him and he wasn't sure if it was his own or Merlin's--

Arthur didn't realise he had stood up until he heard the clatter of the chair as it tipped over, the wood clattering against the stone floor. He moved backwards, away, regarding Merlin as if he were an enemy soldier trying to find a weak spot in Arthur's armour, and Arthur knew he needed to find higher ground or he would be... he would be...

Merlin sat completely still at the table, watching Arthur unblinkingly. His hands were white where they gripped the table surface, but otherwise there was nothing to suggest that Merlin was feeling the same desperate pull which Arthur was feeling. Except that Arthur knew he was, because he could feel Merlin's desire too, like threads of gold spinning around the reds of his own; Arthur could almost see the threads pulling at them both, and he wondered if this was what they called magic.

And that was when Merlin licked his lips. Just once, but it was enough.

Arthur wasn't moving backwards anymore. His feet were carrying him across the room now as though he was a moth drawn helplessly towards a flame, towards Merlin, and he saw Merlin's eyes widen as he approached. Merlin got to his feet unsteadily, looking torn between meeting Arthur halfway and making a break for it.

Arthur caught Merlin's wrist as Merlin reached out, his hand landing on Arthur's chest - whether to pull in or push away he didn't know (and he wasn't sure Merlin did, either) - and Arthur pulled the other man to him, reaching his other hand out to fist in the dark, silky hair and he felt Merlin's gasp against his face; his breathing was as ragged as Arthur's own.

"Arthur?" Merlin's voice was small, uncertain.

Arthur finally let himself look into the eyes of his former manservant, and what he saw there stole his breath away. Merlin stared right back, almost as if daring Arthur to push forward – it would be so
easy, Arthur thought, to just reach out and take. He let his eyes wander down those flushed, beautiful
cheekbones to the full, parted lips just inches from his own...

A quiet knock on the door startled them both, and they jumped apart as if burned.

"Enter," Arthur called out belatedly, his own voice sounding hoarse and foreign to his own ears. A
second later, a servant girl poked her head inside, and Arthur felt something like shame curdling in
his stomach as she glanced between the two men with a hint of confusion, clearly noticing the way
they were still crowding each other's space.

He glanced at Merlin, who was red-faced and looking anywhere but at Arthur. Right, Arthur
thought. Whatever this insanity was, it would end this instant. It would be forgotten. They both cared
too much about Gwen... his wife, he reminded himself forcefully. This was madness.

********GUINEVERE********

Blissfully unaware of the heartbreaking distress which Arthur and Merlin had found themselves in
since doing the ritual, Gwen was loving every moment of being pregnant.

Today, she had spent her afternoon walking the gardens with her maidservant, Leah, trying to keep
her mind off of the nausea which had been creeping up on her ever since the Round Table meeting.

She had hoped the fresh air would make her feel better, but really, she soon found she had to sit
down on a bench, clutching her belly as her lunch threatened to make a reappearance.

"Should I call for Gaius, milady?" Leah asked worriedly, but Gwen shook her head, hand still
clamped over her mouth.

Only four months into her pregnancy, Gwen was well aware of the fact that she was more in tune
with the little person growing within her than anyone could have expected her to be. Really, Gaius
had told her, normally the foetus would only just begin to form conscious awareness around this
time.

But Gwen had felt it from the moment the new life had entered her body and the very inkling of the
child she would soon hold in her arms was created. It was not so much a conscious connection as a
constant awareness, a pulsating light hovering just out of sight.

But right now, she just felt sick. The baby clearly hadn't appreciated the food she had served it today,
Gwen thought, and must now be displaying its unhappiness.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, Gwen felt the by now familiar desire to see Arthur and Merlin
sweep over her, and sighed. Not that she did not always have a desire to see her husband, and Merlin
was always welcome company, but these feelings did not come from her and she knew it.

She rubbed her belly fondly, glad at least that the queasiness was subsiding. "I take it you want to go
find your father, then," she smiled, pushing her maidservant's hand on her arm off as she stood up.
The as usual was left unsaid, as she feared voicing that part might cause her smile to falter.

Guinevere was not a jealous person by nature, and she could hardly begrudge her child the need to
be close to the other two people that had been present at its rather unorthodox conception. Yet she
couldn't help but note with a vague sense of annoyance that the baby always seemed to yearn
whenever she wasn't in the presence of Arthur or Merlin, and only seemed completely at ease within
her whenever they were both near. She assumed it was a side-effect of the spell, but she was already
envisioning the little boy or girl always chasing after the two men as soon as it was old enough to
walk...
Gwen could say without a doubt that she had never and would never love anything as much as this child within her. She would gladly spend every moment of every day with Merlin and Arthur if it was what would make her baby happy. But she couldn't help the nagging worry that once it was out of her belly, it would not need her anymore.

Merlin

After that day in Arthur's chambers, Merlin buried himself in his work.

Luckily, there was a lot to do, and Merlin was excited about all of it. As word had spread about Camelot's changing stance on sorcery, faraway kingdoms had begun to send Arthur (and by association Merlin) tokens of their gratitude for the fact that their subjects would no longer have to fear Camelot's wrath. And more often than not, these tokens would be books on sorcery or accounts of the old religion, or even magical artefacts (some of which Merlin had managed to cause great damage to himself and his chambers with, while trying to work out how to use).

Merlin spent most of his days poring over the tomes, soaking up as much knowledge about the Druids and the Old Religion as possible, and learning new spells. Every once in a while, Arthur would even join him, almost as curious about the practice of magic as Merlin himself.

Or rather, Arthur had joined him. Ever since The Incident, as Merlin had begun mentally referring to it as, Arthur had not set foot in Merlin's chambers. Instead, he would even send servants to summon him whenever Merlin's presence was needed in the Great Hall, or in his and Gwen's chambers.

Gwen, of course, had no inkling of what had happened – or what had almost happened – between her husband and his Court Sorcerer. Merlin had no doubt that, had it not been for that servant, he and Arthur would not have been able to stop themselves. And while a part of him hated the servant for the interruption, he also knew that he would not have been able to forgive himself for betraying Gwen this way – and, worse, Arthur wouldn't have been able to forgive neither himself nor Merlin, either.

Merlin knew how much Arthur valued his honour. And he knew how much this must be killing him. Not only because he knew the King better than he knew himself, but also because he felt it.

Oh yes, the awareness between Merlin and Arthur which had begun to form on the night of the ritual was still there between them, stronger now than ever. More than once, Merlin had woken up soaked in sweat, painfully hard as dreams of himself and Arthur entwined and on fire still lingered at the edge of his consciousness – and he didn't always think the dreams had been his own.

It made it all the more difficult to have to see Arthur almost every day, having to keep up this painful pretence of normalcy, knowing that Arthur's desire was as strong as Merlin's own.

Yet he knew it must be done. Arthur didn't really want him, Merlin had decided; surely he couldn't. He had Gwen, he had the baby coming, and whatever was happening between them, Merlin was convinced that it was the spell making Arthur feel this way. It was definitely what was causing the psychic link, that much was certain, and maybe in the process of creating this child, Merlin had unwittingly opened up Arthur's mind to the part of Merlin's which had been repressing those feelings for so many years? Maybe Arthur was simply feeling all of Merlin's want and longing, but in reverse?

It was a work-in-progress theory, he had to admit, but it was all he had. And holding onto it helped Merlin keep his head about him, and kept him from doing something stupid like breaking down the flimsy wooden barrier between their chambers and pushing Arthur up against the wall, hands on his broad, sturdy chest as he- oh.
But no. *No.* It was the spell. It had to be the spell.

So the months wore on, with *it's the spell, it's the spell* becoming a daily mantra in Merlin's (and he hoped Arthur's, by association) head. In the evenings, Merlin would faithfully trudge up to Gwen's chambers, to spend a few miserable yet wonderful hours in the company of a happy, glowing Gwen and a quiet, brooding Arthur who rarely met his eyes or spoke directly to him.

Merlin both longed for and dreaded those precious moments of closeness. Even under the circumstances, he could not deny to himself that the time he spent in that room, with both Arthur and the baby present, was the only time of the day when Merlin truly felt at peace.

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**GUINEVERE**

*9 months into the pregnancy*

As Guinevere entered the final month of her pregnancy, the castle began to prepare for the imminent arrival of their new little prince or princess.

The servants were scurrying about the place, cleaning and dusting and baking, and doing all of the things Gwen knew she would be doing herself if she had not, beyond all reason or logic, found herself the Queen of Camelot.

Now, they were doing it all for her. And Arthur. And their baby, the future heir to the throne.

Gwen had seen the excitement in people's eyes at the prospect of this child (which many had probably begun to believe would never come, before her pregnancy had been announced), and she knew that while she herself only longed for a happy, healthy child to care for, to the people of Camelot this meant so much more.

It meant the continuation of the Pendragon line, and it renewed the hope that the age of peace and prosperity, which Arthur was bringing to kingdom into after the fall of his father, would not end with Arthur and Gwen's passing.

It was also a reassurance that, even if she and her husband should meet their untimely demise, as long as this child was kept safe the kingdom would never fall into the clutches of Morgana.

This child was a promise, from the King to his people. And Gwen feared for the child, for all the pressure which was already resting on its shoulders before it had even breathed the air of the world which it would be sworn to protect.

But every time she looked at Arthur, she reminded herself that this child would not be alone. It would have a father who loved it and cared for it as his own father never had, and it would have a mother, too, who would shield it from danger and reproach and pressure for as long as she possibly could.

And of course, the child would have Merlin. Pure, loyal, loveable Merlin who Gwen knew without a doubt would protect this child as fiercely as he had always protected its father. Even if she and Arthur were taken away too soon, the knowledge that Merlin would always be there to take care of the little prince or princess made Gwen feel calm and reassured.

One day, after a wonderful romantic picnic with Arthur in the spot he had first taken her to, back when he was still a prince and she was still a maid, Gwen walked into their joint chambers only to find Merlin waiting for her in there grinning like a lunatic.

For a moment she felt nothing but the familiar happy lurch in her belly which came over her whenever Merlin and Arthur were both close, but then she stepped fully into the room - and gasped.
Gwen looked around the almost unrecognisable room, taking in the changes which Merlin must obviously have made with magic: the chamber, which had previously been one large room with a separate area for the bath and chamber pots, had been divided up into two sections, separated by half a wall down the middle of the area. On the left was her four-poster bed, up against the wall as usual, but on the right...

The room was a sunny, inviting yellow colour (almost golden in the waning light of evening, she noted), with a plush, deep red rug and drapes. There were toys in all shapes and colours: balls and blocks and soft-looking plush animals aligning the shelves. Colourful tapestries of the like which Gwen had never seen (she wondered how Merlin could have thought up those designs, even using his magic to shape them) hung from the wall, depicting lush landscapes, glorious knights and majestic wild animals.

Gwen's mouth dropped open when she noticed that the tiny ripples of movements were not the tapestries themselves but the elements within them; the knights were slowly leading their white steeds down the road away from the woods and towards the castle in the distance, and even as she watched, a pack of deer poked their heads out of the underbrush to watch the knights depart. On another tapestry, the sun was setting, and the colours were shifting from light blues and yellows to oranges, reds, purples, and then dark blue with beautiful, glimmering stars casting a silvery light over the now fully golden room.

"Merlin," she breathed, feeling her voice catch in her throat, "Oh, Merlin, it's beautiful."

If she had been able to tear her eyes away from the magnificent golden crib she had finally noticed, standing in the middle of the room with an array of stars and planets spinning slowly above it (with no strings in sight, Gwen noticed, failing to even be surprised at that point), her smile might have faltered at the sight of Merlin, who was not watching her, but rather sharing a look that was at once full of love, sadness and resignation with her husband - who had come in silently behind her to admire the gorgeous room which their child would soon inhabit.

Merlin cleared his throat at last, and when Gwen looked up, he was looking straight at her, showing nothing but his happiness at her reaction. "So, er, you like it then?" he asked, smiling tentatively.

Gwen let out a startled laugh, feeling so much joy inside her that she thought it was threatening to just spill out of her (and maybe it would, if the sudden moisture in her eyes was any indication). "Of course I do, you daft fool," she said instead, her voice sounding so fond that she was sure Merlin didn't mind her words. "It's perfect."

Merlin opened out his arms, indicating the room at large. "And I hope you like the walls. I thought it was appropriate... red and gold, you know," he said, his eyes flickering to Arthur for a moment – searching his approval, Gwen thought. "I thought about making it blue or pink, of course, but..." he shrugged, giving her a small smile.

Gwen's smile was only a bit tighter; Merlin didn't mean anything by the comment of course, and he couldn't know how embarrassing it felt to Gwen that she still had no idea whether the child within her was a boy or a girl.

She knew it wasn't a science – Gaius had told her as much, many times, ever patient as she'd shared her worry with him – but still, she'd heard enough stories from the women at court about mothers just knowing, somehow, what their child was going to be.

Of course, Gaius had reasoned with her, most of those women had probably not had any idea until their child had been born, and then managed to convince both themselves and everyone else that they'd known all along. And he had calming stories for her too of mothers-to-be proclaiming loudly...
and proudly to anyone that would listen that they were having a son or a daughter, even convincing their husbands to purchase a load of fitted clothes and dolls or practice swords, only to be proven very wrong when the child finally came out red and screaming and decidedly not what it had been expected to be.

That all made Gwen feel a little bit better. But still, the disappointment lingered, that she apparently wasn't to be one of the mothers who just knew. Somehow, she'd always assumed that she would be.

She had shared none of those concerns with Merlin, or even Arthur (who had told her many times that seeing his child brought safely and healthily into this world was all he wanted, and that he would be ecstatic to raise either a son or a daughter with her). So she only said, "Red and gold is perfect. Our little Pendragon."

And once again she missed Merlin's look when she turned to gaze lovingly at her husband, who laid a hand on her protruding belly and gave her a soft, proud smile.

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ARTHUR••••••••••

It had been eight months. Or, more than eight months. Nine? He wasn't sure anymore.

To Arthur, it had felt like a lifetime.

A lifetime of feeling the life growing inside of Gwen's belly, at the edge of his consciousness, feeling the surge of love and protectiveness whenever it was near. And a lifetime of Merlin, always Merlin; right there, always feeling like he was just out of reach, and all Arthur wanted to do was just to pull him in, breathe him, feel Merlin everywhere around him, physically connected to him in every way, in body as in soul.

Arthur was losing his mind.

He knew that some part of this was the spell. He wasn't sure how, but it was clearly connecting them. Their minds were aware of each other as much as they were the baby, and like they were both drawn to it, they were also drawn to each other.

But Arthur wasn't an idiot. He knew that the pull he felt towards Merlin was very, very different. And the spell may have forged the link, but Arthur was feeling nothing he hadn't been feeling before. And after all this time he was pretty sure that Merlin wasn't, either.

Yet here they were. They couldn't touch, because they both knew what would happen – even if they were in public. It still left Arthur breathless, thinking back on a moment a few months ago in the Great Hall, when Merlin's sleeve – his sleeve, nothing more – had brushed Arthur's at the Round Table.

Arthur had grasped his quill so tightly it had snapped clean in half, and for the next half an hour he had tried to calm himself down, and force the bulge in his breeches to disappear before he had to stand up. The knowledge that the red-faced, squirming sorcerer next to him was going through the same thing had done nothing whatsoever to alleviate his desire, and he'd had to resort to desperate measures (getting Leon to describe in gruesome detail the unfortunate findings of the patrol which had come across a raided Druid camp) in order to feel even a measure of relief.

He'd felt the waves of gratitude radiating off Merlin even as the hint of annoyance at Arthur's methods of taking their minds off the problem had made itself known, too.

Arthur knew that it was only his and Merlin's combined stubbornness which had kept them apart for this long. Although they had never discussed it, he was pretty sure they were both expecting that
once the baby was born, this insane yearning would finally go away. Surely, it must? Then they could go back to...

He sighed. Then they could go back to how it had used to be, before all of this. Back when Arthur had kept such a tight lid on everything he felt for Merlin, had disguised his feelings alternately behind those of friendship and those of dismay for his hapless servant. Back when he had hid all his love and affection for Merlin behind his devotion to the beautiful, solid, strong woman whom he had made his Queen.

Except it could never be like that again. Because even without the connection drawing them together, Merlin would still be Merlin. And now, Arthur would know that Merlin felt the same way about him, and that he had probably been feeling the same way for as long as he had.

Which was pretty much from I could take you apart with one blow and onwards.

But of course, their time had passed, if there had ever been a time for them. Once upon a time, which felt so distant now, Arthur would have been free to pursue such... options. Back when he had not had a kingdom and a Queen to put before himself, when choosing his own happiness even for a moment would not make a mockery of every oath which Arthur had ever made. Maybe then, he and Merlin could have had... something.

But wait. Since when had he thought of Merlin as his happiness? Surely, that was Gwen. What she had become to him. What he had made her become...

Of course, he could get rid of the problem. He could send Merlin away, to study with the Druids. Merlin himself had suggested it once, off-handedly. He could do it. Right now.

Arthur snorted. He threw his quill across the room with abandon, realising that he was not in the right frame of mind to write to Queen Annis right now.

Yeah, right. Like he could ever send Merlin away. Spell or no spell, Arthur had never been able to part from Merlin for every long, always dragging him along everywhere, even when he shouldn't have, even when it would have been more proper to take one of his knights with him instead. And on those rare occasions when Merlin had journeyed out of Camelot alone, Arthur had followed (the times when he knew about Merlin's plans, anyway). Even to Ealdor.

That was probably the moment when he had first let himself acknowledge that his feelings for Merlin were more than just those of a master towards his servant. Really, he should have realised all of this a lot sooner. Somewhere around I could take you apart with less than that.

Arthur groaned, letting his head thump against the back of the chair. He swallowed audibly as he felt himself harden again. This was happening much too often these days. And he had found that he wasn't even able to go to Gwen anymore – not that she didn't want to, but he found himself filling up with so much guilt... at first he had attributed that feeling to the fact that he would probably be imagining someone else when he lay with her, but he had gradually, horrifically realised that the guilt he felt wasn't for thinking of Merlin. It was for being with Gwen, when his heart so clearly belonged to someone else.

So he had stayed away.

He found his hand drifting down, now. He was in his chambers, but as far as he knew, Merlin would be out all day – that was why he had dared come here at all, seeking the solitude but not willing to risk it unless Merlin was far away from him.
Yet he could feel Merlin right now as if he were only a hairsbreadth away, and it was intoxicating. The smell of Merlin was everywhere in this room – another reason why he yearned for it.

His hand brushed against his half-hard erection now and Arthur moaned, not caring how loud the noise was. No one was around. No one would know. Just this once.

He cupped himself loosely through his breeches, hesitant even despite the growing, desperate feeling of lust and want that threatened to make him come apart right then. *Do you know how to walk on your knees?*

He imagined that it was Merlin's hand touching him now. Merlin's blue eyes darkening with desire, his dark hair catching the light as he moved his face down to Arthur's, his tongue wetting his lips...

Arthur couldn't help the groan of "Merlin" which escaped him, and he gripped himself tighter, pumping in earnest and wondering hazily if he should stop to untie his breeches, or just-

"Arthur?"

The choked, broken sound of his name made Arthur's eyes snap open and he wished at once they hadn't. There, standing in the doorway between their adjoined rooms, was Merlin.

Arthur gasped and his hand immediately stilled. But Merlin had clearly seen what he was doing. Merlin, who stared at Arthur now with such intensity and lust, and Arthur couldn't help the whimper that escaped him.


For a moment Merlin didn't move and Arthur was terrified that this was it, he'd got it wrong, that Merlin would walk away disgusted.

But he didn't. Instead, Arthur felt his breath hitch as Merlin took three quick strides across the room and was suddenly standing right in front of him, looking down at Arthur through hooded eyes.

Merlin reached out his hand towards him – what exactly he was reaching for, Arthur wasn't sure. But he stopped himself. Arthur saw, even through the thick arousal clouding his mind, the struggle on Merlin's face. The hesitancy.

He could reach out. Right now, Arthur could reach out and take.

But Merlin had not actually moved. He was just looking down at Arthur, his own breathing ragged, his eyes darkened just as Arthur had imagined.

Arthur rose out of his chair, a little bit unsteadily, and took a tiny step towards Merlin. Merlin's breath hitched, his eyes dark like pools of ink, and Arthur was drowning in them.

"We can't." Merlin breathed into the infinitely small space between them as Arthur began absent-mindedly stroking his arm.

"I know," Arthur whispered. His free hand came up to ghost over Merlin's cheek, and Merlin shuddered at the contact, his eyes fluttering closed.

"Arthur, we really shouldn't-"

But then Arthur's mouth was on Merlin's and the rest of the words were lost in the desperate moan which one of them (Arthur wouldn't have been able to tell who) breathed into the shared space.
Merlin's mouth opened immediately, allowing Arthur's tongue access as Merlin's own met it halfway, and it was like breathing for the first time after having been underwater for too long. He felt Merlin's tongue sweep his lower lip and he pulled at Merlin's hair to draw him even closer, his own tongue coming out to duel against Merlin's in a passionate, desperate struggle.

Merlin's free arm wrapped around Arthur then as he moved even closer; Arthur felt every part of their bodies connect and he felt his own arousal brush against Merlin's. He was seeing those golden and red threads again, twirling around them and behind his closed eyelids, tightening, pulling the two men impossibly close, and Arthur couldn't believe how alive he felt, how powerful-

"No, Arthur, stop," Merlin breathed, his mouth leaving Arthur's as he pushed suddenly back. Arthur felt confused for a moment, blinking slowly, Merlin's glistening mouth catching his eye, and he didn't understand why it was moving further away... "Arthur," Merlin breathed, and it sounded like a prayer. "Arthur, look at me."

Arthur's eyes met Merlin's then, and even though he saw passion there, a staggering desire which he knew was directed solely at him, and some part of his brain was chanting finally finally finally, something else in there sobered him up infinitesimally, enough to focus his brain on the reality of what was happening.

He let go of Merlin's hand as though burned, and stepped back. "Merlin," he breathed. "Oh god, what are we doing?" Arthur sat back heavily, against the edge of the table and felt the familiar panic and guilt settle back in. And he brought a hand up to cover his mouth in horror as the full implications of what he and Merlin had just done began to hit him. 

"Arthur, something... something has happened to us, I know it. This isn't... this isn't us," Merlin was saying, but Arthur shook his head. They both knew that he was lying.

Yes, something had changed between them. Something was drawing them together. But whatever it was, it wasn't coming from nowhere. This had been building between Merlin and Arthur for a long time, maybe since the beginning of creation itself.

"Just, please," Arthur whispered brokenly. "Go."

And after a moment of conflicted silence, Merlin did.

**********MERLIN**********

"Fuck," Merlin breathed as he slammed the door to his own chambers, "fuck, fuck, fuck!"

He couldn't believe it. After all this time, being so careful, so deliberately ignorant of his own feelings, desires... and now, now... Merlin could still feel Arthur's lips of his own, still feel the King's strong, firm hands pulling him in, their bodies burning everywhere they touched, and oh... Merlin whimpered as he found his knees giving out, and he slid down against the door, coming to sit with a thump; all his energy having gone into moving away from Arthur in that moment, and leaving the room.

What was happening? What did it all mean? Would they-


Merlin pushed off from the floor, resolute, a plan forming in his head.

He would leave. He must. Arthur and him had been talking, vaguely, of a time when Merlin would visit the Druids under the Pendragon banners, reaching out as Emrys and as King Arthur's most
trusted advisor (Merlin had teased Arthur mercilessly about that offhand, easy-spoken compliment, and Arthur had rolled his eyes and tried to take it all back – but compliments like that had been flowing more freely between the both of them ever since). But neither had been keen to pinpoint the moment in the future when Merlin would actually have to leave Camelot and Arthur behind.

But now, of course, it had to be now, Merlin thought wildly, absent-mindedly letting his clothes fly out of drawers with magic and fall haphazardly into the trunk which had flown open by itself.

Arthur would have Gwen and the baby to occupy his mind, he wouldn't need Merlin there distracting him; maybe the time apart would even help him forget all of this. And when Merlin came back, everything could be... could be...

He must have been making quite a racket – or maybe Arthur no longer needed his hearing to know what Merlin was doing next door – because the door leading between Merlin's chambers and the King's opened again to reveal Arthur there. He looked weary and bemused as he regarded the dance of Merlin's clothes, and then turned to the guilty sorcerer.

"You can forget it, Merlin," Arthur said. He sounded tired. "You're not going."

"But Arthur," Merlin started, only to be silenced by a look.

"No. I need you here." In the past, they could have laughed about such a statement, but too much had changed between them for Arthur to even bother trying to deny the many layers of truth to this statement now. "I need you to stand by my side and show my men that sorcery is not a thing of evil," Arthur said, and there was a fierce, determined gleam in his eyes now which Merlin tried very hard not to let affect him. "I need you to guard me against the countless magical threats still hanging over me, from those who do not yet know of my changed attitude. I need your counsel. I need your support. I need..." and only then did Arthur's even voice waver slightly, "The kingdom needs you. Guinevere needs you. The child... at least until it is born, you know that it needs you, you feel that as strongly as I do."

Merlin swallowed and nodded, trying to hold himself together, be strong now for his King. He knew there was more, and he knew that Arthur needed to say it even though they both already felt the weight of the decision.

"Guinevere must never know about this. And it can never happen again."

Only when Arthur had turned on his heel and stormed out of the room did Merlin allow his body to sag and sink into a chair, defeat, regret and heartache threatening to swallow him whole. And even though Arthur hid it better, Merlin could feel that Arthur felt it, too, and he was overcome by the unfairness of it all.

Lost for a moment in despair, Merlin came as close as he ever would to wishing that they had never done that damn ritual in the first place. But of course he couldn't; the love and trust and completeness he still felt for that small, growing life force even from the other side of the castle was all that held him together right now; the reason why he doubted he would have even been able to leave Camelot at all even if Arthur had allowed him to; and Merlin resolved that even if the rest of his life held nothing but misery and buried longing as far as Arthur was concerned, Merlin would love – he already did love – that child as if it was his own.

And as he thought of the child, suddenly a sharp feeling in his gut made his breath catch in his throat, and next door he heard the sound of something shattering against the stone floor.

Across the castle, Gwen felt a surging in her belly. "Oh," she breathed.
It was time.

No words were spoken between them as Arthur and Merlin raced across the castle. They arrived in Gwen's chambers just as Leah was hurrying out of them, and she almost collided with the pair in the doorway.

"Your Highness!" Leah exclaimed in surprise, her eyes wide as they darted between Arthur and Merlin. "My Lords, I was just going to send someone to fetch you."

"Just go get Gaius," Arthur only said, already rushing past her into the room with Merlin close on his heels. They found Gwen panting on the bed, her skirts pooled up around her waist and gripping the sheets, a mixture of joy and pain on her face.

"Arthur!" She breathed, finding her husband's eyes. "Arthur, the baby is coming!"

Arthur ran to her, a wide, ecstatic grin on his face. "I can't believe it," he murmured, grabbing her hand tight and planting a kiss on her forehead; Gwen leaned into it gratefully, visibly relaxing in his presence.

Merlin hovered a few feet away from the bed, looking anywhere but at Gwen's exposed legs and feeling very much like an intruder, even as his insides were screaming that he needed to be closer.

The child was coming.

"Oh, Merlin," Gwen called out, and he hesitantly raised his head to meet her feverish eyes. "Do come over here would you?"

And he couldn't help the relieved smile that broke out over his face as he took the few strides to the bed, coming to kneel at Gwen's other side, taking her free hand in his own. And she regarded them both in turn, so full of love and fondness that Merlin's heart broke a little, even as the pounding in his ears felt very much like a heartbeat.

"I can't believe it," Gwen was saying, "it's really coming. I can't believe it. We did this. We made this."

And as Merlin's eyes briefly met Arthur's before flinching away and focusing again on Gwen, he wondered for a bewildering moment who she was speaking to.

They heard rapidly approaching footsteps now, and Gaius broke into the room, supported by Leah and an excited but uncomfortable-looking Sir Leon. Gaius shook off the helping arms impatiently, even as Merlin noticed his laboured breathing; sometimes it hit him with a pang of worry just how very old Gaius actually was.

Leon quietly slipped back out of the room, exchanging a quick, significant look with Leah as he went which Merlin fleetingly thought he should probably ask him about later, but the thought was gone as Gaius noticed his laboured breathing; sometimes it hit him with a pang of worry just how very old Gaius actually was.

"Gaius," Arthur called formally, standing up and allowing Gaius to crouch down where he had been, taking Gwen's arm to feel her pulse, moving up to feel her heart, her neck...

Merlin very intently watched Gaius. He did not watch Arthur, even as he felt Arthur's eyes on him again. If only their connection extended to telepathy, Merlin found himself thinking wildly, then he could tell Arthur to look at your damn wife, you prat, who is giving birth to your child!
He hoped that the set of his jaw and the pursing of his lips as he glared a hole into the side of Gaius' head would convey the same message.

If Arthur's frustrated sigh was anything to go by, it did.

"Gaius, how is she? How is the child?" Arthur asked now, his attention back at the task at hand, and Merlin noticed that his tone was very much the same as when he was asking his knights and advisors for tactical advice in battle.

"Her vitals are good, Sire," Gaius replied, not taking his eyes off Gwen – who flashed Arthur a reassuring, if slightly strained, smile. "Now, Milady, if you wouldn't mind..." he trailed off pointedly, and Gwen frowned at him in brief puzzlement, then blushed faintly.

"No, no of course. You are the physician," she smiled gracefully, and Gaius nodded briskly before moving away from her side and down to the edge of the bed, and Gwen helpfully reached down to pull her skirts up even higher.

Arthur resumed his place by Gwen's side and she smiled at him, her eyes watering slightly, and he bent his head to brush his lips across her knuckles.

Merlin wanted to look away from the tender moment, but he didn't exactly want to look at what Gaius was doing, so he simply closed his eyes for a few moments, breathing through his nose and trying to calm his raging emotions.

He could feel the baby coming. Just as strongly as Gwen could – though, of course, he thought guiltily, with none of the pain that she was feeling. But none the less, this was it, every fibre of his being was humming with the knowledge that this was the moment when his child would come into the world.

Merlin's eyes flew open as he gasped, unable to believe the thought that had just passed through his mind.

Yes, it was true that he had felt close to the child since its conception. Sure, he had felt love and protectiveness for the life he had assisted Gwen and Arthur create. He had felt like the child was a part of him... but to allow himself to think, even for a second, of this child as his? However much he may feel connected to it, these thoughts had no place here.

He felt it again, as his eyes swept over Arthur and Gwen, still engrossed in each other, that horrible sense of intruding. He could not be a part of this private, magical moment between mother and father, he should not. This wasn't right.

Merlin stood up, Gwen's hand slipping from his grasp. He had to get out of there.

Gwen's eyes flew to him in confusion and alarm. He hated scaring her like that. "Merlin?" she asked tightly.

He smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way. "I'm sorry, Gwen, but I can't- this isn't- I don't belong here."

He fled the room so fast that he missed the confused look on Gwen's face, and her mumbled reply.

"But you do, though."

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ARTHUR••••••••••
Arthur knew that Merlin hadn't gone far. At first he had felt his presence, just outside the room. Then Merlin went away, but not soon after, he came back. It seemed like he was physically unable to stay away, even if he was reluctant to come any closer.

If Arthur closed his eyes, he could almost see Merlin pacing up and down the hallway, could see the worry and apprehension on his face. He could feel the ghost of Merlin's hand in his own, as real to him as Gwen's was now.

They had been in the room for hours. He, Gwen, Gaius and Leah, who when the labour had begun in earnest had quickly gone from lingering timidly in the corner to stoically assisting Gaius, doing everything she was asked to quickly and efficiently without question.

Arthur felt a strong surge of affection for Leah in that moment. She was as good of a maidservant as Gwen had ever been, and they were lucky to have found her.

He continued to dab at Gwen's forehead with the dampened cloth Leah had passed him earlier, mumbling reassuring words to his wife and kissing her hand, her forehead, stroking her hair. Generally, Arthur thought, being completely useless and feeling more than a little awkward just sitting there doing nothing, but still he stayed. Of course he stayed. Gwen was having his child.

But he had never wanted Merlin beside him more than right at this moment. And he should be here, Arthur thought stubbornly. Whatever had happened between them, whatever they were feeling, surely that was not important right now, not compared to this, to the birth of their-

No, wait. To the birth of mine and Guinevere's child, Arthur thought pointedly, shaking his head. He must be getting tired.

Gwen was getting tired, too. She was groaning, and he was pretty sure she didn't even notice him there anymore. It didn't matter. He stayed.

Then Gaius ordered her to push. And she screamed. And Arthur felt Merlin's presence push against the door like he was being pulled inside by magic, just as he felt the presence of the baby push out into the world.

And as Gwen pushed again, Gaius exclaimed that he saw the head. Leah gasped as she, too, saw the head, and she cried tears of relief, and Gwen pushed again, and Leah's mouth fell open slightly, and Gwen was screaming again and then Leah was at her other side, pushing back Gwen's hair and shushing her and doing all the things Arthur realised he had completely forgotten to do in his own panic and shock at the fact that the baby is coming right now.

And then Gwen pushed for a final time, and slumped with a whimper, and the sound of a baby's cries filled the room.

The door slammed open by magic and Merlin finally stormed in, and Arthur felt something snap into completeness inside him as finally, we are together, and he could have almost passed out from the feeling of total happiness that overwhelmed him; that had been building for so long, and now finally the world felt right.

Merlin and Arthur's eyes met across the room and it was such a pure, joyous moment that for once Arthur didn't care that all his love for the other man was shining clear as day on his face.

But then Gaius cleared his throat and Arthur's eyes snapped away from Merlin's and fell on the old physician, who was holding up the baby, looking relieved and happy... and yet, Arthur thought, a bit admonishing. Which seemed a very out-of-place expression, he thought for one wild second, before
his eyes moved downwards, drawn to the squealing, pink baby in his arms...

And finally, Arthur looked at his child.

He knew from the fact that (aside from the baby's whimpering and Gwen's quiet, happy sobs) the room was filled with a complete, stifling silence, that every other person in the room was also looking at the child.

The blonde, blue-eyed, very fair skinned child.

Arthur's mouth fell open in shock.

••••••••••GUINEVERE••••••••••

Gwen felt close to passing out, the pain and stress of the hour-long labour leaving her with so little energy, and she could hardly keep her head lifted or her eyes open.

Yet she needed to see her child, she needed to hold it, she needed to know that it was alright, that it was whole, to see the source of those beautiful, beautiful sounds that meant it was alive...

She saw Gaius' face first, saw his eyes flicker between Merlin and Arthur before coming to rest on hers, with a mixture of stubbornness and pity in his eyes even as he smiled reassuringly at her.

Then she looked down, and the world stopped spinning for a moment. She forgot how to breathe.

It was like a perfectly still, frozen moment of clarity as Gwen gazed at this tiny person she had carried around inside of her for the past nine months and finally saw the truth.

This is not my child.

It wasn't that the baby's skin was pale as snow beneath the blood, nor that its eyes were blue and its hair was fair. She hadn't known exactly how her and Arthur's baby might look, but this colouring was not completely unexpected, considering Guinevere's own parentage.

But still, in that moment, she knew. She knew through her haze of pain and adrenaline, that though this child had just come out of her, it was not of her body.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

This is not my child.

She felt the tears fall down her cheeks, flowing like rivers and dripping onto her already soaking gown.

She exhaled, and her breath was shaky. She paused, blinking once. She inhaled deeply.

When Guinevere spoke, her voice was steady and strong. "She's beautiful."

As if her words were magic, the spell had been broken. All eyes turned to her, and Gaius' face lit up as his smile widened; he slowly began to rise and Leah hurried to his side to help him up. He moved towards Gwen and she watched him approach in a haze, and when he placed the bundle in her arms, Gwen let out a choked laugh.

"Hi," she whispered to the chubby, perfect, blue-eyed beauty in her arms, completely unaware of anyone else in the room just then. "Hi there, little one. You made it," she breathed, planting a soft kiss on the baby's still sticky forehead. She regarded Gwen with wide, curious eyes. Merlin's eyes,
she realised. Set off beautifully by the wisps of Pendragon gold already falling in soft curls around her face. "I've waited so long to meet you," Gwen sobbed now, but she was still smiling, softly rocking the child in her arms. "I'm so glad you're here."

And she knew, in that moment, that she would never love anything as much as this child in her arms; this beautiful, perfect little girl whom she had helped bring into this world.

She didn't notice Merlin slipping quietly from the room, nor the tears rolling down Arthur's cheeks as he sat back on his heels beside her, face frozen in disbelief.

And if she had noticed, she likely wouldn't have cared.
Arthur stayed with Gwen and the baby for exactly 10 minutes after Gaius had completed his examination of her and the child and left the pair to rest.

After Gaius had left, it became apparent very quickly that Gwen had nothing to say to him – and she was completely unwilling to part from the child, choosing to rest with it lying precariously in her arms.

Gwen drifted off to sleep almost immediately, and Arthur had wanted to stay... but instinct told him that he had a mission: he needed to get to the bottom of this. Leah had promised him that she would stay and watch Gwen, and he trusted her to take care of them both.

He went straight to Gaius' chambers, and wasn't surprised to find both Gaius and Merlin at the table, not speaking. Waiting for him.

Merlin raised his head from his arms to look at Arthur as he entered. He had been crying, and Arthur supposed that his own eyes were no less red. Merlin offered a weak grimace which may have been a smile, Arthur wasn't sure. He was so tired.

"He wouldn't speak until you got here," Merlin said, indicating Gaius, and Arthur heard the same exhaustion in Merlin's voice. Arthur just nodded, pulling out a chair and sitting down next to Merlin to face Gaius. The side of his leg touched Merlin's, but neither pulled away. It didn't seem like it mattered, right now, and they could both use the comfort.

Gaius, meanwhile, was simply observing the two men in front of him, eyebrow raised. But he did not look angry. Arthur realised in that moment that Gaius had probably had a long time to prepare himself for this, having figured out the truth long before they did.

"The baby isn't Gwen's," Arthur stated, feeling the need to end the prolonged silence, as Gaius didn't seem like he was going to.

No one offered an objection, nor did they look surprised. And the strange thing was that Arthur wasn't even sure that he was surprised himself, either. Yes, when the baby had emerged, pink and blonde and squealing, Arthur had been shocked... but he hadn't been surprised. And he was pretty sure that whatever Gaius had to say now wouldn't really surprise him, either.

"No, Sire, she is not," Gaius said.

"But she is mine?" Arthur asked, even though he already knew. He felt Merlin fidget next to him, and resisted the urge to take his hand.

"She is, Sire."

Arthur took a deep breath. He had another question, but glancing at Merlin, he couldn't bring himself to ask it. He wouldn't.

To his surprise, Merlin spoke up instead. "This is all my fault."

Gaius' gaze softened as he regarded his former apprentice, who was staring into the mug of cold tea
he was clutching. "Well yes, Merlin, in a way it is," Gaius said, but the corner of his mouth was twitching. Merlin winced. "But you do not deserve the blame for this. The ritual worked just as you expected that it would. You did nothing wrong."

Merlin lifted his eyes in surprise, and this puzzled Arthur, too. "What do you mean?"

Gaius sighed. "The ancient words of the ritual speak of the truest of loves, the kind that sees soul and flesh uniting for all eternity," he said, sounding like he was taking great pains to be patient with them. Out of the corner of his eye Arthur saw Merlin nodding along; they had known this. "It can, as you have experienced, be used to create life where there would otherwise be none. But as you know, Merlin, it has only been used a handful of times throughout history. Why do you think that this is?"

Arthur turned his head, honestly curious about Merlin's response. Seeming to realise that he was suddenly the focus of the conversation, Merlin's ears reddened. "Because the magic will only work in the presence of a love so strong, so complete between two people, that it transcends even the limits of our mortal lives. And that kind is so rare, obviously, but I thought..." he trailed off, his eyes flickering towards Arthur but not quite meeting his gaze.

Gaius nodded encouragingly, and his voice was not devoid of kindness when he said, "You, of course, believed that the love between your King and his Queen would be strong enough for this spell. But as much as Arthur and Guinevere do truly love each other, I already knew that the nature of their love would not be strong enough for this kind of magic. And I could have told you as much, if you had consulted me before performing the ritual." Gaius' reproachful eyebrow was directed at both of them.

Arthur opened his mouth, feeling like he really should protest Gaius' doubts of his affections for Guinevere, but he knew that the old physician wasn't done yet.

"But the spell worked," Merlin whispered beside him, sounding as wrecked and confused as Arthur felt.

Gaius nodded. "Indeed it did. The evidence lives and breathes in the arms of the Queen at this very moment. But as you can now plainly see," he directed the next part at Arthur, "this child was not created out of the love shared by yourself and Guinevere, Sire."

On Arthur's left, Merlin let out a small gasp as the truth was finally laid bare in front of them, inescapable.

"I don't understand," Arthur said blankly, even though he was pretty sure he did.

Gaius sighed again, seeming aware of Arthur's dawning comprehension but choosing to indulge his King. "The spell needed a pure and all-consuming bond of mutual love between two people to create the child, and an able and willing female body to carry it to term. And apparently, those two elements did not have to be directly connected." He shrugged. "I could not have predicted that part of course; I doubt any sorcerer has ever been in a position to discover it before."

Arthur coughed, really wishing that Gaius would stop looking at him so intently. And he was pretty sure that Merlin felt the same way, like their carefully constructed secrets were being picked apart a little too meticulously.

Ignoring their obvious discomfort, Gaius continued, still directing his words at Arthur. "Guinevere wanted a child, your child, and the magic recognised this desire and granted her wish. But the love which created the life within her was not her own love, but rather... the love you share with Merlin." The physician's tone bore no trace of mockery nor surprise; clearly he had seen this before any of
them had, blind as they had been with the feeling of power and invincibility that came from producing a child in such a way as they had done.

Arthur only stared straight ahead, no longer seeing Gaius, nor acknowledging Merlin's presence at his side even as he felt Merlin's own confusion and conflict radiate off of him.

His and Merlin's love had created a child. Maybe once, that very notion would have made Arthur erupt with incredulous, derisive laughter – and maybe it would have been a little bit of a front against what he was really feeling, even then – but now, Arthur felt nothing but the deep certainty that of course. Of course.

As much as some part of him might have hoped that it could have been different, had he not somehow known this all along, ever since he first felt the stirring of life within his wife, that night holding Merlin and Gwen's hands? He had felt the new life forming, had seen the red and golden threads begin to weave together before his eyes, and it had filled him with such overwhelming, all-consuming feelings of home and always which he had never, ever associated with Gwen.

It was too much. Without another word, Arthur rose from his chair, turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, unable to abide the power of his own emotions at that moment. He needed a practice sword and a straw dummy, right fucking now.

\[\text{••••••••••GUINEVERE••••••••••} \]

Gwen was humming an old lullaby her father had used to sing to her when she was a child.

She was leaning over the crib, staring down at her three-day-old daughter, who was sleeping peacefully underneath the myriad of stars and rotating planets turning above her in a calming circle.

The tapestries were all depicting quiet, night-time scenes. An owl hooted softly and rustled its wings as it settled on a branch at the forefront of the nearest tree, yellow eyes blinking solemnly in the darkness while the lights of the castle in the distance shone steadily against the twinkling of the stars.

A small part of Gwen wanted to tear it all down. The tapestries, the floating planets, the damn yellow curtains. She wanted to grab her child, get her out of that golden crib and expensive fabrics, and take her as far away from this wretched kingdom as possible.

She wouldn't, of course. For one, she would never even make it out of the castle. And even if she did, it would mean taking the child away from her actual parents.

For the past nine months, Guinevere had carried a child inside her that was not hers. Created by a spell, her body had been invaded by a foreign element, and she had nursed this child to term thinking that it was her own. The staggering reality of it all was paralysing.

And yet despite all of that... looking at the little girl, holding her in her arms, feeding her, Gwen could feel nothing but love. She had wanted a child, and she had gotten one. She was blissfully happy, lost in the glorious sensation that she was a mother and that this little person had grown within her.

She could never hate this child, who was clearly nothing evil. No matter the circumstances, the girl was innocent in all of this. Gwen sighed.

A small cough alerted her to Arthur's presence. She had heard him enter the room, but had ignored him, unable to take her eyes off of the sleeping child. She still didn't turn around.

"Guinevere," Arthur said. Quiet, humble. She heard real pain in his voice, and that was almost
enough to turn her head. Once, not so long ago, she would not have hesitated for a second before going to him. But now, for the first time in her life, Gwen wished that she had a touch of magic – just enough to send Arthur far away, where she did not have to do this.

"Guinevere." The voice was closer now, and Gwen involuntarily tensed. The complete silence behind her made her think for a moment that her wish really had come true, that Arthur was gone; but alas, no such miracle seemed forthcoming. She kept her eyes trained on the child, trying to remind herself that she didn't need any more miracles. Unless...

"You can't take her away from me." Gwen hadn't really intended to speak. In the small doses that she had allowed herself to imagine this moment, when Arthur would try to explain himself, she had imagined herself proud and silent, a pillar of regality – that which she had always aspired to embody. For Arthur. For Camelot. But she couldn't be that person anymore, not now that there was something in her life so much more important.

A small movement behind her made her brace herself for the reassuring touch, reminding herself not to shrug it off – but it never came. Instead she saw Arthur out of her peripheral vision coming to stand at the top of the crib, looking down at his sleeping daughter. She knew then that he had been crying – good, she thought savagely. She didn't really mean it. God, she was so tired.

"I won't," came the hoarse reply, and Gwen was unable to stop the sigh of relief which escaped her. Arthur was nothing if not a man of his word. Well, at least in this aspect, he hoped that she still knew him well enough to trust in that.

A silence stretched out then. Gwen felt like she had hundreds of questions, but she didn't really want answers for any of them. And then she found that she had nothing left to say to him, after that.

But Arthur clearly did. Or maybe he just wanted to break what to him must feel like a terribly uncomfortable silence. Gwen really found that she could not muster up any real emotion about his presence.

"I didn't know that this would happen." He sounded so lost, so broken. Gwen almost felt bad for him – almost. "I'm sorry."

Gwen sighed. She blamed the mother in her for reaching out and placing her own hand on Arthur's. She wasn't surprised to find that it was trembling. "I know," she said. "I believe you." Because she did.

In her blankets, the baby stirred and let out a funny little yawn. Gwen smiled fondly.

"What shall we name her?"

Gwen blinked, and actually looked up at Arthur then, startled out of her pointed indifference. "We? But I thought-"

Arthur grimaced. "You are her mother, Gwen. You get a say."

And in that moment, Gwen knew that she could never truly hate Arthur - even if she would never love him like before, knowing now that his love had never really been hers at all.

Her eyes drifted back down to the precious bundle, and wondered if she'd ever be able to look away for very long.

"Well," she said speculatively, "We could name her after one of our mothers. Ygraine. Lionesse." A beat, but what was the point in pretending? "Hunith," she added, noting Arthur's sharp intake of
breath without really caring. "Oh come off it, Arthur, let us speak frankly to one another for once in our lives,” Gwen said tiredly.

When she had first seen the child, Gwen had been lost in a haze of pain and emotion, but at that moment she had known two things for certain: one, that this was not her daughter, and two, that she would love the girl regardless; had already loved her for the past nine months. Then exhaustion had got the better of her, and when she woke up she had been alone with Leah and the baby squirming in her arms.

Then, as she fed the child for the first time, marvelling at the wonder of it all, Gwen had had time to think. About the shock of blonde curls, the startlingly blue eyes, the slightly protruding ears. About the way in which the child, even from within her belly, had yearned for not only Arthur, but Merlin, too. About the nature of the spell, of using a love so strong and true that it was almost supernatural to create a new life within a womb.

And about how, as much as Gwen had loved Arthur and as much as she was sure he loved her, she had always known in her heart that if she had ever felt a love anywhere near as all-consuming and ethereal as what the spell described, it had not been with her husband, but rather with another noble man who had been lost to her a long time ago.

And, after all, Gwen had always known that Arthur loved Merlin. Sometimes she had even suspected that the love he held for his friend (even if she'd imagined it as being of a very different kind than seemed to be the case) was stronger and more fierce than what he felt for her. Yes, Arthur loved Gwen, and he needed her by his side. But he craved Merlin. He would not be able to go on without Merlin in his life, and it was obvious to anyone who bothered to look that Merlin felt the same way. The bond between them had been formed the moment they met, and Gwen had only watched it grow ever stronger since then.

As all those thoughts had slotted together in her head like the familiar pieces of the well-worn puzzle she had completed hundreds of times as a child, Gwen finally saw the truth for what it was. And in that moment, she accepted that it could never have been any other way; that if this spell were ever to have worked, it would always have had to be because of how Merlin and Arthur felt about each other. That the child in her arms would not exist at all if not for this love.

Neither Gwen nor Arthur had had mothers in their lives; perhaps that was why she hadn't understood until now how horribly unimportant all of this would seem after the baby was born: who Arthur truly loved, who Merlin loved, who Gwen loved, who had been lost and who would be left behind. None of it really mattered to her now, not really; it was only like a vague humming of sadness in an otherwise steady centre of fierce protectiveness and strength.

Gwen knew Arthur was watching the child now, and not her. She knew that he must be feeling something similar to what she was feeling, and she could only empathise with his pain and confusion. She knew that he, like herself, had loved this child from the moment it became real within her belly, and that whatever happened, he would have their daughter's best interest at heart.

Yet Gwen also knew that if she looked up at Arthur now, he would immediately look away from the child, ashamed and weighed down by broken promises.

In that moment, she made a decision. Gwen could not let her daughter grow up with a father who was ashamed of her. She would not be able to forgive herself for letting that happen.

Her hand was still on Arthur's, she realised suddenly. She squeezed it and let go. He didn't move to follow when she stepped back from the crib; she was glad, because it already felt like she was trying to resist gravity itself.
"Why don't you stay with her?" Gwen said, keeping her voice steady and even. "I should..." she really needed to lie down. But she couldn't do it here, if she was going to stay true to what she had just promised herself to do. "I should like to take my rest in our shared chambers, but I don't expect you to join me. I will move the rest of my belongings up here in the morning."

As Arthur began to voice a protest, she held up her hand and he silenced at once. She didn't quite meet his eye as she insisted, "No, really, Arthur. I will have Leah send for Gaius to attend me. And then send him here, for the child. I will come back in a few hours, when it is time for her to be fed."

She took his silence as acquiescence. As she walked away, she heard his voice behind her, as hesitant and careful as before. "You never told me her name."

Gwen sighed, determined to keep walking while she still had the strength. It took all of her grace and patience to keep her voice neutral when she said, her hand on the door, "Why don't you ask Merlin what he thinks?" And with that, she swept out of the chambers, not daring to look back in case she would find herself unable to leave her daughter's side at all.

She would never let her daughter grow up with a father who was ashamed of her. Either father. It wasn't until she was out in the hallway, out of sight of the child and the man she knew she had lost to another (or who had maybe never truly been hers at all) that she let the tears well up in her eyes, blurring her vision for a moment before they began falling, silently, down her cheeks.

For five counts, she allowed them to run freely. Then Guinevere took a few steadying breaths, wiped her cheeks with her sleeve, and raised her head high, every bit the Queen she had promised herself that she would be. And Guinevere never broke her promises.

Arthur didn't send for Merlin. He felt terrible about it, because he knew exactly how he must be feeling. Exactly like Arthur had, until he had been unable to physically keep himself away any longer. He wondered how Merlin had even managed to stay away for this long at all.

For three days, Arthur had held back, giving Gwen time and giving her the chance to allow him to see his daughter when she was ready. For three days he had not slept, and had hardly eaten, as he thought about the child that was made from his body, brought into this world by the woman he loved, somewhere in the castle where he could not keep her safe.

He needed to see his child.

He couldn't think about the rest of it. He wouldn't let himself. Arthur's years of battle training, strategising and planning had taught him to be pragmatic – dealing with the most urgent task at hand and pushing everything else to the back of his mind had many times been the difference between life and death for himself and his men, and he felt like this situation was pretty much the same.

Arthur knew he needed to speak to Merlin, about... everything. But the very idea left him confused, and angry, and sad and afraid all at once, and it was distracting. He pushed it away.

Of course, he also needed to speak to his advisors and his knights. What would he tell them? What would they tell the people of Camelot? It was too much, and he had no answers. He pushed it away.

Then there was Gwen. Sweet, beautiful, strong Gwen, whom he could never ask to understand or accept any of this, and whose wounds he could never be able to fully heal. He didn't know what to tell her, didn't know how to even begin to make it better. It was tearing him apart, so he pushed it away.
What he needed to do, what was most important at this moment, was to get to his daughter.

On the first day, Arthur went to Gaius. Merlin, thankfully, was out – they had not spoken since Arthur had stormed out earlier. Gaius told him, in no uncertain terms, that Guinevere and the child needed to rest, and that "under the present circumstances, Sire, I must insist that you give them time."

And so he had given them time. But Arthur had never been known for his patience, and so when the sun rose on the second day, he went to Leah.

It was a bit of a cheap trick, he knew, but he was desperate. He'd cornered her in the kitchens when she had been down to collect Gwen's breakfast, and only felt a little bad when the poor girl was so startled by his presence that she nearly dropped her tray.

Arthur had politely offered to carry the food up to Gwen for her, but to his surprise, Leah had quite plainly stated that while she may be neither magic nor royalty, she would do everything in her admittedly limited power to keep Arthur out of that room. "My mistress needs her rest, Sire, and that's that," she said, standing her ground and meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

*Oh hell*, he thought with a regretful sigh as he let her pass. *No wonder Gwen likes her so much.*

On the third day, Arthur was done waiting. He had been ignoring his duties, dodging his advisors, holed up in his room (studiously avoiding looking at the door leading to Merlin's chambers, although he didn't hear the man in there once) and planning his next move - and had come embarrassingly close to actually attempting to scale the castle wall, when he'd just had *enough*.

Arthur was the King of Camelot, and he was going to see his child.

In the end, it had all been a terribly anticlimactic victory, as when he had finally got up the nerve to approach the chamber that evening the guards had not even tried to stop him, and he had found the door unlocked when he tried it.

Although whatever kind of victory it had been, Arthur mused as he watched his sleeping daughter now, the spoils had been more than worth it.

He couldn't believe how beautiful she was. Her skin was pale and fine, and he could already see that her features would be delicate when she was older. She looked... Arthur drew in a sharp breath as he realised. "You look just like Merlin," he whispered, reaching out a finger to ghost a touch along her tiny hand, which was clenched around her blanket in sleep.

"She has your disapproving frown though," a voice said behind him and Arthur jerked back, spinning around in alarm to find – Merlin. He looked tired, too – Arthur wondered if he hadn't been able to sleep, either.

He had a million questions for the other man, but in the end he went with, "Where the hell did you come from?"

Merlin shrugged, and for a moment he looked like a bird rustling its wings. "I have been watching her, of course."

Merlin shrugged, and for a moment he looked like a bird rustling its wings. "I have been watching her, of course."

Arthur narrowed his eyes. "How?"

Merlin looked a bit embarrassed, his eyes darting in the direction of the tapestry.

"*Merlin,*" Arthur hissed, taking a step towards him and keeping his voice hushed, "You enchanted the... how is that *safe*? What if someone-"
Merlin smiled at him, an odd mixture of fondness and regret. "Obviously it's safe, Arthur. Otherwise I wouldn't have done it."

*That's what you said last time*, Arthur almost said, but that wasn't fair. The ritual *had* been perfectly safe, after all, even if it hadn't turned out quite as they'd expected.

Merlin's eyes strayed past Arthur, and Arthur watched, enchanted, as a very different expression stole over Merlin's face.

"I can't believe she's real," Merlin breathed, and stepped past Arthur, their sleeves brushing in the process. Arthur had to close his eyes for a second before turning and coming to stand next to Merlin; close but not quite touching now, looking down at the child they had created.

"I know," he said, simply.

A silence fell over them, but even though there was so much still left unsaid, this felt much more companionable than how Arthur had felt with Gwen.

After a while of watching the baby's steady breathing and occasional twitching, Arthur felt Merlin shift minutely closer to him, and had to close his eyes and take a steadying breath as their hands brushed together. Merlin didn't do anything else, but he also didn't take his hand away. Arthur sighed, and after a moment's hesitation he let his own hand cover Merlin's, entwining their fingers.

"I want to tell you I'm sorry for all of this," Merlin whispered. "I really do, Arthur, but..." He sounded choked up but he kept speaking, and Arthur found himself trailing lazy, comforting circles on Merlin's hand with his thumb without even realising what he was doing. "We made this," Merlin said now, his voice full of awe, "I mean, I didn't plan it this way, you know I didn't, but... it happened, and here she is. She's perfect. I could never be sorry for that."

In that moment, Arthur knew that there was a kingdom out there waiting for him and a Queen left heartbroken by his actions, and that his entire life was on the brink of some enormous changes. But standing there, his hand entwined with Merlin's as they watched the child they had miraculously, impossibly created together, he let it all drift away, just for a moment. *One thing at a time.* So he let himself smile and say, "I know," and smiled when Merlin's head came down to rest on his shoulder a moment later.

And then it felt so natural to just turn slightly to press a light kiss to Merlin's soft, dark hair. And when Merlin raised his head slightly with a quizzical, tentative look in his eyes, it made complete sense for Arthur to reach over with his free hand and tilt Merlin's chin up, and capture his mouth with his own, pressing their lips together for a moment before sliding his tongue slowly across Merlin's lower lip.

Merlin sighed softly, as if in relief, and opened his mouth to Arthur. Their tongues tangled lazily, and Arthur felt the warmth of the embrace filling him completely. He reflected hazily that this was nothing like the frantic, desperate, guilty kiss they had shared three days ago in his room — this was open, and honest, and he felt like he was growing lighter by the second. The guilt was still there, and the disarming powerlessness to do anything but give in... but none of that mattered just then, with Merlin in his arms and their daughter finally within reach.

Arthur slid his hand into Merlin's hair and pulled the other man even closer, and Merlin brought their tangled fingers up to rest between them, his other hand coming to rest lightly on Arthur's neck, stroking softly. They kissed slowly, languorously, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Arthur began to feel the stress of everything melting away. Why did this feel so *right*?
That was when the baby let out a long whimper, announcing that she had woken up, and both he and Merlin started. But they didn't break apart right away, and Arthur felt Merlin smile against his lips before removing his hand from Arthur's neck and unlinking their fingers. Arthur was still slightly dazed as Merlin bent over to pick up the squirming infant, who was now letting out small noises of distress.

He watched in fascination as Merlin crooned, rocking the child up and down in his arms, kissing her forehead with the lips that had just been on Arthur's a moment ago. Arthur cleared his throat, shaking his head slightly. Merlin looked over at him and smiled softly, with the baby resting against his chest- and the image they presented was so beautiful, so perfect, that Arthur felt his heart break a little.

"Would you like to hold her?" Merlin asked shyly. And oh, Arthur did.

Merlin stepped closer to him again, and Arthur held out his arms apprehensively. He had held a baby before, of course, but never like this... he realised that he had never felt so terrified before. What if she didn't like him? What if he dropped her?

Merlin must have seen the flicker of panic in his eyes, because he leaned over the baby now sandwiched between them and pressed his mouth to Arthur's softly, whispering against his lips, "Just trust me."

And of course, Arthur did. He felt the weight of the child (so impossibly light in his arms, he marvelled) as Merlin transferred the bundle to him, and as he rocked his daughter for the first time, she slowly began to calm down, staring up at him with eyes so startlingly blue, and he thought he might cry from the wonder and perfection of it all. From Merlin's conspicuous sniff, he reckoned he was not alone in this feeling.

"So what shall we name her?" Arthur found himself asking, letting himself get lost in this perfect, if slightly surreal moment of domesticity for a little bit longer.

He glanced over at Merlin to find him regarding Arthur with a hesitant, worried look. "I think it's up to Gwen," he said carefully, and Arthur tried not to wince, "But I was thinking, maybe... Ygranna?" At Arthur's confused frown, Merlin blushed but continued uncertainly, "It's just, well, it would be like Ygraine, right? But not exactly, because obviously she is not... the same. But it's still close. And we could call her Anna, then, I thought. Maybe. If you like it."

Arthur looked down at the little girl, who was watching him intently, her hand in her mouth, making soft gurgling noises. A smile broke over his face. "Ygranna. Anna. I like it. Do you like it?" The baby gave a pleased-sounding gurgle and drooled on his hand. He took that as a yes.

When he looked up, Arthur wasn't surprised to find Merlin still watching the baby, his eyes shining with affection.

"I helped a dragon hatch, once," Merlin said suddenly, and Arthur blinked in confusion. "You never told me that."

Merlin shrugged, still smiling. "I didn't have a reason to mention it before now."

Arthur felt a familiar surge of love for Merlin then, and marvelled at how impossibly right it felt to finally be able to acknowledge that feeling. As he was still holding onto Ygranna with both arms, he simply leaned forward until his forehead pressed against Merlin's, trying to convey everything he couldn't say out loud with that gesture.

"I wish you'd told me sooner." They both knew he wasn't talking about the dragon.
To his surprise, Merlin snorted. "This is a right mess, isn't it?"

Arthur grimaced. "Merlin, I'm-"

"Shh," Merlin interrupted, leaning further into him. "Don't say it. I know."

"I want it to be just like this, always," Arthur admitted, finally allowing himself to feel the truth of those words, if only right here within their painfully temporary bubble. "I wish I could promise you that it will be, but-"

"But you're the King," Merlin said, and Arthur wanted nothing more than for Merlin to freeze time in that moment, like he'd talked about doing before, so he didn't have to hear the rest of that sentence. But time did not freeze, and Merlin continued. "You have responsibilities. You have a Queen. A wife. You have a child."

"We have a child," Arthur amended.

Merlin smiled sadly. "We have a child," he agreed. "But the rest of it... this..." Merlin's eyes flickered to Arthur's lips, and he licked his own.

This, they couldn't have. Arthur swallowed. He knew this. Their lives were never going to be that simple.

"I'm sorry," Arthur simply said, and he meant it.

Merlin leaned in and touched his lips to Arthur's once more, and Arthur kissed back, a soft promise of everything he'd never let himself have but which they both now knew they wanted.

"I love you," Merlin breathed against his lips.

And before Arthur had time to respond, Merlin stepped back, and his form shimmered before it seemed to blend into the tapestry, for a moment appearing as an elaborate human-shaped weaving in the fabric before transforming into a large, dark brown owl which flapped its wings and hooted sadly before disappearing over the forest.

Arthur was left alone in the room holding his daughter, who blinked up at him with innocent curiosity. And he looked back at her sadly, hoping that she would never have to endure such heartache.

"Sire, this is madness."

Arthur's head snapped up and he glared at Sir Ector, the foolish man who had dared to oppose his decision. In icy tones, he asked the man, "Would you like to explain yourself?"

To his credit, Sir Ector did not flinch, though he did look a little paler under his thick, grey beard. "I am only saying, Sire. No matter the kingdom's stance on magic, claiming this child as your heir, when it will only become more and more apparent as time goes on that she cannot be your wife's natural born child-"

"But Ygranna is my wife's natural born child," Arthur said plainly. "Dare you deny it?"

Colour returned to Ector's cheeks, in the form of an embarrassed flush. "I'm only saying, Sire. No one but yourself and the Queen, Gaius and the- and your-" he stumbled over his words as his eyes
flickered to Merlin, who had forfeited his usual place at Arthur's side to stand by the wall like he used to, looking for all the world like he was pretending to blend into the solid stone behind him (which, Arthur mused vaguely, he might actually decide to do), "your sorcerer, actually saw the child being born," Ector finally spat. "How will you even attempt to combat the rumours that will undoubtedly arise about the true begetting of this child? Of possible switches, that perhaps this girl is merely a replacement for your true, stillborn heir, that you are pulling the wool down over our eyes to ensure succession-

"Leah was there," Gwen said suddenly, speaking for the first time since they had all sat down for this farce of a meeting. "My maidservant will vouch for the truth."

Ector snorted. "A servant? Who will take her word as fact?"

"I wonder," Arthur said, his tone still as frosty as before, "if Sir Ector here is merely expressing his concern about the possible ways in which our enemies can sully our name, or if he himself is the one doing the sullying?"

Every head in the hall turned to Ector, who looked torn between punching Arthur in the face and making a break for it. Arthur severely hoped he'd try for the former option.

Before he'd made up his mind, however, a cough filled the silence and Arthur gave Ector one last threatening scowl before turning to the source of the noise. "Yes, Gwaine?"

Gwaine's eyes darted between Arthur and Gwen, "Er, well, at the risk of doing some sullying myself," he paused and looked very much like he wanted to smirk, but thankfully restrained himself, "Sir Ector may have a point – as poorly presented as it was. I'm just saying," Gwaine cast a pointed, much too knowing glance in Merlin's direction, "this child may look like you, Arthur, and right now you could probably pass her off as Gwen's if you didn't look too closely... but if she grows up to be as blonde and blue-eyed as she is now, you won't be able to stop people from talking."

Arthur felt Gwen tense beside him; he almost reached out for her hand, but remembered himself at the last moment. He didn't think she would appreciate the gesture. "Look," he said instead, regarding his knights and advisors, trying to remember that these men were his friends (or at least most of them were), and that they were trying to solve an impossible problem. "I am aware that this is a lot to ask of you. But I am the King, and Guinevere is the Queen, and this makes it our duty to leave Camelot with an heir. Which, as you now know, was never going to be within our own power to do. But with Merlin's help, we have now provided you with one after all. It... did not go completely as planned," he acknowledged with a grimace and a silent apology to his daughter, "but none the less, Camelot has an heir. Ygranna is my daughter, my blood. She may not be Gwen's blood, but Gwen is her mother. I know I am asking you to take a leap of faith, but you will come to find that this girl is every bit a Pendragon. You will not be disappointed."

He saw the determined, loyal looks in the eyes of his knights, and the resigned looks of some of the older members of the council who had served under his father, too. He knew that it would be difficult, what he was asking of them, but if he could convince these men, he could convince the kingdom. He must.

Arthur caught Gwaine's eye, and the solemn nod he received in response was answer enough. They would stand behind him. He ignored the twinge of guilt he felt at not telling them the whole story, but he knew that nothing good would come of that. Besides, judging from the speculative looks Gwaine and some of the other knights had shot Merlin, maybe some of them would figure it out soon enough on their own. Arthur only hoped they'd keep that particular bit of knowledge to themselves.

As the Round Table meeting adjourned and he got up to leave, Arthur studiously avoided looking at
Merlin, holding out his arm to Gwen and letting out a small sigh of relief when he felt her accept it. It was important that they presented a united front.

On his right, Gaius got to his feet and Arthur was glad to see that he looked tight-lipped but approving.

They had won this small victory. His council had accepted Ygranna as their trueborn princess, and although they would face many troubles ahead, Arthur knew that they would get through it together.

But he couldn't let himself be happy, even then.

After that small moment with Merlin in the nursery, where they had pretended like it really was just the three of them alone in the world, Arthur had thought that he could push everything he felt away and deal with the situation in the determined yet detached way his father used to favour when handling personal matters. Arthur was the King, he could not allow himself a weakness such as this. He had let it all in, everything he was feeling, for just a moment with Merlin, and he had thought that this would help him purge himself of all his unwanted emotions. But instead it seemed like the opposite had happened.

In the week that had passed since that night, Arthur had not spoken to Merlin alone, not wanting to tempt either of them to do or say something they wouldn't be able to take back. But he couldn't stop thinking about him. Every time he looked at Ygranna, he saw Merlin's eyes, Merlin's smiles, Merlin's cheekbones. Every time he caught a glimpse of the sorcerer in the castle's hallways or at events such as this, he felt the deep, curling desire in his chest, the ache so insistent that he almost couldn't resist.

But he had to. He must – for the kingdom, for his daughter, and for his wife. His adoring, wonderful wife, who had done nothing to deserve any of this, but who had been nothing but strong and supportive through it all.

When Arthur had finally spoken to Gwen about how to make this impossible situation work, she had made it very clear that what had happened was not going to be easily forgotten, but she had agreed that whatever they may think and feel for each other now must not jeopardize Ygranna's future in any way. And therefore some adjustments to the story they would tell the council were necessary.

For one, Merlin's role in the conception of the child would have to be downplayed significantly – a fact which Gwen had pointed out the necessity of, and as much as Arthur hated it, she was right. While those closest to the royal family would probably be able to guess at Ygranna's true lineage, for the time being it was enough for them to know that the spell had only created the child out of Arthur, and not Gwen.

Arthur, coward that he was, had had Gaius relay this bit of information to Merlin. He had heard nothing back, which had left Arthur with a terrible feeling of guilt, but right before the council meeting had started, Arthur had seen Gaius and Merlin conferring heatedly as they walked towards the Great Hall, and then Gaius had taken his place beside Arthur, informing him in clipped tones that Merlin had understood the necessity for these precautions, and had further relayed Merlin's message that perhaps it would be better for everyone involved if he stepped back from these council meetings for a while, keeping his distance from state matters.

This was the right thing to do, Arthur knew that. And yet none of this felt right at all.

While the birth of Ygranna had seemed to bring an end to Arthur and Merlin's odd magical link, that didn't mean that Arthur felt any less drawn to the other man. He was finding it difficult to concentrate on anything, constantly remembering the feel of Merlin's lips on his, and although he no longer had any way of knowing, Arthur suspected that Merlin felt the same way. Their love had created a child,
He wished he knew what to do with that. Arthur had always desired, even loved Merlin, he'd realised that a long time ago – but all of those feelings were never meant to lead anywhere; they couldn't. And so Arthur had resolved to push them away, to the back of his mind, never to be acted upon. And he had certainly never wanted to make his wife privy to what up until nine months ago had been his innermost, very inappropriate feelings for his best and truest friend.

But now there was tangible, undeniable proof of Arthur's love for Merlin. A child had been created out of that love - and though Gwen luckily favoured and treated Ygranna as her own, the knowledge that it wasn't her daughter must weigh heavy on her mind. Arthur himself was more torn than he had been even while Gwen had been pregnant – at times he found himself overcome with guilt that he had produced a child with another, but every so often, Arthur caught an undeniable sense of happiness and contentment stealing over him. Not only because little Ygranna existed at all, but because she was half him and half Merlin. It should have been impossible, and Arthur couldn't help but think of her existence as a bit of a miracle. Thoughts which, in turn, only made him feel even more guilty about the situation with Guinevere.

And now the whole court had to be involved, too. Eventually, he expected that most of his knights and servants would know, or at least have strong suspicions, that Ygranna was Merlin's child too. And they would whisper, and word would spread, and where would that leave them all?

Arthur rubbed his temples, resigning himself to a permanent headache. He had to make sure to tell Gaius to stock up on potions.

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"Merlin, I am worried about you," Gaius told him one night, while they were sharing dinner in the old physician's study.

Merlin had taken to spending a lot of time there, when he was not out in the grounds or skulking around the castle library, ignoring the dirty looks Geoffrey would shoot him every time he touched one of the books.

He avoided his own Arthur-adjacent chambers as much as he possibly could.

Up until now, Merlin knew that Gaius had been laying off him, clearly appreciating the gravitas of the situation and not wishing to unnecessarily intrude. But it had only been a matter of time, and Merlin tried to remind himself that his old mentor only wanted the best for all of them. And if he was honest with himself, that was what worried Merlin. He no longer knew what was best for anyone.

"I'm fine, Gaius," Merlin sighed, knowing that Gaius would hear that for the lie it was but not having the energy to try harder to make it sound convincing.

"Sure you are," Gaius said dryly. "And I am Kilgarrah's long-lost brother."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Merlin grumbled, glad to see a small smile on the physician's face.

Taking advantage of the temporary lightening of the mood, Gaius immediately pounced (and Merlin would have expected no less from his old mentor). "You haven't been to see the child for weeks."

So they were going there, then. Merlin bit back a sigh. "I haven't," he acknowledged, and it was only half a lie.

Merlin certainly hadn't approached the nursery, too much of a coward to risk running into Gwen or
Arthur, and he hadn't used his tapestry either, not since... that night.

Well. He hadn't used the tapestry to enter the room, anyway. But almost every night, Merlin had transformed into an owl, and watched his daughter sleep from his perch on the tree on the periphery of the forest close to Camelot, the scenery which the tapestry was depicting. He simply couldn't stay away, as much as he tried.

But Gaius didn't need to know that now. Nor did he need to know of how painful it was, to watch Ygranna from afar, knowing just how unwelcome he truly was in her life.

Maybe, if things were different... but, Merlin forcibly reminded himself for the hundredth time, they weren't. It was futile to imagine something which could never be. He knew where Arthur's responsibilities lay – with his wife and his kingdom – and whatever emotion the King may or may not have for him, Merlin was sure that Arthur's love for Gwen (and now his daughter) would be enough to push that aside.

Merlin, on the other hand, was left with no other love to distract him from the ache. And being separated from his child, well, that was just another level of pain he had never thought he would have to endure.

It was slowly killing him. He looked at Gaius, who was watching him with unmasked concern. His mentor was right to be worried about him.

This, more than anything, sealed the decision which Merlin hadn't even realised he had been making up until that moment.

"I have decided to leave Camelot," Merlin said. For a moment, Merlin was surprised that his voice had actually uttered the words, but as soon as he said them out loud he knew that it was the right thing – the only thing – for him to do. Merlin didn't let himself think about the consequences of his words as he continued to speak, and did his best to avoid Gaius' shocked and disappointed expression. "I am going to stay with the Druids. I have thought about this for a long time, Gaius, and I know that it is something I owe to my magic. To my King." His voice caught on the last word, but he swallowed and carried on. "I need to learn everything I can about myself and my powers. What I am truly capable of. Before I can truly understand everything I am to become, I need to know about – about Emrys. And the Druids have the answers I seek, you know this as well as I do."

Gaius' attempt at keeping his response neutral was poor, but Merlin pretended not to notice. "And you think that now is the appropriate time to leave, Merlin?"

Merlin nodded. "Now is the perfect time to leave."

And despite the doubt nagging at him, and the deep pain at the idea of leaving Ygranna behind, Merlin knew in his heart that it was true. Gwen deserved to enjoy being a mother, without having to worry about Merlin's feelings for her daughter or husband, he owed her that. If she had any lingering doubts about Arthur's affection for her, he owed it to her to dispel them. And he owed it to Arthur to let himself settle back into the role of husband, of father, without any... distractions.

And he owed it to Ygranna, to grow up with the mother and father that were meant to have been hers. She didn't need Merlin in her life, and Merlin would do his best to make sure that he didn't need her either.

His father had left Merlin and his mother behind for their safety, even though it had broken his heart to do so. Now, Merlin finally understood what Balinor had had to go through. And he could do the same now, for his child. He was strong enough. He had to be.
Of course, Gaius would try to talk him out of it. Gaius had understood much more about the situation from the very beginning than the rest of them, and Merlin should have listened to him the first time around. But he hadn't, and this was Merlin's mess to clean up now. How could he ever understand? Merlin thought cruelly, pushing away any feelings of guilt. Gaius never had a child.

Merlin was too wrapped up in his own pain to remember that Gaius did know what it was like to watch someone he considered as good as his own child suffer through a seemingly endless string of pain and losses. That he was once again watching the young man put aside his own happiness for the people he loved, and that Gaius' heart was once again breaking a little bit for it.

"You thought you could just leave, without the King of Camelot knowing about it?"

Merlin smiled sadly, not turning around as he continued folding his shirts and putting them neatly into the trunk – by hand, this time. He felt rather too heartsick for such domestic magic as folding and packing, right at this moment. "Wouldn't be the first time, Sire."

He heard Arthur's sigh as the other man stepped fully into Merlin's room, through the adjoining doors that felt like they hadn't been used in years. In actuality, it had only been a month.

One month had passed since Ygranna's birth. One month had passed since Merlin and Arthur had crossed that precarious line which they had balanced on for all these years. One month had passed since Merlin's life had fallen apart, and he was only now beginning to pick up the pieces, for both of them.

"You know you can't do this, Merlin."

"You know you can't stop me, Sire."

"Stop calling me that," Arthur snapped, sounding tired. He'd been up all night with the baby, of course – Merlin knew this because he had been watching them, from his perch on the tree at the edge of the woods. And from the frequent glances Arthur had cast in his direction, Merlin knew that Arthur had known he was there, too. Oh what a complicated game they played. "And stop packing. You're not going anywhere."

Merlin had to shut his eyes for a moment to collect himself. "Arthur..."

"Please." The voice came from right behind him now. Merlin's back muscles tensed up, anticipating the touch, but it didn't come. Merlin yearned to turn around, but he couldn't, he mustn't. For Ygranna.

"I have to leave. I told you, I have to visit the Druids." A silence. Merlin knew they were both remembering the day when Merlin had told him just that, and how that conversation had ended. His hands were gripping the shirt he had been folding so forcefully, and he absently wondered if it would tear. It was his favourite.

"I need you here."

"Stop saying things you don't mean, Arthur." It was meant to come out cold, detached. It sounded broken to his own ears.

Maybe that was what prompted Arthur to step forward again, his chest aligning flush with Merlin's back. They both inhaled sharply at the contact.
Arthur's breath ghosted against Merlin's neck. "I have always needed you." And that just wasn't fair. But since when had Arthur ever played fair?

It would be so easy, Merlin thought, to just reach around. To push back. To touch. To have everything he wanted, everything he knew that Arthur wanted.

But then what? Merlin shook his head slightly, trying to clear it, to ignore the want curling in his chest and how ragged Arthur's breathing was against him.

Arthur was still married to Gwen. He still had a daughter, who still needed to be legitimized as the heir to Camelot's throne. He still had his honour, his duty, his people. He didn't really want this, this... complication. And Merlin wouldn't be the one to ruin everything which Arthur had built up so carefully.

Merlin meant to tell him all of these things. He opened his mouth to speak, but then he felt Arthur's hands tentatively curl around his waist, and hot lips close around his neck. What came out was a broken moan. "Arthur..." he breathed, and Arthur's responding moan rumbled through his own chest, as Arthur's tongue licked a trail up to Merlin's ear. Merlin did lean back then, shuddering and feeling like his knees might give way. "Arthur, we can't."

Arthur hummed against him, teeth grazing the shell of his earlobe, and Merlin's eyes rolled back in his head.

But they couldn't. They couldn't.

This wasn't just about them anymore.

Merlin pushed away, whirling around and feeling the backs of his knees hit the side of his bed. Arthur's eyes were dark with desire and they flitted down to Merlin's lips, and oh, how Merlin wanted to just reach...

"No!" he said desperately, and he pushed, not realising what he was doing until Arthur's back collided with the wall on the other side of the room.

Merlin gasped, his hands falling to his sides, looking at Arthur with horror. He had used magic.

Arthur stared at him, seemingly paralysed with shock. At least, Merlin hoped he hadn't actually paralysed him.

"Arthur, I'm sorry," Merlin started to say, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"You promised," Arthur said quietly, and the hurt in his tone made Merlin's mouth snap shut. "You promised you would never use it against me."

When Merlin closed his eyes now, it was in shame. He couldn't stand Arthur looking at him like that. "I know."

The silence stretched between them, charged very differently from a moment ago, and Merlin couldn't stand it – but then, wasn't this what he wanted? He made himself open his eyes. Welcoming the hurt and betrayal he would see in Arthur's eyes, needing it.

Arthur was still looking at him, but his expression was closed. It wasn't the look Merlin was expecting, but he knew he'd hit a nerve. The fact that Merlin was powerful enough to take full control of Arthur and the kingdom if he wanted to (even if they both knew that he never would) was the one sensitive topic still between them, even after all this time. In hindsight, it had been the only
thing that Merlin could have done to break them apart at that moment, and maybe that's why he'd instinctively done it.

"Right," Merlin said quietly, more to himself than Arthur, and he turned back to hastily put the rest of his clothes into the trunk.

"Merlin," came Arthur's indignant cry a moment later, and Merlin's heart ached at the familiar sound. "I thought I told you not to go. I command it," he added, a note of desperation in his voice now.

Merlin smiled sadly. "But now you know why I need to." He looked back over his shoulder, catching and holding Arthur's gaze for a brief, glorious moment. Memorising the shade of his blue eyes, the curve of his lip, the way the sunlight streaming in through the window set his blonde hair alight. "You have a family now, Arthur, and I'm not a part of it. Maybe some time apart will help you remember that."

And he turned away, wishing that Arthur's frozen look of dawning realisation and heartbreak wouldn't be the last thing he'd see on the King's face, but knowing that this was how it had to be.

After a moment, he heard the quiet click of the door, and he knew that Arthur was gone.

And that would be the last time Merlin and Arthur would see each other for a very long time.
Three Years Later

Chapter Notes

There is now a fanfic trailer for this story! It was created by the wonderful Sally Sparrow on YouTube, and you can watch it here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcZC-_wtaUQ

"Ygranna! Young lady, come back here this instant!"

Gwen tried to make her voice admonishing, she really did. But she couldn't quite disguise her laughter when her daughter finally came into view, peeking around the low hedge with wide, innocent eyes.

"But mummy, the turtles are so pretty," the girl trilled, looking at Gwen imploringly. Her blonde hair, which Leah had arranged in such lovely curls only an hour ago, was caked with mud, and her bright blue eyes stood out in sharp contrast to the brown patches of dried earth on her cheeks. Gwen marvelled at how she had managed all of that in the two minutes since she had seen her last – a reprimand was on the tip of her tongue, but when she was met with a toothy smile, Gwen was done for. She returned the smile warmly as Ygranna asked, "Can I keep one?"

"Oh sweetie," Gwen said softly, coming to kneel before her daughter – noticing for the first time the three turtles, that were now scuttling away and disappearing under the hedge. Ygranna tracked their movement with her eyes but made no move to stop them, simply turning back to Gwen with the same imploring look as before.

Gwen kissed her hair softly, careful to avoid the muddy patches. "But if you took one of them inside, then it wouldn't be able to play with its friends. Is that what you want?"

Ygranna's eyebrows pulled together in a perfect imitation of Arthur, and she gave her mother such an earnest look as only a child could. "No," she said solemnly, with all the wisdom of a three-year-old. "I could never take King Uther away from his family."

Gwen ignored the small pang she felt at those words, and smoothed down her daughter's hair in vain, smiling and grasping onto a safer topic. "You named one of the turtles after your grandfather?"

Ygranna's eyes crinkled as she smiled proudly. "Well, father is always saying that grandpa was hard on the outside but soft on the inside. Like a turtle."

Gwen laughed as she picked up her child, not even caring that she was getting mud all over her gown, too. "You really are too clever for your own good, you know that?"

"Yes," Ygranna said brightly, patting her mother's hair now in an imitation of what Gwen had just been doing to hers. "The turtles told me."

Gwen just laughed some more and carried her child back into the castle.

"Milady!" Leah exclaimed as soon as they reached the entrance hall, running towards them and
taking in the state of their dresses. "Where have you been? Why do you look like that? What has happened?"

Gwen rolled her eyes and Ygranna giggled. Leah's over-protectiveness was very sweet, but sometimes it felt a little suffocating. "We were playing in the gardens."

"With the turtles," Ygranna supplied helpfully.

Leah raised an eyebrow, and Gwen suppressed a snort. The young maidservant had clearly been spending too much time with Gaius. "Well," she said, her voice laced with disapproval, "Luckily, I have already prepared baths for you both. I trust you remember that the banquet starts in an hour."

Ygranna's face immediately fell, and she cringed at her mother. "Oh, do I have to go? Please, mother, can't I stay in my room and play?"

If Leah had not been giving her that look, Gwen might have given in to her daughter, just this once. As it were, she merely touched her finger to the tip of her child's nose softly, smiling. "No, Ygranna, you know your duties. You are Camelot's princess, your presence is expected."

Ygranna sighed heavily and pouted in a truly adorable way – another trait she'd picked up from Arthur – but she offered no more protests. She really was a very clever child, Gwen reflected.

Gwen grudgingly handed Ygranna over to Leah, who already had her arms outstretched expectantly, and followed behind the pair as they began their ascent to the chambers Guinevere still shared with Ygranna. She suppressed a sigh; she must not appear hesitant about attending this feast in front of her daughter – she had to lead by example, after all.

But the truth was that Gwen didn't want to go to the banquet any more than Ygranna did. She had come to hate these functions with a passion, but she knew there was no way out of them. Her absence, or her daughter's, would only encourage even more talk.

Really, Gwen thought, all things considered it could have been a lot worse. At first glance, Ygranna was almost the splitting image of her father, and a lot of people took that at face value. The fact that she looked nothing like her mother was uncommon of course, but not completely unheard of.

But after spending five minutes in Ygranna's company... well, the other similarities became almost impossible to ignore (and gods knew that Gwen had tried her best). Anyone who had ever met Merlin, and who knew what the three of them had done to bring about the birth of the child, would undoubtedly begin to wonder. And Gwen hated it. She hated the scrutinising looks, the subtle comments and questions, hated having to sit there on display and having people thinking about it, maybe even realising the truth, while she had to smile and behave like the Queen she was.

And she dreaded the day when Ygranna, too, would notice their pointed glances. When one off-handed comment would register with her, and she would begin to wonder like so many strangers already did. When she would ask all the questions that Gwen didn't have the answers for.

Tonight's banquet would be no different, Guinevere knew this. But she would endure, as she always did, because it was a small price to pay for everything she had. Sometimes, she still couldn't believe how lucky she was, how perfect of a daughter she got to hold in her arms and kiss goodnight and love as if she were her own. Because Ygranna truly was her daughter, in every way but by blood.

Sometimes at night, at the place in between wake and sleep when Gwen had no control of her mind, her thoughts would stray to Morgana, and she would wonder if her old friend and mistress would have turned out differently if she had been loved in this way; if Uther had acknowledged her as his
true daughter from the beginning and treated her as such.

And at those times, Gwen really missed Morgana, as she had been then. She would have known what to say to dispel Gwen's worries. She would have told her to forget about those snooty visiting nobles; that whatever they whispered amongst themselves shouldn't matter to her because she was so much better than they would ever be. Morgana would certainly have been better company than Leah, as loyal as helpful as Gwen's maidservant had been for the past three years.

Yes, Guinevere had come to consider Leah a very good and loyal friend. But it was nothing like what she had shared with Morgana - and lately, considering how distant she had grown from her husband, Gwen had really found herself longing for that closeness.

At least she had Ygranna. The child was such a bright, wonderful presence in every life she touched, and on most days she chased away the loneliness. But sometimes Gwen felt overpowered by just how alone she really was – her father was gone, her brother was gone, Morgana was gone... and Merlin was gone. Despite everything, Gwen and Merlin had been good friends, and his absence had left yet another empty space in her life – even though she thought she would rather have that particular space than the alternative.

Although, she mused, maybe if Merlin hadn't left, her husband wouldn't have become so... well.

She would never complain. She had Ygranna, and that was more than she could ever have hoped for. Gwen raised her head high, a gracious smile on her lips. This was the only way any outsiders would ever see the Queen of Camelot – content and composed.

Morgana would have been so proud of her.

Tonight's banquet was an unusually dull affair.

But at least his daughter seemed to be having a good time, Arthur thought wryly.

Sitting in a high chair on Gwen's other side, Ygranna was behaving every bit the princess, using proper cutlery and everything. She always complained about attending these events, but Arthur knew she enjoyed it really – she was looking around the room imperiously, with a truly precious expression of haughtiness on her face. He severely hoped that she hadn't picked that up from him, but he had to admit to himself that she probably had.

His daughter looked so content, there, staring down the room of grown-ups as though she owned the place. She was only three years old, but Arthur already knew that one day she would make a glorious Queen. He was so proud of her.

When Ygranna noticed him watching her, she grinned and gave him a very exaggerated wink as if saying, Don't worry dad, I'm not really mad at them, before schooling her expression and levelling a withering glare in the direction of a confused-looking nobleman from Kent.

Arthur snorted into his goblet, ignoring the familiar twinge he felt whenever his daughter shot him such a look. Sometimes, looking at her was like looking into a mirror, but at other times... well, it was like looking at someone else, someone whom he'd rather not think about just now. He had been in such a good mood, after all.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Gwen looking at him enquiringly, but he ignored her, turning instead to converse with Lord Bowman, the evening's guest of honour.
"Are you enjoying your stay at Camelot?" Arthur asked politely.

Bowman smiled graciously. "Indeed, Your Highness. You keep a very fine household," he said, his eyes searching beyond Arthur's shoulder as he bowed his head respectfully, presumably at Guinevere.

"We thank you," Arthur responded, raising his goblet in acknowledgement of the perfunctory praise and taking a small sip of the wine.

"And may I add," Bowman said, his eyes twinkling. "Your daughter is fetching. I have three at home, myself, but none as well-behaved as the lovely Princess Ygranna."

Arthur's grin was more genuine now. "Ah, well my wife deserves all the praise for that one, My Lord. I am afraid my own influence is not as helpful."

This was absolutely true. Arthur and Ygranna spent most of their time together with wooden swords or on hobby-horses – Leah (who had taken to scolding Ygranna whenever she as much as rumpled her clothes) had been inconsolable when she had first found out, Arthur remembered gleefully.

He heard Gwen's polite chuckle at his comment, and felt a little twinge of guilt for so obviously excluding her from the conversation – but he knew where this was going. It always started out with flattery, and then...

"Pardon me for saying, though, My Lord," Bowman said, quieter now as he leaned in slightly – on the other side Arthur there was no sound but for the slight rustling of fabric and he knew that Gwen had turned abruptly away, realising now where the conversation was headed and doing her best to ignore it, as she always did – "but young Ygranna could have been cut from your likeness."

Arthur's smile was forced as he replied, "I thank you, Lord Bowman." Leave it at that, you fool, he added silently.

The idiot didn't, of course. "She has your complexion, your hair, your eyes, your smile..." (actually, Arthur wanted to say, that was not exactly true. But of course he wouldn't say such a thing, not here, not with Guinevere listening) Bowman shook his head. "If I didn't know better, I would say that-"

"But you do," Arthur said tightly, not caring that he sounded rude. Bowman blinked, shocked at being cut off mid-sentence. But of course he couldn't exactly object, as he was speaking to the King of Camelot. "And I believe I am beginning to feel the effects of this wine quite significantly."

Bowman's eyes flicked to Arthur's goblet, which was still mostly full. "I shall have to bid you goodnight, Lord Bowman."

And he stood, hearing the scramble of chairs as the hall sought to rise with him; some of the nobles were still chewing their food. Arthur raised a placating hand. "Please, do continue to enjoy yourselves in my absence," he said magnanimously. Chairs scraped again and conversation haltingly picked back up.

Gwen was looking up at him, her expression inscrutable. Arthur imagined that she was probably thinking something along the lines of, Oh don't you dare leave me here with this idiot. But he couldn't bring himself to care that much, just now.

"Ygranna, bedtime," he called instead, and Ygranna – who had been watching the court scrambling to stand and sit back down with great interest – jumped off her chair at once, beaming.

"Yes, father," she said loudly. She only ever called him that at official functions or when Gaius or Leah were around, Arthur noted with amusement. He held out his hand and she grabbed it, and with
a curt nod at Gwen he escorted his daughter out of the Great Hall, ignoring the looks they were getting along the way. Oh, if his dungeons were only big enough, he'd lock up the lot of them. It wasn't like anyone would dare protest; he was the damn King.

Who was he kidding? Those notions of his had been dispelled a long time ago, even though the person who had done the dispelling was no longer here. Arthur hadn't even ordered anyone into the stocks for years.

He turned instead to his daughter, who had to run on her short legs to keep up with his pace. He slowed down, shooting her a smile. "Did you have fun today, Anna?"

She shot him a grin, as she always did when he called her by their private nickname. "Oh yes, daddy. I like pretending to rule the people."

Arthur laughed. "You say that now. Just wait until you're the one having to make all those hard decisions."

"I'll have you to help me," she replied easily, and Arthur's heart clenched; he didn't know how to respond to that. They reached the stairs, and Arthur bent down to sweep up his daughter into his arms. She yawned heavily, immediately slotting herself against him. Her sleepy smile was so achingly familiar, Arthur had to look away.

"Dad?" she asked after a moment, and his eyes found hers. No, he thought, those eyes are really not like mine at all.

"Yes, princess?"

"What does it mean to love somebody?"

Arthur blinked down at her, immediately pulled out of his reverie. "What? Why are you asking me that?" he asked, bewildered.

Ygranna only shrugged, her arms snaking around his neck. "I heard Irena from the kitchens tell Robbie the stable boy that she didn't love him, when I was in the gardens. They didn't see me. But I don't understand, because Robbie said he loved her. And you always tell me that I must love the people because they love me. So why mustn't Irena love the stableboy back as well?" The end of her babble was punctuated by another yawn, and she sagged against him, her eyes closing. Arthur wondered if he could get away with just not answering.

Why must be so wise beyond her years? Arthur was struck, in moments like these, by how unusually bright Ygranna really was. He wondered where she got that wisdom from.

After a moment's thought, he said quietly, "There are different kinds of love, my sweet. Some never waver, like our people's love for you. This is why you must always return that love. As my love for you will never waver, nor your mother's." He paused, stroking her hair down with his free hand as he considered his words. "But some loves are not as strong as that. They aren't as important, it's just something people say sometimes to get what they want." He looked down at her sweet, open face; she was trying and failing to keep her eyes open. "It can be hard to tell the difference sometimes. But I will always be here to help you do it. I promise."

Ygranna's eyes were closed now, but she smiled against his chest. "I know you will. And I'll help you too daddy," she said, and Arthur leaned down to kiss her hair softly, feeling his love for her swell in that moment.

As they approached the chambers, Arthur was sure that Ygranna had fallen asleep in his arms. But
when he reached down to open the door, Ygranna blinked sleepily up at him. "What kind of love do you and mummy have?"

Arthur paused, his hand on the door handle. After a split second, he reminded himself to move, and pushed open the door, entering the golden room where the planets were spinning slowly, in a comforting arc over what was now a small four-poster bed in the centre of the nursery.

He kissed his daughter again, placing her down on the bed and unlacing her shoes, helping her change into her night clothes in silence.

As he pulled the covers over her, Ygranna held onto his hand, looking on the verge of sleep but still searching his face. "Daddy?"

Arthur sighed. "Your mother and I love each other very much," he answered, kissing her hairline again and watching as she smiled softly, her eyes closing as sleep claimed her instantly.

Between lying to his daughter and breaking her heart, Arthur knew that he would never know the right option. But he would take those dilemmas one at a time, hoping that he always said the words which would cause Ygranna the least amount of pain.

And sometimes the truth was just too complicated to explain to a sleepy, innocent child.

"Goodnight, Anna," he whispered, his eyes flickering to the tapestry as they always did. The owl, of course, was absent as always. He had not seen it for three years, and he was beginning to think that he never would again.

Closing the door softly behind him, Arthur was not altogether surprised to find Guinevere on the other side - clearly she had managed to slip away from the banquet hall not soon after he had made his own exit.

"Is she sleeping?" she asked, her tone hushed.

"I just put her to bed," Arthur confirmed. Gwen smiled wanly at him; she looked tired. Arthur kind of wanted to ask how she'd got rid of Lord Bowman, but he found himself unable to muster up the energy to care. Really, he only wanted to go to sleep, and he was sure that Gwen wanted the same.

In moments like these, Arthur hated what they had become to each other – Ygranna was truly the only thing they had in common these days.

"Right," Gwen said, as if reading his thoughts. "Goodnight then, Arthur."

"Goodnight, Guinevere," Arthur replied quietly, and she leaned up to kiss his cheek; a perfunctory action, her lips barely grazing his cheek.

Then she turned and stepped into the chambers without a backwards glance, the door clicking shut behind her.

There was not even a question of them sharing a room these days; they had abandoned even the pretence of wanting to sleep in the same bed not long after Ygranna had been born.

Arthur remained outside the door for a moment, trying to remember a time when he had truly believed himself in love with his wife. He knew he had truly loved her, once, but he found now that he could not actually recall the emotion.
Arthur sighed, and began the long descent to his own chambers.

He struggled to remember a time when things had not been strained between them. Even in the years where they had been happily married, before all of this, he knew that there had been a shadow hanging over the love they shared. There had always been someone whom Arthur had loved more.

At least now, he and Guinevere had come to a very comfortable understanding: if nothing else, they had always made a good team, and this was how they would rule the kingdom and raise their daughter.

And he did love her, he reminded himself. He had always loved Gwen, and he always would – but his love for her felt old and comfortable, habitual. It had been easy to convince himself that this had been the way a man was supposed to love a woman, until he had discovered the true passion that such a love could entail. And his feelings for Guinevere were such a pale imitation of that; he could no longer fool himself into believing that she had ever been the one true love he had hoped she could be.

Looking back, Arthur knew he should have realised much sooner. Maybe when he watched her fall in love with Lancelot, and had silently questioned whether her love for him could ever really match up. Maybe when some small part of him had wondered if he was truly marrying her for love, or to prove a point to his dead father. Oh, he had loved her with all of his heart, of that there was no doubt. But what he had truly loved had not been Gwen, the girl she was, but rather Guinevere, the Queen he knew she could be. He had been in love with everything she stood for - kindness, fairness, honesty, and grace.

After Merlin had left Camelot behind, Guinevere had been as gentle with and supportive of Arthur as could be expected from someone with such a kind disposition. But he knew that she felt as duty-bound now as he did himself; that early affection and infatuation she had felt for him, which had brought them together despite all odds, had been lost somewhere along the way. Probably around the time that she found out how truly he had really come to love another.

Arthur wondered if she ever thought of Lancelot, perhaps even wishing that she had run away with him when she'd had the chance. He wondered what he would have done, if she had. Been upset, surely. But he would have gotten over it. He wouldn't still have been a shell of a man, three years later. Not like he was now.

But it was not as simple as that: Arthur had a daughter to protect, and a kingdom to rule, and he could not afford to fall apart. So he and Gwen persevered, together, because they must. The worst part of it was that Arthur wasn't even very upset about the arrangement. It was working for them, and in a way his life was a lot less complicated.

But then, he thought as he passed the door to the chambers adjoining his own, which had stood empty and untouched for three years, Arthur would be lying to himself if he said he didn't miss any of the complications.

Merlin had been gone for three years, but the ache in Arthur's heart had in no way dissipated.

It wasn't that Arthur didn't understand why Merlin had left. In fact, he hated to admit it even to himself, but it had made certain things a lot easier.

Gwen, for one, had visibly relaxed when she had learned of Merlin's decision to leave and stay with the Druids indefinitely. It had allowed her to connect with Ygranna in a way which Arthur worried that she may not have done otherwise, if Merlin had been there vying for the child (and Arthur's) affection.
And the court, for the most part, had shown no resistance to Ygranna becoming their princess, despite what they knew or suspected about her true parentage. Arthur wasn't sure if that would have been the case if Merlin had been around – after all, it was becoming more and more obvious every day that they were related.

Honestly, everyone always said how much Ygranna looked like Arthur, but aside from the blond hair, he thought she was a tiny, female version of Merlin. And it hurt sometimes, a little bit, to look at her and see his smile directed at him, or his eyes regarding him with such complete love and trust.

While all of the reasons for why Merlin had had to leave were valid and relevant, Arthur found that he didn't care one bit about any of them. *Let the kingdom talk*, he thought viciously as he opened the door to his chambers with a bit more force than necessary. *Let them say whatever they want.* He wanted Merlin here, where he belonged. With him, and their daughter.

Arthur's eyes fell on his cluttered desk, where quill and ink lay abandoned next to a blank sheet of parchment. One which he had stared at compulsively for more nights that he could count – but no words had ever come.

He had tried to find the words that would bring Merlin back to him. Had tried to think of a message to relay to him, which would convince his wayward warlock to return. But the words just would not come, and he had never been able to write the letter. And tonight would be no different, he acknowledged, turning away from the desk to ready himself for bed.

He never had gotten around to finding another manservant, and had quite gotten used to performing these tasks himself.

Not able to get his mind off the letter, Arthur tried to reason his hesitance to himself: after all, it wasn't like he'd know where to send the letter, even if he did find the right words for it. Merlin had given no indication of where exactly he was going, and no one – not even Gaius – had heard from him since he had left.

Arthur would be worried, but one look at the enchantments still holding in Ygranna's room, at the planets still spinning and the tapestry still changing to reflect the world outside, and he knew that Merlin must still be alive and well. He *had* to believe that if anything changed, he would know. He would feel it, surely. Wasn't that what true love was supposed to be all about?

*True love.* It was ironic, Arthur thought, that he should finally understand the meaning of those words, right when he had lost it. But then, he reminded himself, he had Ygranna now. And that was a different kind of love, but no less powerful.

Arthur would be fine, as long as his daughter was around to remind him of the future he was fighting to ensure for her.

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**GUINEVERE**••••••••••

The summer was beginning to wane, the leaves turning beautiful shades of reds and yellows, when it happened.

Arthur and Guinevere were walking in the woods, Ygranna happily in between them, her hands clasped in theirs.

Leah and Leon were walking at a respectable distance behind them, clearly trying to give the little family some privacy while still offering protection and help if it was needed. Gwen tried not to listen to their conversation, but she couldn't help but grin as Leon once again awkwardly tried to flirt with
poor, clueless Leah. She looked over and caught Arthur's gaze, and he rolled his eyes conspiratorially before looking away again.

For a moment their easy companionship felt so much like old times, and Gwen let herself revel in it.

Ygranna was singing some nonsense song, probably of her own invention, kicking up the leaves as she went. Every once in a while she'd throw herself forward and squeal in delight as Arthur and Gwen dutifully brought their arms up, allowing their daughter to float through the air for a moment, pretending to fly before her small legs hit the ground again.

Gwen remembered seeing other parents do this with their children when she was young; but having grown up with only one parent, she had never been able to do it herself. She suspected that Arthur wouldn't have ever had a chance to do it either, and knew that he took as much pleasure in doing this one small thing for their child as she did.

Whatever else had happened in their lives, Ygranna was nothing if not loved, and Gwen was immensely proud of that fact.

That was when the bandits attacked.

Gwen gasped as Arthur whipped around, grabbing Ygranna and thrusting the child into her arms, telling her to "Run!" before unsheathing his sword and jumping in front of her, Leon rushing to his aid.

Ygranna gasped in surprise but luckily didn't scream or cry out as Gwen turned and began running. Leah fell into step with her, and Gwen felt her heart beat in her chest, hearing swords clashing behind her. Bandits, this close to Camelot?! She couldn't believe it.

How many had there been? She didn't even know. All she knew was that she needed to get Ygranna back to Camelot now.

But before she'd even made it past more than a dozen trees, two more men jumped out in front of them, baring their teeth and looking at her as though she were a feast for them to devour. Gwen's eyes widened and she spun around, but there were two more men behind her

"Arthur!" she called desperately, but while she could still hear swords clashing behind the men, she couldn't see her husband or Leon. Oh, why had they not brought more guards? They were fools, thinking themselves safe. Desperate tears pricked in the corners of her eyes, but she forced them back; she needed to stay strong.

In her arms, Ygranna was turning her head, looking at the advancing men with wide, scared eyes, and Gwen couldn't bear it, she wouldn't, she would fight tooth and nail to save her child if she could... but the tears kept coming, because she knew that she couldn't. She was useless.

"Hello there, pretty thing," the biggest and ugliest of the bandits said, leering. Gwen realised with horror that he was talking to her child.

"Stay back!" a shaky voice called from beside her, and Gwen felt a strong surge of affection for her brave, stupid maidservant. These men would kill Leah without a second thought, they both knew it, but still she would stand and fight.

But the ugly man didn't even seem to have heard her. His eyes moved from Ygranna to Gwen, eyeing her appraisingly. "We've got your husband occupied. It's just you and me now, Milady." He said the last word with such mockery, it made Gwen bristle with anger.
"It can be," Gwen found herself saying – she didn't know what had come over her, but she needed Ygranna safe. "Just let my maidservant take my daughter and go. It can be... just us, if you want." She didn't drop his gaze, even when his face broke into a cruel, lewd grin. The few teeth he had left were black and broken.

"Well, isn't that a hospitable proposition?" His words were accompanied by a mocking bow, and the other men guffawed stupidly. Gwen couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Take it, she wanted to say, oh please, just take me and let my daughter go. "But," he said, eyeing her speculatively, "that'll have to wait, beauty. It's not you we're after." And his eyes fell on Ygranna again.

Gwen's blood ran cold. "Who sent you?" she asked, even though as she spoke the words, she thought she already knew.

"Oh, the witch didn't give us a name," the man shrugged, moving infinitesimally closer. "Only enough gold to ensure that we got her back the prize. So give her up, foolish woman. I might even let you live... after."

"Never!" Gwen screamed. She would die before allowing Ygranna to fall into Morgana's clutches. "Arthur!" she called again, desperately, "Arthur! Leon! Anyone!"

The man stepped forward and his hand collided with her face so hard she stumbled; Ygranna cried out in panic and Gwen only clutched her harder. Ygranna was being tugged away, but Gwen would never let go, they would have to kill her...

"Let me go!" Ygranna was shrieking, twisting wildly in Gwen's grasp and Gwen was sobbing in earnest now; blood was streaming down her face and she could hardly see, but she felt her child slipping more and more out of her grasp, and clung desperately. "Daddy, mummy, help!"

Ygranna continued to scream, "stop it, let me go! I said, LET ME GO!"

And to Gwen's complete shock, the pressure let up suddenly and she stumbled back – and then there was silence; her child's sobbing and her own ragged breathing the only noises for a long, impossible moment.

Gwen opened her eyes, blinking to clear away the blood, and looked around in shock. Leah was lying on the ground a few feet away, looking like she had been knocked out. She looked ahead to find Arthur and Leon a distance away, turning in circles, their swords raised, confusion on both of their faces.

She finally turned her head, looking at Ygranna still squirming in her arms, panting.

The child's eyes were glowing gold.

"Mummy?" Ygranna asked, turning her burning gaze on Gwen. "What happened? Where did they go?"

Gwen could only stare silently back at her, a mixture of awe and horror on her face.

*********ARTHUR*********

"She's fine, Sire," Gaius told Arthur, smiling at Ygranna kindly as he helped her pull a tunic over her head. After her got her arms through the sleeves she jumped off the cot immediately, racing to chase a spider she had seen scurrying away earlier. "There are no injuries, no lingering effects to speak of."

Arthur ran a hand over his face in frustration, ignoring Gwen's sigh of relief behind him. "Are you sure, Gaius? You didn't see her. What she did..."
"It was very powerful magic," Gaius agreed, nodding gravely. "Especially for one so young. But I tell you again, the princess is fine." They had been over this before, of course. But Arthur couldn't let it go, he needed to be absolutely sure that Ygranna was alright. "Actually," Gaius muttered after a while, "she is more than fine. This certainly explains a lot."

"What do you mean?" Arthur asked.

Gaius shrugged. "Ygranna has always been a very bright child, but for someone so young, you cannot deny that she has been speaking and behaving like someone far beyond her years. A greater than average intelligence is very common for children who possess some magical ability. You may remember that the Lady Morgana was the same," he added, with a raised eyebrow, and Arthur scowled - but privately had to acknowledge that, yes, Morgana had been annoyingly clever when they were children.

"But I still don't understand," Gwen spoke up suddenly. She had been quiet up until now. "Gwaine and Percival said that they found the bandits lying unconscious in the field on the other side of the Darkling Woods. That's miles away, Gaius. And there were eight of them."

Gaius turned his patient gaze on her. "Indeed. I have never heard of a transportation spell so effective, especially when done without an incantation."

There was silence in the room for a moment, and Arthur's eyes fell on Ygranna. She was still following the spider, now crawling up the stairs to the small room where, once upon a time, Merlin had slept. Of course, Ygranna didn't know that. But it didn't escape his attention that every time they visited the physician's study, the child always ended up in that room somehow. It was like she was drawn to it.

"Gaius, what do we do now?" Arthur asked quietly, still watching Ygranna playing happily, the trauma of that morning already half forgotten by the toddler.

He thought he already knew the answer, but he needed Gaius to say it. If nothing else, then for Guinevere's benefit. Arthur couldn't be the one to suggest it, as much as he wanted to.

From the frustrated noise the physician made, Arthur thought Gaius probably knew exactly what was going through Arthur's head. But it was not without longing in his voice that the physician finally said, "Ygranna has magic. She is very powerful. She needs someone to teach her how to control it, before something like this happens again. She needs..."

"Merlin."

Arthur turned to Gwen, startled out of his thoughts by the sound of her voice. She looked back at him with an level, determined expression. "Oh come on, Arthur," she said, sounding almost fond for a moment. "Ygranna needs him. What kind of mother would I be if I didn't see that?"

He loved her very much at that moment.

From the direction of Merlin's room, he heard the clear, ringing voice of his daughter call out, "Daddy, what's a merlin?"

Gwen raised an eyebrow at him, and he saw resignation there. He took a deep breath, not breaking her gaze as he called back, "Merlin is a friend. He's coming to visit."

Was that a shard of pity he saw in Gwen's eyes? Arthur didn't want to examine that too closely. Nothing has changed, he reminded himself. If Merlin even answered the call... if they even figured out a way to reach him... it was for Ygranna they needed him. Not for Arthur. This wasn't about
Gwen broke the gaze first, turning to Gaius. "I trust you'll send word to him?"

"At once, Milady," Gaius said respectfully. At least he would be glad to see his old protege again, Arthur thought. He smothered the stirrings of anticipation he felt. *Nothing has changed.*

Who was to say that Merlin hadn't moved on, anyway? There was a time when Arthur almost hoped that Merlin would find a girl to be with, just to make it easier to convince himself that there was nothing between them... it would have to be the same way, now.

And after all Merlin had been the one to leave; he had been the one willing to part from Arthur, even after Arthur had *begged* him to stay – and he was sure that the only thing Merlin would want to come back for now would be Ygranna.

And, he thought, glancing guiltily at Guinevere, wasn't that how it had to be?
When he received the note, there was a brief, painful moment when Merlin considered ignoring the
summons.

It took all of two seconds for him to realise that he could never do that. Still, those two seconds were
the most conflicted of Merlin's life.

Gaius' message had been short, but to the point:

Dear Merlin,

King Arthur and Queen Guinevere request your return to the castle immediately. The young
Princess Ygranna has developed magical powers. They need your help.

You have been missed,

Gaius

Merlin closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and trying to still his quickening heartbeat.

For three years, Merlin had been giving himself up to magic, letting his mind soar while his body
ached for home. But there had been times when he had almost been able to drown out that ache, and
he had come to live for those moments.

The Druids had taught him things he'd never dreamed of, helped him go places he'd never even
imagined his magic could take him. He had soared with the eagles and swum with the mythical
beasts of the sea; he had danced with faeries and raced on unicorns. He had almost been lost to it
completely, had almost let himself be lost to it, because wasn't that just so much easier than
constantly being forced to remember a life he could have had, and would never have?

Trivial mortal qualms like losing loves and abandoning children could feel so small, when the entire
universe was yours to command and explore.

This was why he had asked Gaius not to contact him, why he hadn't even given the physician a way
(and Merlin suspected that magic had probably been involved this time, or else how would the
message have even reached him here?). He was cutting off all ties, for Ygranna's sake, and maybe a
little bit for his own, too. He didn't want to know what he was missing.

Yet through it all, the beautiful and wonderful magic, what Merlin wanted most of all was in a tiny
pocket of time, in a tiny castle only miles away from his physical body. He could not break his ties to
Arthur and Ygranna no matter how much he had tried, and this was probably why he was still
present at all to receive the letter.

And how could he ever refuse his King? How could he deny the child - who now, unfathomably,
needed him?

Ygranna has magic.

Although Merlin had had no idea, once he had read the words, it suddenly seemed like the most
obvious thing in the world, and he couldn't believe that they had not seen this coming. As much as
everyone were intent on denying it, Ygranna was his daughter, she was of his blood. And Merlin had passed his magic on to her, just as Balinor had done to him.

When Merlin had left Camelot behind, it had first and foremost been to protect Ygranna. It wasn't just about him and Arthur anymore, or Gwen, or anyone else; he had left because he wanted to give his own child the family which he had never had.

At the time, Merlin had truly believed that he'd been doing the right thing. But instead, he had left his daughter to find out about these powers on her own, with no one there to help her deal with them. What if he really had lost himself to the magic, what would they have done then?

Staying away was no longer what Merlin thought would be best for Ygranna, and that was really the end of that internal debate.

Kya and Matthew looked up at him curiously from their place by the fire as he exited his tent. The Druid camp he had joined was small; only about a dozen people dwelled together here, but the relative peace and quiet had suited Merlin just fine. There were no children – although he doubted that this would be true for long, considering how close he had watched Kya and Matthew grow over the past few months.

They would miss him, he knew. As he would miss them. But there was really no question about where he belonged.

You're going, Matt's voice sounded in his head. Kya looked up curiously, and her eyes met Merlin's. No words needed to be spoken – they had always known this day would come, after all.

It's time, he replied. Thank you. And with that, he was gone.

It was getting too easy to leave behind the people he cared about, Merlin had time to reflect, before he found himself at the edge of Camelot's forest. His belongings would already be back in his room, but he had chosen to transport himself a bit further away. He needed the walk to compose himself.

Which was why he really didn't need to run smack into Gwaine.

"Hey watch yourse- Merlin!" Gwaine exclaimed, staring at Merlin with such a comical expression of shock and glee, Merlin could have laughed if he hadn't been so preoccupied with his own gloomy thoughts.

"Gwaine!" he replied, trying to match the knight's enthusiasm. "It's been..."

"Three years," Gwaine said, shaking his head but grinning. "And not a word from you! I feel like a jilted lover."

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Right, I'm sure you were just weeping into your pillow in the nights."

Gwained winked. "That's not all I've been doing at night. But you didn't come back to Camelot to hear about that, did you?" he added, and Merlin heard the edge of concern in his voice even as Gwaine slung an arm around his shoulder, leading him towards the castle.

Merlin smiled tightly. "What have you heard?"

Gwaine raised an eyebrow. "Since when did you subscribe to court gossip, Merlin?"

Merlin shrugged, keeping his face blank. "A lot can change in three years."
"That it can," Gwaine said quietly – almost wistfully. A silence fell, and Merlin wondered what could have changed to have made Gwaine so... well, pensive.

After a moment, Merlin couldn't stand it anymore. "So... the princess. How, er, how is she?" He hoped that his tone was light, but something must have given him away, because Gwaine's arm slipped off his shoulder and the other man shot him a quick, knowing look.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, then seemed to think better of it and fell silent. Just when Merlin thought that he might not answer at all, Gwaine said, in the same wistful tone, "The little princess is good. Beautiful. Healthy. A temper worse than Arthur's."

Merlin snorted, his smile widening as he allowed himself, for the first time in a long time, to imagine. Gwaine's next words made him stop dead in his tracks. "She's got your eyes though."

Merlin's eyes shot to his, and Gwaine nodded grimly. "Yep, there they are. Definitely your eyes." His face fell slightly. "Gods, Merlin. What did you do?"

"Do?" Merlin asked indignantly. "I didn't bloody do anything, alright? I performed the spell, it worked just as it should! A child was born. The end!"

He didn't realise he had been shouting until the final word rang out of his mouth and made a flock of birds shoot up from a tree a distance away.

Gwaine was looking at him with a sort of sad, much too knowledgeable expression. "Arthur missed you," he said.

Merlin swallowed. "I doubt that."

Of course, he didn't actually doubt it. Arthur had surely missed him, when he had first left. It was one of the reasons that Merlin had had to leave in the first place. But Merlin knew that Arthur must have acclimated, remembered his duties; and unlike Merlin, the King had a wife and a daughter to distract him and help him remember everything he was supposed to be.

After leaving Camelot, all Merlin had been left with was his magic. And while that had been freeing, in a way, mostly it had just been terribly lonely. Arthur hadn't been lonely. He'd been fine. Merlin was sure of it.

Gwaine must, once again, have picked up on something in Merlin's expression. "He called you back, didn't he?" he asked softly, a hand coming up to grasp Merlin's shoulder reassuringly.

"For Ygranna," Merlin said, his voice catching on her name. He hadn't spoken it aloud in three years, yet it seemed as familiar to him as his own.

Gwaine gave him a tight smile, letting his arm drop. "Yes, well," he said. "It is what it is."

And Merlin really didn't know what to make of that.

"Anyway," Gwaine continued after a moment, as they continued their walk to the castle, "it is good to have you home." He smiled at Merlin, and Merlin allowed himself to return it, feeling slightly less panicked. Home. Whatever else that would happen, whatever reason had brought him back, Merlin was finally home again.

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GUINEVERE••••••••••
Gwen saw him first.


For some strange, petty reason, this made her feel a little bit better.

Really, Gwen was not a petty person. She did not hold grudges, she did not resent. But when it came to Merlin? Gwen had found that her feelings had... twisted, somehow. She knew that he needed to come back, because Ygranna needed him. She knew that he needed to come back because Arthur needed him, too, but that part had ceased to bother her years ago.

No. It was when it came to Ygranna that Guinevere needed to check herself. Remind herself that she had agreed to let Merlin return (not that she'd probably have been in a position to refuse him the right, but she hadn't felt like testing it), had seen the sense in calling him back.

But knowing that his return to Camelot was imminent, and seeing him approach the castle now – looking both older and more weary, yet still the same Merlin she'd always known – Gwen found it hard to remember why.

He was walking along the path leading up to the castle, speaking easily with Gwaine, who was clearly very happy to be reunited with his old friend. But Merlin looked... happy, yes, but also on edge, she thought, his movements too controlled. Was he taller? Or just carrying himself differently? She couldn't tell. But he had definitely changed. She just wished she knew how.

Gwen didn't hate Merlin. Honestly, she doubted that anyone could truly hate Merlin. She couldn't even blame him for what had happened. It wasn't his fault, and whatever the consequences, it had given her Ygranna. And he had even left for them; Merlin had given up his entire life for his daughter, and Guinevere knew only too well what an impossible (yet startlingly easy) choice that would be.

But still, selfishly, she was scared. Scared of becoming irrelevant in her child's life, scared of Merlin replacing her role. She knew it was stupid, because Merlin was not Ygranna's mother, and besides, he was Merlin. He would never try to freeze her out.

And yet...

No. She was becoming paranoid. Gwen shook her head, making herself step away from the window. She would not be the bitter wife of a man who loved another; she would not become that person. Whatever it took, she would find it in herself to be nice to Merlin, remember him for the hapless young boy she had known, not for the man who had unwittingly stolen her husband's heart away from her.

It wasn't Merlin's fault that Arthur didn't love her anymore.

Maybe she'd have to keep reminding herself of this, but she would not let herself grow bitter. That was not going to help any of them – and certainly not Ygranna, who was going to be facing a whole new set of obstacles in her life. Not only was she the Crown Princess of Camelot, but she also had magical powers that she needed to learn how to control. It was a lot of pressure to put on a young child, and Gwen would do everything she could to make it as easy for her as possible. She was a mother, now, and whatever else she had been – servant, friend, lover, wife – that all came secondary.

"Milady? Are you well?" Leah's voice sounded behind her. It was oddly subdued – but then, Leah had sounded like that ever since the attack a few weeks ago. Gwen knew that her maidservant had
not been harmed, but the shock of the thing, the knowledge that if not for Ygranna, they would both probably be dead, had had a deep impact on the girl.

Gwen gave her a tired, but genuine smile, not wishing to upset her further. "Yes, Leah, thank you."

Leah was still performing her duties admirably, but ever since that day in the forest, Gwen had been sad to see her treat Ygranna with more trepidation than she ever had before. She didn't look scared of the child, but she was more hesitant before telling her off, and a lot more careful with her. If Gwen had to guess, she would say that Leah was feeling a mixture of gratitude, which felt strange when directed at someone so young, and worry about what Ygranna would grow up to be.

Ever since magic had been allowed back into the heart of Camelot, people had slowly begun to acclimate to the presence of sorcerers in their midst. But the lingering fear was still there for the people who had spent their entire lives learning to loathe and shun anything magical, and even though Leah had seemed fine around Merlin (and was now even assisting Gaius in some of his experiments), this must be a lot to take in.

Gwen only hoped that her maidservant would be able to move past this, because she had grown very fond of the slight, dark haired girl over the years that had passed since she had entered Gwen's service. She was reserved and deferential, yes, but every so often Gwen would crack a joke, or offer to help with a particularly arduous task, or let Leah read Ygranna a bedtime story, and she would see cracks at the girl she was underneath. The person, not the servant – and Gwen was always left hoping that one day, Leah would trust her enough to let her see that girl freely, without the barrier of rank between them.

Perhaps Gwen saw something of herself in Leah. She knew that the girl was honourable and trustworthy with all her secrets – and maybe that was what now allowed her to voice her biggest concern. "What if he takes Ygranna away?"

Leah looked up, her shocked eyes meeting Gwen's. "Merlin wouldn't," she said, and it was so blunt that Gwen was momentarily stunned. Leah seemed to remember herself and blushed, diverting her eyes. "My apologies, Milady, I spoke out of turn."

Gwen's eyes narrowed. Well, that was unexpected. "No, please, explain what you mean."

Leah blushed even further now, looking anywhere but at Gwen. "It's nothing Milady, really, I just- Merlin was always so kind to me. We spoke, before his station was raised above mine. About- you, Milady, and the King."

"You spoke about us?" Gwen asked. When no reply was forthcoming, she stepped closer and lay a hand on Leah's arm. "What did he say?" She didn't think she really wanted to know, but at the same time she was morbidly curious. It was like pressing your thumb into a bruise, she couldn't help it.

"Only how kind you were," she mumbled, "and what a good mistress you would be for me. I had..." Leah took a deep breath, but continued on, her voice stronger. "I had just lost my old master, as you know, Lord Highcroft, and you didn't have a maidservant, and I was nervous about entering the service of a Queen..." here, Leah smiled softly, some distant memory ghosting across her face. She looked up and met Gwen's eyes then. "Merlin is a good person," she said, a tiny hint of defiance in her eyes which Gwen would never admit that she always enjoyed seeing.

Seemingly satisfied that she had said her piece, Leah curtseyed gracefully, and Gwen let her hand fall from her arm. Leah gave her an enquiring look and Gwen nodded absently, waving her hand slightly and Leah curtseyed again – understanding the unspoken permission to take her leave.
Gwen was alone in her chambers a moment later, and she let herself sink onto the edge of her bed with a sigh. *Merlin is a good person.*

She didn't need her maidservant to tell her this, of course – her maidservant, who had clearly at some point been infatuated with him. But it was still jarring to hear someone speak about Merlin like that. She only then realised that no one had, not since he had left. Before then, it was always her job to add in her token defence of her friend whenever Arthur had made a (increasingly half-hearted) complaint about his incompetence.

Oh, how she missed those times. Things had seemed so balanced between the three of them. Even though Gwen had known, even then, that Arthur cared about Merlin almost as much – if not more – than about her, it had been different. Merlin had been his servant and his friend. She had been his wife and his Queen. But now?

*Merlin is a good person.* He would not try to take Ygranna away from her. If he needed to take her somewhere, to people with magic, she would demand to come along and he would not refuse her. Even if Arthur tried to, Merlin never would.

Maybe that was what hurt, she reflected. It wasn't like the all-consuming heartache she had felt when she lost Lancelot, or when Arthur had banished her from Camelot, not even close; it just a dull, bitter ache reminding her that the only one whose feelings had truly changed in all of this was Arthur. He had discovered who he truly loved, and it had upset that precious balance.

And now here they were. Arthur and Gwen were husband and wife in title alone, and Merlin had left Camelot behind in what Gwen had to admit now had been a misguided attempt to set things right.

But it wasn't that simple at all. Because there were four of them now; four of them to find a new way to balance, to exist together - somehow. Gwen squared her shoulders, lifting her chin. She would not be the one preventing them from doing that. Arthur still cared about her, and she was pretty sure that Merlin did too. And Ygranna was her child; she loved her. And Gwen loved Ygranna more than anything else in the world.

She could do this. She could make things right.

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**MERLIN**

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"Gaius!" Merlin exclaimed happily, letting himself into the physician's study.

The old man gasped in surprise, and the vial he had been holding up promptly slipped out of his fingers – but Merlin stopped it with a thought, allowing the still shocked Gaius to wrap his fingers around it before Merlin relinquished his hold on gravity.

"Merlin," Gaius exclaimed, still shocked but obviously glad to see him. Merlin crossed the room quickly to envelop his old mentor in a hug, and was glad to feel Gaius' arms wrap around him and hold on tight. Merlin had missed him so much. "Welcome home, my boy," Gaius said gruffly into his shoulder, and when Merlin pulled away, the old man's eyes were suspiciously wet.

Merlin only grinned though, and made a point to turn in a circle, taking in the familiar room while giving Gaius the chance to compose himself. "I see not much has changed here, then? I was of course expecting the place to fall apart without me," he added, turning back and flashing Gaius a smile.

Gaius laughed fondly, but there was some other emotion reflected in his eyes which Merlin couldn't place. Gaius looked *old,* he realised, and once again felt a twinge of regret for leaving Camelot the
way he had. If something had happened to Gaius while he were away...

But Merlin wouldn't let himself think about that now. He schooled his features back into a smile, and patted Gaius affectionately on the shoulder.

"So, how is-" Merlin's question was interrupted by a loud thump! coming from the small room at the other side of the study, where he used to sleep. "What was that?" he asked urgently, instantly alert.

Gaius winced. "Ah," he said. "That would be... the child. She has taken to spend a lot of time in that room, ever since her powers were awakened." That room. Merlin's old room.

Merlin tried to calm his racing heart. There was no need to get worked up about this, he told himself, he had known that this was coming. He was prepared for this.

Not taking any time to consider it, he let his legs carry him forward, and pushed open the door.

Within, a grinning little girl was sitting on the floor, watching with eyes as golden as her hair as small pots, pieces of crockery and a pillow floated in a circle around her.

Merlin let out a gasp and the girl looked up, her eyes turning a very familiar shade of blue as the items she had been levitating dropped down around her.

"Who are you?" She asked curiously, her eyebrows furrowing in such a familiar way, Merlin found himself forgetting to breathe for a moment.

"Er. Merlin," he said, stupidly.

The girl frowned at him for a moment longer before suddenly comprehension dawned on her face, and her wide grin slid back into place. "Oh! You are the man with magic."

The man with magic. Right. "That's one way of putting it," Merlin said quietly, a sad smile on his face as he attempted to quell the feeling of bitterness. I chose to leave, he reminded himself.

"Daddy says you can teach me how to use mine," the girl said brightly, and Merlin's stomach clenched. "I'm Ygranna by the way."

And she stuck out her tiny hand at him, a gesture so endearing, Merlin wanted to cry.

Instead, he only stepped into the room and took her hand in his own. "It is very nice to meet you, Ygranna," he smiled.

For a moment, Ygranna looked confused, glancing at their joined hands. "Are you doing magic to me?"

Now it was Merlin's turn to frown. "What? No," he said, a little defensively.

Ygranna let go of his hand and looked down at her own. Then back up at Merlin. "You did, I felt it."

"I did not!" Merlin exclaimed indignantly.

Ygranna crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at him. "Did too!"

"Fine, except I didn't," Merlin scowled, before realizing what he was doing – who he was having this argument with. Gods, he thought, his head spinning, it had been so easy to fall into that routine, because she was just like...
He sighed, coming back to reality. Merlin had just tried to have an argument with a three-year-old

girl.

"Look," he said, noticing with horror that the girl's eyes were watering. Oh, hell. Merlin crouched
down in front of her awkwardly. This was not how he imagined that his first meeting with his
daughter would go. "Ygranna," he said, but she was staring at the floor now, furious. "Ygranna,
look at me," he continued softly, laying a hand on her arm.

She looked at his hand, then up at him. "You're doing it again," she said, her voice small but
insistent.

Merlin glanced down at his hand. "Hmm," he said pensively. "What do you feel, exactly?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. "Warm?"

Warm. Strange. Merlin had no idea what might be causing that. "Maybe it's your magic responding
to mine," he thought out loud. "Maybe it's because you've never met anyone with magic before. Or
maybe..." He trailed off. *Maybe it's because your magic came from me*, he thought suddenly. *The
magic remembers.*

Ygranna was still looking at him hesitantly. Merlin smiled and shook his head. "Look, I believe
you." She returned his smile, relieved. "But enough talk about your magic. Let's see what you can
do!"

This seemed to have been the right thing to say, because Ygranna's smile widened and she raised her
hand. A small globe of golden light formed over her palm, and Merlin stared at it, entranced. She
was only three years old, he had to remind himself. For someone so young, the power and control
she displayed was astonishing.

So entranced was he with Ygranna and her magic, he didn't hear the door open again. But he
suddenly felt the eyes boring into his back, just as Ygranna's concentration faltered and the ball of
light evaporated. Her eyes fell on something over Merlin's shoulder and she bounced past him.
"Daddy!"

Merlin hesitated for one moment before turning around, seeing Ygranna leap into Arthur's arms.
Merlin's heart felt like it was lodged in his throat. *Arthur.*

Arthur picked Ygranna up easily and gave her a warm smile, before turning to Merlin. He was still
smiling, but it looked... strained. Hesitant.


Merlin couldn't speak. He could only stare at this man before him – nothing could have prepared him
for the vision of Arthur; a little older but just as stunning of a presence as ever before, with their
daughter in his arms. And Arthur stared right back, seeming just as tongue-tied as Merlin himself.

Luckily, Ygranna suffered no such problem. "This is the man with magic, isn't it daddy?" she asked
excitedly. "He is very nice. I like him."

This seemed to break the spell, as it were, and Arthur snorted. "He has his moments," he mumbled,
which in turn made Merlin roll his eyes fondly.

"I'm nicer than you," he replied easily, and for a moment it felt just like old times. Arthur gave him a
smirk in return, which suggested that he probably felt much the same way – although the hesitation
was still there, just below the surface; everything he would not show in front of Ygranna.
Arthur cleared his throat, turning his eyes on his daughter, who had been watching their exchange with wide eyes. "Princess, maybe we should let Merlin get to his chambers. I have been informed that his belongings have already arrived, and he probably needs rest after his... journey," he said, and Merlin definitely sensed a note of amusement in his tone at that.

"Yes, daddy," Ygranna answered sweetly, squirming in Arthur's arms until he lowered her to the floor. Turning back to Merlin, she did her best curtsey – which was the most adorable thing Merlin had ever seen. "It was nice to meet you, My Lord," she said gracefully.

"Please," Merlin found himself saying, smiling shyly. "It's just... Merlin."

Ygranna nodded solemnly, with the air of someone much older than she was. Merlin caught Arthur's eye over Ygranna's head and found the King watching him intently. Their gaze was broken when Ygranna tugged on her dad's leg and he bent his head. "Daddy, will you stay here and play with me?"

Arthur glanced back up at Merlin for a moment, looking torn. Then he sighed and dropped to his knees with a tired smile. "Of course I will, princess."

Merlin left the two behind without another word, catching Arthur's eye one last time before he went. Later, he mouthed, and Arthur nodded – an odd imitation of Ygranna's solemn look from a moment ago.

When Merlin arrived in the main study again, he found Gaius watching him with the same inscrutable look as before. Merlin sighed. "Just come help me unpack, will you?" he smiled, and Gaius blinked in surprise before returning the smile.

"It's good to have you home, Merlin," the physician said fondly, and Merlin privately agreed.

----------ARTHUR----------

When Arthur next saw Merlin, it was at the official feast welcoming back Camelot's Court Sorcerer. The fact that he needed to host such an event for Merlin at all had not even crossed his mind, what with everything else that had been occupying it – but luckily, Guinevere had been more mindful of court etiquette. It would have looked very bad if the King appeared as if he were hushing up the sorcerer's return, after all.

Even though sorcery was no longer outlawed in their lands, the people were still understandably trepidatious about magic users, and the King and Queen needed to lead by example. Welcoming Merlin back after a three-year absence with such a pompous, expansive celebration would send the people a message.

However, when Gwen had said that Ygranna needed to attend the feast, Arthur had flat out refused. "She doesn't need that exposure," he'd told her, "not tonight." Luckily Gwen had not argued; Ygranna had been left exhausted by the day's events, and Leah didn't mind staying behind and reading to her, rather than attending her mistress at the feast.

It was wonderful, now, to watch Merlin greet his old friends; Gwaine had immediately pulled him over to the core group of knights upon entering the room, and he was currently sitting in between Leon and Percival, grinning and gesticulating wildly. The knights roared with laughter at what was undoubtedly a story of one of his exploits – Arthur's heart clenched with a mixture of happiness at having Merlin back in the castle where he belonged and jealousy at seeing him interact so easily with his men while Arthur himself was unable to join in.
He also felt a terrible sense of guilt, looking at Merlin now. Which was ironic, because guilt for betraying Gwen was exactly the reason Merlin had left, and that same guilt had been what had stopped Arthur from doing everything in his power to call him back. But what about what Merlin had had to sacrifice?

Arthur saw now how glad everyone were to have him back, and how glad Merlin himself seemed to be about being here. While it had been Merlin's choice to leave, during those three years that had passed there hadn't been a moment when Arthur hadn't wished it could have been different. It wasn't fair, that Merlin had had to give up everything while Arthur had given up nothing. Sometimes Arthur thought that he would have given Merlin the world, no matter the consequences, if Merlin had only asked. Yet now, here they were – with a child who only called one of them "father," and until a week ago hadn't even known Merlin's name.

While Arthur was unable to speak to Merlin about this right now, having to keep his place at the high table, he allowed himself to look at the man, drinking in his presence and marvelling at the fact that he was really back. Merlin looked much the same as he always had, but his chest seemed a bit wider, his jaw a bit fuller. He was undoubtedly a man now, no longer a lanky boy.

The time with the Druids had clearly also changed him in other ways. There was no denying now that Merlin was a powerful, confident wizard; the power seemed to emanate off of him, and Arthur knew he wasn't the only one picking up on that. Some of his father's old advisors were watching Merlin, too, with far more somber expressions.

Just then, Merlin looked up mid-story and caught Arthur's eye. He seemed to stutter, for a moment, looking at Arthur as though entranced by what he saw, until a nudge from Gwaine turned his attentions back to what he had been doing.

Arthur averted his eyes, too - and found Gwen watching him with an impassive look.

"You should engage me in conversation," she said, raising an eyebrow.

When Arthur only frowned at her in confusion, Gwen nodded her head towards the group of knights imperceptibly.

"Oh," Arthur said softly, "right."

Gwen smiled at him in an adoring way, but it didn't reach her eyes. She leaned towards him in a mockery of intimacy, speaking too low for any servant to overhear them. "I know you've missed him, Arthur."

Arthur opened his mouth to protest, but Gwen only shook her head, smiling sadly.

"Don't deny it. Not now, not to me," she said, taking his hand. To anyone looking on, it would look like a very different conversation. "But remember what we agreed on, three years ago. That still stands, Arthur."

Arthur remembered the promises he had made only too well: of a united front between the King and Queen, of keeping Merlin and Arthur's connection... downplayed, for Ygranna's sake.

"Right," Arthur said, his voice tight. "Of course."

Guinevere nodded, squeezing his hand briefly before letting go. "You are a king, Arthur, and I am a queen. That comes with certain expectations. But..." she hesitated, then a resigned expression settled on her face. "I am no fool. I know that this, right here, is all that we are to each other now. I know you care about me," she added quickly, because Arthur had opened his mouth to say... something,
even if he wasn't sure what was left to say to that, and Gwen continued. "And I care about you, too, you know I do. Which is why I want to remind you that... as long as we keep up appearances, you are free to do as you wish. I want to see you happy, Arthur, I really do. And you haven't been, for far too long."

Arthur blinked, shocked at Gwen's words. Was she actually giving him permission to... no, surely not. And even if she was, if she was really telling him to – no, he wouldn't even let himself think it. He had spent years convincing himself that it was wrong, that nothing could ever happen between him and Merlin, that Arthur would never do that to his wife. Yet here she was, telling him to... no, it couldn't be.

"There is nothing that I wish for, other than to be with you," Arthur said quietly, automatically, not meeting her eyes. He had made her promises that he could not break; his honour would not permit it.

Gwen looked at him with fond exasperation. A look which he realised hadn't seen directed at him in a long time.

"Oh Arthur," she whispered. "So noble, even now." She smiled softly, sadly. "But I am not the one your heart truly belongs to anymore, if I ever was, and we both know it. Not accepting that truth, but keeping all of us stuck in this, what, charade of emotions we don't really feel? That would be the truly dishonourable course of action here, my love. And I won't be that selfish. I set you free, Arthur." She shrugged, gazing across the hall. "What you do now is up to you."

Gwen raised her glass then, inclining her head fractionally, and Arthur followed her gaze to find Merlin watching them closely, a sad, resigned look on his face. And the guilt Arthur immediately felt at Merlin having witnessed what must have looked like an intimate moment between husband and wife told him everything he needed to know about his own feelings; who he really felt was owed his devotion.

He sighed, looking away again. "I don't even know if he still..." he began, but Gwen cut him off.

"Arthur? I may have accepted this, but that doesn't mean I want to hear about it." But she sounded amused, so Arthur allowed himself a small smile.

"Thank you," he said, the words heavy between them. For everything, he wanted to add, but that would sound oddly like goodbye.

"Thank you," she replied softly. "For Ygranna."

She turned back to face him, and the look that passed between them then really was full of love – for the daughter they shared, who would always bind them together.

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MERLIN••••••••••

The feast lasted for hours.

Merlin had no idea if half the people in attendance were even glad to see him – yes, in very formal and important speeches he was being hailed like some kind of returning hero, but no matter what the stuffy nobles claimed, he was still a warlock. There were plenty of people in Camelot who didn't trust him, and probably never would, and some of them were probably in this very room.

But he didn't care. Because the people he was happy to see (the knights, mainly) were clearly glad to have him home.

Honestly, Merlin hadn't been sure whether he'd be required to sit at the King's side, and he wasn't
even sure he wanted to. Yes, he had a lot to talk to Arthur about, like how all of this with Ygranna was even going to work, but some part of him didn't want to have any of those conversations, especially not in front of the whole court. He was too scared of what the answers to some of his questions would be, and he would prefer to be able to deal with that in solitude.

Luckily he was spared having to decide for himself, because as soon as he'd entered the hall, the knights had hailed him over to their part of the table and he'd gone willingly, eager to catch up with them. He wasn't avoiding Arthur or anything, he told himself. Just postponing, and gathering strength.

It was reassuring to find that very little had changed with his friends. Percival, Gwaine and Leon were all healthy and happy, and Gwaine had even gone on some fancy adventure while he'd been gone, which had just been fascinating to hear about – apparently he had beheaded an eccentric old knight who had challenged him, only to find out that the knight was some kind of sorcerer, and the resulting quest had sounded very exciting and perilous. Exactly the sort of thing Gwaine lived for, essentially.

Leon, meanwhile, told Merlin all about his apparently unrequited and all-consuming love for Gwen's maidservant, which was a slightly more bemusing topic, but Merlin smiled encouragingly none the less, and reassured his sheepish friend that any girl would be lucky to have him.

And Merlin himself could regale them with stories of his own adventures: of hatching dragons and riding unicorns, of learning to feel his way into the depths of the earth and discovering it to be round, not flat, and pulling wondrous plants up from the other side. The Druids had taught him what it meant to be Emrys, and Merlin had been relieved to discover that he could still be Merlin, too. No more powerful than before, just much more in control of the powers he already had.

And it was a testament to how much the knights truly cared for him that they didn't show any discomfort as he told them his stories about magic, even after having mostly lived without it since he'd been gone.

Yes, being home was good. But when Merlin had looked up towards the high table, simply not able to keep his eyes off of Arthur for another moment, he had felt his heart sink seeing the King and Queen whispering together, heads close, sharing secret smiles.

Of course, he thought. This was what was supposed to happen. This was why I left.

Merlin may love Arthur, but that was his burden to bear. Arthur loved Gwen above anyone, Merlin knew he did, he'd just needed time to remember that. And clearly he had.

So why did Merlin feel like his world was falling apart all over again?

Because you've been letting yourself hope, he told himself angrily, that even after all these years, Arthur would still feel like you do. That maybe his feelings were as strong as yours.

But clearly, he had been mistaken.

It was just as well. Merlin had a job to do: teaching the daughter who could never know who he really was about the magic they now shared.

It was in equal parts a thrilling and terrifying prospect.

For now though, Merlin was content letting the knights distract him. But as the feast began to draw to a close, he began to dread the first of what was promising to be many lonely nights in his old chambers. He was therefore grateful when Gwaine offered to see him back and keep him company
for a while.

Gwaine managed to sweet-talk a servant girl into giving him a flagon of ale, and Merlin had to join in his laughter as they raced through the castle halls with their prize like a pair of young delinquents.

Entering his room, Merlin sighed at the bareness of the walls and shelves. At least it hadn't been full of dust like he had anticipated, and he supposed he should feel grateful that Arthur had not settled some random noble in there, but it still didn't feel like home. Maybe he'd feel better once he had unpacked his clothes and books, but he'd felt oddly hesitant to do so - even though all it'd take was a snap of his fingers.

Gwaine wasted no time in settling down into the most comfortable chair, swinging his legs onto the table and grinning at Merlin.

"How about getting a fire started, then?" He asked, looking for all the world like this was his room, and Merlin rolled his eyes, glancing towards the fireplace and alighting the dry wood there with a thought. Ever since finding out about Merlin's powers, Gwaine had been demanding to see "magic tricks" at every turn, and was particularly fond of Merlin setting things on fire for some odd, probably unsettling reason.

At least he hadn't been scared of Merlin though, or angry, or betrayed. But that was Gwaine, he took everything in stride. Before Merlin had left Camelot, he had often found himself wishing that life could be as simple as Gwaine made it out to be.

"You look like you could use another drink," Gwaine told him then, raising an eyebrow. Merlin blushed; he hadn't realised that Gwaine had been watching him.

Merlin sat down in the other chair and accepted the proffered flagon gratefully, taking a deep swig of the ale.

Gwaine looked impressed. "You haven't been going easy on the drink tonight. I seem to remember you being more of a lightweight than this," he remarked, and Merlin grinned.

"Ah but you know those Druids. Drink up or go home." They had only been half-joking, but Gwaine didn't need to know that.

The pair fell into an easy silence, and Merlin took another sip before hanging the flagon back to Gwaine. The other man accepted it wordlessly, shooting Merlin a sidelong glance as he drank.

Then Gwaine put the ale on the table and turned to face Merlin, looking more serious than Merlin had seen him all day. "So the little princess has magic," he said flatly.

Merlin looked up in surprise. "Yes," he said, warily. "It happens, in some families. Morgana-"

"Got it from her mother's side of the family, not Uther."

"What are you getting at, Gwaine?" Merlin asked warily.

"Only that you and I both know who Ygranna came from, and it was not just Arthur," Gwaine shrugged, way too casual about the whole thing in Merlin's opinion.

Merlin sighed. He could continue denying it of course – he knew that he should, that it was expected of him – or confirm Gwaine's suspicions and have a friend who knew exactly what he was going through.
He was saved having to make the decision; it seemed like Gwaine took his silence as confirmation.

"Oh Merlin," Gwaine muttered, sounding suddenly as tired as Merlin felt. "This is why you left, isn't it?"

Merlin met his eyes defiantly. "Yes, well, it is what it is, like you said. Can we just... not?" His voice took on a pleading note, quite without his acquiescence.

Gwaine looked like he wanted to say something else, but after a moment he closed his mouth, nodding once.

A silence descended again, this one less amiable. Merlin scowled, looking down at the table. The problem wasn't Gwaine, of course. And Merlin did want to talk about it, but...

"Look," he said, at the same time as Gwaine said, "Well," and they laughed, the tension broken.

"Merlin, I understand that this must be difficult for you," Gwaine said after a beat. "Believe me, I've seen the way you look at Arthur... the way you've always looked at him. And when I saw Ygranna, and found out about this true love ritual," he grimaced, "well... it wasn't a big leap from there, knowing what I knew about you both."

Merlin frowned at that. He wanted to ask what exactly Gwaine thought he knew about him and Arthur, but he wasn't sure it mattered. Gwaine was uncommonly perceptive, always had been, but this... "Does everyone know?" Merlin asked instead. He wasn't sure he could handle that just now; the whispers and the knowing looks as Merlin had to stand in the background and watch Arthur, Gwen and Ygranna be a perfect little family.

Gwaine looked much too understanding as he laid his hand on Merlin's arm. "No, I don't believe they do. Eventually, people will probably figure it out, especially now with the magic," he added thoughtfully, "but as far as I can tell, the people who know anything at all still believe that she was created out of Arthur alone."

Merlin nodded slowly. "She definitely could have been, she's beautiful," he said quietly, letting his mind wander back to his daughter. Her soft blond hair, her beautiful, perfect face, those hands, how much she had grown. He smiled softly, feeling his eyes well up. Gwaine squeezed his arm reassuringly, and Merlin took a shaky breath, laughing quietly at how much of a sap he was being.

"Please," Gwaine said, rolling his eyes. "Besides that mop of Pendragon gold on her head, she is all you, Merlin. Don't you see that?"

Despite how wrong the entire situation was with Arthur and Gwen and Ygranna, Merlin couldn't deny the sense of joy he felt at hearing those words. She's all mine. It was a dangerous notion to entertain, and a treacherous path for his heart to take knowing that it could never really be true... but for a moment, Merlin let himself believe it.

Just then, the door clicked open unexpectedly and Merlin and Gwaine both jumped at the noise, Gwaine's hand falling from Merlin's arm.

Surprisingly, Arthur was standing in the doorway, the light of the torches in his own room illuminating him in an annoyingly gorgeous way.

"Merlin," Arthur said, sounding surprised – like it had been Merlin walking into his chambers unannounced, not the other way around. "And... Gwaine," Arthur's eyes narrowed as they took in the knight, who seemed to sit up a little straighter.
"Sire," Gwaine said, his voice sounding a little strained.

Arthur's eyes moved between Gwaine and Merlin, frowning. "Merlin," he said again. "I apologise. I thought you would be alone. That was... foolish of me."

"I can leave," Gwaine offered, though it sounded almost like a challenge.

"No, please," Arthur said quickly. "Don't go on my account, Gwaine. I didn't wish to intrude upon your reunion. Merlin, I'll see you in the morning. Goodnight."

And the door was shut once more, before Merlin could even voice his protest.

Merlin looked at Gwaine, intending to share a bewildered look with his friend, only to find Gwaine's eyes still trained on the door, fuming.

"Gwaine, what-" Merlin began, then trailed off when Gwaine stood from the table abruptly.

"Well, it's getting late, Merlin, I'm sure you're exhausted after the day you've had," Gwaine said, giving Merlin a smile that looked way too carefree considering the emotion he'd seen on the man's face a moment before.

"But... yes, I mean, of course, but you don't have to leave," Merlin said, confused. "Is this about Arthur? Did you have an argument with him or something?"

Gwaine let out a startled, humourless laugh which took Merlin aback. "Right. Like Arthur would ever actually talk to me about..." he stopped, shaking his head with a wry smile. "You know what? Never mind, Merlin. Get some sleep."

And with that he turned on his heel and exited as far as Arthur had, but through the door leading out into the corridor.

Merlin was left sitting at the table alone, listening as the muted sound of Gwaine's footsteps grew fainter. The flagon of ale was still sitting in front of him, so for wont of anything else to do, Merlin picked it up and downed what was left inside.

He wondered why the presence of Arthur had made Gwaine so upset. He had always been protective of Merlin, of course, but this?

As much as he tried though, Merlin couldn't keep his mind off of Arthur, or stop himself wondering what had brought the King to his chambers – the King, whom Merlin had been assuming would be spending the night with his Queen.

He was tempted to knock on Arthur's door now, if for nothing else then just to see him again. He hadn't realised how much he had missed just being in Arthur's presence, watching him... it was pathetic, really.

But Merlin really was very tired. Transporting himself and all of his belonging by magic wasn't particularly hard for him to do, but all the reunions had sapped a considerable amount of his strength. The sensations of seeing Ygranna again, and Arthur, and Gwen, Gaius and the knights as well, coupled with all that ale? He had to admit it, he was exhausted.

Plus, Merlin was sure that all of this would seem a lot less overwhelming and would make a lot more sense in the morning.
Merlin awoke early the next morning, instantly alert despite the fact that he had slept very poorly indeed, the events of the previous day running through his mind.

But he was going to see his daughter today. He would be speaking to her, maybe even see more of her magic.

He dressed quickly, and had just finished when a servant brought him an extravagant breakfast – then proceeded to stare, wide-eyed, as Merlin wolfed it down in minutes.

Merlin shot the servant a grin as he bolted from the room. Hopefully Ygranna was awake already, he thought, giddy with an excitement he couldn't even attempt to suppress. He would be seeing her room today – what kinds of toys would she have? He would have to get her something, not so precious or expensive that it would arouse suspicion of course, but something unique. Something that she could look at and think about him.

It was with these thoughts that he got to Gwen's rooms. Standing in front of the door, he suddenly had a flashback to standing there all those years ago, when he had just been made Court Sorcerer and believed that he could fix all of Gwen and Arthur's problems with his magic.

Merlin had been so sure, then, of his ability to help Gwen. He had known within himself that all the ingredients of the spell were present, that the potential for this child existed somehow, vaguely, just out of reach without his magic. He had felt this need to complete the ritual – a need which he now realised had come from within himself, his magic recognising the child that he could create with Arthur, using Guinevere's body.

But he had not recognized his own feelings for what they were then, and had trusted in his King and Queen to be the fairytale romance he'd thought that he had known they were.

It had not worked quite as planned. Merlin had often wondered since if the creators of the spell, whomever they'd been and however long ago they'd lived – could ever have imagined that it could have worked this way, with the love being between the sorcerer and the man, the woman acting merely as a... what had Gaius so crudely called it? A cooking pot. Somehow he didn't think so.

But standing here again now, waiting to see his child, Merlin could not even begin to be sorry for the outcome, even if the pain he had brought Gwen would always haunt him.

Even if he did not get to be her father, Ygranna was worth any price.

He knocked once on the door before letting himself in - instinctively scanning the room for Guinevere and breathing a sigh of relief when he found her absent.

Moving into the room he found it virtually unchanged since he had left. The room was still divided in two, and while the child's bed was different, everything he had created for her was still in place. This only added to the happiness Merlin felt in that moment.

"Merlin!" a child's voice called, and Merlin only had a second's warning before small, surprisingly strong arms wrapped around his legs and he stumbled a little, laughing. "You're back," Ygranna said happily.
"Of course I am, I told you I would be," he said fondly, ruffling Ygranna's hair and trying to ignore the memory that he did in fact leave her once without promising any such thing.

Merlin looked up, to see a young woman with long, dark hair hovering over by the bed, smiling shyly. He grinned in recognition. "Leah! It's good to see you again."

Leah's face lit up, even as she bowed her head respectfully. "Thank you Sire," she breathed. "And you, Sire."

"Please, it's just Merlin," he smiled, rolling his eyes. "As I recall having told you dozens of times before. Or have you forgotten in my absence?"

Leah's cheeks darkened but she was looking him in the eye again now, thank goodness. "No, of course not. Merlin."

"Father says that titles are a sign of respect, that people need them to remember that we are important," Ygranna piped up, hands on her hips as though she was scolding Merlin.

Merlin laughed, then tried to stop himself immediately when he saw Ygranna's eyes narrow. Laughing at Arthur when he had tried to seem intimidating had never got him anywhere good, either.

"Yes," he said, "well, Arthur's a-

A cough from Leah stopped him, and when he met her eyes they were amused but held a clear warning. Right. Probably not good to go insulting her father the King on his first day back.

"A what?" Ygranna asked suspiciously.


"My teacher?" She asked.

"Your friend."

The sympathetic look Leah gave him then made Merlin wonder just how many people actually knew the truth. But he put that aside for now – it was time to get to know his daughter.

Merlin hadn't had much experience being around children, and was therefore immensely glad that Leah was there to keep Ygranna focused and happy. But even despite his own hesitancy and awkwardness, he found it easy to talk to the child.

Not only did she seem unusually well spoken for her age (which Merlin suspected probably had to do with her being a princess - having observed Arthur and Morgana for all those years had given him an idea of how many expectations had been put on their shoulders from a very young age), but she also seemed very interested in Merlin, and in learning more about magic.

After a few hours though, Ygranna's eyes inevitably began to drift out of focus, and she began to fiddle with various objects, clearly not able to pay attention for much younger.

Glancing at Leah who nodded with a small smile, Merlin cleared his throat.

"Er, well, I think this has been enough for today. You've done very well."

Ygranna's head shot up. "You're leaving?" She asked sadly. "But I thought we could play."

Even if Merlin had been planning on it, there would have been no way he could turn that face down.
"Of course not, Anna," he smiled. "What do you want to play?"

Ygranna's face lit up in the most beautiful smile he had ever seen, and it struck him how easy it could be to just let himself love her, just... claim his right to her, somehow, he could find a way.

Not that he ever would. He could never do that to Arthur or Gwen; not only would it destroy them, but they were what was best for Ygranna.

Merlin didn't notice that Ygranna had paused on her way to pick up the toys, and was staring at him with a strange look on her face. "You called me Anna," she said, tilting her head like she was deep in thought.

"I'm sorry, do you not like that?" Merlin asked, his eyes darting in Leah's direction for confirmation, but she was only looking at him with that same sympathetic look as before.

"I do," Ygranna said quickly, smiling tentatively. "It's just, only my daddy calls me Anna."

Merlin felt his ears redden slightly. "Oh."

"But you can call me Anna if you want," Ygranna said happily. "I like you."

Merlin couldn't help the grin that spread over his face then. "I like you, too," he told her, reaching over and ruffling her hair.

Merlin was walking back from his lesson with Ygranna, smiling to himself about how delighted she had been as he'd transformed himself into a bird in front of her, when he heard quick footsteps behind him.

Turning, Merlin saw Gwaine half-jogging to catch up with him, and tried to quell the swell of disappointment that it wasn't Arthur. Of course it wasn't Arthur, why would it be?

"Merlin!" Gwaine called, delighted. "You're a hard man to track down."

"You were looking for me?" Merlin asked, never able to stay disappointed for long in the presence of Gwaine and his infectious good mood.

Gwaine nodded, falling into step beside him. "Aye. The knights are headed to the tavern tonight, I just wanted to see if maybe you wanted to come." He shrugged, his words light, but when Merlin caught his eye the other man looked oddly hopeful.

"Um," Merlin said. Honestly, a distraction probably would be good for him - but the thought of spending another night in the company of the boisterous knights, knowing that the one person he really wanted to be with was at home with his wife, that was a little hard to handle. In time, Merlin was sure it would get easier... but right now, this was about all he could manage.

Something of what he was thinking must have shown on his face, because Gwaine hhm-ed his understanding. "Look, it's fine if you don't want to come, Merlin, I just thought I'd ask."

"No, no," Merlin protested quickly, "it's really not that, you know I enjoy your company, I just... it's been a long day?" he pleaded weakly, already knowing that Gwaine knew him far too well to buy that excuse.

Gwaine sighed, and pulled on Merlin's arm as he stopped, in the middle of the corridor. He looked
resigned as he said, quite plainly, "this is about Arthur."

"Gwaine, please, not here," Merlin said weakly, eyeing a passing servant nervously.

"Yes, here, Merlin," Gwaine's voice was laced with an irritation he'd very rarely heard from the usually so carefree man, and it was enough to give Merlin pause. "You know that the King has my full loyalty, but I swear, there are days when I'd give my title away to give him a good kick up his-"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Merlin asked, startled by the sudden vehemence. "Gwaine, what is it with you and Arthur?"

Gwaine just shook his head sadly. "The pair of you, honestly, you're so alike and you don't even realize it. Both too thick to see what's right in front of you." And he raised his eyebrows, looking straight into Merlin's eyes like he was willing him to just get it. But what was there to get?

Merlin frowned. "Gwaine, what are you saying?"

But as he asked the question, his eyes widened, because... "Oh." Suddenly, a lot of things about Gwaine's protectiveness, the way he'd always worked the hardest to include Merlin in their group of friends, it all made sense. Merlin felt a fool for never having noticed it before, having been too wrapped up in his own feelings.

Gwaine's grimace was enough confirmation, and Merlin made an aborted move to grab Gwaine's arm - but thought better of it and let his hand fall uselessly back to his side.

"Look, it's not important," Gwaine said, his smile tight. "You've always been a lost cause, anyone with a lick of sense could have seen that. But then, I never had much sense to begin with," he added with a self-deprecating snort. After a beat, Gwaine shook his head, a genuine - if slightly subdued - smile on his face now. "Just promise me one thing, Merlin."

"Of course," Merlin found himself saying, still too shocked to really say much else.

"If Arthur ever gets his head out of his arse and actually decides to screw propriety in order to follow his heart... don't run from it, yeah? Allow yourself to be happy this time, for both of our sakes. Watching the King mope around for the past few years has been remarkably dull."

And with a final smirk and a wink, Gwaine left Merlin standing, gaping, in the now thankfully deserted corridor.

**********ARTHUR**********

"But daddy, Merlin is my friend, I want him there!"

Arthur sighed, knowing that he was most likely going to give in to Ygranna's pleading eventually; he always did and they both knew it.

Gwen looked up from her needlework, which she had been quietly working on by the window as Ygranna and Arthur played with the wooden swords he had had carved out for her. "Oh, Arthur, it is her name day," she said with a fond smile. "Let her invite whomever she wants."

Ygranna looked back up at Arthur with a smug smile, and Arthur only rolled his eyes, knowing that he had lost this argument before it had even begun. "Fine," he said grudgingly. "You can tell him at your session later."

Ygranna squealed and hugged him around the legs, and Arthur caught Gwen's eye. She was looking
at him with a mixture of amusement and pity, and he wondered just how much she knew about the battle which had been raging within Arthur since Merlin had returned a few weeks back.

It wasn't like he was avoiding Merlin or anything. He wasn't.

Except he absolutely was.

Merlin was back. After three years, Merlin was back in his life. Ygranna loved him – of course she did, everybody loved Merlin – and even Gwen had admitted that she and Arthur's romantic relationship had been over for a long time.

But all of that meant nothing if Merlin didn't want him anymore, which he clearly didn't.

In those three years, Arthur hadn't let himself hope, even once. He had lost himself in his duties, and in his responsibilities as a ruler and a father, trying to accept that Merlin had made the impossible choice for both of them. But when Merlin had come back... considering how they'd left things, of course he had hoped.

When Arthur and Guinevere had finally cleared the air, he had felt an inexplicable sense of lightness, like he was finally free. Not only was his heart free to pursue what it wanted, but for the first time in a long time, Arthur also felt like he and Gwen would be okay, as partners in all but marriage: as parents, rulers and friends.

But his arrogance had always been his downfall, and even though Arthur liked to think that more than half a decade on the throne had taught him a thing or two about humility and putting others first, clearly he had still failed to actually take Merlin's feelings into account while basking in his own joy at having his best friend back in his life.

Even though they had had an undeniable connection before Merlin left, and even though Arthur had spent the past three years pining for him to return, that didn't mean that Merlin still returned the sentiment. After the night of the welcoming feast, when Arthur had walked in to find Merlin with Gwaine, of all people, Merlin had not sought Arthur out, nor had he seemed particularly keen to speak to him whenever they had found themselves in the same room (which, granted, had not been nearly as often as Arthur would have liked).

Merlin had spent most of his time with Ygranna since returning, and while Arthur would have loved to join them, he always seemed to have meetings or training sessions to attend to. And in the evenings, Merlin was usually nowhere to be found.

As far as he had understood it, from the brief sessions he had spent with Merlin (and the court advisers, annoyingly enough) discussing his time with the Druids, Merlin had learned a lot more about his magic, and had taken to spend a lot of time... communing with nature, or whatever it was that Druids did. Not that Arthur had been looking for Merlin or anything, of course. If Merlin wanted to speak to him, he knew where he could be found. Their rooms were right next to each other, after all.

At least Arthur could find out more about what Merlin spent his days doing from Ygranna. Granted, maybe he felt a little bit bad about using his daughter to spy on his Court Sorcerer, but he was running out of options. And he certainly wasn't going to ask Gwaine about it.

Ygranna could happily tell Arthur about the time she and Merlin spent playing – and playing, in her mind, apparently both encompassed the time they spent holding tea parties for her dolls and knight figurines, and the time they spent honing her magical abilities. Arthur wasn't really surprised that Merlin was managing to make their lessons fun and make them seem like games; given the chance,
Arthur rather imagined that Merlin would have made an excellent tutor.

The idea of Merlin as a tutor – Ygranna’s tutor – felt so right to Arthur, somehow. The idea of always having Merlin around, and having him such a significant part of Ygranna’s life, was tantalising. But at the same time, it left him feeling a bit empty. Because it wasn’t the role Merlin should have in her life, and Arthur couldn’t help the horrible guilt which threatened to overpower him if he let himself think too much about it; the fact that he and Merlin were both the parents of this child, yet it was only Arthur she called "daddy," only Arthur who got to pick her up and kiss her on the forehead when she was upset, and twirl her around and call her his little princess to make her laugh.

He wanted so badly to just set everything right. Even if the time for him and Merlin to be together had passed, even if he had left it too late and had truly set Merlin free, Ygranna was still their child. And as much as Arthur knew it would kill Gwen if he ever tried to take Ygranna away from her, he also knew just how tough it had been for Merlin to leave, and how hard it must be to be so near Ygranna now, without actually holding the place in her life he should.

There were so many things he needed to say to Merlin – to clear the air, even if it would be horribly uncomfortable and leave him heartbroken – but Arthur found that he just couldn’t. It was stupid and childish and very much not the proper way for a King to behave, but then again, Arthur had never been able to be proper with Merlin anyway. And if Merlin had moved on... with Gwaine, or a Druid, or anyone else, Arthur didn’t want to know about it. Or at least, Merlin could be mature and come tell him himself.

He wasn’t being stubborn. Only pragmatic. Arthur was a very busy and important man, he couldn't go chasing down wayward sorcerers for awkward heart-to-hearts, could he?

So Arthur would endure, again, to spend time with Merlin without actually spending time with him, letting the distance between them grow ever wider because neither of them were able to put words to what was happening.

The third anniversary of the day Ygranna was given her name was to be a spectacular affair. Being as advanced for her three years as she was, the child was already very well-versed in court etiquette, and as such, Guinevere and Arthur had decided to give her a proper celebration this year, in the style of a Princess as opposed to a little girl.

Gwen had had a splendid gown designed for her; sky blue to set off her eyes with strands of silver thread adorning the sleeves and neck. Her golden hair had been braided and fastened behind her head, and a thin silver coronet rested on the top.

As he watched his daughter getting ready for the feast, Arthur was once again struck by how much he loved her, and how beautiful she would grow up to be.

And in that moment Arthur had no idea how anyone could not know the truth about her parentage, because aside from the hair, he thought that his little Anna looked just like Merlin.

"Well?" Gwen grinned at him as she and Leah stepped back, allowing Ygranna to twirl happily around, admiring the way the silver strands sparkled as she moved.

"She's perfect," Arthur smiled, nodding at her.

"Now, Ygranna," Gwen said sternly, crouching down and touching her daughter's shoulder gently.
"What did we agree upon?"

Anna pursed her lips and raised her head, looking so much like Merlin when Arthur had given him an order he didn't like, Arthur had to hide his smile behind his hand. "That I would not play with my swords, lie on the floor, or pet the castle cats until after the dress had been put away, mother," she recited, and Gwen nodded solemnly - though Arthur could tell that she was amused, too.

"Right you are," Gwen said, moving her hand up to rest on the child's cheek and kissing her forehead softly before standing up.

Arthur cleared his throat and Ygranna turned to him as he held out his arm. "Ready when you are, Lady Anna," he said formally, and laughed when she raced over and tried to jump up to reach his arm. Instead he bent down and picked her up, letting her arms snake around his neck. He would never get tired of this.

"You know, she's going to have to learn to walk the halls on her own at some point, Arthur," Gwen said lightly, but she and Leah were already moving ahead of them out of the room.

"She won't!" Arthur disclaimed in mock shock, delighted to hear his daughter chuckle into his neck. "I shall take it upon myself to build her a litter, so she can only move somewhere when I have time to carry her around in it."

Ygranna pulled away from his neck at that, looking at him with wide eyes. "Daddy, you wouldn't!"

Arthur smiled. "Of course not. You're light as a feather now, but I don't fancy dragging you around when you're 30."

"I could make myself light as a bird," Ygranna said thoughtfully. "Or become a bird. Merlin can do it, he showed me."

"Well," Arthur said, shifting her slightly on his arm, "let's hold off on the experiments until he's actually taught you, shall we? I don't fancy my daughter ending up permanently covered in feathers."

A giggle. "You're silly, daddy. Merlin would never let me stay a bird, he'd save me."

"Hm. I thought I was the one who would save you?" He didn't think it had sounded petulant until Gwen turned her head, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Of course. You will save me from the men with swords," Ygranna stated, but it was with less excitement than she usually reserved for Arthur's hypothetical acts of chivalry, "but Merlin will teach me to save myself. He'll teach me to fly, and to fight, and to command the dragons."

Arthur frowned, his vague jealousy forgotten. "Dragons? When did he tell you this?" It was common knowledge now in the kingdom that Merlin was the last Dragonlord, so he didn't think the sorcerer would be careless enough to tell Ygranna that she had those powers too - lest the word got out and people started talking (even more than they probably already were).

"He didn't," Ygranna shrugged, her blue eyes wide. "The dark-haired lady did."

Arthur stopped dead in his tracks, and Gwen turned, too, her eyes alert. "The... dark-haired lady?"

Ygranna nodded. "Yes. She appeared in the wash basin once, I thought I had made her appear but she told me she was a friend. She has been talking to me through the turtles in the garden. She has magic like me and Merlin."
Gwen gasped, and Arthur felt his heart thud in his chest. Morgana had been speaking to Ygranna, had *scryed* with her in his own castle, and none of them had realised. He tried to keep his voice even as he asked her, "What else did she tell you?"

But to his frustration, Ygranna only shook her head, frowning at him disapprovingly. "Daddy, I can't tell you, it's a secret."

Gwen was at Arthur's side now, and she gently touched Ygranna's cheek, getting her attention. "Who is it a secret from, darling? Your father?"

"It is a magical secret. Only us with magic can know," Ygranna said, rolling her eyes as though it was such a trivial thing that it didn't even need saying.

To Arthur's surprise, it was Gwen who asked the obvious question. "But you can tell someone who has magic?"

Ygranna looked thoughtful for a second, then nodded happily.

Arthur and Gwen looked at each other, Gwen nodding at him with relief. *Merlin.*

"Well," Gwen said, smiling and doing a much better job of seeming calm than Arthur was sure he was doing himself, "we shall have to figure all this out later, because a certain princess has a feast in her honour to attend."

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*MERLIN*

If Merlin had held any assumption of dining with the knights again, that was quickly dissuaded when, immediately upon his arrival in the Great Hall, a servant steered him directly towards the High Table, where he was surprised (and a little apprehensive) to find himself sitting next to Gwen.

"Merlin," she said, and Merlin was relieved to see that she was smiling kindly at him – although something was clearly bothering her. "I'm glad we finally get the chance to talk."

Merlin did his best to calm his nerves. It had been three years. Gwen was clearly happy with her husband and child, and as far as he knew she had been fine with him teaching Ygranna about magic. It was true that they had not actually sat down and talked about the situation, but Merlin had not felt like it was his place to approach her, and he was rather hoping that time would have healed these particular wounds. Maybe the two of them would never be the close friends they once were, but he had done his best to give Gwen the life she deserved. Hopefully she had recognised this.

"Me too," he said, trying for a friendly smile.

To his surprise, Gwen reached out and put her hand over his own, leaning in. She was still smiling, but there was an urgent note in her voice when she spoke. "I had planned to use this time to really clear the air between us, Merlin, but I'm afraid it will have to wait. We need your help."

Merlin frowned, glancing over her shoulder; first to see Ygranna next to Gwen, too busy concentrating on eating her food properly to pay them any attention, and then to Arthur, whose eyes were fixed on a point across the hall – but his head was tilted slightly in their direction, and Merlin suspected that he was listening carefully to what they were saying.

He found Gwen's eyes again, and she was looking at him so imploringly, so trustingly, that he found himself covering her hand with his own and nodding. "Whatever you need."

"It's Morgana," Gwen said, and Merlin's breath hitched. He knew that they had already come very
close to losing Ygranna once, that only her magic had saved her from being taken away by Morgana's men. "She has been... communicating with Ygranna. No, Merlin," she said urgently, her hand squeezing his own when Merlin started and almost made to get out of his chair, his eyes darting wildly over the hall. "Relax, please, we don't want to arouse suspicion."

"Relax?!" Merlin hissed at her, but he remained seated; his eyes were fixed on Ygranna now, and he even ignored Arthur's pointed look in his direction. "Gwen, Morgana's spies could be everywhere, how can you know that Ygranna is safe even here?"

Gwen raised her eyebrows and gave him a pointed look. "Because you're here," she said simply, and her voice held such conviction, it stunned him for a moment.

"But..." Merlin didn't know what to say. He was honoured that she had such trust in his abilities, even now – that she had such trust in him. "Gwen, thank you, but-"

"I wasn't trying to compliment you, Merlin," Gwen said, but she smiled slightly and despite himself he felt some of the tension leave his body. "But I know how powerful you are, and how much you care about Ygranna. You'd never let anything happen to her."

"Right," Merlin said softly. "I do. I'll do anything to protect her, you must know that."

"I do know that. And I'm glad." Gwen's gaze fell to where their hands were still clasped on the table. "Look, Merlin, whatever Morgana is planning... we need to stop it. After the feast, we need to get together and figure out what to do. And to do that, we need to put everything else aside. This is about protecting Ygranna."

Merlin nodded. "I understand."

But Gwen wasn't done. "I don't want there to be any awkwardness between us," she said. "We were good friends, once, and there is no reason why we can't be now. I want to talk to you, when all this is over, about everything. But for now, I just need you to know that I understand, Merlin. And I want to thank you for what you gave to me. Gave to us."

He was glad that their heads were so close together, so that the shadows across his face hid his eyes; they had gone a bit moist. "Gwen, I'm so sorry. I know how much you love Ygranna, but I'm sorry for not... giving you the child I promised you. Messing everything up, as usual," he added with a sad, self-deprecating smile.

Gwen shook her head, and her eyes were perfectly clear when she looked at him. "Merlin, I'm only going to say this once: I don't want you to be any awkwardness between us," she said. "We were good friends, once, and there is no reason why we can't be now. I want to talk to you, when all this is over, about everything. But for now, I just need you to know that I understand, Merlin. And I want to thank you for what you gave to me. Gave to us."

Merlin was speechless at Gwen's admission; still not quite sure if she had really forgiven him or just needed him to believe it – but he hoped it was the former. The guilt of having betrayed Gwen had gnawed at him for three long years, and Merlin was just so tired of feeling guilty.

But like Gwen said, there was more important things to worry about. With a final squeeze of his hand Gwen was turning away from him now, back to Ygranna, to fuss with her collar and fix her hold on the cutlery. Merlin found himself unable to take his eyes off the child, wishing that he could just scoop her up and take her somewhere safe.

Even though Merlin had not been with her for most of her life, she had been a constant presence in his mind, and Ygranna was more important to him than anything. Losing her to Morgana would kill
him, just as he knew it would kill Arthur and Gwen. Merlin swore in that moment that he would rather die than see that happen, would rather destroy himself than to see his daughter taken away from her family.

Before, with his magic, there had always been a limit. Even while with the Druids, Merlin had always known in the back of his mind that he could never fully let go, never fully become Emrys, because he would lose himself in the process. The fact that he was willing to do that for Ygranna, without a second thought, should terrify him. But it didn’t. No matter what title she held and what he officially was to her, Ygranna was his daughter. No one could ever take that away from him, least of all Morgana.
Of course, Arthur thought wryly, the first time he found himself alone with Merlin since the sorcerer's return to Camelot would be when his wife was also present.

The three had escorted Ygranna back up to her and Gwen's room after the feast. She was exhausted, and it was clear that she wouldn't be able to tell Merlin everything he needed to know until she'd had some rest. So, after some discussion, they had agreed to leave Leah there with her and guards outside the door while they adjourned in Arthur's chambers, to let the child sleep in peace.

It helped that Merlin revealed that his tapestries actually acted as safeguards against foreign magic; while Merlin himself was able to use them to enter the room, they would repel every other form of magic used within.

"You couldn't have told us that three years ago?" Arthur had grumbled, but he didn't really blame Merlin – there had been a lot going on then, after all.

Just like now. Would their lives ever be quiet? Arthur ran a hand over his face, the other resting on the table surface as he leaned forward, as though he was strategising ahead of a battle (which he supposed he kind of was). Gwen was sitting on his left while Merlin was standing on his other side, across from Gwen.

His Queen on his left, his Sorcerer on his right. Arthur in the middle, and wasn't that just a stark reminder of everything else that was going on?

But once again, that would have to wait.

It was Guinevere who broke the brooding silence which had settled over the three of them as they each contemplated the problem. "Why does Morgana even want Ygranna?" she muttered, shaking her head.

Arthur shrugged. "It makes sense. She's my only heir, another person who could contest Morgana's claim to the throne even if she did somehow manage to wrestle it away from me again."

"And she has magic, Morgana probably sensed that," Merlin added. Arthur heard the guilt in his voice, the unspoken I should have been here, but he filed it away. They could fight about who got to feel the most guilty about all of this later.

"Fine," Gwen said, an impatient edge to her voice. "Then what does she want with our daughter?"

For a moment they all looked at each other, wondering if anyone would dare to voice the obvious, but unthinkable, answer to that question. After a beat, Arthur shrugged. "Maybe she just wants to turn Ygranna against us. I'm sure she could be a useful weapon in Morgana's vendetta against me, if she got her on her side," he said, shuddering at the thought. Morgana loved me once, too.

"That's not going to happen," Merlin said quietly, intently, his eyes boring into Arthur's.

Arthur swallowed at the fire he found there, and he had to look away.

"Well," Gwen said, breaking the tension again, "that's what we're here to make sure of, isn't it?"
"Right," Merlin said, nodding his head as he looked away from Arthur at last. "Well, as long as Ygranna is in her room, nothing can harm her. But we can't keep her in there forever, as much as we may want to. Plus, there is the scrying – Morgana isn't technically in the room when she does that."

The concern evident in Merlin's voice was heartbreaking.

"Can you make her some kind of..." Gwen waved her hand, searching for the words, "charm, or something, to protect her? For the time being," she added, "until we thing of a more permanent way to keep her safe."

By more permanent way, Arthur wondered if she meant killing Morgana. It had never been an easy topic between him and his wife, as both of them had been dealing with the grief of losing Morgana in very different ways, both reluctant to let go of her completely after having loved her so dearly in the past – but now, Arthur had no doubt that neither he nor Gwen (nor Merlin, for that matter) would hesitate for a moment if Ygranna's safety was at risk.

Merlin was nodding enthusiastically now. "Yes, of course, I've learned a lot of protective magic from the Druids. I have been trying to find ways to protect people from being injured in battle," he said. His eyes strayed to Arthur and once again Arthur heard the implied meaning of his words (to keep you safe). "But protecting against magic is easier, especially if the protected has their own magical signature. The Druids do it all the time."

Merlin's relieved smile was infectious; they hadn't found a solution, but they could make sure that Ygranna would not become a victim of any spell or enchantment. And if they made sure she was watched at all time, and that she didn't venture out of the castle... "You can keep her safe," Arthur breathed, awe-struck, not realising he had spoken the words out loud until he noticed both Gwen and Merlin looking at him – amusement and confusion written on their respective faces.

Gwen's eyes turned to Merlin, and she too was smiling. "Ygranna is lucky to have you. As are we."

When Merlin returned her smile, it was Arthur's turn to look confused. What had he missed?

Guinevere rose from her chair then. "I am going to go and check on her, and then probably retire for the night. When can you have the charm finished, Merlin?"

"Tomorrow morning, probably, if I begin working on it now," Merlin said.

"Perfect," Gwen's smile widened. "Well, then," she hesitated for a split second then, her eyes flitting between Arthur and Merlin for a moment as her smile faltered, but then it was back in place, and she nodded her head at Arthur. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Arthur said, nodding back, still feeling like he was missing something in this whole exchange. "See you in the morning."

And with one final smile in Merlin's general direction, Guinevere had gone from the room, leaving Arthur and Merlin alone at last.

"So I should probably... go do that spell," Merlin said after an excruciatingly awkward silence, shuffling towards the door to his own chambers.

"Right," Arthur said, "of course," though his brain was screaming at him to stop him, to finally talk to Merlin now they were finally alone. Instead, what came out was, "do you, er, need any help?"

"Sure," Merlin said, looking at him like he was trying to work out if there was a trap buried in the question.
After another moment's uncomfortable silence in which the two men just stood there, waiting for something, Merlin finally shrugged and turned, entering his room and leaving the door open. Arthur followed him after a beat - and gasped when he entered Merlin's rooms.

"Wow," he said lamely, "you have... redecorated."

Whereas Merlin's room before had been much like the one he'd kept at Gaius', except much bigger and therefore a bit bare, it now looked like a mixture of the physician's study and a woodland clearing.

There were vines growing up one of the walls, and several fairly big trees quickly outgrowing their pots, and the ceiling seemed to have been enchanted to reflect the sky outside; stars were twinkling above them and the full moon cast a soft glow over the room.

The four-poster bed looked very out of place there, Arthur thought, but then, everything about this was so Merlin that he had to laugh.

Merlin, who had been rummaging through a chest of what looked like an unnecessary large collection of vials, looked up with a tentative smile. "You're not mad, then?"

"Mad?" Arthur asked, "why on earth would I be mad?"

Merlin shrugged, but his eyes glinted with amusement. "Because I practically moved the forest into your castle?"

Arthur snorted. "Actually I've half a mind to make you Camelot's chief decorator, you seem to have a knack for it."

"I just like feeling closer to nature," Merlin said, his smile soft. "I always feel... more alive, somehow."

"Well, as long as you don't bring a herd of deer in here," Arthur smiled, feeling so much lighter at being able to speak to Merlin this way again, freely and easily like before. Even with everything left unsaid, this felt important too. "At least there are no unicorns... right?" he added, turning his head slightly just to make sure.

Merlin laughed; a genuine, wonderful sound which Arthur didn't realise he had been craving until now. "No, no unicorns. Yet," he smiled.

When Merlin continued to smile at him for a bit longer, the tension shifted again. Arthur coughed, intent on keeping the mood light.

"So what are we doing here?" He asked. When Merlin only raised an eyebrow, he flushed slightly. "With the spell, I mean."

"Right, well," Merlin said, and was Arthur imagining the disappointment? "It's more like a potion, really, of sorts. I'm going to make Ygranna a locket - something she can wear always, which will carry a repellant of magic. It will respond to her own magic, and ward off everything that isn't like that."

"But not yours," Arthur added.

"No, Arthur, not mine," Merlin said quietly, finally turning back to rummage through the chest - emerging a moment later with a few different beacons and vials and setting them on the big table in the middle of the room.
"Because it's the same."

"Well, not exactly," Merlin admitted, frowning. "No two people's magic can ever be the same, but... Anna's magic came from me directly. She inherited it from me, but she was also made from it, just as you were made from magic. I think that probably makes it different. Not dangerous. Just... different. I don't quite know yet, it's not like there is a precedent," he shrugged, looking sheepish - but also a little proud, Arthur thought.

But Arthur was still stuck on the first part of his sentence. "Anna," he whispered. "I haven't heard you say that in three years, Merlin."

Merlin coughed, averting his gaze. "There's a lot you haven't heard me say in three years, Arthur," he said dismissively. But his ears were reddening, and there were a million things Arthur wanted to say at that moment. I missed you. I still miss you. I wish I could have chosen you.

"I know," he said instead, knowing how terribly insufficient that was.

It seemed Merlin was still doing his best to ignore Arthur's presence, looking uncomfortable. Well, so much for their light moment.

Merlin began clearing a space on the table and after a beat, Arthur moved closer, coming to stand awkwardly at Merlin's side. "So, what can I do to help?" he asked, hoping it came out more casual than he felt.

The concrete question seemed to make Merlin relax a little, and he shot Arthur a grateful smile.

"Hold this," he murmured, handing him a vial half full of a purple liquid he'd just measured out.

When the vial passed between their hands and their fingers brushed against each other, Arthur jolted at the contact. He looked up, but Merlin was already looking back at what he had been doing. Right.

They worked in silence for a while, only speaking when Merlin gave Arthur instructions. Arthur marveled for a moment that this should feel stranger, not being the one calling the shots for once. But this was Merlin, and Arthur had never really seen him as an inferior.

And here, in this strange room which was clearly full of magic, Merlin looked more focused and controlled than Arthur had ever seen him. Like Arthur himself when he was doing drills with his knights, or hunting, or preparing for battle. This was where Merlin's power lay, and he was in such complete control, it took Arthur's breath away.

This, working together side by side after so long apart... it struck Arthur that it almost felt like Merlin had never left, like Arthur's entire being had just been lying in wait, to wake up when Merlin was back where he belonged. This, right here, felt so beautifully normal, and served as yet another reminder for Arthur that was exactly what he wanted.

And if he wasn't King, if he didn't have a duty to his kingdom, this was what he'd have wanted all along - just this, right here, with Merlin. And their daughter.

"I want to tell her," Arthur blurted out, not able to stay silent any longer, and Merlin stilled his movements beside him. "Anna. I want to tell her that you're her father. Gods, Merlin, I've always wanted to tell her, but you weren't here, and I didn't know how to explain why you left, and she's so young, I just..." Arthur trailed off, shaking his head miserably.

"Arthur," Merlin said carefully, putting down the mortar he'd been using and turning to face Arthur's profile. "I appreciate that, I really do, but we both know that we can't tell her. Not yet. Not until she is old enough to understand, and until we're sure she can keep the knowledge to herself."
Arthur shook his head. "But I don't care who knows, Merlin! This, none of this is fair to you, I know how much you care about her."

Merlin sighed, his voice infuriatingly calm. "But this isn't about fair, Arthur. And it's not about me. Don't victimize me because I left, I knew what I was doing. If our daughter is to grow up to rule as Queen of Camelot, she needs to be your trueborn heir – at least that needs to be what your people believe for as long as possible. But..." he added, and although he tried to keep his voice neutral Arthur finally heard emotion in Merlin's voice, hope, "maybe, when she is older, it can be different. When she has earned the people's trust in her own way, proven herself as a capable leader..." Merlin's smile was sad. "Maybe then, I can stand at my daughter's side and show the world how proud I am of her, just like you and Gwen."

"Oh, Merlin," Arthur breathed, turning to see tears glinting in the corner of the other man's eyes, and he couldn't stop himself. He closed the short distance between them and pulled the other man into a tight hug, squeezing him like he was a lifeline. "You self-sacrificing idiot."

"You're one to talk. Noble prat," he heard, though Merlin's reply was muffled into his shoulder. After a moment, Arthur was relieved when Merlin's arms came up to wrap around him, too, and the tightness of his embrace suggested that he had needed this as much as Arthur.

They stood there for a little while, breathing each other in and finally acknowledging how much they had missed each other.

"Arthur?" Merlin finally said, his voice a rumble against Arthur's shirt.

"Hmm?" Arthur replied.

"Were you happy?"

Arthur pulled away slowly, to look at Merlin, who met his eyes with his own shy yet determined ones.

"When I was gone, I mean," Merlin continued. "When you... when the three of you got to be a family." His eyes dropped, and the tips of his ears reddened, and Arthur could only stare at this man before him; this man who had given up everything for him. And worse, Arthur had let him.

"Merlin," Arthur said, and something in his voice made Merlin raise his head to meet his gaze again, "you really are an idiot." Because he was. Arthur had understood Merlin leaving for Ygranna, but if he honestly thought that him leaving would make Arthur happy? "Merlin," Arthur said again, imploringly, bringing up his hand to hold Merlin's jaw, keeping his face raised and looking straight into his eyes. "We could never truly be a family without you."

He didn't wait for Merlin's response before capturing his lips with his own, groaning in relief as finally, finally Arthur was kissing him the way he had wanted to since the day Merlin had left; when Arthur had been too concerned with honour and duty to follow him.

Arthur began moving his lips, softly, not wanting to presume anything about how Merlin still felt about him. For a moment nothing happened, and Arthur had time to think oh fuck and I was too late, but then- then Merlin let out a noise, somewhere between a moan and a groan of annoyance, and Arthur felt Merlin's hand close around his neck as he was being pulled even closer, Merlin opening his mouth against his own and kissing him back fiercely - showing Arthur just how much he had missed this, too.

"Merlin," Arthur breathed against Merlin's mouth, and Merlin responded by sucking on Arthur's
lower lip, causing Arthur to gasp in surprise. Arthur turned them both, crushing Merlin back against the table and angling his head so he could deepen the kiss.

"Thank the gods," Merlin breathed against him, "I didn't know if you still... if we still..."

As Merlin's hand loosened a fraction to run tentative hands over the nape of Arthur's neck, he felt a shift in the energy of the kiss. It was deep, and wet, and just a little bit desperate, but there was an inexplicable tenderness to the way Arthur and Merlin were pushing into each other, holding each other like neither was quite sure that this was really happening.

In this kiss, Arthur and Merlin found the answers to all of their questions. Arthur poured everything into the strokes of his tongue, running his hands over the sides of Merlin's face, into his hair, down over his arms to show just how much he truly wanted this, wanted Merlin.

After a moment, Arthur pulled away, breathless, moving his forehead to rest against Merlin's. "Gods, Merlin," he whispered, "I missed you."

Merlin's breath hitched, but when Arthur managed to tear his eyes away from Merlin's glistening lips to meet his eyes, they were bright and happy. "Missed you too," he breathed, "fuck, Arthur." Merlin closed the distance between them to capture his lips again.

Arthur let his hands roam lower, letting his fingertips ghost against where Merlin's shirt had ridden up, exposing his lower back. When Arthur's hands closed around Merlin's hips, their kisses became frantic, and Arthur gasped as Merlin shifted even closer to him and their erections brushed against each other.

He gasped, pulling away again, panting hard, only growing harder when he saw that Merlin's eyes were almost black with arousal. "Merlin, I just, I need to tell you," Arthur began, and fuck, he couldn't think, he couldn't see anything but Merlin but he had to, he had to make sure Merlin knew how he felt, that it was only Merlin, had only ever been Merlin, that Arthur had been a fool for ever thinking he could convince himself of anything else...

"Shut up," Merlin breathed against his lips, kissing Arthur deeply again while his hand ventured down, down and oh, "no more talking." Another peck, and Merlin's smile was just this side of wicked when Arthur's eyes rolled back in is head as Merlin's hand closed around him. "There has been enough talking," Merlin said, his voice ragged. "Not enough kissing."

And Arthur had no argument against that.

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Merlin moaned into Arthur's mouth, his entire body on fire with the knowledge that this was really happening, that Arthur still felt the same way as Merlin did and that - yes - they could have it.

Right now Merlin didn't care about anything, he realised hazily, shivering as Arthur bit his lower lip; Merlin thrust against the other man involuntarily and the friction made him break the kiss, throwing his head back. The action caused Arthur to attack his exposed neck with increased vigour, kissing and sucking and undoubtedly marking Merlin as his.

No, nothing mattered but this. Nothing, nothing- Merlin shifted against the table and bumped against something, he heard a vague crash and somewhere in the back of his mind he thought, Wait, that should matter...

But Arthur's hands were roaming across his chest now, going lower, almost at the place where his shirt met his breeches and-

Eyes that were almost black with lust met his own, and for a moment Merlin could only gaze back hazily, taking in Arthur's mussed-up hair, the pink spot on his cheeks, and glistening, swollen lips. But, no. Merlin shook his head lightly, trying to clear it, noting the way both men were breathing hard.

"I swear, Merlin, if you're going to try to tell me that we can't again..." Arthur grumbled, but Merlin could see real worry underneath, real worry that Merlin would.

"No, no," Merlin said quickly, resting his had lightly on Arthur's cheek, and trying not to notice the way Arthur leaned slightly into the touch. "I want this, I- gods, you must know that I want this," Merlin said, huffing out a breathy laugh as his eyes flicked downwards. Arthur, to Merlin's amusement, blushed. "But we have to... the charm, Arthur."

Arthur's eyes widened fractionally, then comprehension settled over his face and he groaned, head falling to Merlin's shoulder. "Right. The charm," he said, clearly put out, but a moment later Arthur was the one who disentangled from Merlin and squared his shoulders.

It was a subtle reminder of how theirs lives had changed because of Anna, how nothing could be as important as keeping her safe. And even though Merlin's body was very much protesting the interruption, it made him so proud to see Arthur now, focused and determined once again, despite the disappointment he must be feeling himself. Merlin took a few deep, steadying breaths, and set to work.

Dawn was breaking when they finally completed the complicated potion and spell required to transform the locket (which Merlin had bought Ygranna for her name day, but luckily hadn't had a chance to give to her before all of this happened) into the protective charm which would ward off all foreign magic. As long as she wore it, she could not be enchanted nor bespelled, and no magic would work in her presence save for her own, and Merlin's.

Merlin hadn't been lying when he'd told Arthur that he wasn't sure what the nature of Anna's magic was - but he had decided to keep the suspicions he did have to himself, at least until he knew what it all meant.

He had no proof, but Merlin thought that he'd felt a subtle shift, in the very fabric of the universe, after Ygranna had been brought into the world. Being a child of pure love, her existence was not an affront to nature... but being a child of this particular love, with these particular parents whom had both been born of magic, that had to mean something. He hadn't thought much about it, not until he had been told that his daughter had magic herself, but ever since then, seeing how powerful she was and how much control she already had...

Merlin was no ordinary sorcerer. His very creation had been the result of magic (not as an orchestration of sorcerers like Arthur's or Ygranna's births, but as a product of the very magic residing within the earth itself), and this magic lived inside of him. As Emrys, he was magic and magic was him.

But then Merlin had created a child, something which he'd never believed he would do seeing as how entwined he'd always been with Arthur, and that had changed something. Ygranna had served to ground him, more than he'd ever been before, to humanity and to the mortal world.
Before he had created a child, Merlin had always felt a little bit unsettled, different, like he didn’t belong anywhere (but at Arthur's side, in whatever capacity). But now, because of Ygranna, he felt much more... human, for a lack of a better term. Normal. It was one of the reasons he had never lost himself even when he'd tried, while staying with the Druids.

And Merlin had to wonder if maybe he'd not only passed magic on to her, but passed on his magic, his potential. The very core of what made him Emrys.

Holding out the locket triumphantly, Merlin grinned at Arthur - the other person whom had grounded him so effectively to the mortal world; whose touch and affection had anchored him to this time, this place.

Arthur looked tired but accomplished, and closed his hand around Merlin's and the locket.

"Let's go find our daughter," Arthur said, emphasizing the word our in a way which made Merlin's heart sing.

Merlin wanted to kiss him then, again, just because he could - but then he worried they might never make it out of his chambers, so he settled for a nod and another smile, before lowering his hand.

To his surprise, Arthur didn't let go. Instead, Merlin found himself half-dragged out of his chambers, into the deserted hallway. But he could hear people moving around, and a servant could walk around a corner at any moment. He tried tugging his hand free but Arthur only turned to him, raising an eyebrow, an annoyingly smug smirk on his face.

"Arthur," Merlin tried, "people will see."

"See what?" Arthur grinned, spinning round completely and crowding into Merlin's space. "I'm just taking a walk with my good friend Merlin," he smirked, his breath hot on Merlin's face.

Merlin tried not to seem fazed. He did. But he couldn't help but let his eyes drop to Arthur's lips, half open and inviting and so tantalizingly close to his own...

"I'm pretty sure this isn't how close you're supposed to stand to your good friend Merlin," Merlin breathed, licking his lips, and was rewarded when Arthur's breath hitched slightly, his own eyes having dropped to Merlin's mouth at the movement.

"No?" Arthur murmured, so close now that his upper lip brushed Merlin's, and Merlin had to close his eyes to steady himself. Arthur's lips moved infinitesimally against his own-

A door slammed somewhere nearby and both men jumped apart as if burned, Arthur's hand slipping out of Merlin's.

Their eyes met and they giggled nervously, Arthur running a hand through his hair and giving Merlin one last regretful look before tilting his head and motioning for Merlin to follow him.

When they made it to Ygranna's room, Arthur paused outside, listening for movement within. Seemingly satisfied that they were awake, he rapped on the door once before stepping inside, Merlin trailing half a step behind him - suddenly, unaccountably nervous.

Even though he and Arthur had come a long way in the past 24 hours, he was still not completely sure how he would fit into this little family.

But Merlin needn't have worried, because as soon as he was inside the door he found his legs tackled by a flurry of blond hair, Ygranna almost making him fall over in her enthusiasm.
"Merlin!" she called, looking up at her with bright, blue eyes. "You're here! Mummy said you would be coming today, I have been waiting for you!" she beamed, and Merlin laughed as he reached down and hoisted her up into his arms.

"Good morning, Anna," Arthur said pointedly, and when Merlin looked over at him from over the top of Anna's head his eyebrow was raised, but his eyes sparkled with amusement.

Only then did Merlin notice Gwen, who had risen from her chair by the window as they entered. She was watching Arthur with a mixture of amusement and something else, which Merlin would have to examine later.

If she was surprised that Arthur and Merlin had brought the completed locket together, she didn't show it.

"Morning daddy," Anna called distractedly. "Merlin, I want to play, come play with me."

Merlin laughed, hearing Arthur snort. "Maybe later. I actually have something for you."

"A present!" Anna immediately squealed, wriggling to get out of his arms, and as her feet hit the floor she was looking around his legs, as though he'd been concealing something there.

"Yes," Merlin said, crouching down to face her. "I was going to give it to you yesterday, but you got so many presents, and this one is really special."

"Because it is from you," she nodded solemnly. Merlin paused, his eyes lifting to Arthur's of their own accord, but Arthur only shrugged as though that was obvious.

Merlin had a fleeting, alluring notion that maybe he wasn't as out of place in this family as he'd thought.

"Well," Merlin's smile was suddenly a little too watery, as he realised how much Ygranna must truly like him, if not love him. "That. And also," he said, producing the locket, "it has magic, like you."

Anna's eyes widened as she took in the locket and her hand reached out tentatively as though worried he'd snatch it away again. "It's pretty," she said, and Merlin let out a sign of relief that she actually liked it.

"See there?" he asked, pointing with his other hand, "this here's a bird-"

"A merlin?"

"Yes, a merlin, well done," he grinned, unable to stop the pride welling up in his chest. "And this is a tree, see, because this is where magic truly lies. In the earth, all around us. Only when you fully understand that will you be able to wield your true power."

A power, he realised, which might be far greater one day than any of them – including Morgana – could even imagine.

Ygranna touched the locket with something like reverence, and Merlin wondered once again how much she really understood of all this. She was so young, yet undeniably wise beyond her years, and she'd recognized their linked magic when she'd first touched his hand. Was she feeling now the protective magic he and Arthur had just poured into it? Or the magic that already lay within, which Merlin had designed specifically for her, to help her channel and control the powers she had? Or even deeper – the way this locket was linked to the earth and the universe, just as they all were?
One day when she was older, he would have to ask her about all of this, teach her how to tap into that knowledge and how not to float away and let herself become consumed by the magic, if this was truly her fate now.

He wanted her to stay Ygranna, just as he now knew that no matter what, he wanted to always stay Merlin.

"Here, let me help you," Arthur said softly, and for a moment Merlin thought he’d been reading his mind until he realized that Arthur meant the locket. He reached around Ygranna to take it out of her hands, and pushed her hair back so he could fasten it around her neck. "There," he said, "let me see."

Anna turned around, squaring her shoulders in such a perfect imitation of Arthur it almost made Merlin laugh, proudly displaying the locket.

"Perfect," Arthur grinned. "It suits you. Now," he said, tucking the locket into her dress, "you must keep it safe, and never lose it, alright Anna? Merlin would be so upset," he added eyes twinkling. "He might even cry."

"Oy!" Merlin said, and Arthur and Anna turned to him with matching smirks of mischief.

"I shan't," Ygranna said with a giggle. "Don't worry, Merlin. I won't take it off and make you sad." And even though she was smiling, her voice sounded serious. He hoped it wasn't just the tone of a three-year-old's fancying herself important, but that her magic was actually responding to the locket, making her understand how important it was.

"Now what do you say, Ygranna?" Gwen called as she approached. She had stayed silent through their little exchange but was now walking over, coming to stand behind Arthur.

"Oh! Thank you Merlin?" Ygranna said, looking up at her mother enquiringly, and Gwen smiled warmly.

"You're very welcome," Merlin muttered, ruffling her hair as he stood up, Gwen's gaze meeting his own.

"Yes," she said, "thank you, Merlin."

A loud yawn from Arthur, who was still crouched on the floor, made them both look down. "Sorry," he said, "we didn't exactly get much sleep last night."

As if realising what he'd said, Arthur's eyes widened and he looked up at Merlin in alarm. To Merlin's horror he felt his own ears reddening and suddenly felt very, very uncomfortable. Not that they'd really done... much, really, but they could have, and even though Gwen had seemed much more agreeable about him than he'd hoped for...

"What were you doing?" Anna asked, all innocence, and Merlin thought longingly of his tapestries and how easy it would be to just slink through them into the forest on the other side.

"Making this locket for you," Arthur replied smartly, kissing her forehead and standing up, coming to hover awkwardly in between Merlin and Guinevere, seeming as unsure about where to look as Merlin.

It was the impatient huff of breath from Gwen which finally made the two men turn towards her. "Well," she said, "I had a great night of sleep myself. And while you two look exhausted, you look very happy with your... accomplishment." She said, looking way too knowing about it all. Her eyes met Arthur's. "In fact, you look happier than I've seen you in years," she told him quietly.
A small pause, in which Merlin found himself holding his breath. "I am," Arthur finally said, something small and private passing between the King and Queen which would have made Merlin feel very out of place if he hadn't known that they were talking about something which he was very much a part of.

"Merlin," Anna said, breaking the moment, clearly bored of this adult talk. "Can we play now?"

Merlin glanced at Arthur, who returned his look with such an incredible fondness, it was almost too much to bear. Arthur nodded once, seeming a little regretful as he said, "I've actually got to meet my knights to go over a new practice regimen... although I would love nothing more right now than to retire to my chambers," he added, eyebrow lifting slightly and Merlin did his best not to blush like a girl.

"Right," Merlin said, tearing his eyes away from Arthur to Anna, "right, let's play."

"Mommy, will you play with us too?" Ygranna asked Gwen, reaching out a hand.

"I would love to," Gwen said, and the smile she shot Merlin told him two things: one, Guinevere had no illusions as to the nature of Merlin and Arthur's relationship, and two, she was okay with it. Or at least she was trying to be, which just reminded Merlin of what an incredibly big, forgiving heart his Queen truly had. And he loved her so much in that moment.

He thought some of that must have shown on his face because Gwen reached out and squeezed his hand as they moved over to Ygranna's side of the room. Merlin looked over his shoulder to catch Arthur's eye, as the other man looked back over his shoulder before exiting the room. They smiled at each other, and in that moment Merlin thought he had never been happier.

Much later – well, in actuality it had only just gone lunch time, but Merlin was so exhausted it had felt like years – Merlin stumbled back into his chambers. The fact that he hadn't slept all night was taking its toll on him, and all he wanted at that moment was his bed. Well, his bed and...

"Arthur." Merlin's tired face lit up in a smile, because there, sprawled across his bed, was Arthur. The man was snoring softly, one arm over his eyes, looking so peaceful Merlin almost – almost – didn't want to disturb him.

Merlin closed the door quietly, toeing off his boots and swaying slightly as he did so. He moved across the room, crawling onto the bed carefully, trying not to wake the sleeping King in his bed. But as he lay down next to Arthur, facing him on his side, the other man stirred.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked sleepily, his free arm reaching out blindly, and unthinkingly Merlin reached out and laced his own fingers through Arthur's. Arthur's eyes were closed, but his lips tilted up in a smile. "Missed you today," he murmured.

Merlin let out a breath that should have been a laugh if he'd had the energy. "Me too."

"Did you have fun with Anna and Gwen?" One of Arthur's eyes opened to regard him sleepily.

"Mmm," Merlin murmured. The truth was, he really had. For the first time, Merlin was really beginning to believe that Gwen could be okay with him being in Ygranna's life, and Arthur's – and that Gwen herself would be okay, too. This filled him with a happiness he couldn't begin to describe. "How about you?"
Merlin reached out his free hand to ghost over Arthur's face, running a finger lightly down across his eyelid to make Arthur's eye close again.

"Was fine," Arthur mumbled. "Not enough... you."

Arthur's hand tugged weakly on Merlin's and Merlin scooted closer, resting his head on the same pillow as Arthur, their noses brushing together.

"Merlin," Arthur whispered, leaning in to touch his lips to Merlin's; it was the lightest kiss they had exchanged yet, but still it sent Merlin's whole being reeling, a warm feeling settling in his stomach as Arthur's free hand came to rest on the back of his head, drawing him closer.

Merlin opened his mouth to deepen the kiss, and their tongues tangled lazily. Merlin moved even closer and aligned their bodies, pushing his leg in between Arthur's and just letting himself enjoy the closeness, the easy way their bodies fit together as if they'd always meant to be that way.

Arthur moaned deeply into Merlin's mouth, his hand moving through his hair and over his face; his movements slow and heavy, his body warm and pliant, and Merlin found himself melting into the touch.

After a while of tantalizingly slow, lazy kissing, Merlin hummed against Arthur's lips, and with a final soft kiss, Merlin's head fell back to the pillow, already feeling sleep claiming him. Arthur shifted beside him, pulling Merlin fully into his arms and resting his head atop Merlin's.

They fell asleep tangled up in each other, and Merlin's last thought before drifting off was that this, right here, was all he'd ever wanted. And he still couldn't quite believe that it was really happening.

Little did Merlin know that not so far away, Morgana was plotting her most intricate scheme against Camelot yet.

And Merlin may have slowed her down for now, but she would not rest until she had gained the most important chess piece in the game: the child of magic, the princess of Camelot.
Morgana was seething.

She'd had the perfect plan. Everything had been ready. Arthur could not have made it easier for her to defeat him if he'd tried.

When news of Guinevere's pregnancy had first reached Morgana's ears, she had been furious - and the messenger had felt the full extent of that fury, she remembered with vicious satisfaction. But after she had calmed down, the wheels had begun turning in her head.

This child didn't need to mean the end of her dreams, it didn't need to mean the continuation of Arthur's Pendragon line. Because the child would also be of Morgana's blood, and if she could only get to it, snatch it away from Arthur and Gwen's cloying influence, make it see the truth of it all - of Arthur's tyranny, of Guinevere's unearned grandeur, of how horribly mistreated and repressed Morgana had been - then she would have the most powerful ally she could ever hope for.

Morgana would never bear a child, but this became like a light in the darkness, a tiny flicker she could almost reach out and touch, and which lit up her soul in a way which nothing had done since her sister had died.

She would love this child. She would care for it, nurture it as if it were her own. And when it was old enough, she would put a sword in its hand and it would plunge it into Arthur's heart without a second thought, because it would be like her. It would understand.

Perversely, Morgana already loved this child more than she had ever thought she could love anything, and it came to consume her thoughts.

When Ygranna had been born, Morgana had wanted to storm Camelot right then and there, to take her. But Morgana had learned from her mistakes - she would bide her time, and wait for the opportune moment to strike. She would infiltrate the child's life slowly, work her way gently into her mind, and when she finally took her away, Ygranna would throw her arms around her and love her like Morgana loved her.

Then, when she tried, Morgana had discovered that Ygranna had magic. And this had changed everything.

Because it wasn't Morgana's magic running through the child's veins - that had come from Morgana's mother, not her father. No, it was a golden magic, she saw it now, naive and untainted and innocent - and she had seen that magic before. Had felt it, and hated it with every fibre of her being. It was Emrys' magic.

And Emrys was Merlin. That much had become clear when Arthur had made him his Court Sorcerer - choosing his friendship over his father's laws, something he had failed to do for his own sister. Now, Merlin's magic was running through the child, the child with those blue eyes and easy smile, and Morgana understood.

And as her shock had faded, her lips curled up in a cruel smile. "Even better," she had said, stroking her beloved Aithusa with an uncharacteristic gentleness.

But now, Merlin had returned, and he had ruined everything. Because the child was suddenly,
inexplicably, no longer accessible to her. Morgana could no longer feel her presence, no longer reach out and prod her mind with magic.

"I will kill you for this, Emrys," she spoke to the empty throne room in the abandoned castle she now called her home. No, she thought. I'll have Ygranna do it. And make Arthur watch.

And she knew just how to do it.

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MERLIN••••••••••

Merlin woke up much later - he had no idea how long he'd been sleeping, but it was still dark outside, the only light in the room that of the moon shining down from the enchanted ceiling.

For a moment, he felt disoriented, head still thick with sleep - then he felt the pressure of an arm draped around his waist, and a warm body pressed all along his back. He heard soft breathing, and felt the rhythmic puff of air on his neck.

He smiled to himself. "Arthur," he whispered, putting his own hand over Arthur's and rubbing his thumb slowly up and down the back of it.

"Mmmmm," Arthur groaned, his lips touching Merlin's neck as he did so, and Merlin shivered at the touch. He felt the hand below his own tense, and after a moment, tentative lips brushed his neck again - this time with clear intent. "Merlin," Arthur breathed, pressing another light kiss to his neck, angling his head up to lay a kiss closer to Merlin's chin and Merlin couldn't hold back the moan that escaped him. "I thought I was dreaming."

"Definitely real," Merlin gasped, as Arthur's mouth opened and his tongue licked a thin stripe up to his ear, and when Arthur's teeth closed lightly around his earlobe, Merlin arched back - and felt Arthur's very hard erection brush against his arse.

They both groaned at the contact.

"Merlin," Arthur groaned, pulling Merlin back towards him in a rough motion and rolling his hips slowly once, twice, each time sending a jolt of pleasure through Merlin's body. His own cock was straining against his breeches and he was suddenly very, very awake.

"Years," Merlin mumbled, already losing the capacity for speaking full sentences, "years I've wanted this, you, gods," he breathed as Arthur moved against him.

"I've never," Arthur started, his breath hitching, "I've never wanted- not like this-" he paused, sounding like he was trying to hold back a moan, "Merlin, what you do to me... no idea." Arthur's breath was shallow, his movements were becoming more frantic - and Merlin gasped as Arthur's hand traveled down over his stomach, ghosting over his erection, before grabbing it through the fabric.

Merlin's eyes rolled back in his head as Arthur began to stroke him lightly, and he thought fuck, we are actually going to come before even taking off our clothes, when suddenly Arthur took his hand away-

"I want to feel your skin on mine," Arthur breathed into Merlin's ear, and that was possibly the hottest thing he had ever heard.

"Can't you just... you know?" Arthur murmured, pressing open-mouthed kisses to his neck, the very top of his spine, his hands now tracing frustrating and very distracting circles on Merlin's upper thigh.

"I- nggh," Merlin panted, because fuck, how did Arthur expect him to think while he was doing that? But no, this - vitally important things like this - surely was what his magic was made for? Right now anyway, Merlin could think of no better use for it.

A whispered word, and then both men gasped as they found themselves naked on the bed, skin on skin - Merlin felt Arthur shift experimentally against him and Arthur's erection slipped up along the inside of his thigh, leaving behind a wet trail. Merlin groaned, his cock (mercifully unrestrained) twitching in response, and he felt like he was losing his mind.

His body felt like it was on fire where Arthur was touching him, but he wanted, no, needed more. Now that he finally had Arthur, now that he was finally able to do all of this, he was falling apart at the seams with how much he wanted it.

Needing more contact, Merlin turned in Arthur's arms so they were facing each other, and had only a split second to take in Arthur's haggard, almost desperate expression before surging forward and crashing their lips together, swiping his tongue over Arthur's lower lip once before plunging it into his mouth.

Arthur returned the kiss with equal fervour, and moved himself to rest over Merlin's body, his knee sliding between Merlin's legs and causing a delicious friction which had Merlin bucking against him.

Arthur's hands were everywhere; in Merlin's hair, moving across his face, and down his arms, as if trying to memorize every inch of Merlin's skin.

Merlin used the new angle to his own advantage, reaching around to grab Arthur's arse and pull him closer, ever closer, as though he could make them become one being.

"Merlin, I want, I need-" Arthur was panting, his mouth moving over Merlin's cheek and his breath coming out in hot puffs against his cheekbones as he thrust against Merlin's leg.

"Anything, Arthur, anything you want," Merlin whispered into his ear, and groaned as Arthur began mouthing down his neck, sucking at his collarbone, murmuring filthy promises into his skin.

"I love you," Arthur whispered, meeting Merlin's eyes as he kissed his way down his stomach. "Let me show you." And Merlin realised his intention just before Arthur brushed a light, teasing kiss against the head of his cock, Merlin's entire body arching upwards, his hands burrowing into Arthur's hair.

Arthur's eyes never left Merlin's as he slowly, torturously licked a stripe up alone the underside of Merlin's cock before opening his mouth and letting his lips close over the tip. Merlin tried to keep from shaking, moaning, desperately trying not to come at the sight of Arthur like that, at the feel of his mouth slowly taking Merlin in. Merlin watched in mute amazement as Arthur sucked him, hollowing his cheeks and taking him deeper, and it was the most obscenely beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Arthur's tongue was doing impossible, amazing things, while he was taking Merlin all the way down his throat - once, twice, three times - and Merlin resisted the urge to throw his head back, wanting to watch Arthur's mouth working on him. "Arthur," he breathed, his voice breaking, "Arthur, please." And then he was coming, feeling like the world itself was bursting apart at the seams, and Arthur was swallowing him down - and Merlin did have to shut his eyes then, because it was too much, too good.
Not even magic could make him feel like this, he thought hazily, wondrously. Only Arthur. *Only ever Arthur.*

Arthur carried Merlin through his release, then slowly kissed his thigh, his large hand caressing Merlin's arse, palming the flesh, squeezing, making Merlin gasp. Arthur shifted, lifting Merlin's leg up to rest on his hip, and used the new angle to move his own cock against Merlin's in a truly filthy way.

Merlin reached up to grab Arthur's neck, and pulled him down for a wet kiss, tongues sliding over each other. Merlin licked a thin stripe up his cheekbone, resting his lips against Arthur's ear. "I want to feel you inside me," he whispered, and was rewarded when Arthur shivered against him, and turned to claim Merlin's mouth with a new ferocity, biting down on his lower lip and thrusting shallowly against his inner thigh.

Arthur sucked in a breath, his eyes losing focus for a minute as he watched Merlin hungrily. "Do you have any...?" he finally breathed against him, and Merlin nodded weakly at the unspoken question, disentangling his other hand from Arthur's hair and feeling his eyes flash gold, a small bottle flying into his open palm.

His eyes never leaving Arthur's, Merlin used his other hand to pop the cork of the bottle and pour a liberal amount of oil into his hand. He reached down, and both men gasped when Merlin wrapped his hand against Arthur's cock and began slicking up the shaft, preparing him.

Merlin removed his hand and Arthur groaned at the loss of contact, but when he looked down, he saw Merlin move his hands back, towards his hole.

"No," Arthur said raggedly, surprising Merlin when one hand shot out to stop Merlin's movement, "let me."

He held out his hand, and after a beat Merlin realised his intention. He upended the bottle, pouring the rest of the oil onto Arthur's fingers, and then Arthur was shifting above him, hitching Merlin's leg further up onto his hip and Merlin curled his ankle around Arthur's back.

Arthur moved his hand down, hesitating for a split second before gently touching Merlin's opening.

"Fuck, Arthur," Merlin breathed, and he could already feel himself growing hard again, as Arthur gently pushed one finger inside him.

It was tight, and a little painful, but Merlin thought that nothing had ever felt so right. Arthur moved carefully, gently, but if the beads of sweat on his brow and his concentrated expression were any indication, he was just as far gone as Merlin was, struggling to hold himself together.

Merlin could not reach up and kiss Arthur from his current position, so he used his hands to express his desire, running them down Arthur's arms and over his abs, causing the other man to shiver, and finally down to grab his arse as Arthur added a second finger, then a third -

And then he hit a spot within Merlin which had him seeing stars, and Merlin let out an obscenely loud moan which he thought had probably awoken half the castle.

Experimentally, Arthur moved his fingers again, and Merlin whimpered as he hit the same spot for a second time. Arthur's clear wonder and delight at this discovery was almost painful it its beauty, and Merlin found himself grinning suddenly, wonderfully happy, and his hands came back to Arthur's face to touch him gently, reverently. A quiet moment, filled with so much lust and longing, and Merlin and Arthur stared into each other's eyes as Arthur's fingers fucked him slowly, filling him up
and making Merlin achingly hard again. And it was all so good, and it was Arthur, and they had waited far too long to do this.

"You ready?" Arthur murmured, the tremor in his voice betraying his calm demeanour. Merlin nodded mutely, breathlessly, and shivered when Arthur's hands left him - only to swallow audibly and feeling his stomach coil with anticipation as he felt the tip of Arthur's cock brush against his entrance a moment later.

Arthur's eyes didn't leave Merlin's as he entered him - slowly, full of so much control, and Merlin almost came apart right then at the intensity of his gaze.

It was a promise, and a fulfilment of destiny, as Arthur slid into Merlin and both closed their eyes in the sheer ecstasy of the moment, as finally the two became one.

Arthur filled Merlin, and he had never realised how incomplete he had been without Arthur inside him.

Arthur's head dropped down to rest against Merlin's, their foreheads pressing together, and for a moment it was still, and silent, only their ragged breathing filling the room.

Then Arthur began to move.

At first it was slow, slick and oh so delicious, as Arthur set up a torturous pace. Merlin lifted his other leg up to hook his ankles together behind Arthur's back, and gasped at the changed angle, which meant that Arthur was now hitting that spot with every thrust.

"Faster," he breathed, "Arthur, please, faster."

"Merlin," Arthur groaned, and it sounded tense, like a warning.

"I'm good, Arthur, I'm good, just, just move, Arthur," Merlin was seeing stars again, his world exploding, but he didn't want to come yet, he wanted to feel Arthur filling him completely.

Accepting Merlin's words at last, Arthur picked up his pace, and soon he was slamming into Merlin, pushing him into the mattress, and oh, Merlin could do nothing but try to meet Arthur's thrusts, lost to the relentless rhythm as Arthur fucked him hard, all the years of loving and longing pouring into this one, glorious moment.

Arthur's thrusts became faster, shallower still, and when his shoulders began to shake under Merlin's grip, he knew that Arthur was close.

"Come inside me, Arthur," he whispered, and Arthur's head snapped up, his eyes wide and almost black with lust, and he kissed Merlin hard, thrusting his tongue inside his mouth, and then he was coming, spilling his seed inside Merlin, and it was enough to send Merlin over the edge - his second orgasm swept over him like a wave, and for a moment he swore he slipped out of time and space itself, pure pleasure overtaking his senses and sweeping him away.

Only Arthur's lazy, messy kisses against his mouth, his cheeks, his chin and his neck pulled him back.

"I love you so fucking much," Arthur said wondrously, shaking his head and looking at Merlin as if he had never seen anything more beautiful. He lingered above Merlin staying sheathed inside him for one more moment before slipping out, and falling to the bed next to Merlin, panting heavily.

Merlin rolled over to drape himself across Arthur, kissing his jaw. "Mmm," he murmured, too tired to
say actual words. And it wasn't like Arthur didn't already know.

"Messy," Arthur mumbled after a moment. "We should probably..." he gestured vaguely, letting his hand flop down on Merlin's back, clearly as bonelessly tired as Merlin himself.

Merlin breathed a word, and a cold, clean sensation swept over him. Arthur let out a surprised noise but didn't move.

"The perks of sleeping with a sorcerer," Merlin grinned into the skin of Arthur's neck, and Arthur's low chuckle was the last thing he heard before sleep claimed him again.

------------GUINEVERE-------------

Guinevere woke up with a start, Lancelot's name dying on her lips, and she fell back onto her bed, sighing into the darkness.

When she had chosen Arthur, back in what now felt like another age, it had been for all the right reasons: she loved him, he needed her, and perhaps she had been just a little bit enamoured with the idea that the Prince of Camelot himself had chosen her, a servant, over all the beautiful princesses and noblewomen throwing themselves at his feet.

It had always made her deeply uncomfortable, the knowledge that her heart would always be split in two. And looking back on it now, Gwen thought that it probably hadn't been much easier for Arthur, being in the same position with Merlin.

And after everything they'd been through, even if she could not have the love of her life, she was at least glad that Arthur could have his.

Judging from the pale strip of light stealing in past the curtains, Gwen thought it was probably just before dawn.

Sighing, she swung her legs over the side of the bed, knowing that she was not going to be able to go back to sleep now. Her feet bare, she pattered quietly over the cold stone floor to peer down at Ygranna's sleeping form - relieved as ever to see her beloved child unharmed and protected by Merlin's charm, which rested against her chest.

Gwen slipped on a nightgown and toed on her shoes before exiting the chamber quietly - nodding at the guard who had been standing vigil outside to reassure him that everything was as it should be.

As she made her way down the deserted corridor, she reflected how true that statement really was. *Everything is as it should be,* she thought, feeling more content than she had in a long time.

She walked through the quiet castle, aimless, dreading the moment when everyone else would wake up and she would lose her precious solitude. Not that Guinevere did not take great pride and enjoyment in her duties as Queen, but there were times when all she wanted was to remember a simpler time – a time when she had merely been a servant, and no curious eyes had followed her, scrutinizing her, judging her.

Suddenly craving that freedom more than anything, she let her feet guide her down the staircase, towards the kitchens, giggly with the excitement of a much younger woman, remembering the times when she, Elyan and Leon would run through these same corridors laughing and shouting and knowing nothing of the fates that awaited them.

Gwen arrived at the kitchens breathless, fully intent on sneaking in for a quick breakfast which, for once, she would cook for herself... but then, for a moment, her mind went blank. And she blinked
slowly, trying to remember where she had been going and why.

Oh, right... she had been going outside.

But wait, *is that wise?* she wondered, frowning - feeling like there was something very important she was forgetting.

*No, no,* she thought, shaking her head to clear it, she was pretty sure there was nothing... outside was where she needed to go, very important.

She must hurry.

Turning on her heel, Gwen moved away from the kitchen and towards the narrow door which would take her out past the pig sty... she was feeling strange; dazed and lost even as her movements became more sure, and it almost felt like a warm breeze was guiding her, gently moving her along, out through the door.

Something at the back of her mind was telling her that this wasn't right, that she really shouldn't be moving outside the castle... not alone, not at night... but the sensation to carry forward just felt so simple, so wonderful, and she couldn't focus her mind on anything but moving forward, through the servants' quarters, down to the gate leading out towards the fields...

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Gwen blinked slowly, her movements faltering, moving head head slowly to chase the sound, her mind groggy as if she were half asleep.

A guard was moving towards her - *no,* her mind was telling her, *this isn't right,* but he was coming closer...

"My- your highness," the guard called out when the light from his torch reached her face; Gwen flinched back, still feeling a bit like she was moving underwater. "Queen Guinevere, what are you doing out at this hour?"

Gwen opened her mouth, but... it was strange, she mused, because the words just would not come. Wasn't that odd, now?

The guard continued to peer at her, clearly confused, though Guinevere couldn't imagine why. "Your highness?" He prompted.

"Leave me," someone was saying - and oh, it had been herself, how peculiar.

"I... I'm not sure that's such a good idea, Your Grace."

Oh, but it was. Guinevere's face lit up in a serene smile. "I command you to leave me." Her throat worked, her mouth moved and her voice sounded in her ears but it did not feel like she was speaking.

The guard was frowning now, not moving away. He should be moving away... why wasn't he moving away? Gwen felt a little bit lost, but still so warm and safe. It would be better on the other side of the castle walls though...

"My lady, I really think it would be best-" the guard started again, but suddenly a loud blast sounded and the man was slammed back against the wall behind him, his head colliding with the stones with a crack.
Guinevere blinked into the silence.

Good. Now she could keep moving.

She stepped through the gate, and took a deep, settling breath, feeling contentment wash over her once more as she knew she had accomplished her one most vital task...

And there, in the tall grass, stood Morgana.

Gwen's eyes widened. No. That definitely wasn't right. But - no. No, this was bad. What had happened? How did she even get out here? She looked around wildly, suddenly feeling her senses return, understanding in an instant that she had been manipulated into coming out here.

She reached back, desperately, towards the gate - but Morgana snapped her fingers and thin ropes coiled around Guinevere's wrists, binding them together.

"Now, now," Morgana said sweetly, smiling in such a cruel mockery of what the two women had so easily shared in the past, Gwen felt a twist of anger curl in with the quickly mounting panic. "It's been so long, Gwen, it wounds me that you would think to cut our reunion short."

Gwen bristled, the enchantment finally wearing off completely, giving her full command of her mind once more - for all the good it'd do her. "What do you want, Morgana?" To kill me, her mind supplied, and cold dread coiled in her stomach - but above all, such a deep relief that Ygranna was protected.

Morgan's smile widened into something resembling madness (and it probably was). "I simply thought we might have a little chat."

Gwen twisted her hands uselessly. Right. Talk. The servants would be up soon, they were right outside the castle... keep her talking, she thought. Someone will come.

And hopefully that someone would be Merlin - or an army, she thought, trying to hold down her panic. Anything less, and whoever walked through those gates would be doomed. And it'd all be her fault.

"What could you possibly have to say to me?" Gwen spat out, because she couldn't help herself. Even after all this time, it was all still there - the hurt, the heartbreak, the betrayal. Arthur wasn't the only one who had loved and lost Morgana.

But this woman before her was not the girl Gwen had known. It was easy to forget that, when all she'd had were the memories; but this haggard, wild-eyed woman before her now was nothing like the face she saw in her dreams.

Morgana gave a tittering little laugh which sent shivers up and down Gwen's spine. "Oh, my dear Gwen. I suppose I want to thank you, first and foremost, for making me an aunt."

Gwen blanched.

"Yes," Morgana continued, filling the silence, stepping a little closer - Gwen considered trying to run for a split second, before realizing that she'd get nowhere, and that she needed to keep Morgana calm for as long as she could. "Imagine my surprise, when after three long years of marriage, and suddenly the news of your happy condition reached my ears. I was beginning to worry that my dear brother didn't have it in him." Morgana's eyebrow shot upwards, seemingly considering her words, a small smirk tugging at her mouth. "Or maybe he just didn't have it in you."
Gwen might have blushed or fumed at the implication, had she not been desperately trying to think of ways to divert Morgana from the topic of Ygranna - of somehow, if these were to be her last moments, save her daughter from a similar fate. She couldn't care less what Morgana knew or suspected about her and Arthur's marriage.

Morgana seemed to take her silence as acquiescence, however. "What, you can offer no words in defense of your dear husband? My, it seems I have missed a lot since my last visit to Camelot. Tell me," she added, smirking, "how is Merlin these days?"

Guinevere only raised her chin, staring at Morgana in silent defiance.

"Oh, how sweet," Morgana cooed. "You keep their shameful secret, even now. You always had such a forgiving heart." She shook her head, expression morphing into something which almost looked like concern. "Tell me Gwen, do they still let you see her?"

"I- what?" Gwen was so startled by the question, she forgot to stay silent. She quickly shut her mouth, but the damage was done.

Morgana didn't look triumphant though, only worried, and a little sad. Haunted. Gwen wished, not for the first time, that things could have been different.

"They do, don't they? They let you play with her, and braid her hair, and pretend to be her mother."

The anger which surged through her felt almost like relief, a solid point to hold onto. "I am her mother," she said coldly.

Morgana took another step closer, almost close enough to touch. Gwen flinched back, but Morgana didn't move. Only shook her head sadly. "Oh, Gwen, we both know that isn't true. You don't need to hide the truth, not from me. You never did before, remember?"

And Gwen did remember, but she also remembered betrayal, and death, and fire. This was a game, a trick. "She is my daughter," she said, squaring her shoulders.

"Of course she is," Morgana said, with a pitying smile. "For now. But what about in five years, or ten? When Ygranna is old enough to understand, to see the truth for herself? When her real parents get the guts to tell her? Where will that leave you, Gwen? Do you think they'll still want you, an outcast in their little family?"

Gwen swallowed, despite herself. Morgana, for all that she was evil and manipulative, was right. Gwen didn't know what would happen when Ygranna found out. But it was not for Morgana to prey on, this weakness; Gwen wouldn't let her.

"As her mother, as I have always been," she said, through clenched teeth, watching for Morgana's flinch - but it didn't come. Rather, Morgana nodded empathetically, as if she not only agreed, but staunchly believed it.

"Yes, good," Morgana said, encouragingly - and Gwen's eyes narrowed, trying and failing not to be surprised by the strange direction the conversation was headed in. "Yes. A child needs a mother. You are right to stand by her, even after this... horrible betrayal. It just just like you, full of so much love," Morgana breathed, and Gwen thought she saw tears in the other woman's eyes. "You would never turn away family."

Gwen swallowed, sensing a trap... but again, Morgana wasn't wrong. "Unlike you," she said, hating that her voice wavered.
Morgana's laugh was harsh, startlingly cruel after having just addressed Gwen so tenderly. "Unlike Uther, you mean. I just don't want to see you turned away from the people you love like I was, hated for what you are, just because you weren't what they needed you to be."

*That's not how it happened,* a voice inside Guinevere's head tried to protest, but she couldn't bring herself to speak the words.

"Morgana," she said quietly, placatingly, speaking for a moment as though the other woman was simply a small and scared child (which, she realised with a pang, in a lot of ways she was), "What is it you want from me?"

Morgana's voice was surprisingly small when she replied, after a moment. "I want to make sure that you get what you deserve, Gwen. By all rights that child should have been yours." There was a fire in her eyes, and for a moment Guinevere thought it looked fierce, not fearsome. "I can help you. I want to."

"I don't need your help," Gwen said, but her words had no bite. Morgana was evil, yes... but she was also so sad, and probably very alone. How could Guinevere not emphasise?

A single tear fell from Morgana's eye. "Are you sure about that, Gwen?"

To her surprise, Guinevere felt the bonds holding her hands together fall away, and for a moment she just stared down at her hands, not daring to move, waiting for another trap.

After a moment, Morgana spoke. "Go. Go back to your daughter. While you still can." She sounded almost kind, and when Gwen chanced a look in her direction, Morgana was smiling sadly again.

Hardly believing her luck, Gwen turned and began to back away, slowly, not taking her eyes off Morgana - but the other woman just watched her with an unreadable expression in her eyes, and soon enough Gwen was safely back inside the castle walls. And then she turned on her heel, all the terror of her encounter making her weep as she ran, unable to believe how she was able to get through to Morgana after all this time, but deeply relieved that she had.

Outside the gates, Morgana was still smiling.

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"Are you saying that Morgana actually enchanted you to leave the castle?"

Arthur was furious, as she knew he would be. He was pacing the nursery while Gwen sat in her chair by the window, absent-mindedly watching Merlin with Ygranna; he was distracting the child on the other side of the room.

"Guinevere."

Gwen looked up at Arthur's tone, and she was startled by how much worry she saw in his eyes. She sometimes forgot how much he still cared about her.

"Yes," she replied, noticing for the first time that someone - probably Leah - had brought her tea at some point. But it had long since gone cold. "Yes, she put some kind of spell on me... it made me want to go outside, it was as if it was the most important thing in the world."

She looked back up to Arthur to see him regard her curiously. "Do you still feel affected by it?"

Gwen shook her head. "No, it wore off as soon as I left the castle," she shrugged.
Ygranna laughed loudly, and Gwen started; hadn't it been a while since she'd last heard Ygranna laugh like that? Or did she only do it when she was with Merlin?

Arthur followed her gaze, and Gwen's heart clenched at the look of pure tenderness which stole over his features for a moment at the sight of Merlin with his daughter. *Their* daughter.

Unbidden, Morgana's words came to her mind. *Where will that leave you, Gwen?*

She shook her head, trying to clear it. No. Morgana was wrong. She loved Ygranna, and she loved Arthur and Merlin, too. And they loved her, she knew they did. They would make it work - they *were* making it work. Hadn't Gwen done everything she could, after all? Welcomed Merlin with open arms, even giving Arthur her blessing to be with him if he wished?

*And considering the besotted looks they keep shooting each other, it looks like they finally worked it out,* Gwen thought, and tried to push the thought away, but to no avail. Merlin and Arthur were together, she realised - watching as Merlin's eyes were once again drawn to Arthur and he blushed deeply.

The knowledge didn't hurt, exactly, but it did make her wonder. If she were only Ygranna's mother in name, and now only Arthur's wife in name, too... was she really anything at all?

*No. Stop it,* she told herself, closing her eyes, but seeing only Morgana's forlorn expression behind her eyelids.

"I think I need to lie down," Gwen said, ignoring Arthur's concerned look. "Really, I'm fine. A bit shaken up, but nothing a bit of rest won't fix." When Arthur still didn't look appeased, she touched her hand to his, smiling her warmest smile. "Really, Arthur, I'm alright. I'll tell you everything, I promise, I'm just very tired."

"She could have killed you," Arthur breathed out, closing his own hand over hers.

*You would have managed,* she wanted to say, and the thought shocked her - and even after Merlin, Arthur and Ygranna had left the room and she had closed her curtains, lying alone in the darkness, Guinevere couldn't shake the feeling that they probably *would* have.

Deeply unsettled, she slowly drifted off into a fitful sleep. This time her dreams were not of Lancelot, but rather of herself, tearing down empty castle corridors, following the sound of her child's laughter. But Ygranna was nowhere to be found.
Merlin's back was against the wall and his legs were wrapped around Arthur's waist, and Arthur was kissing filthy promises into his mouth, moaning obscenely as Merlin thrust his hips forward.

Arthur's hand encircled Merlin's thigh, pulling his leg closer towards him, causing their cocks to rub together through their breeches - and Arthur let out a truly delicious groan against Merlin's mouth before his lips left his and moved down, nibbling at his chin before licking Merlin's neck, sucking, and oh, that was going to leave a mark, but Merlin only clutched Arthur tighter and used his heel as leverage for rolling his hips forward - and now it was Merlin's turn to gasp.

Merlin shuddered in pleasure at the sensation of being this wrapped up in Arthur, of having his lips touch him, his hand running greedily up his thigh, to cup his arse.

With a grunt, Arthur lifted Merlin from the table and stumbled backwards, simply muttering "Bed," as he went, and soon Merlin found himself thrown heavily onto his mattress, with Arthur following only a second later, coming to rest over Merlin.

To Merlin's surprise, Arthur didn't lean down to kiss him - Arthur simply hovered over him, his breathing ragged, eyes roaming over Merlin's face as though he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

"Having second thoughts?" Merlin laughed breathlessly, trying to quell the mild fear that even after everything, maybe Arthur was.

But Arthur's soft smile was answer enough. "On the contrary," he whispered, leaning down slowly to capture Merlin's lips in a soft, gentle kiss so completely unlike the passionate ones they had just shared - and Merlin had to stop being so worried, he realised. With everything else that was going on, this was one thing he could finally be sure of.

The kiss was sweet, and intense in a completely different way than he had been expecting, and Merlin brought up a hand to caress Arthur's cheek softly as they pulled away, now smiling too.

"You sure?" Merlin asked, though he now felt confident what the answer would be.

"My only regret is not having done this sooner," Arthur whispered. "When I'm with you, Merlin, I feel... this feels so right. I want this, you, Merlin. Only you," he breathed, leaning in for another kiss - deeper than before, Arthur's tongue mapping Merlin's mouth with a new intensity.

Arthur moved his mouth from Merlin's again, this time to lick a stripe from his ear down to his collarbone, stopping at the places that made Merlin shudder with pleasure and giving them extra attention. He moved away again to run his hands down and up under Merlin's shirt, and Merlin lifted his torso off the bed to help Arthur slide the fabric over his head. He helped Arthur get his shirt off too, and then they moved onto their breeches, giggling as Arthur's fingers caught in the laces and Merlin had to help untangle them.

Finally they were naked, and for a moment they just took each other in, Arthur sitting in Merlin's lap and both panting heavily.

"Merlin," Arthur breathed as his hands gripped his hips and pushed Merlin back down onto the bed, digging in just past the point of pain. Merlin arched into the touch, shivering as Arthur's mouth
closed around a nipple, sucking and licking before moving lower, mapping his stomach and dipping the tip of his tongue into Merlin's navel before finally coming to rest just over his cock. Merlin sucked in a breath as his eyes caught Arthur's; the other man was gazing up at him with such intensity and arousal, yet clearly waiting for Merlin's permission, even now.

Nodding once, Merlin groaned as he watched Arthur's mouth close around his cock, and Merlin's hands found Arthur's hair as his wet mouth began moving up and down, licking, sucking, his tongue swirling around the head before taking him deep, hollowing his cheeks and humming in a way that had Merlin arching off the bed. The first time had been amazing, but this... Arthur was clearly a very fast learner.

"Arthur," he warned, "Arthur, I'm gonna-" Like the last time, Arthur didn't pull away, and Merlin felt himself shatter into a million pieces as he came, spilling into Arthur's mouth and watching through lidded eyes as Arthur swallowed around him. It was the hottest thing Merlin had ever seen.

Merlin was still reeling when Arthur moved up his body again, and captured Merlin's lips in a searing kiss; Merlin could taste himself on Arthur's tongue.

Arthur was still hard, and he was moving against Merlin's leg, seeking friction. Merlin reached a hand down and Arthur hissed into his mouth when his hand wrapped around Arthur's cock. Merlin stroked up and down experimentally a few times, before finding his rhythm and beginning to pump Arthur in earnest. Arthur was moaning into his mouth, his hips jerking as he thrust into Merlin's hand - but then Merlin slowed his ministrations, and Arthur's eyes flew open with a frustrated grunt. Merlin smiled mischievously, his movements almost coming to a full stop.

"Merlin," Arthur started, but Merlin only smiled more widely, and before Arthur knew what was happening Merlin had flipped them over, coming to rest over a surprised Arthur.

"It's my turn," Merlin only said, and Arthur's expression changed into one of such pure want, Merlin felt his spent cock twitch, and had to pause for a moment before continuing.

Like Arthur had done to him, Merlin began to kiss and lick his way slowly down Arthur's chest, being sure to take his time exploring; Arthur's body was finally his to touch, to hold to pleasure, and he was going to take his time finding out just what made Arthur make those delicious noises like he did when - oh, and there it was, the noise, and Merlin licked the nipple again, feeling Arthur's hands tighten in his hair. He grinned against Arthur's chest.

Realising what this must be doing to Arthur, Merlin regretfully left the nipple behind and continued downwards, finally stopping over Arthur's cock, letting his breath ghost over it and secretly enjoying the way in which Arthur was trying - and failing - to remain patient underneath him.

Deciding to end his suffering, Merlin kissed the tip of Arthur's cock lightly, and felt Arthur's whole body shudder. He then opened his mouth and slowly guided Arthur inside him, using his tongue to caress the underside of his cock and his hand to caress Arthur's balls. Arthur moaned and did his best not to thrust up into Merlin's mouth, and having already been brought to the edge once before, it took only a few more moments before he was coming. Merlin didn't pull away, sucking and swallowing down Arthur's come until there was nothing left, and guiding Arthur through his the aftershocks of his orgasm.

With a final groan, Arthur collapsed back against the mattress, and Merlin pulled his mouth off of him before sliding up Arthur's body and laying his head on the other man's chest. After a moment, Arthur's hand came up to trace lazy circles on Merlin's arm, and he sighed contentedly into the silence.
Merlin looked up to see Arthur smiling down at him, his hair ruffled and his lips red and swollen, and Merlin was struck by the happiness he felt in that moment. Even with everything that was happening, the threats they faced and everything that still needed to be said between them, this was everything Merlin had not dared hope for since finding out how Arthur felt about him three years ago. And here they were at last.

Suddenly, a frown stole over Arthur's face. "What is it, Arthur?" Merlin asked.

"I'm worried about Morgana."

Merlin chuckled, even as he used his finger to smooth down the frown lines above Arthur's brows. "You're thinking about Morgana right now?" he asked, and even though his tone was light, Merlin felt the worry too.

Arthur rolled his eyes, amusement causing some of the tension to leave his features. "What are we going to do, Merlin?"

He sounded so lost, so helpless, and so sure that Merlin would have all the answers. Merlin sighed heavily, hand moving idly through Arthur's hair as he considered the question.

What were they going to do, indeed. Merlin and Arthur were both formidable fighters in their own right, and together some might call them unstoppable - but if it was just a question of taking the fight to Morgana, they would have done it years ago.

Merlin's magic was spectacular, he had long ago accepted that as fact. But as a High Priestess of the Old Religion, Morgana had powers of her own; powers of concealment and of deception that cloaked her even to Merlin.

And knowing now that she could control someone, even someone with a strong of a mind as Guinevere, was worrying. Even if Merlin had protected Ygranna, who was to say that Morgana couldn't enchant someone else - Gwen, or Leah, or even Arthur - to pick her up and carry her outside? Merlin had to wonder why she hadn't just done that in the first place, and realised that more than anything, worried about the fact that he couldn't figure out what she was playing at.

If she wanted to kill Anna, surely she would have done so, he had to acknowledge to himself. She could have found a way, just as she could have killed Gwen that morning. But she hadn't. Why?

At least Merlin and Gaius had been able to work out that the spell Morgana was using to control minds could only work on one person at a time. Therefore they had tripled the guard outside of Anna's room, and no one - not even Leah or Gwen - were allowed to take her anywhere alone. It was a temporary measure, like the charm, but it was the best they could do.

Merlin had even offered to sleep in Anna's room himself, but Guinevere had refused, reminding him that they still needed to tread carefully; as far as the rest of the castle's inhabitants were concerned, there was no connection between himself and the child other than the fact that they both had magic.

It had hurt, Merlin had to admit that to himself, but Gwen had a point, and in the end he had to acquiesce. At least for now, Merlin must continue to play the part of the sorcerer, not of the parent, and he was happy to do it if it ensured Anna's future happiness. He just hoped he could also keep her safe.

"I wish I knew," he finally spoke into the darkness, but Arthur had already fallen asleep. And Merlin soon followed, comforted by the steady thump-thump of Arthur's heart.

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The next morning, Merlin awoke to the feeling of Arthur wrapped around him - and yes, he thought, he could get used to this.

In no hurry to get out of bed, Merlin only snuggled closer into Arthur's warmth, and felt Arthur's arm tighten around his waist.


"Is it?" Merlin replied sleepily, wishing it wasn't.

"Afraid so," Arthur replied, kissing the back of Merlin's neck softly, lingering for a moment before beginning to move away.

"Where are you going?" Merlin couldn't help but ask, turning to lie on his back as he watched Arthur sit up and stretch.

Arthur looked down at Merlin, and smiled regretfully before leaning down and kissing him softly. "One of the less enjoyable aspects of running a kingdom, Merlin, is that one actually has to get out of bed in the mornings," he said, but his tone was light, and Merlin rolled his eyes.

"Prat," Merlin said fondly.

"But your prat, and you love me," Arthur only replied, taking Merlin's hand and kissing it before moving off the bed, and Merlin was left staring after him with what he was sure was a ridiculous grin on his face.

That was the moment when the door burst open and Leah stormed in, her eyes wide and frightened - she didn't even seem to notice that Arthur was naked or had hastily jumped behind a chair in a wild attempt to hide his modesty.

"Sire! Merlin! You must come quickly, please!" Leah wailed, and Merlin and Arthur shared one brief, panicked look. "It's, it's..." she shook her head, eyes welling up with tears. "The Queen, Guinevere, she's... she took Ygranna. I tried to stop her, I just, I'm so sorry," she was outright sobbing now, but Merlin didn't notice, his vision dimming as his ears filled up with a ringing noise, hardly hearing Leah when she spoke the words his mind was refusing to comprehend. "They're gone."

Arthur tore down the hallways, needing to see it for himself even though he already knew that it must be true. Yet he simply refused to believe it.

He had still been pulling on his breeches as he stumbled from Merlin's rooms, and the laces of his tunic remained untied, but he didn't care - the furthest thought from Arthur's mind right now was how this must look to anyone who saw him.

He didn't slow down for anyone, and he didn't look back - he didn't need to, to know that Merlin was right behind him.

Bursting into Gwen and Ygranna's chambers, Arthur stopped dead as he surveyed the scene.

The room was empty.
No sign of a disturbance. Not a hair seemed out of place. But there was no Gwen, and no Ygranna. He heard Merlin's broken exhale from behind him, and Leah's quiet sobs, and he knew.

His daughter was gone.

Arthur allowed himself one moment. He was the King, he was Ygranna's father, but he let himself have one moment of wild, mind-numbing panic, eyes falling on his child's empty bed and feeling an ache inside him like he never thought possible.

Then he closed his eyes, forced his chest to fill up with air, and blew it out slowly through his mouth. When he turned to face Merlin and Leah, it was not as Arthur, but as the King of Camelot.

"Where are the guards?" He asked calmly, strategically. Wherever they had gone, Arthur must follow.

Leah seemed to be trying to pull herself together in a similar way, but was not as successful; her voice shook when she replied, "I sent them off to alert the knights, Sire."

Arthur nodded. "Good. We must dispatch search parties immediately, everywhere. Merlin," he added, finally turning to face the other man and steeling himself for whatever he might see on Merlin's face.

He still wasn't quite prepared for the raw pain he saw on Merlin's face, which displayed every one of Merlin's emotions plain as day: fear, grief, worry, and guilt. But Arthur would have to deal with all of that later.

"Merlin," Arthur tried again, his voice softening. Merlin's eyes were wide, unfocused, but they met his own. "I need you to reach out with your magic."

Merlin began to shake his head, looking so broken it almost broke Arthur in turn. "I can't. If she's with Morgana, Arthur, you know I can't..."

"But the charm, Merlin," Arthur said, putting a hand on Merlin's shoulder and feeling it shake beneath him. "You told me before, you can find the charm. Remember?"

Merlin's eyes drifted down to Arthur's hand for a second, then something seemed to shift in his gaze. When he looked back up, it was with a new focus. And this, more than anything else, gave Arthur a glimmer of hope.

••••••••••GUINEVERE••••••••••

She hadn't been planning to do it. Even as she had awoken in the night, dazedly walked over to her daughter's bed and gently picked up the sleeping child, she had not been planning to do it.

Nor when she had exited the chamber and found herself confronted with guards, only to command them in her most authoritative tone that she needed Gaius' assistance immediately, and had reminded the reluctant men that she could have them whipped for their insolence.

It was not until she was back at the kitchens, like the previous night, and one again saw the ghostly echoes of her younger self with her brother and best friend racing along the corridor, laughing and happy, that she realised what she was doing. That she would never have told the guards those things,
or taken Ygranna out of the safety of their chambers. This wasn't her. And yet, this realisation must mean that it was her, mustn't it?

And in that moment, she knew she could turn around.

Even if this was Morgana's enchantment, even if this was part of her plan, this was Guinevere's loophole.

Morgana was calling to her in her mind. There was a clarity there, so crystal clear that Gwen knew it must be an enchantment, that all she needed was to go outside the castle walls like last time and everything would be alright. But it was different from before, because Gwen was recognising it for what it was, and she knew that Morgana was holding back. For some reason, she was allowing Guinevere to think, to pause, to question what was happening.

And as Gwen stood there in front of the kitchens, she did pause. She knew she shouldn't take Ygranna outside the castle. She knew it was dangerous, and wrong, and against all of her instincts as a mother and as the Queen of Camelot.

But then she looked down at the sleeping child in her arms, and her memories shifted, transforming before her eyes and transporting her back to a long time ago, to a moment in which she had been happier than she would ever be again.

She saw herself in the tiny house where she used to live, being sung to sleep by her father. She saw her own face, so full of love and trust and devotion. Those visions were strange, seeming a little too real in front of her eyes, but the memories that accompanied them were her own. Gwen remembered the fierce love she had felt for her father, and she remembered the mother that had left her - and how she had felt nothing for that mother. No hate, nor resentment for leaving her behind. All she had ever needed was her father.

Would Ygranna be the same, if Gwen left her behind? Would she even remember that she had ever had a mother, with Arthur and Merlin ready to raise her and love her and make her laugh in that wonderful way?

Guinevere could not allow her daughter to grow up like she did, believing that she didn't need a mother.

*Don't let them take her away from you*, a voice spoke in her mind, and she wasn't sure if it was Morgana or her own subconscious speaking to her.

Unnerved, afraid, Gwen shook her head. *No*, she thought, head head spinning, *they wouldn't.*

*Wouldn't they?*

Guinevere gasped as another vision filled her mind: of an older Ygranna, blue eyes shining and a brilliant smile lighting up her face, holding the hands of both of her fathers as a crown was placed on her blonde locks. Gwen was nowhere to be seen.

The vision left her and Guinevere was left alone in the dark hallway, holding her child in her arms. Her harsh breathing was the only sound which penetrated the silence.

She hesitated. She should turn and run, back to the guards, back to the safety of her chambers. She should call for Arthur, for Merlin, for anyone to help.

Instead, Guinevere took a small, uncertain step forward.
Then her eyes widened as she realised what she had just done, what she had just considered doing, and she made to turn - but it had been enough. Morgana's spell swept over her again, clouding her senses, and she lost control of her mind completely.

••••••••••MERLIN••••••••••

He could feel her. He could feel Ygranna's energy, pulsating golden and bright and content, and he wanted to laugh and scream and cry all at once.

He did none of those things, only opened his eyes and searched out Arthur's face among the small crowd of knights that had gathered around him. Merlin nodded, once, and then Arthur took charge, ordering the horses to be saddled and commanding his men into action.

Merlin knew where Ygranna was, but he could not teleport there. Morgana was blocking him, but it didn't matter. Arthur could get him there.

His faith in the other man was staggering, and even more staggering was the fact that Merlin knew Arthur's faith in him was just as strong. Arthur was trusting him with his - no, with *their* child.

It was all that kept him from falling apart.

••••••••••GUINEVERE••••••••••

"Mummy, where are we going?"

Ygranna had woken up and was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, blinking owlishly, eyes reflecting the light of the torches.

No guards stopped Gwen this time and she suspected that Morgana had had a hand in that, too.

"To see a friend, my darling," she said, and as the words left her mouth she was shaken by how true those words felt, even when she knew them to be lies.

She knew what she was doing, where she was going. But there was no resistance left in her mind. *It was your choice*, that calm, wonderful, soothing voice spoke in her head. *Yes*, she thought, vaguely, *yes, of course.*

Gwen exited through the tiny gate and was not surprised to see Morgana waiting on the other side, a relieved and joyful smile on her face - a smile which, once upon a time, Gwen had associated with all things good and right in the world.

She only had a moment to take in the scene before her, eyes widening in panic as Morgana's iron hold on her mind loosened, before the other woman raised her hand and muttered a spell - and Guinevere's world dissolved into darkness.

••••••••••ARTHUR••••••••••

Merlin was riding hard just ahead of him and it was all Arthur could do to hang on as his horse was propelled forward at breakneck speed, seemingly as determined as Merlin and Arthur to reach their destination. Or maybe it was magic.

Merlin would get him to Ygranna. He had to keep telling himself that. He could not think about Guinevere right now - he did not know if it was possible that she could still be alive, or imagine why Morgana would possibly need her, but he would have to save his panic for later. Until they found Morgana and knew exactly what had happened, he could not let himself lose hope for either his child
They had been riding for more than an hour, but the horses were not tiring. This was definitely magic, and Arthur had never welcomed it more. It was just him, Merlin, Gwaine, Leon and Percival, as they had quickly decided that a stealth attack was the best option. Morgana might not know about Ygranna's charmed necklace, and they had to bank on the fact that she would therefore not see them coming.

As they neared a steep cliff wall, Arthur's heart began to sink. He had a sneaking suspicion that they were not going to be able to go around it or find a natural way up. And no matter what Merlin had done to the horses, he doubted that he could make them fly.

Arthur's suspicion was proven right when, with the cliff only a short distance away, Merlin pulled on his horse's reins so hard the horse reared - but Merlin was already jumping off and running the last bit of distance to the wall, and Arthur could see the desperation and panic welling within him even before he let out a horrible yell and punched into the wall so hard, Arthur heard a crack even as he dismounted his own horse and broke into a run.

He reached Merlin as the other man was collapsing against the cliff wall, cradling his broken hand to his chest and sobbing.

"Arthur, she's up there," he was saying, and it took everything Arthur had not to join Merlin in his panic. "I can't get up there, Arthur, how are we going to get up there?"

Not caring the slightest bit about his knights, Arthur enveloped Merlin in a tight hug, running his hands down his back soothingly.

"Shhh, Merlin," he said, ignoring the way his heart was hammering wildly and trying to get his breathing under control. "You can do it, I know you can. You don't need horses. I know how powerful you are. Just focus. You can do this."

And even though they were only words, even though his intention had been to soothe the other man, Arthur truly believed it. He had such complete faith in the other man, and maybe that should worry him - but how could it? It was Merlin. His Merlin. "You can do this," he repeated softly, pressing a kiss to the top of Merlin's head.

Merlin stilled beneath him. His breathing became more steady, and a few whispered words sent a wave of heat through the hand that was resting against Arthur's tunic. After a moment, Merlin raised his head from Arthur's chest, and Arthur drew in a sharp breath when he realised that Merlin's eyes were glowing gold. He would never get used to that sight, so beautiful and terrifying all at the same time.

"You're right," Merlin said, his voice determined. "I won't lose her, Arthur, not again. I will get us there."

"I know you will," Arthur said, believing it. Willing Merlin to believe it.

Merlin nodded once, then moved back, out of Arthur's embrace, and got to his feet - a little shakily, but his head was held high. Arthur followed Merlin with his eyes as the other man moved away from the cliff wall, past the knights (who had been hovering uncertainly by the horses watching the exchange), and out onto the open field. For a wild moment, Arthur thought maybe Merlin was just going to just keep going, until Merlin's voice - strong and sure and nothing like what Arthur knew - filled the silence.
"O drakon, e male so ftengometta tesd'hup'anankes!" Merlin called, his head cast skyward, his arms spread wide and commanding.

For a moment, nothing happened.

And then the dragon arrived.

Arthur sprang to his feet and his sword was halfway out of his scabbard before he realised what he was doing. He knew about the dragon, of course, he knew how his father had killed its kind and kept it imprisoned, and he knew how Merlin had set it free.

Still. Seeing it now, when last time he encountered it he had been fighting for his life, it was a shock.

The dragon landed in front of Merlin and, absurdly, bowed. Well, Merlin was a Dragonlord, and Arthur knew what that meant, but... the idea of anyone bowing to Merlin would probably always strike Arthur as bizarre. Under different circumstances, he might even have laughed.

As it was, he just edged slowly closer, his hand still on the hilt of his sword. For all he knew, the dragon might turn on Merlin, and if that happened Arthur wanted to be able to protect him the best he could. He would not lose another person he loved today.

But Merlin was talking to it, imploring it, insisting that he needed to get up onto that cliff. Promising the dragon that this was the last thing he would ever ask of it, which seemed to Arthur a rash choice, but one he would have made himself in a heartbeat.

And the dragon responded, in a strange, echoing voice, and Arthur wasn't sure if he was hearing it out loud or in his own mind. "Merlin, I am old," the dragon said, and Arthur thought he heard regret in its voice. "The time for me to assist you on your quests is, I am afraid, over."

"No," Merlin said, shaking his head desperately as Arthur slipped up to his side, hoping that his arm pressing against Merlin's would offer him a bit of support. "No, Kilgharrah, please, you have to help us!"

"Us?" the dragon asked curiously, acknowledging Arthur with a slight incline of its enormous head. "I see. I am pleased for you, young warlock. It seems you have finally discovered your destiny. But this is one task you will have to solve on your own. I cannot help you rescue your Queen."

Merlin looked so distraught, so broken. But damn it if Arthur was going to let some overgrown lizard stand in the way of him getting up that wall.

"Dragon," he called, trying to sound as intimidating as he could even though the beast could obviously incinerate him where he stood. "Please. We know we are asking a lot, but this is the most important thing Merlin will ever ask you to do. After everything, it is on your honour to assist him."

"Young Pendragon. Your destiny has been unclear to me for some time now," the dragon said, addressing him directly for the first time. "I do not know what lies ahead for you anymore, and it would not be wise for me to interfere any more than I already have."

"You claim to be some great dragon, but yet you would refuse your Dragonlord's request?" Arthur shouted, anger welling up inside him, and he was hoping he didn't imagine the slight bowing of the dragon's head, as if in shame. "Kilgharrah," he tried again, imploring, "I do not know you. I know what my father did to you, but I am not my father. Which I suspect you know already."

"Our child," he said, unnecessarily, but he needed the dragon to know. To understand.
Someone sucked in a surprised breath behind him, and he wondered which of his knights had not yet put the pieces together himself. It didn't matter right now. If they ever did get Ygranna back, Arthur would never again hide who she really was, what she really meant. He would never deny Merlin the right to love her as freely as he did himself.

The dragon was silent for a long time. "A child. I did not know," he said slowly, speculatively, gold eyes flickering between Arthur and Merlin. "This was not foretold." He sounded almost accusatory, as though someone had unexpectedly changed the ending of his favourite story.

"Please, Kilgharrah," Merlin whispered. "I am begging you. No. I am telling you. Take us to the top of this cliff. Help us save Ygranna."

There was a silence. Then the dragon nodded. Arthur sagged against Merlin slightly in relief.

"I can only manage to carry the two of you. And only to the top of the cliff. I fear that this shall be my final journey." The dragon paused. "But I am glad of this news. This changes everything." Arthur thought he saw a flicker of relief in the dragon's eyes as they fell on him again. "For both of you."

Merlin nodded as if he understood what the dragon was saying (and maybe he did - maybe there were still some things that Merlin hadn't told Arthur after all), and a tentative smile lit up his face. "Let's go," he said.

And before Arthur knew it, he found himself on the dragon's back, his arms tight around Merlin's waist, pressing into his reassuring warmth as the ground disappeared beneath them and they soared upwards into the sky.
Gwen groaned as she slowly opened her eyes, blinking against the harsh light of the midday sun. She lifted her head gingerly from the floor, still disoriented, and looked around in confusion. She was lying in a strip of light, in what seemed to be an otherwise dank and dark throne room. Cobwebs hung from the pillars and moth-eaten tapestries, and candle stubs were left unlit in ancient, broken chandeliers.

Slowly she eased herself up, using her arms to push off the floor and stand, turning in a circle, shaking her head slightly to clear it.

Suddenly, Gwen remembered everything.

"Ygranna!" she cried, feeling an unbearable desperation welling up as she spun around the circle - quickly realising that she was alone. "Ygranna! Where are you?!"

Her voice echoed ominously through the cavernous hall, the last syllables of her cry reverberating all around her. And then there was only silence.

Guinevere raced down the room to the large door at the end, only to find it locked. She sobbed, her fists colliding with the unyielding wood, chanting her daughter’s name - but still, no response.

"No," she breathed, falling to her knees, tears obscuring her vision, hands shaking while she feebly tried to push at the door. "No, no, I take it back," she breathed, "I take it back. I take it back!" She was sobbing in earnest now, pain and regret stronger than she had ever felt paralysing her. Morgana had taken her child. Gwen had let it happen. "Ygranna," she tried again, pounding uselessly at the door even as she knew it was futile, "can you hear me? Please, where are you? YGRANNA!"

Her only answer was the ghostly echo of her own voice, which responded with a mocking chant of Anna...Anna...Anna.

As he and Arthur clambered off Kilgharrah’s back, Merlin took a moment to turn back and smile. He knew that the dragon's time was near, he felt it, and even if right now his entire being was aching to find his daughter, there would come a time when he would cry for his old friend.

Kilgharrah nodded solemnly, and they both knew that this was goodbye.

He began to turn around, but Kilgharrah's voice in his head made him pause. He knew from glancing round at Arthur and seeing his confused look that he couldn't hear it this time.

Well done, young warlock, for everything you were hoping for has come true.

How? Ygranna is still with Morgana, Merlin thought desperately. A chuckle sounded in his mind.

Ah yes, the child. A very unconventional method of altering destiny, I grant you, but it seems to have worked. Arthur's fate has been unclear to me for a long time, and now I know why. You prevented his downfall, young warlock. But now the rest is up to you.

Even despite everything, Merlin felt a deep sense of relief flood through him as he heard
confirmation of what the dragon had implied before. That Arthur's prophesied death had been avoided, that Ygranna's birth had changed all of their futures.

*Thank you, Kilgharrah,* he thought.

*No, young warlock, thank you. For reminding me that there is still strength to be found in the hearts of men. And love. I think I had quite forgotten.*

Merlin smiled, feeling his eyes well up with tears. *Goodbye.*

*Goodbye, Merlin. And good luck.*

And Merlin turned to face Arthur, who raised his eyebrows in question. Merlin nodded, and they took off, already knowing their destination: the old, foreboding castle was looming before them - and Merlin knew that Ygranna was within.

----------GUINEVERE----------

There was no way out. She had tried everything. Now Guinevere was pacing, like a trapped animal, beside herself with worry.

Morgana had her child.

Gwen knew that no matter what, Morgana would have forced this, she would have found a way to get Ygranna - but that one, tiny step, that had been her. Even for a moment, Guinevere had wavered, and she had wondered: *what if?*

And Morgana had *wanted* her to wonder, and to take that step. She had been manipulating her, yes, but why? If she could have just taken Ygranna at any time, why do it this way?

Why was Gwen even still alive?

Her only hope was Merlin and Arthur. They would come for them, Gwen knew. Or... they would come for Ygranna, at least. She didn't want to think about the rest - the most important thing was getting out their child, anything else had to come second. She hoped that they understood this.

So wrapped up in her panic was she that she did not notice anything different until the loud, clear voice of a child cut through the silence.

"Mummy?"

Gwen spun on her heel and gasped - there, out of nowhere, was Ygranna. Just... standing there.

Something was wrong.

"Mummy?" Ygranna called again, reaching out a hand. She did not otherwise move.

Guinevere was fighting every natural instinct to run to her daughter. She knew Morgana, and the games she played - she would not fall for it again.

"Sweetheart," she called anxiously, approaching slowly. "Are you alright?"

"Mummy? Where are you?" Ygranna called. She looked... empty. Wrong.

Gwen swallowed. Only a few feet away from her daughter, she stopped. Ygranna was looking straight at her, her eyes a blinding gold - but she wasn't *seeing* Gwen.
"I'm right here," Gwen said softly, her voice breaking as fresh tears welled up in her eyes. "Ygranna, I'm right here."

"Mummy?"

Gwen took a deep breath. Ygranna's hand was still outstretched. Carefully, Gwen reached out her own hand, and touched Ygranna's - or tried. When their hands met, Gwen's passed through Ygranna's flesh as if it were smoke. Her daughter didn't even flinch.

"Ygranna, can you hear me?" Gwen whispered, already knowing the answer.

There was no reply. Ygranna only stood there, still as a statue. She looked so lost, so frightened. So alone.

Gwen felt her heart break, and her hand came to cover her mouth as she fought to bite back the sobs that were wrecking her body. She had never felt so helpless.

"Morgana!" Gwen called. "Morgana, tell me what you want! Please, just stop this! Morgana!"

There was silence. Except for the slowly receding echo of her own voice, chanting.

Anna...Anna...Anna.

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ARTHUR••••••••••

Arthur had a bad feeling about this.

He and Merlin approached the large, seemingly abandoned structure warily, Merlin feeling out for any traps with his magic... and so far finding nothing.

Had Morgana really believed that she could hide herself so effectively that she didn't need defences?

Somehow, knowing Morgana, Arthur didn't think so.

Still, what could they do? Their daughter was in there. Needing them to rescue her.

And Guinevere. If she was still alive. Arthur swallowed, trying to clear his mind. Reminding himself of his mantra: one thing at a time.

Merlin was slightly ahead of him, his hands outstretched, feeling for magical barriers. But he turned his head as if sensing Arthur's distress, his golden eyes meeting Arthur's.

Arthur nodded, and Merlin gave him a tight smile in response. Worried, but confident.

"Merlin," Arthur whispered, not sure what he was going to say until Merlin stopped and turned fully to face him, his eyes turning back into that wonderful, familiar blue. Just like Ygranna's.

Arthur swallowed. "Listen, Merlin... if anything happens in there, if it's a question of making a choice..."


"No, Merlin," Arthur said, the hand not holding Excalibur coming out to rest on Merlin's arm, gripping it right. "You must promise me, you take Ygranna to safety before you do anything else. Do you understand?"
Merlin opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked angry. "I can protect all of you, you know I can," he finally said. "My magic-"

Arthur shook his head. "No, Merlin. This is our daughter. I'm not taking any chances. And neither should you." He didn't mean for it to come out as an admonishment, and when Merlin flinched away from his touch, eyes darkening, Arthur sighed. "I know you are powerful, Merlin. I just... I just need to know that you'll protect Ygranna, no matter what."

Merlin was silent for a moment, his eyes not meeting Arthur's and for a moment Arthur thought he wouldn't answer.

When he did, his voice was quiet but firm. "I will."

Merlin’s eyes met Arthur's, and there was a promise there. There was fierceness, stubbornness, and above all staggering loyalty, and it was everything Arthur had always loved about Merlin - even before he recognised the emotion for what it was.

Arthur surged forward, hand curling around the back of Merlin's neck as he drew the other man in for a passionate kiss. Merlin let out a surprised breath but quickly responded to the kiss, licking his way into Arthur's mouth and drawing his body close.

Only when breathing was becoming an absolute necessity did they draw away, and Arthur leaned his forehead against Merlin's, keeping him close for another moment.

"You have to promise too," Merlin breathed, his voice shaky.

Arthur wasn't sure what hope he could possibly have of rescuing anyone, if Merlin was down and Morgana was still standing. But he nodded fiercely nonetheless, needing to offer Merlin the same assurance as he himself had needed. "Of course. I promise."

Regretfully, Arthur released his hold on Merlin, but he did not look away. Merlin's eyes didn't leave Arthur's as they slowly turned golden once more, and they let themselves look for a moment longer, drawing strength from each other.

Staring at him like that, with magic in his eyes, Arthur felt like Merlin was staring straight into his soul. And when Merlin looked away at last, Arthur felt a little bit empty.

But as they carried on, he felt his resolve strengthen. Because Arthur wasn't facing this alone. He had Merlin with him, as he always would. Everything would be alright.

It had to be.

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GUINEVERE••••••••••

When the door creaked open at last, Guinevere rushed towards it immediately - only to be blasted back by an invisible force. She fell to the floor, her back colliding painfully with the stone, but she jumped to her feet immediately, adrenaline spurring her on.

When Morgana entered, alone, Gwen let out a yell of fury, but she could not move.

"Where is she?!" Guinevere exclaimed.

"Relax," Morgana smiled - actually smiled, the nerve - "she is safe. As I have shown you."

Gwen shook her head vehemently. "You showed me a mirage - a mockery of my daughter. I want to
Morgana narrowed her eyes, regarding Gwen with a calculating look for a moment before her face rather abruptly broke into a wide grin. "Well of course. That is why I brought you here, after all."

A snap of her fingers and Ygranna appeared before Gwen, sitting on the floor, her eyes wide as she looked around. When she spotted her mother, she let out a cry, and Gwen was on her in an instant as the invisible bonds loosened.

"Ygranna," Gwen breathed, hugging her daughter close, "did she hurt you? Are you alright?"
Pulling back to grab her daughter's head between her hands, Gwen searched her face - but aside from the frightened look in her eyes, Ygranna appeared unharmed.

"I'm... I'm fine," Ygranna whispered, and Gwen let out a sigh of relief, hugging the child to her again.

"See?" Morgana's voice came from somewhere beyond them, sounding much too pleased about it all. "I kept her safe?"
Gwen's head snapped up. "What?"
Morgana looked almost like a little child herself, gleeful and proud as though she had accomplished something great. "I wanted to prove to you that I could look after her too, Gwen. That she will be safe here."

"Safe?" Gwen cried, trying and failing to keep her voice quiet for Ygranna's benefit. "She will never be safe with you."

If Gwen's words stung Morgana, she didn't show it. "Yet you brought her to me, did you not?"

"You did this to me," Gwen accused, but she couldn't stop her voice from shaking as a horrible feeling of guilt swept over her. "You manipulated me."

"Please, I only nudged you along," Morgana said, shrugging. Then her eyes fell on Ygranna, who was hiding her face in Gwen's neck now, and Gwen's heart felt like it was ready to burst.

Morgana's grin was wide and frightening as she just looked at them, taking them in and it felt like a violation - but somehow Gwen knew that she would not harm them. She wouldn't have gone through all this trouble, if that was her goal. Hadn't she just proved how absurdly easy targets they had been, blinded by a misguided notion that Morgana would never dare to make a move this bold?

But even knowing that she was not about to die, it felt like she was hovering on the edge of an abyss and her arms tightened around Ygranna.

"She wasn't very talkative before," Morgana said, edging closer, looking at Ygranna as though she were a particularly delicious meal and Morgana hadn't eaten in weeks. "I was hoping you would introduce me to my niece properly."

"Stay away from us, Morgana," Guinevere hissed, rising and stepping backwards, pulling Ygranna with her. She hated her own weakness, hated that Morgana had found a way to exploit her fears, but she would not let herself be beguiled by false visions again.

Morgana's eyes narrowed cruelly. "Don't go soft on me now, Gwen. I did this to help you."

"Oh god," Gwen breathed, "you honestly believe that, don't you?"
"It's the truth," Morgana said. "I offered you a way out, and you took it. I gave you a choice."

"A choice!" Gwen said, her voice a little hysterical. "You forced those memories on me, you planted them there. In my mind."

"It doesn't matter, they were still true," Morgana shrugged. "I know you, Gwen. I know your heart. I know how easy you love, and how quick you are to give up your own happiness to make other people's dreams come true. I won't let you do it again."

Guinevere didn't have to ask to know that Morgana was talking about Lancelot, and about the fact that she had chosen Arthur because Arthur had needed her more than Lancelot had. But it didn't matter now.

"You have sacrificed enough, Gwen," Morgana whispered, shaking her head sadly. "I know what you think of me. And you have every right to hate me. But I am trying to make it right. I am trying to give you the future which Merlin and Arthur denied you."

And the most horrible thing was that in that moment, Guinevere knew that Morgana truly believed in what she was saying.

At the sound of Merlin and Arthur's names, Ygranna raised her head, and her eyes were full of tears. "I want my daddy," she whispered brokenly, and Gwen felt her own tears blur her vision.

"See?" Morgana whispered.

And Gwen did see. She saw it all, quite clearly. Morgana was right; Ygranna would grow up loving her fathers. And who knew where it would leave Gwen?

But it didn't matter.

"This is not your choice to make, Morgana," she breathed, tearing her eyes away from her child. "And it is not mine either. I will not allow you to take Ygranna away from her home."

Morgana's face hardened. "Too late, Gwen. If you haven't noticed, we are no longer at her home. You carried her from it yourself."

"You made me," Gwen whispered.

"It doesn't matter now. You have shown me what is really in your heart, however much you try to deny it. And that was all I needed from you. You are terrified of losing your daughter, Gwen, and I don't blame you. And they will take her away from you, you know," Morgana whispered, and in her eyes Gwen saw that same haunted, harrowed look as when Morgana had still been her Lady Morgana, and had woken up from one of her prophetic dreams, desperately willing Gwen to believe what she had Seen.

"Mummy, what is she talking about?" Ygranna breathed, and Gwen closed her eyes. *Please, no.*

"Why don't you tell her the truth, Guinevere?" Morgana asked, voice soft. "Let's see if she'll still cling to you like that once she knows. Are you willing to take that chance?"

"Please," Gwen said, hating how her voice broke on the word, "please, Morgana, she is only a child."

"We were all children once, Gwen. Innocence ends. You should know that better than anyone."
But hadn't she promised herself that it would be different for Ygranna? Hadn't she promised herself that this child would be loved in a way that none of the people who raised her had ever been?

Whatever Morgana claimed to have Seen, whatever vision she had shown Guinevere, Arthur and Merlin would let her love Ygranna. She knew they would. They had promised.

"I am her mother," she said fiercely. "That is the only truth she needs."

To her surprise, Morgana smiled. "If that is truly what you believe, Gwen, then your choice will be easy to make." She paused, and Guinevere knew what she was going to say before she spoke the words. "Ygranna is my family now. She is staying here with me. But you are free to go. Only..." she trailed off, turning her head so the sunlight caught her face, and for a moment Morgana looked as pure and as beautiful as she had once done. "I don't want to break up any more families. So I hope you will stay here, with us. We will raise her together." She paused, her eyes searching Gwen's. "They would never let you keep her. But I will."

Gwen swallowed, her eyes falling to Ygranna, whose arms were around Gwen's legs now, hair covering her face as she clung to her mother. In that moment, Guinevere knew that there were no spells affecting her. No manipulations, or enchantments.

And she knew that Morgana was telling the truth.

**********ARTHUR**********

Arthur stayed close to Merlin's side as they entered the castle. Once inside, Merlin stood still for a moment, his eyes closed.

Then he nodded once to himself and motioned for Arthur to follow him. Arthur did, raising his sword in front of him and setting his jaw. Whatever they were about to face, they would defeat it. They would save their family.

Merlin edged towards a giant door which could only lead to the castle's throne room, and Arthur thought he heard voices within. Gwen, he thought, trying not to let hope cloud his senses. She might still be alive.

Merlin turned towards Arthur again, and his eyes were back to normal. He put his hand on the door, a silent question. Are you ready?

Arthur nodded. Merlin pushed the door open.

Breaking into the room, Arthur's trained eyes took in the scene immediately. The throne room was large, dark and abandoned - save for the three people huddled close together towards the other end.

He recognised Guinevere at once, standing in her white night gown. Ygranna was in her arms, blonde hair catching rays of the waning sunlight through a thin window and shining golden in the gloom.

And with them was Morgana. Her hand was outstretched, and it looked like she had been petting Ygranna's hair.

And Guinevere had let her?

Arthur's eyes narrowed. What was happening?

Having turned at the sound of the door opening, Morgana and Gwen were facing Merlin and Arthur
with matching looks of shock on their faces. Ygranna stared, wide-eyed, but didn't say a word. Probably frightened beyond belief, Arthur realised with a pang.

"Morgana," he called, raising his sword and hoping his voice didn't waver. "Let Guinevere and the child go. I promise that if you do, no harm shall come to you."

Morgana's laughter rang out high and shrill, the sound bouncing off the walls. Merlin shifted restlessly beside Arthur, but otherwise stayed still, alert. Waiting.

"You have come in vain, my dear brother," Morgana called triumphantly. "Your daughter belongs to me now. She will have two mothers now, instead of two fathers."

Merlin's sharp intake of breath was the only sound which followed Morgana's proclamation.

"You can't honestly expect-" Arthur began, after a moment, but to his surprise, Guinevere cut him off.

"Arthur," she called, her voice trembling. "Arthur, I'm sorry. But I'm going to stay with Morgana. She will keep us safe, I promise."

Arthur's mouth dropped open. "You have been bespelled," he breathed, brokenly, even as he doubted his own words. "Guinevere would never betray me like this."

"Betray you like you did her, you mean?" Morgana called cruelly, stepping forward, as if to shield Gwen and Ygranna with her body. "You should be ashamed of yourself, trying to make me promises, when we all know that you can't keep them."

Arthur felt Merlin shift next to him again, and he knew how much this must be upsetting him - he didn't have Arthur's years of training, didn't know how to block his emotions in the thick of battle. Arthur put his free hand out and hoped that Merlin took the hint.

"Guinevere knows that I care about her," Arthur said, looking beyond Morgana to seek Gwen's eyes - but she was avoiding his gaze. "We both do."

"And yet," Morgana said, a cruel smile twisting at her mouth, "you stand here now, with your lover beside you, ready to take her child away."

This time, it was Merlin who responded. "No more games, Morgana. Gwen is coming with us," he said, his voice surprisingly strong. "They both are."

Morgana's eyes narrowed as her eyes shifted from Arthur to Merlin. "That is where you are wrong, Emrys," she spat. "Because I have shown Guinevere the truth. I have shown her what is really in your hearts. You want the child for yourselves."

"What?" Merlin cried, and Arthur winced. Don't fall for it, Merlin. "We would never."

"Oh, but you will," Morgana said. "I have Seen it. When everyone knows the truth about Ygranna's parentage, there will no longer be a need for Gwen. And I think you knew that all along, didn't you, Emrys? Only biding your time."

Arthur fought the urge to take his eyes off Morgana to see how Merlin was reacting to this. He couldn't show such weakness. But he longed to reach out, to assure Merlin that he did not believe any of this - even if, unfathomably, Gwen did.

"Gwen, please," Merlin called after a moment, sounding broken. "You can't believe it, this is
"Morgana is right, Merlin," Gwen responded, sounding heartbroken - but resolute, Arthur noted with a sinking feeling. "For so many years, you both lied to me. I trusted you, hoping that you would not hurt me any more than you already had, but..." her voice broke. "Morgana has never lied to me. And I'm sorry, but I can't lose Ygranna. She is all I have left. Surely you understand that I would do anything to keep her safe."

And as she spoke the last words, Guinevere's eyes found Arthur's.

She nodded, once.

And Arthur understood.

"Merlin, now!" Arthur called and he dashed forward. As Morgana lifted her hand to cast a spell, Guinevere set Ygranna down and ran forward, pushing into Morgana and sending them both crashing to the floor.

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw Merlin moving, impossibly fast, towards Ygranna, and he thanked the gods that Merlin had managed to catch on so quickly.

On the floor, Morgana and Gwen were locked in a struggle, Guinevere trying to hold down Morgana's hands to avoid being blasted back - but Arthur knew it was only a couple of seconds before Morgana's eyes would turn gold and...

He ran.

Merlin reached Ygranna just before Arthur reached Gwen and Morgana, and for one impossibly long second, his eyes met Arthur's.

Go! Arthur tried to tell Merlin with his eyes, hoping that he understood.

Merlin hesitated for the briefest of moments. Then his eyes flashed gold, and he and Ygranna were gone.

That was the moment when Morgana flung Gwen off with a scream and launched herself at Arthur instead.

----------GUINEVERE----------

Ygranna is safe. Ygranna is safe. Ygranna is safe.

Gwen ached all over, her body protesting, but she managed to raise herself off the floor by sheer force of will, that one all-important thought giving her strength.

It had worked. Morgana had let her guard down. Merlin had taken Ygranna away. Her child would be okay.

She allowed herself only a moment to be terrified for herself before seeing Morgana advancing on Arthur. He was holding Excalibur out in front of him but he was backing up; the look in Morgana's eyes was purely predatory.

"I could kill you where you stood," Morgana hissed and Gwen's eyes widened; she struggled to make her legs work, to pull herself to her feet, but she had no strength left.

"Why don't you?" Arthur taunted, his voice hoarse but full of confidence. Clearly feeling the same
sense of relief as Gwen.

For a moment, Guinevere saw everything in Arthur that she once had, everything that she had fallen in love with.

"Morgana!" Gwen called, and Morgana spun around to face her, her eyes narrowing. Gwen fought against the urge to flinch back; she was on the floor, defenseless. But it didn't matter, not anymore.

"You," Morgana sneered, nothing but hatred in her eyes. "I wanted to give you everything, and you betrayed me! You truly are a Pendragon, aren't you?"

Morgana raised her hand, her eyes the colour of molten gold.

Guinevere's eyes met Arthur's terrified ones, and she hoped he understood. She hoped, when Ygranna asked him, that he would tell her that she had been brave.

She hoped that Ygranna would not resent her for not being able to watch her grow up.

"NO!" Arthur cried, charging forward, sword raised - and as the spell formed on Morgana's lips, the point of Excalibur burst from her chest. And for one moment, Morgana's eyes simply widened, her eyes finding Gwen's. She looked surprised - and oddly relieved.

Morgana smiled. Gwen gasped as her mind filled up with a terrible sound, almost like a scream... but the sound receded, and she heard Morgana's voice in her head.

One final gift for you, Guinevere. So you will remember how much I loved you.

And Morgana twisted her head, her eyes still golden, and faced Arthur.

Even as she fell backwards, Morgana's final spell flowed out of her, and Gwen could almost see the tendrils of magic wrapping around a shocked Arthur.

Morgana fell, and Excalibur slipped from her body like a knife sliding through butter. Guinevere followed her fall with her eyes, unable to believe what she was seeing - until the loud clatter of Excalibur hitting the floor startled her, and she looked up to meet Arthur's eyes.

But Arthur had fallen to his knees, his breathing laboured.

No, Guinevere thought, and she struggled to her feet, swaying and falling but not caring as she rushed to Arthur's side as fast as she could, no, no, please, Morgana, I did not ask for this, she thought desperately, even as she knew that the voice was no longer there.

She reached Arthur's side after what felt like forever, and she grasped his shoulders, trying to keep him upright even as he tilted forward. His eyes were closed now, and she wasn't sure he even noticed her arrival.

"Arthur," Guinevere called, shaking him, refusing to believe what was happening. "Arthur! Arthur, come back to me," she called, "please, Arthur, you have to stay. For Ygranna. For Merlin." She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, but she couldn't calm down; she didn't know what to do. "They need you. We need you," she whispered, willing her words to reach him, to help him hold on.

She did not know when she had started crying, only that her vision was blurred by tears. Arthur was so heavy in her arms, and she was so weak, she couldn't hold him up. "Arthur," she breathed again, willing him to move. But there was no response.
We were going to be a family.

Merlin appeared with Ygranna in front of the knights, terrifying the horses. Percival and Leon ran to calm them down while Gwaine ran towards Merlin immediately, alarm and concern on his otherwise so carefree features.

Merlin took a deep breath as he held Ygranna, relishing the fact that she was alright, that she was out of Morgana's reach. He kissed her forehead, trying to ignore the way she shook in his arms, and told her that she was safe, that the knights would protect her.

Ygranna only clung to his neck and refused to let go. Merlin had to pry her arms away and his heart broke as she let out an anguished wail, begging him not to leave her. But she was safe. He had to go.

Gwaine held her as she cried and thrashed, and he told Merlin to go bring his family home, that he would protect Ygranna with his life.

Merlin believed him. So he went.

He had been able to teleport out of the throne room, of course, already being in the presence of Morgana and therefore unaffected by her cloaking spells. But Merlin was surprised to find that there was no resistance as he pushed against her enchantment again - he had been ready to unleash every little bit of power he had in him to get up there, even if it meant losing himself in the process, but it seemed he didn't have to.

He transported himself back inside the throne room, ready to face down Morgana.

But the only sounds penetrating the silence were Gwen's sobs as she knelt over Arthur's body, which lay unmoving on the floor.
This could not be happening.

Merlin sank to his knees next to Gwen, his eyes wide and unseeing. His mind simply refusing to believe.

They had won. Morgana was dead. Ygranna was safe. Gwen was alive.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

He felt for Arthur's pulse, desperately hoping, and - yes - there it was, but it was so weak. Arthur was dying.

Merlin felt out with his magic - this was a spell, surely he must be able to reverse it.

But somewhere inside of him, his magic already knew that there was nothing he could do. Merlin had never encountered this spell before, but from studying magic with the Druids, he knew exactly what Morgana had done.

It was like she had planted a seed of darkness, inside of Arthur, and its roots were spreading out through his body, slowly suffocating him. It was sapping Arthur's life force, and there was no way of stopping it.

Merlin's own magic was like water pouring over a stone. The darkness was impenetrable. Arthur's essence was being diluted, his presence in this world obliterated, bit by tiny bit - the spell was designed, Merlin knew, to work slowly. To make Arthur suffer. To make the ones who loved him watch him die.

"Merlin," Gwen whispered, putting a hand on his arm. Her voice was raw, devoid of emotion. She knew what was happening as well as he did. "Merlin, it's too late."

But it couldn't be. Merlin and Arthur had just found each other. Everything had been fine, no, better than fine - they were supposed to have forever. Together, with their child, at last, and there was so much left to do. So much life left to live. It wasn't supposed to end like this.

Merlin shut his eyes, trying to will every bit of magic inside of him to respond, to find a way.

He would not lose Arthur now. He would do anything, lose everything, he would give in to his magic and soar away and never come back if it meant giving Arthur even the faintest chance...

"Merlin!" Gwen's voice rang out, sharp and clear and Merlin's eyes snapped open as he was jarred back to reality.

Merlin felt hands on his face and found his head being turned forcibly, away from Arthur. His eyes met Gwen's, and the look he found there shocked him.

He had expected despair, sadness, maybe even pity. But what he found instead was strength and resolve. Iron. Guinevere was every inch the Queen which Merlin had always known she could be.
That was a sobering thought - because, he realised in that moment, she had accepted what was happening. She was steeling herself for carrying on without Arthur.

Merlin did not think he could ever be that strong.

"Merlin," Gwen said again, "you can't help him."

And Merlin realised in that moment that she was right. Arthur's life was slipping away, and as much as Merlin wanted to, he could not anchor Arthur to this earth.

But he couldn't risk losing himself, too. Ygranna was out there, waiting for him to return to her. Needing him. He closed his eyes, nodding, trying to pull himself together. He had a daughter, and he had promised Arthur to take care of her. He would. They would. He put his hand over Gwen's.

"We need to get him back to Camelot," Merlin said, his own voice hollow.

At least he could transport them there by magic, he thought, sparing Morgana's broken body a brief look before pulling Gwen to her feet. He wondered if the dragon would come if he tried to call it again - and if Kilgharrah would even have the strength to carry them at all.

A surge of anger welled up inside Merlin as he thought of the dragon, and its final words to him.

Hadn't Kilgharrah told him that he had succeeded? That he had saved Arthur, prevented his fate? How could it all end here? Merlin had prevented the prophecy. Ygranna was the variable, the unexpected element.

But... wait.

Merlin's eyes snapped to Arthur's body, eyes flashing golden again as his magic trickled out to feel into Arthur's bones, to see the tendrils of dark magic still weaving their way through him.

Ygranna was the variable. Ygranna had been born, an impossibility made possible out of magic and love. Within her, Merlin's golden essence and Arthur's red one had weaved together and created a brand new life - and the magic within her was not just Merlin's, he knew, it was very much her own. And some of it came from within Arthur's own spirit, and the magic which had brought about his own conception.

Merlin could not be Arthur's anchor to the mortal world. But Ygranna was Arthur, as she was Merlin; she was solid and real and Arthur's life flowed within her veins.

"Gwen," Merlin breathed, not taking his eyes off Arthur's body. "We need to get to Camelot. Now."

And he gripped Guinevere's hand tight, enveloping all three of them in the spell, and closed his eyes.

Merlin transported them to Ygranna's rooms, confused for a moment upon finding them empty, until he remembered that Gwaine and the others would still be making their way back with her.

He focused his magic and sought out the charm. Yes, there she was.

He let himself disappear again, ignoring Guinevere's cry of alarm. There was no time. He trusted her to take care of Arthur until he was back. He trusted Arthur to hang on.

Appearing in the middle of a field, of course, startled the galloping horses again, but Merlin put out his hand and stopped Gwaine's horse from rearing.
"Merlin!" Gwaine called in alarm as his horse froze and he was jostled forward - but he kept his arms locked tightly around Ygranna, whose head was buried in his chest.

"Gwaine, I need to take her with me," Merlin intoned, his voice sounding devoid of emotion to his own ears. Think like a knight, he told himself. Do what Arthur would do.

Gwaine was off his horse in a second, hurrying towards Merlin with Ygranna. "Merlin, what happened?" he asked, alarmed. Behind him, Leon and Percival were getting off their horses too.

Merlin felt bad for leaving them like this. But he had no time.

"I'll tell you later," he said, reaching out for Ygranna.

"Merlin," Ygranna whimpered, and extended her arms towards him.

"Hey sweetheart," he said, willing his voice back into something that sounded vaguely reassuring as Ygranna clambered into his arms. "Are you alright?"

"I didn't want you to leave me," she mumbled into his neck. "I was so scared."

"Hey," Merlin said, taking a deep breath, ignoring Gwaine's concerned look. "Listen, Anna, you're safe now. Do you trust me?"

She lifted her head and nodded, with a seriousness far beyond her years.

"I need to take you somewhere again," Merlin said. "Back to the castle. Arthur, your father..." he took a deep breath, hating that he had to tell her this. "He is very sick, Ygranna."

He was thankful for Gwaine's silence, even though he could see the knight tense up out of the corner of his eye.

"What is wrong with him?" Ygranna asked, wide eyes filling up with tears.

"I... I don't know. But he wants to see you. He's sleeping right now, but we need to go."

He hated lying to her. But this was important, and though what he had planned was in no way dangerous for her, he did not want his daughter to be scared.

She might already have to suffer the loss of a parent tonight. The last thing Merlin wanted to do was to add to her trauma. But he would hate himself forever if he didn't try - and he suspected, once Ygranna was old enough to understand, that she would hate him too.

"Okay," Ygranna said after a moment, looking more resolute than any three-year-old had a right to look. "I'm ready."

Maybe it was her magic speaking, Merlin wondered as he touched her cheek for a moment, hoping he looked more calm than he felt. Maybe her magic recognised the gravity of the situation and was guiding her along.

He still had so much to learn about the extent of her powers. But he was hoping that he was right about his current hypothesis.

Merlin spared one final look at Gwaine, and saw that the knight's eyes had filled up with tears. But he had no words of reassurance for his friend. He didn't want to give him false hope.

"I'll see you back home," Merlin simply said, letting the magic sweep over him again.
When Merlin appeared with Ygranna, Gwen's heart sank; she was sure that he had taken her to say goodbye.

"Merlin," she said sharply, trying to pull herself together. "I really don't think-"

But Merlin was barreling past her, carrying Ygranna to Arthur, who Gwen had managed to deposit on the bed with the help of a terrified Leah.

"Daddy," Ygranna cried when she saw Arthur's prone form, and Gwen's hand came to cover her mouth as she stared, horror-struck, at the scene before her. What was Merlin playing at?

"Hey, hey, listen," Merlin mumbled, setting Ygranna down to stand on the edge of the bed, lowering himself to meet her tearful eyes. "Remember I told you that your daddy is sick?" She nodded mutely. "He wanted you to hold his hand, Anna, alright? Can you do that? Can you hold his hand?"

A silence. Then Ygranna nodded again, and Merlin smiled softly, reassuringly, picking her up and setting her down on the floor, letting her make her way to Arthur's side on her own.

Gwen wanted to protest, she wanted to take her child and get her away from this terrible moment in time in which her father was dying - but something in Merlin's tone stopped her. When she moved closer, Merlin's head turned and a silent communication passed between them.

Merlin had a plan.

And Guinevere knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he would never do anything to harm Ygranna. Not even for Arthur.

She nodded. Not that she was sure he was actually waiting for her consent, but she was happy to give it nonetheless. Gwen hadn't realised until this moment how implicitly she trusted Merlin - and she knew that no matter what happened tonight, this was her family now. She had made the right choice - no, there had never really been a choice at all.

This had to work. It had to.

He watched anxiously as Ygranna's hand clasped Arthur's, hating himself for putting all his hopes on the child - but it wasn't her, he reminded himself, it was her magic. Her existence.

Merlin could not imagine a world in which this didn't work, in which Arthur would not be with them as they saw Ygranna grow up. But he knew they could, him and Gwen, of course they could. He just refused to believe that they would have to.

For a moment, nothing happened. Merlin resisted the urge to reach out with his magic; this had to happen on its own.

Arthur's life, on its own, existed only within himself. The spell was targeting this essence, and the darkness was claiming him - but Ygranna's life was separate from his, yet intrinsically linked. Just as Merlin had designed this room to repel all magic but his own, and this had automatically included Ygranna's, too. Just as the charm around her neck responded to her own magical signature - and Merlin's by extension. Because even if their magic was different, at the core it was the same.

His blood ran in her veins. She tethered him to time and space, kept him grounded in reality, in the
mortal life. Surely, the same must be true for Arthur.

And so he waited. And Gwen waited. And Ygranna, curiously, seemed to be waiting too, because she had not moved since taking Arthur's hand in hers.

And then - Arthur's hand twitched.

Gwen's gasp broke the stunned silence and both she and Merlin hurried forward to crown Arthur's bed, on either side of Ygranna.

When he opened his eyes, they took a moment to focus – and as he regarded Merlin, Ygranna and Gwen, he frowned in confusion.

"Why are you all looking at me like that?" he croaked. Merlin wanted to laugh and cry all at the same time, and from the sound of Gwen's stifled sob, she was feeling much the same way.

"Daddy!" Ygranna cried happily, and launched herself onto the bed. Arthur laughed, though he still looked very confused about it all, and allowed Ygranna to snuggle against his side, curling his arm around her.

"Ygranna, thank god," Arthur breathed, and his eyes met Merlin's and Gwen's in turn, filled with gratitude now. "You saved her." He smiled, reaching out with his free hand to grasp Merlin's. "I knew you would."

Merlin let out a watery chuckle. "I made you a promise, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Arthur whispered, "you did."

They stared at each other for a long moment, and Merlin finally let everything sink in at last - Ygranna was safe. Arthur was alive. Still weak, clearly, as the darkness was still inside him, but it was quickly receding as Arthur's own life force was fighting back from all sides now. It would soon be gone completely. And they had Ygranna to thank.

One day, when she was older, Merlin would tell her all about the day she saved her father's life. But not today. Because at last, she was back where she belonged, and she was safe in her father's arms, protected against all evil as children should be. As Merlin would now make sure Anna would be, for as long as she would let him.

Arthur's eyes were drooping closed, but his grip on Merlin's hand tightened. "I don't remember what happened," he confessed, and his eyes flickered between Merlin and Gwen worriedly. "Morgana-"

"Is gone," Gwen said, and when Merlin turned to meet her eyes, she was grinning. "It's finally over."

Arthur's smile was brilliant, then, and he tugged Ygranna closer. "And we are all here," he stated, as if he could hardly believe it either. "We actually made it."

"Yes, Arthur," Guinevere breathed, reaching out her own hand to cover Arthur and Merlin's joined ones, "we made it."

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When Merlin woke up, he was confused.

He wasn't sure what had been dreams and what had been reality - and, wait, this definitely wasn't his bed.
He frowned. Something heavy was on his arm.

He turned his head, squinting against the bright light which definitely didn't hit him like that from the window in his own chamber - and frowned in confusion at the sight before him.

There, curled into his side and resting her head on his arm, was Ygranna. Behind her, slightly tucked in around her, was Arthur. He was lying on his side facing them, and one of his hands had entwined with Merlin's in the night. Merlin surmised it must have been Arthur's doing, since his own hand was numb at this point and probably unable to entwine with anything of its own accord. He smiled at the sight - he could get used to waking up this way, even if it meant a permanent twinge in his arm.

Feeling the sheets pull slightly against him, Merlin turned his head - and did a double take when he realised that on his other side, Guinevere was sleeping peacefully, her breathing deep and even.

Then the events of the previous day came back to him, and he had to close his eyes against the onslaught of memories.

Finding out Ygranna and Guinevere were gone. Realising that Morgana had taken them. Chasing after them, flying on Kilgharrah, saving Ygranna. Discovering Arthur's body in the throne room. Coming home. Ygranna's magic saving Arthur.

And at that point, after everything, they had all been too exhausted to do anything but sleep. Arthur had drifted off not soon after waking, his body completely drained of energy from having to fight off the darkness; Ygranna had gone through a massive trauma, and luckily she had been too exhausted to be scared, falling asleep in Arthur's arms.

And Merlin and Gwen had grinned at each other then, sharing a happiness so overwhelming, and knowing in that moment that everything would truly be alright. When Gwen had offered that Merlin share the bed with Anna and Arthur, he had been too tired and relieved to refuse - but when she herself had made to retire to her and Arthur's old shared chambers, Merlin would have none of it.

"None of us should be alone tonight, Gwen," he had said, and scooted closer to Ygranna and Arthur, making a space for her on the bed.

The fact that she had agreed with a relieved smile of her own was all the confirmation that Merlin had ever needed that she not only accepted the reality of their complicated situation, but that even after everything they had been through, she still very much wanted to be a part of it.

He smiled to himself. They really were an odd little family. But they would make it work. Because with so much love between them, how could they not?

•••••••••• ARTHUR ••••••••••

Arthur woke up to someone poking him in the ribs. And it hurt. He felt like he'd had a jousting match with a troll and lost.

"Merlin, get off," he grumbled, trying to squirm away from the pressure - only to find himself almost falling off the edge of the mattress and grabbing tightly onto - wait, whose hand is that? - to keep himself balanced on the bed, his eyes flying open in alarm.

The sight that greeted Arthur would have been enough to send him over the edge if he hadn't already been holding on to something.

Ygranna was leaning over him, her golden hair falling in a tangled mess down over her face. She was regarding him with a curious expression, her eyes slightly narrowed. He realised that she must
have been the one poking him.

Behind Ygranna, Merlin was yawning, blinking at Arthur and Ygranna, a stupid smile on his face (which, at any other time, Arthur would probably kiss off his mouth). And behind Merlin... was Gwen. Her head was propped up on her hand, and she was watching the scene with amusement despite clearly having just woken up herself.

"Don't be silly, daddy, I'm not Merlin," Ygranna stated, hands on her hips.

He sighed, but he couldn't stop the grin that was forming on his own face. "What?!" he asked in mock outrage. "And here I go thinking Merlin is a girl again."

"Oy," Merlin muttered sleepily, and Ygranna giggled.

"Daddy," Anna said after a moment, "Why are you and Merlin holding hands?"

Oh. Arthur looked down to find that his hand was, indeed, still entwined with Merlin's. Neither of them had let go, even after Arthur had probably squeezed it rather forcefully to keep himself on the bed.

Arthur's eyes met Merlin's, and they both blushed. Behind them, Gwen coughed pointedly.

"I think the answer to that question is rather long overdue, don't you, boys?" Guinevere said, smirking.

Ygranna looked between the three of them with innocent, wide-eyed confusion.

Arthur sighed. Merlin caught his eye and shrugged, in that hapless way he sometimes did, and Arthur felt something give way in his chest, feeling simultaneously like anxiety and relief. Guinevere was right: it was time, finally, for the truth.

Sitting up on the bed, Arthur let go of Merlin's hand regretfully, in order to lift Ygranna up into his lap.

"Anna," he started, "there are some things you need to know, about... about Merlin. And me. And your mum. But just know, sweetheart, that we all love you, alright?"

Ygranna rolled her eyes. "Of course you love me, silly."

Merlin laughed - half nervous, half joyful. Arthur could only imagine how much he had been anticipating and dreading this moment.

"Yes," Arthur nodded, "yes, we do. But Anna, see, you know how everybody has a mother and a father..." he took a deep breath. "Well, in your case, you actually have two fathers. Myself, of course, and Merlin."

For a moment, Ygranna was silent, her brow furrowed as she considered this new information.

Arthur was pretty sure that both Gwen and Merlin were holding their breath.

Then Ygranna jumped off Arthur's lap and launched herself at Merlin. "I get two daddies!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around him, and Merlin let out a surprised gasp - he shot Arthur a happy grin before letting himself embrace his daughter, burying his face in her hair.

Guinevere was smiling too, tears in her eyes, and she touched Merlin's arm softly. After a moment Merlin extracted himself slightly from Ygranna, his own eyes suspiciously wet, and pulled Gwen
into the hug, too.

Merlin's eyes met Arthur's over the girls' heads, and he quirked an eyebrow. **Well?** his expression seemed to say. **You might as well...**

And Arthur laughed as he threw his arms around Merlin and Gwen, trapping Ygranna in the middle. She giggled, and he felt his heart expand.

They would need to tell the court now. They would need to face everyone with the truth. They would need to accept that there would be resistance against Merlin, against Ygranna, and maybe even against Arthur himself.

But whatever happened, they would face it together. And they would emerge victorious, from whatever battle they had to fight to keep their family together. Arthur had never been so sure about anything in his life.

----------MERLIN----------

*Three months later*

Merlin was watching through the window in his and Arthur's new joint chambers as Gwen, Leah and Ygranna played in the gardens. It seemed like he was always smiling these days, and right now was no exception.

So wrapped up in his own happiness was he that he didn't notice Arthur get out of bed before the other man was right behind him, wrapping his bare arms around Merlin's waist and pulling him back against his chest.

Merlin leaned back into Arthur, *hmmm-*ing his contentment as Arthur pressed an open-mouthed kiss against his neck.

"What are you thinking about?" Arthur murmured, his breath ghosting over Merlin's ear, making Merlin shiver.

"You," Merlin murmured, turning around in Arthur's arms and kissing him softly, his hands snaking into Arthur's hair. After a while, they pulled away. "And our daughter. And how she'll grow up to be just as stubborn and proud as you, and as arrogant, and as hot-tempered, and as stupidly noble..." He laughed as Arthur pouted. "And how much I'll love her for it, just as I love you."

Arthur's laugh carried into his kiss, and Merlin felt like it was filling him up, as if Arthur was pouring his own happiness into him.

The kiss turned from tender to urgent very quickly, and before he knew it, Merlin was backed up against the wall, and Arthur was hard against his thigh.

"I want you," Arthur panted, and Merlin ran his hands down Arthur's back, enjoying the way he could make Arthur's breath hitch *just so.*

"You have me," Merlin whispered. "Forever."

And forever was only just beginning.

----------GUINEVERE----------

One day, Arthur came to Gwen, looking like he was gearing up for a spectacularly awkward conversation.
"Guinevere," he greeted, shuffling his feet and looking stuffier and more unsure than she'd seen him in a long time. "I just wanted to say - I mean, that is, Merlin and I were talking and I wanted - we wanted to let you know..."

"Arthur, come, sit down," Gwen laughed, taking pity on him and taking his hand, pulling him down to sit next to her by the window. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Arthur sat, but he fidgeted still, not quite able to meet Gwen's eyes. "It's only... I know we've sorted everything out now, kind of, and-" his eyes darted to hers only to fall to his hands again, "-and you've been so gracious, accepting my feelings for Merlin. I don't think I have ever met anyone as understanding as you, Gwen, you have been truly extraordinary and I'm still not sure I deserve it."

She reached out and took his hand, and was relieved when he didn't flinch away. "Arthur, look at me," she commanded, and he did. Gwen offered him a reassuring smile. "You know I don't blame you for what happened, Arthur. You did everything in your power to protect me from this, but it was true love, after all," she shrugged. "It took me a while, but I understand that now. I see it in both your eyes, clear as day."

After a moment, Arthur smiled, clearly relieved. "Good. Because that is actually what I am here to talk to you about. Love." Gwen frowned, and opened her mouth to voice her confusion, but Arthur finally seemed to have found the words for what he wanted to say and was intent to get it all out. "I want you to know, Guinevere, that I don't expect you to... to stay celibate, for me. That is," he paused, and now it was Gwen's turn to blush, "I won't lie to you; if you did eventually wish to remarry, the court might have some objections, but I just wanted you to know that I will stand behind you - and Merlin will, too - and Ygranna will not be any less of your child, whatever you choose to do."

"Arthur..." Guinevere began, unable to find words to express the incredible gratitude she felt towards him at that moment. And towards Merlin, too. They must have discussed this, and they must know as well as she did how many problems this could truly cause for all of them, how much bigger of a scandal would come out of this than they were already facing.

Arthur shook his head. "It is the honourable thing to do, Guinevere. I will not jeopardize your happiness, no matter what the consequences. We'll deal with the fallout, together, just as we have done with all of our other... er, controversies."

For a moment they simply stared at each other, smiling, hands entwined. And Guinevere could not believe how much she loved this man - even if her feelings for him had shifted into something very different now from what they used to be.

After a moment, Arthur dropped her gaze, a small flush spreading on his face again. He opened his mouth, hesitating, but finally said, "I do have one request, however."

"Anything, Arthur," Guinevere said immediately, squeezing his hand.

"I would like you to remain my Queen, even if you stop being my wife," Arthur said quietly. "Whatever else has happened between us, making you co-ruler of the kingdom remains one of the best decisions I ever made." He looked back up to meet her eyes again, his expression fierce and proud. "Camelot would suffer in the absence of your wisdom and your kindness, Guinevere. I need you by my side, and I hope you will continue to support me as I bring peace to the kingdom."

And Gwen really had no words for him this time, so instead she threw her arms around Arthur, hugging him fiercely, tears of gratitude obscuring her vision. After a moment Arthur returned her embrace, letting out a sigh of relief.
Although it was hard to believe that she could ever love anyone as much as she already loved Ygranna and her fathers, there might one day in the future be someone who would catch Gwen's eye. And it was good to know that she had Arthur's permission to pursue it, whatever it was - and that it would never be a question of making a choice, of giving up anything or anyone she loved.

But for now, Guinevere had everything she could ever want: she had her kingdom and ruled over a people she loved. She had her daughter - and she had Arthur and Merlin, her little family, unusual as it may be.

Guinevere's life was perfect.
She pulled back her elbow, tightening the string of the bow and repeating everything she'd been taught in her mind. *Elbow. Shoulders. Hand. Aim.*

She released the arrow, hearing the satisfying *thunk!* as the tip buried itself in the wooden plate moments later. And when she looked up, it was to see the arrow embedded in the exact centre of the target. *Yes!* And without magic, too - of course that was forbidden in the tournament.

Dazed, Princess Ygranna of Camelot turned to face the cheering crowd, which had been collectively holding its breath as the reigning champion took her shot - but for the second year running, she would walk away from the archery tournament victorious.

Anna used her free hand to push her braid back over her shoulder and then to shield her eyes from the sun, looking towards the royal box to see the King, the Queen and the Court Sorcerer all cheering for her enthusiastically - the latter so excited about her victory that he'd jumped out of his seat, and Anna grinned, giving him a little wave. Knowing, as she smiled, that her crinkling eyes would mirror Merlin's own.

After shaking what felt like hundreds of outstretched, eager hands and accepting her trophy, she finally entered the tent where the tournament weapons were kept. And although Anna was not surprised to find all three of her parents waiting for her, her cheeks still reddened with embarrassment as Guinevere let out a squeal and threw her arms around her.

"Mum," Anna mumbled, embarrassed, "not in front of the squires!"

The shorter woman snorted into her shoulder, but withdrew with a fond smile. "I'm just so proud of you."

"Thanks mum," Ygranna said, grateful for once again being able to breathe.

That didn't last long though, as moments after her mother had released her, Arthur and Merlin took her place, wrapping Anna in a giant hug that knocked the breath from her lungs.

"Need - breathe - please," she gasped, but to no avail - finally she had to nudge the two men slightly with her magic, and as if they were being pulled by strings, their hold on her loosened.

"We're just so proud of you!" Merlin protested, but he was grinning widely. "Double archery champion at only sixteen!"

Arthur huffed, though the pride in his eyes betrayed him. "I, for one, am not surprised. She's just lucky she got her hand-eye coordination from me."

"And my good looks and charm, so it's a win/win," Merlin quipped, and Anna couldn't help the giggle that escaped her - damn, so much for acting unaffected by their praise.

"Yes, well. Luckily I have my mother's good sense to keep my head out of the clouds, unlike the two of you," she said, eliciting a laugh from Gwen. It might be true that Queen Guinevere wasn't actually
related to her, but that did not make her any less family.

Moving to put away her bow, Anna was surprised when Merlin followed her, putting a gentle hand on her elbow.

"Have you given any more thought to what we discussed?" he asked, lowering his voice when one of the young squires - Elyan or Robert, Anna never could tell apart Leon and Leah's twin boys - bustled past, carrying a suit of armour which was clearly far too heavy for him.

Anna shot Merlin a look as she moved to help the squire (Robert, she was pretty sure it was) with his burden.

Anna? Merlin's voice sounded anxious in her mind.

*Dad, can we not do this now?* Anna asked him silently, but she knew he meant well. She knew she had been putting this conversation off for far too long.

Of course, it's just... there was silence for a moment and Anna took the time to smile down at Robert, who blushed to the roots of his hair and mumbled something unintelligible which might have been 'Thank you' before running off. *I've seen you come so far with your training, both fighting and magic*, Merlin continued. *And I know you, you've been begging me to teach you how to transform yourself into animals for years! You're ready to learn all these things, Anna, why are you holding back?*

*I do want you to teach me,* Anna acknowledged, feeling uneasy. Unable to voice her real concern, even to her father, her eyes instead fell on Arthur and Gwen - who were conversing lightly and pretending like they weren't aware of Merlin and Anna's silent communication. But what about them?

When she looked back at Merlin, he was smiling. *That's the best part. Your mother is coming with us.*

"To the Druids? *Mum?*" Anna said, so shocked that she didn't realise she had spoken out loud until Arthur and Gwen's heads turned in their direction.

Guinevere smiled warmly. "Ah Merlin, I see you've broken the news," she said, coming over to stand by Merlin's side. "Yes, I have decided that a few months away from the castle would really do me wonders. Plus, Merlin has been telling us so much about his friends, how could I not be intrigued?"

"But..." Anna's eyes strayed to Arthur. It was embarrassing, really, how attached she still was to her parents, but she really could not see herself leaving any of them behind.

Arthur seemed to understand, and ruffled her hair fondly as he too joined them by the weapons rack. "It's only a few months, sweetheart. And someone has to stay behind and run the kingdom," he shrugged. "Besides," he added, his eyes falling on Merlin. "Don't worry about me feeling left behind. It's not like *someone* can't transport himself back here whenever he wants to see me." He winked, in what he probably thought was a subtle way.

Anna and Guinevere pointedly looked away as a telling blush stole over Merlin's features. Anna couldn't quite contain her giggle, however. Her fathers were so *obvious* sometimes.

After all these years, Anna still wasn't sure if she was mortified by her fathers' unsubtle public displays of affection or if she thought it was adorable. Catching her mum's eye, she thought that Guinevere probably felt much the same way.
"Right, er," Merlin cleared his throat. "Anyway, I really think it's high time you learned more about your magic. And your mum and Arthur agree," Arthur and Gwen both nodded. "After all, it took me a long time to come into my full potential, and we both know that you're capable of so much more."

Anna sighed as they all looked at her expectantly.

The truth was that she had been dying to visit the Druids, to discover the true extent of her powers. Sword fighting and archery were great, but she knew that there was something out there - something bigger, and a hell of a lot more important - waiting for her. She could feel it.

"It's just..." she started, her voice small.

"You're worried," Gwen finished her thought for her. "About what you're capable of."

Anna nodded, not able to meet any of their eyes. She had seen first hand what magic could do to a person - despite being so young at the time, she had not forgotten her encounter with Morgana.

"Hey," her mum said, lifting up her chin, and Anna looked up reluctantly. "Don't be. We know you, Anna. We know that whatever comes next, whatever fate has in store for you... you can handle it."

"And we'll be right there by your side, every step of the way," Arthur added.

Anna took a deep breath, looking around at them, at the three people whom she loved more than anything else in the world. And she knew they were right.

She met Merlin's eyes, and nodded. She was ready to face her destiny.

**********THE END**********
SEQUEL PREVIEW: The Once and Future Princess

Chapter Summary

This is a teaser chapter for the upcoming sequel to this fic, titled The Once and Future Princess. It is Ygranna-centric, and takes place a year after the events of the epilogue.

As you'll see, things have changed a lot since the last time we checked in with Anna, Merlin, Arthur and Gwen - and here, their new adventure begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She spurred the horse on, kicking in her heels and feeling the black mare respond to her urgings, pushing itself harder even than before.

It felt like flying, tearing across the plains and letting herself be transported faster, faster, her long blonde hair whipping around her face. It was an escape, and these days it felt like these few, precious moments were all that kept her sane.

She threw her head back and let out a cry, letting the wind swallow the sound; she never felt so free as when she was riding like this, hurtling through this land which was so familiar to her and yet so foreign as it sped by, everything blurred before her eyes.

It was almost like flying. But it wasn't enough. She closed her eyes for a moment, trusting the horse to guide her path, and let herself stretch out her mind, feeling out the places where the horse's hooves collided with the soft earth, upturning the soil and tearing out lumps of grass.

And she pushed off.

When she opened her eyes she was still riding, the horse's hooves pounding away - but not at the earth, but at the empty air above it, allowing her to move even faster. She was only a few inches off the ground but she could move higher, and she wanted to - she wanted to soar, to--

"YGRANNA!"

The voice boomed out even over the rush of the wind and she started; she felt the horse's stride falter as she lost her concentration and they almost stumbled out of the air, but she regained control and gently let go of the hold in her mind, allowing her mare to slow down gradually to a trot.

Dahlia snorted disgruntledly and Anna reached down to stroke her sweat-soaked flank gently, murmuring softly, "I know. I wanted to go higher, too."

Anna let him catch up to her, and resisted rolling her eyes at the expression of consternation on his face.

"Anna," Merlin huffed, voice slightly breathless - he must've been riding hard, too, to catch up. "What were you doing back there?"

She sighed, already anticipating the lecture that was coming.
"I was flying, dad," she said, and braced herself.

But to her surprise, all her father did was look at her silently - and while there was anger there, and worry, she thought there was also understanding.

"You know you can't," he said at last, searching her eyes. "I know it's hard to resist the pull - believe me, I do - but Anna, horses were not meant to fly. You know this. Just because you can manipulate the natural order of things doesn't mean you should."

"I know, but I..." she trailed off. Now that she had her feet (well, her horse's anyway) back on the ground, *I really wanted to* suddenly didn't seem like a very sound argument. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Merlin reached across the distance between their horses to ruffle her hair; she automatically reached up to bat his hand away, but the damage was probably already done considering how hard she'd been riding.

"Come on," he said, not unkindly. "Let's get back to Camelot."

As he spoke the words, a new sadness laced his tone, and Anna winced, suddenly feeling guilty about adding another worry to her father's growing list.

She turned Dahlia around and they began a slow trot, weary of not over-exerting their horses. After all, tomorrow they had a long journey ahead of them.

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Ygranna had hardly set foot in the castle after brushing down her horse when Queen Guinevere set upon her, trailed as always by Leah, her handmaiden.

"Anna," she greeted, smiling warmly and placing her hands on Anna's shoulders - then snatching them back with a frown. "You're soaking wet!"

"Oh yeah," she grimaced, "I was out riding. I probably should bathe, before--"

"Riding?" Guinevere asked quickly, eyes narrowing. "Alone?"

"No, dad was with me," Anna replied. Well, it wasn't a complete lie.

Guinevere's expression softened, and Anna tried to remind herself that they were only trying to protect her. These were not peaceful times, after all, and the Crown Princess of Camelot riding on her own was like an open invitation to all passing enemies - even if said Crown Princess was more than capable of taking care of herself, thank you very much.

"Mum," she smiled, taking her mother's hand in her own, "I'm careful. I promise."

Guinevere nodded. "I know. I just worry."

Anna smiled. She understood; after all, she worried about her parents, too, and the knights, and her friends, and everyone else.

They had that in common, her and her mother, if not much else. Ever since she was little, Anna had looked up to the kind, gentle Queen Guinevere, and sought to emulate those qualities, too... but with very little success. 'You're untameable, child,' her mother would laugh when she tucked her into her bed, back when Anna was still young enough that she needed her mother to do that. 'Maybe you'd
be better off running wild in the woods.'

She hadn't meant it, of course - but right now, the irony of Guinevere's words didn't escape Anna.

But wild and untamed as she may be, Anna was still a princess, and she still held her head high and her back straight just as her mother had told her. She would never stop trying to be her mother's daughter - even if, technically, she wasn't.

"Anna," Guinevere said softly, squeezing the hand she was still holding. "After your bath, your father wants to see you."

When Anna met her mother's eyes, there was nothing but sympathy there. Anna could only nod, her throat suddenly tight. She let her hand fall out of Guinevere's and turned, not wanting her mum to see the worry she was sure was etched on her face.

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In his early forties, King Arthur of Camelot was still a strong, formidable ruler of the kingdom. He sat now at his famed round table, alone, forehead resting on his knuckles - a position Anna knew meant he was deep in thought. Thoughts she knew were troubled, as they had been for a long time now.

But as she entered the room he looked up, and smiled at her.

Ygranna was sure that most women would probably call her father handsome with his striking blue eyes and closely cropped beard as golden as his hair - but of course, those who knew him knew not to bother trying to sway his affections. For the past fourteen years, his heart had belonged to one person only, and neither Arthur nor Merlin had tried to keep that fact a secret.

Anna was glad. Despite her unusual circumstances, she could not have wished for a happier childhood, even if she spent the first three years of her life not knowing the truth about her parentage.

When Anna had been born, it had been to a Queen thought to be barren, and at first Guinevere's pregnancy had been seen as something of a miracle. But what no one had realised was that when Merlin had called on the power of true love magic to assist Arthur and Guinevere in conceiving a child, it had actually been the secret affection between Arthur and Merlin which had created Ygranna.

Thus, while she was birthed by Guinevere, her biological parents were in fact Arthur and Merlin.

Naturally, her parents had sought to keep this fact hidden from the court for as long as possible. Not only because of what it might mean for their personal reputations, but also because it would bring Anna's position as the heir to the throne into question. While she was King Arthur's daughter, born to his wife, it would be easy for their opposers to deem her an illegitimate child with no true claim to the kingdom.

However, once Arthur, Merlin and Guinevere had managed to settle their differences amongst themselves and had decided that it was time to reveal the truth, there had been very few actual consequences. Most of Arthur's inner circle of knights had already known or suspected, and had defended the Pendragons' honour fervently, but they hadn't actually needed to. King Arthur's subjects loved him, and they were surprisingly disinterested in whom he chose to love.

And Ygranna, too, had remained the unchallenged Crown Princess of Camelot.

Until now.
"Father," Anna smiled, adding her perfunctory curtsy automatically even though there weren't any visiting nobles to impress.

"Anna, good, you're here," Arthur said, rising as she approached and embracing her. Anna hugged him back - and if they took a bit longer than usual to let go, neither of them mentioned it. Once they broke apart, Arthur's hands stayed on her shoulders. "I trust you're all set to go?" he asked.

She nodded. "I am. We all are."

The expression on her father's face didn't change, but she saw the pain in his eyes clear as day. She pretended she hadn't.

"Good," Arthur said. "Because we can delay no longer. You'll depart tomorrow."

"What? But--" She stopped herself. *It's too soon, she wanted to say. I'm not ready.* But it didn't matter. She had to be ready, there was no choice. "Alright," she said at last. "Tomorrow."

Arthur squeezed her shoulders, and buried beneath the pain, she saw a glimmer of pride.

*He wants me to be strong,* she thought. *So I will be strong.*

Ygranna may have Merlin's magic, but she had Arthur's determination. She would see this through, because she must.

The war was starting, and her father - no, the kingdom - needed her to be ready.

Chapter End Notes

The Once and Future Princess will be a separate, multi-chapter story, but I wanted to post this teaser chapter here to let all the readers of The Patter of Tiny Feet know that a sequel will be following soon! I can't set a firm start date yet, but I've got a lot of ideas for this story, and will hopefully be able to begin properly working on it soon. Stay tuned. :-)