Magic, Myth and Merlyn

by B_B

Summary

"Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the don'ts. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me... Anything can happen, child. Anything can be." The world was full of mystery and possibility. Merlyn moved to Camelot to start afresh but she had no idea just what she was getting into. Series rewrite! Rule63!

Notes

Hey there! So this is my first multichapter I've actually gotten far enough for me to feel comfortable posting. Pretty much this is me testing the waters, getting a feel for this whole author idea that's been plaguing me since I was in nappies. I have this story planned out the entire way and am halfway through the second season. This first book starts similar to the series, since the only thing I've changed is Merlin's gender and the consequences thereof, but as I go on, it will deviate more and more until it is completely AU

As of this moment, I'm unsure how many books I'm writing, but it will probably be four since things that happen later will negate or increase certain Canon reactions and plotlines. But have no fear, this is NOT a recap of the series with a woman in place of Merlin making the same decisions as he. It is not a smut-story (though there will probably be elements of such later in the game), nor is it a Hate-fest to any particular character. I like them all and so none of them will be OOC (I hope *Pulls at collar nervously*)

So, um, onwards - and, er, leave me a review? *Flutters eyelashes coaxingly*
The ground rolled beneath her back, lurching as if the earth itself was trying to toss her off. The stone walls of her mother’s house fragmented, large chunks of masonry tumbling down around her body. Overhead, the thatched roof caved in, straw and heather falling on her like dirty rain. Dust and soil churned, clogging the air and gritting in her eyes.

She felt the rumble deep in the earth, the tremors throwing her body side to side like a ragdoll in a toddler’s grip, but the expected bass roar of the tumultuous terrain went unheard. Instead, an unnatural, dual-noted shriek rent the air like a horror story of Bean Sidhes come to life.

The relentless pitch pierced eardrums and brought the entire village of Ealdor to its knees, agony overriding the desperation to flee the chaos.

Helpless on the ground, Merlyn tasted the blood of another person in her mouth and the warm slide of her own on the skin of her throat. Her head pounded mercilessly with pressure as magic and sound pressed on her body like a living thing. She looked up at the stars where her roof used to be and all around her, her home crumbled into dust.
“I don’t want to go.”

“You must, my love. Ealdor is safe for you no longer. Don’t despair. Gaius will guide you in ways I am unable. He will not lead you astray.”

“I don’t need his help. I’ve stopped all that. I don’t want to be a monster anymore. I don’t want to leave you.”

“You are not a monster, Merlyn. Your magic is not evil, no matter what anyone says. It is a part of you as much as your heart or your mind or your fiery spirit. You cannot turn from it without destroying yourself.” Hunith kissed Merlyn’s forehead and wiped away a tear that darted down the girl’s cheek. “Your magic is a reflection of who you are and you, my love, have a good and pure soul. Now you must go. The village will awaken soon. William will escort you to the forest.”

The kiss was passionate and hungry. He nibbled her lip and touched her tongue with his own, stealing her breath with the strange sensation. He pressed closer so his front was firm against her own. It caused butterflies to flutter low in her belly and heat to zap through her limbs. When he eventually pulled away, she was dizzy.

“There is no one better for me than you, Merlyn. I will wait centuries if I have to. Go out and heed your mother’s wishes. I will be here when you return.”

Merlyn left with tears clogging her throat, Will’s devoted gaze hot on her back.

Camelot was magnificent. White and solid and impregnable, it rose above the surrounding forest like a sentinel to which the whole kingdom bowed. It was beautiful and terrifying.

She passed under the heavy city gates, walked through the subdued lower markets, skulked between the forbidding double-gated guardhouse separating the lower and upper town and made it to the royal courtyard that spread before the citadel’s front entrance. She stopped at the back of the crowd gathered and watched as a young, blonde woman was led to a pyre. Merlyn listened as the King announced her crime of sorcery and her sentence of death and cried as the flames gobbled up the kindling then greedily moved onto the woman’s helpless body.

The black-haired girl gagged when the woman’s screams finally gurgled into nothing and the stench of sizzling flesh invaded her nose, so strong she could taste it.

She staggered away as fast as her legs could carry her, bile in her throat, and morbidly questioned how much it would hurt when it was her turn to feel the flames.

She truly didn’t know how she always ended up in these types of situations. Broken banisters and magical displays and secrets revealed. The sound of the pyre crackled in her ears and nearly drowned out Gaius’ words.

Thank you? She blinked at him and balked on the steps to her new room. Magic was not something to be appreciated. Surely he knew that.
“I – my mother told you what happened in Ealdor?” she half stated, a non-sequitur.

He raised an eyebrow at her and said carefully, “she explained that your home was invaded by two travellers in the night and that you were saved from a terrible fate by a mysterious earthquake.”

Merlyn lifted her chin. “Did she also mention that it destroyed half the village and caused my mother’s friends to turn their backs on her. If Will hadn’t accepted me, my mother and I would be homeless. So… so, even if I did something good just now, it’s not enough. Magic is… magic is merciless and-and untrustworthy and I don’t intend to use it again, no matter what my mother may have written to you.” She nodded her head to the letter scroll in his hands then spun on her heel and escaped to her room, shutting the door quickly behind her.

She pressed her forehead against the wood before taking a deep breath and shoving her whirling emotions to the back of her mind. She would just have to try harder in the future to not fall back on her instincts in a crisis.

She turned then stopped short in surprise. In front of her was a bed. An actual mattress-wielding bed. Her mouth opened in awe, previous thoughts flying from her mind.

With an excited squeal, she dropped her bag and rushed over to it, twisting around and flopping onto her back like she’d always dreamed of doing.

“Oomph!”

The solid impact sent all the air rushing out of her lungs and left her groaning breathlessly in pain. It was a lot harder than she’d expected and slightly lumpy.

But still! She wheezily pushed herself up on an elbow and smoothed a hand over the mattress, the grin irrepressible even as she wrapped an arm around her aching chest. I have a bed!

She stood up and grabbed her bag, dumping it beside the rickety nightstand to be sorted later. She only had a couple of items of clothing, her favourite lily-scented soap and the remains of the salve for the skin on her throat, which she dug out to give to Gaius. He could do with it as he pleased; it was a simple mixture.

She loitered in her room for a good hour before her grumbling stomach and the image of her mother’s scolding face forced her to join her new guardian. He was standing at the main table, scraping together a paste. She cautiously stepped closer to observe.

“I was about to call you,” Gaius said without looking up and Merlyn jumped, not realising he knew she was there. “You have an injury I’d like to examine.”

Merlyn’s hand lifted self-consciously to her neckerchief-covered throat and she mumbled, “I’m perfectly fine.”

“You mother’s letter was rather insistent.” He eyed her shrewdly before directing her to the table to sit. “Something requiring eight sutures is no small matter.”

“It’s nothing,” she argued weakly as she reluctantly seated herself. “Almost completely healed.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he said, raising an eyebrow at her until she sighed and untied the faded red fabric from her neck, pulling it into her lap and twisting it between her fingers. Gaius stepped closer and unwound the sloppy bandages before patting a damp cloth over the dressing to unstick it from her skin. His face was a mask as he examined the wound, prodding carefully with his fingers.
Merlyn swallowed. “It looks awful doesn’t it?”

Gaius looked up and caught her badly-veiled discomfit. His craggy face gentled. “The wound is deep and slow to repair. It will look grave for a little while yet but it will heal. There’s no sign of infection or swelling and the sutures are clean and undisturbed.”

“Is it going to scar badly?” she asked. Having such an obvious mark on display for the world mortified her. It didn’t take much reasoning to recognise what caused such a clean cut through such a delicate place on her skin nor the intent behind the action.

“With diligent treatment and no trauma to the sutures, the scarring should reduce to barely noticeable. But it will take time – though you are healing at a remarkable rate,” he added musingly. “Almost magically.”

Merlyn’s eyes shot to him but he was being deliberately obtuse. She scowled. “Magic is banned in Camelot. I won’t break the law and I refuse to succumb to the lies it offers.”

Gaius met her angry gaze and dipped his head apologetically but she saw his lips were pressed together as if holding back words.

The tense moment was interrupted by the door slamming open and a regal but ruffled woman strode in. Merlyn jumped in surprise and covered her throat.

“Gaius,” the woman called. “Gaius, I am in need – oh!” she stopped short when she caught sight of Merlyn. “Forgive me. I didn’t expect you to be busy.”

“That’s alright,” said the physician, turning to uncork a paste to smear on the stitches. “I’m just finishing up, if you could give me a moment.”

“Of course,” agreed the woman, coming closer. “It’s nothing that cannot wait.”

Her sea-green eyes were alight with curiosity as they roved over Merlyn, causing her to flush. She was distracted by Gaius touching her hand. “Let me see.”

She glanced in the lady’s direction but reluctantly obeyed, crinkling her nose as the stench of the paste assaulted it when Gaius held the salve close. She grimaced and turned her head away as much as possible while he scooped some out and smeared it on her skin. She forced herself not to flinch at the grainy texture against her raw flesh.

Silently, he dressed then rewrapped her throat, snug but not restrictive so she could still breathe and swallow, then he retreated to wash his hands in a bowl. The regal woman took the opportunity to introduce herself, surprising Merlyn with the courtesy.

“I am Morgana,” she said pleasantly.

“Mer-Merlyn,” she stammered then added hastily, “My Lady.”

Gaius stepped in with further introductions, to the younger girl’s relief. “The Lady Morgana is ward to King Uther, Merlyn. I trust you’ll show her the appropriate respect.” He raised an eyebrow at her as if he expected her to start swearing and carrying on. She felt a little insulted.

“Gaius,” said Lady Morgana reproachfully, rolling her eyes. “I’m hardly some small-minded noble who expects my subjects to kiss my boots – I leave that to Arthur.”

“Indeed,” said the old man noncommittally as he dried his hands. He changed topics; “now, what
is it you need, my dear?"

“Well…” Lady Morgana trailed off, green eyes dancing reservedly towards Merlyn, who was busy tying her neckerchief around her throat. Gaius took the hint – which Merlyn thought particularly unfair since he ignored her own unease not five minutes ago.

“Away with you, my girl. Fetch some water from the main courtyard; I’ll heat you up a bath to wash away the grime of your journey. Now go. Shoo!” he pointed to a couple of pails near the door and she did as told with a theatrical sigh, even if she was secretly eager to soak in a bath – particularly one with hot water.

Usually, residents of Ealdor simply scrubbed in the frigid water of the nearby stream, the effort of lugging enough water to fill a trough too much after a long day toiling in the fields. Some folk went so far as to forego bathing altogether, though it was never encouraged by their neighbours.

It took Merlyn a little while to find the courtyard faucet, hidden by the stairs and she studiously focused on pumping the lever, keeping her gaze away from the large soot stain where the pyre had once been. A pair of servants were working on removing the last of the evidence, their scrub brushes leaving unmarred, white stone behind while the water turned into a filthy, black sludge. If only it were so easy to rid oneself of such darkness, she thought then snorted at her own dramatics.

She closed the faucet when her second pail was full and heaved a fortifying breath before lifting the heavy buckets, hauling them back to Gaius’ chambers. By the time she returned, Lady Morgana was long gone and Merlyn was aching, sweating and swearing off having baths ever again.

“How do you do this every day, Gaius?” she panted, arms feeling like dead weights as she shook them out.

The old man had the gall to smirk at her. “I don’t,” he said. “I go to the castle bathing room. They provide excellent, prompt service.”

Merlyn gaped at him in outrage. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?” she exclaimed. “I would have gone there instead!”

“As you are not a member of the royal household, I’m afraid your access would be prohibited. On the morrow, I will show you the upper town bathhouse. They provide heated water at scheduled times throughout the day. I’m sure it will be to your satisfaction.”

Merlyn snorted. “As long as I don’t have to drag those things up the stairs ever again, I’ll bathe anywhere.” Then she frowned and asked, “I thought I was to be your apprentice. Wouldn’t that make me a member of the royal household?”

“Unfortunately,” sighed Gaius, giving the smaller pot over the fire a stir. Vegetable stew wafted on the air and Merlyn’s belly growled in anticipation. “Uther believes the time is not yet right to fund an apprentice, though what time he would deem appropriate is beyond me.” Gaius shook his head and met Merlyn’s gaze. “You will continue to help me until I can find paid work for you. You may take over my rounds for the patrons of the castle while I tend to the lower town, unless there is an emergency. It will do you well to familiarise yourself with the royal house.” He glanced sidelong over her attire. “Though, we may need to exchange your outfit for something more suitable.”

Merlyn looked down at her clothes. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” she asked. “It’s not unheard of for women to wear men’s garments when for working purposes.”

“I think you’ll find Camelot is a little formal in their conduct. Many nobles will find it distasteful.”
Merlyn scoffed. “I don’t care what the nobles think. They don’t have to work a day in their life. They have no clue how cumbersome a dress can be.”

“If you wish to survive here, my dear,” said Gaius as he scooped up some stew into bowls. “You will need to learn to accept the opinions of those with more power than yourself. Camelot is a reserved community and it doesn’t take lightly to nonconformities.”

He handed Merlyn her bowl but touched her arm when she went to turn away. She looked back at him questioningly. “Your mother wished for you to find peace here,” he said solemnly. “The best way to do that would be to keep your head down, your chin up and heed your neighbour’s words.” He tapped her under the chin lightly then moved past with his own dinner. Together, they sat down to eat.

In the early hours of the morning, she was disturbed from her sleep by a voice in her head.

Merlyn… Merlyn…

She refused to listen, curling into a tight ball on her new bed. She was not hearing bodiless voices. She was not going crazy.

Merlyn…

She was sitting across from Gaius, eating breakfast when he began the dreaded but inevitable conversation.

“What did your mother tell you about your gifts?” he began, tone carefully light.

Merlyn glanced up at him from her inspection of the runny porridge. “She said I was special,” she replied flatly.

“If what she described is true then you are special, the likes of which I’ve never seen before.”

Merlyn gazed at him from under her lashes. Even if she had vowed not to use it anymore, it didn’t mean she wasn’t curious. “What do you mean?” she finally asked.

“Magic requires incantations. Spells. It takes years to study. Your mother wrote that you have been able to move things with your mind since before you could talk.” The question was implied.

The black-haired girl sloshed her spoon through the gruel and hunched her shoulders. “I used to pretend my dolly was alive. I’d act out scenes from stories mama would tell me. But I never had to touch the toy to make it move.”

Gaius’ craggy face was fascinated. “And you never incanted a spell, not even in your mind?”

“I don’t know any spells,” Merlyn admitted.

“Nothing from the Old Religion?”

“I have no idea what the old religion is,” she said honestly.

Gaius hummed noncommittally, peering at her like she was a beguiling specimen. It made her a little uneasy so she posed a question of her own, watching him shrewdly.
“Did you ever study magic?”

He hesitated then said, “Uther banned such work twenty years ago.”

“What?” exclaimed Merlyn. “All of them?”

“There was one dragon he chose not to kill,” Gaius said carefully, picking his words. “Kept it as an example. He imprisoned it in a cave deep beneath the castle; where no one can free it.”

Merlyn finished her noonday rounds with the castle patients and could boast to getting lost only twice. With a few hours of free time, she decided to head to the main training grounds to see what all the fuss with Camelot knights was about – and yes… to ogle at some of the fine male specimens there too.

She halted in the shade of one of the stone tunnels connecting it to the courtyard and watched as the two knights closest to her moved with lithe, deadly grace as they sparred. She was admiring the broad expanse of the curly-haired one’s shoulders when a disturbance at the right archway, perpendicular to her position, drew her attention.

There were a few surprised shouts as a broad palomino steed leapt onto the fields from the entrance, scattering men as it galloped and kicked like a wild thing. He was tacked up but riderless and, while the knights in attendance were diligent in avoiding its sharp hooves, they didn’t appear particularly concerned. In fact, several of the men were laughing.

The horse completed a lap of the field but skidded into a turn away from the low balustrade at the far end, possibly sensing the long drop to the lower town on the other side. He dodged a lunge from a knight and kicked out at him, tossing his head as he sped away. He adjusted his direction for the only close exit and Merlyn's stomach dropped when she realised he was heading straight for her.

She darted to the side of the tunnel but glanced behind her and saw two servant boys, probably there for the same reason as her. Their eyes were wide and faces pale and they weren’t moving.

“Run!” she shouted. “Run!” but they were paralysed with fear.

So, in a moment of utter stupidity and recklessness, Merlyn jumped in front of the arch and threw her arms wide.

“HeeYAH!” she shouted, startling him into shying. His hindquarters swung around but she leapt for the reins flapping on his neck before he could lash out.

He shied again with her movement but her firm grip of the leather had her soaring with him. He lurched a bit more then reared up but she fell against his shoulder, missing his flailing hooves through dumb luck. He squealed and darted backwards, tossing his head, but that brought his rump closer to the two petrified boys still in the archway: exactly what she didn’t want.

She flung her free hand back to smack his flank and his back end skipped away, pushing him...
towards the wall instead. “Easy, easy boy… steady on now… easy…” she murmured desperately, not strong enough to stop him by force.

She had no experience at all with horses. Only seeing them once or twice at a distance with a traveller. But she had handled a couple of steers used for ploughing the paddocks and those tough beasts couldn’t be defeated with brute force alone. She went for the most malleable part of him instead.

Grabbing the pommel of the saddle with one hand, she reefed on the rein with her other to wrap around the horn, effectively forcing his head to his shoulder. He spun a few tight circles and tried to buck but the position kept him off balance and he was forced to stop or fall. He decided to halt with a frustrated snort.

She patted his neck reassuringly and murmured nonsense words, waiting a little bit before letting him have his head back. He was breathing heavily and his nostrils were still flared but the wild look in his chocolate eye was gone. She stroked the half-sun mark on his forehead and said, panting herself from adrenalin, “now that wasn’t so hard, huh?”

The horse heaved a large sigh and dropped his head to her chest, accepting her ministrations grudgingly. She grinned at his attitude.

It was one of the only things she was proud of that wasn’t connected with magic. Her ability to calm panicky or mulish animals. Her mother had admitted that it was a gift she’d inherited from her father – and was one of the only things she’d ever said about the man.

Laughter erupted from the far archway and the crowd parted enough for Merlyn to see a disgruntled, brown-haired knight being joshed by his fellows as he marched closer, a nervous stableboy in tow. He was clearly the knight who owned the horse.

Merlyn shifted uneasily as he drew near and the horse picked up on it, head lifting and ears pricking. She kept a hand on his neck and held the reins out for the man to take. He snatched them from her without thanks then turned to the stableboy, ignoring the flat ears and raised head of his steed.

“You see that?” he snapped. “You hand over the reins when I’m ready for him. You don’t drop them or scream like a little girl when he paws. Now hold him while I mount.”

However, when he tossed the reins to the poor boy, the horse jerked back, dragging the boy along. The knight stepped closer, snapping, “Control him!” but the large animal struck out with a hind leg to keep him away.

Merlyn leapt forward to help just as the stableboy fell over and grabbed the reins before the horse could bolt again. The knight tried to approach but the stallion danced around Merlyn so he couldn’t, leaving her to be tugged along like a string toy.

The man barked in irritation, “Keep him still!” but Merlyn was fed up with his attitude.

“Just wait a bloody minute and let him calm down some. Can you not see you’re scaring him?”

The brown-haired man along with several watching – and laughing – knights stopped in surprise at her cheek. The horse owner sputtered in indignation. “Excuse me, boy? I’ll have you flogged for your insolence.”

“If you took a minute to watch the horse instead of charging in, you’d see he doesn’t take kindly to your temper,” she said, forcing herself to calm.
“And what do you know of horses?” he demanded, looking over her scrawny form.

“Well,” Merlyn retorted then fumbled. “Um… n-nothing really.”

“And yet you presume to know more than a knight of Camelot?” his left hand rested pointedly on the hilt of his sheathed sword.

“I don’t presume anything!” she denied hotly. “Anyone with eyes could see he doesn’t like you! It doesn’t take a horse master to know that!”

“This beast likes no one. He’s injured eight stablehands, permanently disabled two grooms and attacked the stablemaster from within his stall.” He pointed at her warningly. “You, little boy, shouldn’t comment on things above your intellect.”

Merlyn scowled. His condescension raised her hackles. “A horse isn’t so different to a steer and I’ve handled those.”

“A cow?” he looked incredulous and several of his fellow knights guffawed. “You’re likening a knight’s destrier to a peasant’s cow?”

“No!” she cried hastily, seeing his affront and cursing herself for getting involved at all. “I-I just think the idea of handling them is similar! If you find his sweet spot and exploit it then he won’t fight you anymore. You have to make it a pleasant experience.”

“Is that what you think?” he asked scornfully. “That a young, green horse can be tamed by being soft and weak?”

“Not weak,” she retorted, gritting her teeth. “Just kind.”

He smirked at a few of the knights to his right. They grinned back in anticipation. Merlyn was wary.

“Then why don’t you show me how it’s done, O’ wise one?” he said and approached to pick her up.

“No – what? Wait – unhand me!” she tried to wriggle free but he lifted her like she weighed less than a bag of flour. “I-I don’t even know how to ride!”

“Then pretend he’s a cow and work it out,” he mocked and threw her on.

Merlyn was thankful she had the presence of mind to swing her leg over before he let her go because as soon as the horse felt weight on his back, he reared.

“Hold on, now,” laughed the knight, dodging out from under the hooves.

With a girly scream, Merlyn wrapped her arms around the steed’s neck and clamped her legs to his sides – which was apparently the wrong thing to do as he leapt forward and took off, galloping. The jeers of the knights were whisked away in the wind and her vision filled with long, whipping, flaxen mane. She had no idea where the reins were. She’d let go of them when she tried to get free of the knight. And the stirrups too. She knew they were where the feet went but she could feel the leathers flapping against the horse, much too long for her to reach.

Pleasestoppleasestoppleasestoppleasestoppleasestop

The mantra tumbled through her head as she closed her eyes, waiting to be tossed to her death. She
could feel the power of the horse beneath her and the propulsion in his strong strides. Beyond the wind howling in her ears, the pounding of her heart was all she could hear, thumping in her ribcage faster than a frightened hare.

As tense and panicked as she was, it took several long minutes for her to realise that, instead of feeling herself slip sideways to her doom beneath his hooves, she felt the horse’s mad dash turn into something slower, more restrained. The wild beating turning into a controlled gait, a rocking canter that was steady enough for her to risk lifting her head to see what had changed.

Seemingly nothing. They were even still on the training fields, loping around the edge so casually it was as if it had been planned. Merlyn blinked the frightened tears from her eyes and caught sight of the reins dangling on the crest of his neck. She grabbed the horn of the saddle, which had been digging into her gut, then reached with her right hand, breathing a victory as her hand closed around leather. Sitting up a little, she gathered them in one hand, the other still gripping the pommel like a lifeline, and – praying for it to work – pulled on them to slow him down some more.

He responded easily with little pressure, though she felt in his coiled muscles that it was only because he had decided to listen to her – for whatever reason. He broke into a trot and Merlyn gritted her teeth as she bounced like a sack of potatoes. She tried to imitate what she’d seen the few people who passed through her village with horses do. Lean back a little; grip with her thighs; roll her hips. She felt ridiculous but the animal beneath her responded and smoothed his stride, tucking his head and picking up his legs like a show off.

Clumsily, she steered him back to where they started but when she tried to bring him to a halt, he instead danced around the group, snorting at them challengingly until she managed to lay a soothing hand on his wither. He stopped, right in front of his owner and she had to bite her lip to stop a proud grin at her success.

“What would you like me to do now?” she asked, looking at the deep saddle to figure out how to dismount.

One of the knights watching near the fringes stepped forward and took the reins for her. She recognised him as the curly-headed man she’d been admiring before. The horse nipped at him but didn’t jerk away and the knight didn’t seem insulted by his attitude, touching the horse’s nose calmly when he shook his head.

“Do you work in the stables?” he asked, looking up at her curiously.

“No, sir,” she said. “I arrived in the city yesterday to find work. I’ve never been near a horse in my life before now.”

“Hmm,” he said and his eyes flicked to the knight who owned the horse. “You should let this lad have a go at him; he has some natural talent. Perhaps the butcher can yet be avoided.”

“You suggest I pay some peasant runt to train my horse?” he asked incredulously.

“He can be employed by the stables and learn the trade. If he retains his natural talent, then you would do well to employ him provisionally. You’ve not had any luck with others and the stableboys all fear to go near him. What’s the worst that can happen, Ulric?”

Unable to dispute the other knight’s logic and reluctantly deferring to the seemingly higher rank, Ulric turned his glare to Merlyn – not that she noticed. She was a little preoccupied feeling affronted that she wasn’t being consulted on matters of her own life. Perhaps she should tell them that she was actually a girl. She certainly wouldn’t be allowed into the stables after that.
But she needed a job and also, ousting herself as a girl while surrounded by brawny men probably wasn’t a good idea.

“Do you hear that, runt? You have a week in the stable’s service before I expect you to be present for duty. If he doesn’t improve, he’ll be to the butcher’s and you’ll be in the stocks for wasting my money. Take him to the stables and have one of the boys aid you in untacking then come to my chambers to retrieve a letter for the marshal. He will need to know you are under his employment and mine.”

With that, he turned and strode away, one of the knights joining him with a smirk and nudge of the arm. With the excitement over, the rest dispersed to their previous activities, leaving her with the horse and friendly knight.

She smiled at him sheepishly and said, “I’m Merlyn, by the way.”

“Sir Leon,” he replied.

“Thank you, Sir Leon… er; I was just wondering…” she scrunched her nose. “How do I get down?”

His cute face crinkled into a smile as he stepped closer to help.

And that was how she got a job. Gaius was going to be pleased.

That night, she fell, exhausted, into bed, limbs sore from shovelling and sweeping and brushing and tacking and untacking and cleaning. She was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Merlyn…

The black-haired girl groaned, half-awake as she pulled the pillow from underneath to over her head.

Merlyn…

“Go ‘way,” she mumbled. The voice sounded annoyingly amused.

Merlyn…

She curled her hands around her large ears and tucked into a ball, begging for sleep. *Who are you?* She whined in her mind.

To her utter surprise, the voice replied.

*I am below.*

Merlyn shot up in bed, gasping.

Merlyn glared defiantly at the great golden dragon chained within the bowels of Camelot.

“I don’t want my gift. Give it to somebody else.”

“It was given to you for a reason. Prince Arthur is the Once and Future King who will unite the
land of Albion."

“So?”

“But he faces many threats from friend and foe alike.”

“I don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“Everything,” the dragon declared. “Without you, Arthur will never succeed. Without you, there will be no Albion.”

“No,” she denied. “No, you’ve got this wrong.”

“There is no right or wrong. Only what is and what isn’t.”

“You’re wrong,” she shouted and pointed a finger at the large reptile. “Prince Arthur is the prince. I’m a peasant. The only time I’ll see him is during public appearances and perhaps formal events Gaius invites me to. I won’t nearly be close enough to guide him to some great destiny. And I will not be using my ‘gift’, she added spitefully. “I haven’t used it for over a week. With practice, I’ll be able to stop it permanently. I can do things the old-fashioned way.”

The dragon’s top lip curled back in a facsimile of a smile. “You exude magic from your very essence, Merlyn. You cannot stop being who you are.”

“I am not magic. I don’t need it and it doesn’t control my life.” She jutted her chin proudly. “I got a job today without using magic. I tamed a wild horse in minutes and now I’m employed in the royal stables. All in one day of being here.”

“Foolish girl,” he ridiculed. “Your talent with beasts stems from your magic. Creatures are drawn to it. The sooner you stop fearing that part of yourself, the sooner your future can unfold. The Pendragon destiny was foretold long before you or I walked this earth. There is no escaping it.”

He stretched his wings before she could reply and launched from the rock. She shouted at his retreating form, “I’m not part of some destiny! I won’t let magic rule me! You’re wrong!”

He disappeared overhead and she was left feeling unfavourably judged and condemned. “You’re wrong,” she murmured again to reassure herself.

She met Guinevere – or Gwen as she preferred – the next day. The cocoa-skinned maid sought her out as she did her morning rounds in the castle to praise her for her bravery, having watched from a window. She told Merlyn that Knight Ulric was a friend of Prince Arthur’s and that their group seemed to derive great pleasure in humiliating servants. She had been pleased to see a lowly commoner one-up them, even if she wasn’t a rough, tough, save-the-world kind of bloke.

Merlyn grinned at her then, deep azure eyes sparkling in amusement. Gwen looked confused.

“What?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you a secret?” she asked, glancing around furtively. Gwen leaned in interestedly and Merlyn divulged, “I’m actually a girl.”

“What!” laughed Gwen, obviously thinking Merlyn was joking. Then she saw the honesty in her face and the smile slid off like stone. She looked her over and her eyes went wide. “Oh my goodness, you are! What are you doing? You could get into serious trouble if you’re discovered.”
Merlyn smiled and shook her head. “I’m not doing it on purpose,” she reassured. “It’s simply easier to move around in trousers. If you haven’t noticed already, I’m a bit of a klutz. In a skirt, I’d be a hazard to everyone around me.”

“What about your hair?” Gwen asked, reaching out to touch a strand by her ear. “Surely you don’t enjoy it this short?”

Merlyn touched the hacked off length nostalgically. “This was only for the journey here, to make sure I wasn’t accosted. It’ll grow back.” She laughed. “It’s not like I’m looking to impress anyone.”

“You never know,” said Gwen. “The fates may surprise you.”

“Uh-uh,” Merlyn shook her head firmly. “I don’t believe in fate or destiny or futures written before I was born. I want nothing to do with any of that.”

“Oh-kay,” said the other woman slowly, looking at Merlyn like she was the strangest being she’d ever met. “Anyway, I have to get these dresses to the laundry room. I’ll see you around, I think,” she smiled kindly and moved around her, basket of clothes in her arm.

“Right, yes, um, me too… bye!” she waved as Gwen disappeared around a corner then smacked herself in the forehead for her inelegance. She was never very good at having friends. Everyone back home had been distant so she’d been fairly lonely until Will had stood up for her against some bullies. Here in Camelot, she hoped to change that. And Gwen seemed to be a nice person to befriend.

Two weeks passed.

During the second, she was thrown in the deep end with learning how to ride. Such direction as heels down, elbows in, back straight, bottom tucked, thumbs skyward, hands steady, calves resting, “and no pressure unless you’re giving a command.” And that was just standing still. She had to learn leg aids for Sunstrider to obey without reins. The groom tutoring her assured that the palomino already knew the basics from the stud but was too stubborn to obey his riders without reinforcement.

But he obeyed her, even when she was pretty sure she’d botched the command. Merlyn – with the dragon’s words running tauntingly through her mind – had tried to avoid touching him with bare skin unless necessary, but it didn’t seem to matter. Their first encounter had left an impression on him, for he was more like a big, possessive puppy dog than a fearsome, temperamental stallion.

It was both good and bad. Good since it meant he listened and responded to her without a fight but bad because he still refused to have other stableboys tend to him and the one time Knight Ulric appeared for an update, he’d lunged forward in his stall, almost stealing a chunk from the man’s arm. Needless to say, Sir Ulric hadn’t been pleased.

Other than stable work – where most of the staff realised that she was a girl rather quickly – she continued to help Gaius with his rounds in the castle, remedying the patients at the higher end while Gaius took the ones with less stairs, grumbling about old knees.

She caught up with Gwen a few times as well, quite surprised at how easy it was to talk to her. She’d never had a girl friend before and found it was quite different to being friends with boys. There were no mud fights for one.
And the Lady Morgana seemed to have taken her under her wing in a strange motherly/sisterly acquaintance thing whenever they crossed paths – which, considering Merlyn delivered her tonics when she needed them, was often. At first, the younger girl had been terribly discomfited in her presence – not only because she was of noble blood but also because she had seen the ugly mark beneath her neckerchief. But then she’d learned that the beautiful highborn wasn’t displaying pity with her care, she really was just that compassionate, treating the other servants of the castle kindly too.

Merlyn hadn’t visited the dragon beneath the castle since that night and quashed the urge whenever it arose. She was still firm in her vow of no magic, refusing to relax even in her dreams. The itchiness under her skin worsened when her subconscious ruled and she’d taken to wearing socks on her hands so she didn’t scratch herself raw as she slept. Gaius continued to watch her vigilantly but didn’t mention magic again, leaving her decision be.

She fell into a comfortable routine; she had some evolving friendships, hadn’t slipped up with magic and, all in all, was feeling quite content with her lot in life.

Then Sir Ulric decided it was time to test Merlyn's progress, having observed a smooth training session between her and the gruff old groom who’d somewhat adopted her as his pet project. He hopped on.

A lot of things happened but suffice to say, it ended badly.

Sir Ulric’s arm was broken. His right arm. His sword arm.

After being tended to by Gaius and told he was out of commission for minimum six weeks, he demanded the destrier be taken to the butcher’s immediately, face red with fury. So Merlyn did something she’d never done before. She begged.

“Please,” she implored. “He's a good steed. He just needs a bit more training. I'm still learning too. Perhaps, perhaps in a month or so I will know how to make him accept others on his back.”

“I will not pay another month’s wage,” Knight Ulric said, sliding awkwardly off the patient bed with only one arm, bare from the waist up.

“I will do it for free,” she bargained. “I'll work with him as I have done but you will not pay me for it.”

“He needs care; feed, shoeing, agistment…” he looked at her with an eyebrow raised.

“I haven’t the money,” she said, as she knew he knew. “But please, he doesn’t need to die.”

Knight Ulric shook his head once. “If he’s unable to be handled by anyone other than a single servant then he is useless to me. I’ll not pay for the keep of an untrainable beast. Now leave me.”

He picked up his jumper, unsure of how to put it on so Merlyn took it from his hand and placed it back on the table, picking up his loose undershirt instead.

“You will be unable to wear jumpers for now,” she explained, taking his hand and sliding it through the sleeve then lifting his arm so she could pop it over his head. He looked disgruntled at needing the help but Merlyn was clinical, her mind working furiously for more ideas to persuade him. She ignored the glances Gaius was shooting her from the far bench he was working at.

“I will go to the castle seamstress this evening and ask for some jumpers with toggled fronts. They tie together so you don’t have to lift one over your head to put it on.” she smoothed the shirt over his braced arm then grabbed his cloak and put it around his shoulders, clipping it at his neck.
She stood back and met his gaze beseechingly. “Please,” she said. “I’ll work off his upkeep. You’ll need help with daily chores until you are healthy again. I’ll fill that role for free.”

Sir Ulric looked at her with narrowed eyes. She held her breath and waited to see if she passed his judgement. “You are employed by the stables. You haven’t the time to work for me also.”

“I do,” she assured. “I’ll make time. I’ll… clean your chambers and – and retrieve your evening meals and if you need assistance with anything, just send for me and I’ll come. Just please, please allow Sunstrider to remain. You won’t have to see or care for him at all; it’ll all be me but I don’t have the gold to pay in hand.”

He eyed her for a moment then said, “Morning and evening meals, armour duties and if I require you, you will come. You are paid nothing. Are you agreeable?”

“Yes,” breathed Merlyn, unable to help the giddy grin that spread over her face. “Yes, certainly.”

When she smiled, Sir Ulric frowned, eyes roving over her face as if she suddenly looked unfamiliar. He blinked and shook it off a moment later to say, “Breakfast by the seventh bell. I like eggs, pork sausages and strong black tea. Don’t be late.”

When he turned to open the door, she beat him there and smiled him out. When she closed the door, she couldn’t help but do a little jig in excitement, twirling in glee. Sunstrider was to live and be hers (very nearly) and she didn’t have to worry any longer about not finding that big, golden face in the mornings. She squealed in happiness and bounced over to Gaius, not caring about the disapproval in his gaze.

“He gets to live! He gets to live! He gets to live! Oh!” she stopped suddenly. “I have to tell Gwen. Gwen will want to know.”

She spun away but Gaius’ voice halted her in the doorway. “Be careful, Merlyn,” he warned. “This may not end well.”

Merlyn looked back at him, frowning. “What do you mean? This is better than the alternative.”

“For now perhaps,” said Gaius. “All I ask is that you remain wary. It would not do to build your hopes only to have them crushed if circumstances changed. Knight Ulric holds all the power in this arrangement and eventually, he will need another mount. The destrier is only taking up space.”

“I’ll work it out,” she said, refusing to be dragged down from her high. “I have some time now whereas before I had none.”

Gaius conceded her point and Merlyn left with a skip in her step. She didn’t have much time to talk to Gwen before she was due in the stables but tidying their stalls for the night could wait a few minutes. Picking up poop… probably the worst task of her work but not so bad on the whole. She had passed by the pigpens once or twice, after all.

Another week dwindled into nothing and Merlyn was juggling her new tasks fairly well. The relatively rigid schedule of Knight Ulric and the variable hours of the stables made it easy to negotiate a timetable. She’d even taken on the task of picking herbs for Gaius since she took Sunstrider out of the city most mornings after her predawn duties anyway.

It was on one such venture that the calm, foggy atmosphere in the lower town was disturbed by a brigade of soldiers abruptly marching out of an alley, scaring Sunstrider into shying. They were
dragging a dazed male peasant along while one of the rear guards held back a distraught old woman.

“My son!” she cried, sobbing and reaching for the petrified man. “My son!”

Disliking the noise and disruption around him, the palomino stallion reared, tossing his head and drawing the attention of the lead soldier. He left the group and stepped closer, hand on the hilt of his sword as he demanded, “What is your business here?”

Merlyn stroked her steed’s neck until he stopped fussing and stuttered nervously, “I-I’m venturing past the gates to collect herbs for the Court Physician.”

The man with light hair and symmetrical features – which was about all she could glean in the shadows of predawn light – said sceptically, “this early in the morning? And with Sir Ulric’s destrier? I think not.” One of the spare guards in the group peeled off to join him but the rest continued on to the citadel with their hostage.

“It’s true!” she exclaimed, worry setting in. “I come this way every morn after tending the horses. I’m the hand who cares for Knight Ulric’s horse. You have to believe me!”

“It’s true, sire,” said a gravelly voice to her right. She looked over and saw one of the gate sentries, Favian, standing at attention. Merlyn felt relief explode in her chest. The older soldier was a regular night sentinel of the city entrance and they’d become something like friends in their interactions. She’d even collected him flowers for his pregnant wife a few mornings prior.

The blonde soldier looked past Sunstrider to stare at the intruding guard. His eyebrow was raised at the man’s gall. “You have seen him before?” he asked.

“She and the beast pass through most mornings, indeed collecting plants for Wiseman Gaius. She has caused no quarrels or disturbances.”

“She?” the blonde man said in surprise, looking back up at Merlyn – not that he would see much. Though it was midsummer, the nights were cool in Camelot and she had her faded red scarf tied around her head and mouth to keep in the warmth. She hated having a numb nose.

“Yes, sir,” she said then prompted politely. “May I go? I haven’t much time before I’m needed at the castle and Gaius requires some feverfew.” And she might go collect some raspberry leaves to make a calming tea for that poor old woman.

“Yes, go,” he waved her on and ordered Favian back to his post. Sunstrider was glad to move and tossed his head as he neared the archway but, for some reason, Merlyn was too distracted by the blonde soldier’s eyes on her back to quieten him.

She and Sir Ulric had shared some awkward moments as she helped him through the days. The first morning, when she delivered breakfast, he demanded she help him dress for the day. She didn’t truly grasp what it would mean until he dropped his daks right in front of her innocent eyes. She squeaked and spun away, blushing scarlet as she cried, horrified, “sir!”

“What?” he demanded. “I asked you to help me dress. Taking off the old clothes is part of the process.”

“Surely you can put on your pants yourself. I can aid with everything else, I promise. I-I’ve just
never… I mean, I haven’t… you do know I’m a girl, don’t you?” she asked. She thought he had known. He’d been around her enough to look past the outfit and hair; he would’ve had to notice her feminine features.

But apparently not for he bellowed, “what!”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, utterly mortified. “Oh goodness, I thought you knew!”

“Certainly not!” he objected. “This is… that’s just…” he sounded flustered. “At least now your girly face makes sense.”

Merlyn snorted a little hysterically.

After that, they adjusted their dealings. She still needed to tie Sir Ulric’s pants before she could step him into his trousers but since the material was loose, he managed to pull them up one-handed and preserve his modesty and her virtue.

It was the same sort of thing with baths. She prepared the water and loosened his ties but she didn’t stick around for the washing. Sir Ulric was actually quite blasé about it all after he got over the shock. He still enjoyed bossing her around at any rate.

Because of that, she was forced to clean his unused armour – again – before she was able to escape to prepare tea to take to the old woman in the lower town. The calming and fruity flavour of the drink would hopefully take the edge off her emotions.

In the lower markets, she was directed by a sorrowful lad to a ramshackle house in the same alley from that morning. She took a fortifying breath then knocked on the thin wooden door. There was no answer.

Cautiously, she unlatched and edged the door wide to peer into the gloomy shuttered hut. She found the old woman slumped on a wooden chair by the empty fireplace, staring into its ashy depths without expression.

She cleared her throat nervously. “Excuse me, Mary Collins. I’ve come –”

“I don’t want your condolences or your pity or your accusations,” she said dully, not looking away from the hearth. “Leave me be,”

“Perhaps a calming tonic?” suggested Merlyn.

The old woman turned her head slowly to stare at the young girl. She asked in that same monotonous tone, “Do you believe that a herbal draught is going to make me forget that my son is to be murdered by the King on this day?”

“No,” said Merlyn, inching a little bit closer. “But I do believe that one should not be left to wallow in grief alone.” She crouched down by the old woman’s chair and asked, “Will you let me stay for a while? I can build a fire and collect some water for a good, strong tea to mask the unpleasant taste of the tonic. Maybe open a window for some light.”

Mary looked at the black-haired, big-eared girl with a faint frown. “I don’t know you,” she said.

“No, you don’t,” agreed Merlyn. “I’m the Court Physician’s ward. I was present this morning when the guards came. I did not think you should be left without care.”

Listlessly, the old woman’s worn eyes drifted out of focus and her head turned back to the
fireplace. Merlyn took that as her cue to start her tasks.

Over the couple of hours Merlyn spent there, Mary floated in and out of awareness but as the noonday sun beat down and the black-haired girl readied to leave, she was surprised to turn and find the old woman by the hard, narrow bed, digging through an old gullet pouch purposefully.

“What are you searching for?” asked Merlyn, going over to help.

“Something to make it all better,” said the weathered woman.

Merlyn cocked her head in confusion but didn’t argue, chalkling it up to the senile mutterings of a desperate soul. “What does it look like?” she asked, looking under the thin pillow and raggedy blanket for anything unusual. “Perhaps I can help.”

“A talisman,” she said. “My mother’s necklace. I need it to be strong enough.”

“Okay,” said Merlyn gently and looked behind the rickety bedside table to see a small leather purse wedged there. She pulled it out and turned it over and out fell a large amber stone connected to a leather cord. The moment it touched her palm, she felt a strange tingling that called to the magic inside her.

Instinctively, she flinched back and the jewel fell from her grip. But in a show of startling dexterity, the old woman caught it mid-air. Her craggy face transformed into a cold smirk of triumph but Merlyn was too unnerved to take notice. She beat a hasty exit and went searching for Gaius: she needed to know what that stone was.

“Perfectly,” mumbled Gaius, squinting at several tomes before pulling the one on the left from its place.

“I thought I told you not to get involved,” Gaius ranted. “What if someone reported to have seen you with her? What would I do if you were dragged before Uther and accused of consorting with sorcerers?”

Merlyn rolled her eyes at his melodrama but she was also curious to hear his answer. “What would you do?” she asked, cutting into his speech.

Gaius stopped to glare at her but didn’t seem able to think of a reply. He finally said, “let us hope never to know.”

He moved to the left wall and climbed up the steps to the balconies with a grunt. “What did you say it looked like?” he asked.

“Um… about two inches long, amber coloured – I felt the magic in it, Gaius. It was strange, not as if the jewel was magical but that it held magic, if that makes sense.”

“Perfectly,” mumbled Gaius, squinting at several tomes before pulling the one on the left from its place.

The city bell tolled for the second hour post noon and Merlyn remembered a patrol was due back to the stables soon and Gaius still wanted her to deliver more hollyhock and feverfew to Lady Perceval.

“Gaius,” she called, disturbing him from his study. He glanced down at her. “Where’s the tonic for Lady Perceval? I’m due to leave.”

“Oh,” said the old man and he stuck his hand into a few pockets before he struck gold. “Aha.
“Here.” He leant down to drop it between the banister’s bars but as Merlyn approached to catch it, the wooden barricade gave out with a snap, Gaius tumbling from the terrace.

“No!” Merlyn cried and felt the sudden heat of magic explode from her body, slowing time around the old man’s falling form. She looked around for a means to soften his crash and locked onto his bed. She willed it to slide under his body then released him just as he face-plant the pillow.

He huffed in shock at the heavy landing then scrambled to his feet; face the perfect image of befuddled astonishment. “You just used magic!” he exclaimed, looking over the bed then back to her.

Merlyn didn’t answer, too busy being breathless under the euphoria washing over her body. It felt like she’d taken her first gasp of clean air after being drowned in water for a month. Her blood buzzed in her veins and her heart thumped erratically in her chest. She felt sky high but despair and anger dragged her back to earth rather quickly.

She looked at her hand and saw a literal spark fizzle on her tingling fingertips. She clenched it into a fist, clamping down on the rush under her skin and locked it away once more.

“I was doing so well,” she growled. “A whole month and nothing! Those banisters need to be reinforced! I won’t save you again!” she turned on her heel and stormed out the door, ignoring Gaius call her name.

She was not a tool for destiny. Magic did not dictate her life. It didn’t.

It was early afternoon and Merlyn had just spent all her free time scouring the lower town for Mary Collins after hearing from Morgana the vow the old woman made against the prince after the execution. “A son for a son,” Morgana had quoted, looking worried despite herself.

Walking up the path by the upper markets, Merlyn was distracted from her thoughts by an arrogant male voice asking, “Where’s the target?”

She looked over to her left and saw a small cluster of knights hanging in a small cobbled square by the courtyard entrance. In front of them, a young male servant pointed to the fairly evident green and yellow target. “There, sir?” he said uncertainly.

“It’s in the sun,” stated the blonde and Merlyn recognised him from the morning before. So he wasn’t simply a soldier; he was a knight.

The servant looked up to the overcast sky and contested, “but it’s not that bright.”

“A bit like you then,” the blonde knight mocked with a false smile.

“I’ll put the target at the other end, shall I, sire?” the young man said resignedly and moved off, hefting the heavy board onto his shoulder.

One of the blonde’s friends muttered something to him and he smirked, changing the hand of one of his throwing knives then hurling it at the target. The servant heard the thunk! and peered over to see the imbedded blade in alarm.

“Hey! Hang on!” he cried.

“Don’t stop!” Blondie called amidst laughter, aiming another knife.
Another few steps and the servant asked, “Here?”

“I told you to keep moving!” another knife whooshed by and buried in the wood. “Come on! Run!”

Merlyn looked on in distaste as they laughed when the servant tripped, the target dropping out of his arms to roll along the ground towards Merlyn. It fell over at her feet and she put a boot on its painted front to prevent the servant from picking it up. He looked at her incredulously before glancing back at the knights. Merlyn looked at them also.

“Hey,” she said, working a smile to be pleasant. “Come on, that’s enough,” They were all much bigger than she was but if she could diffuse the situation nicely then maybe she could escape with no bruises.

“What?” said the blonde as if he couldn’t believe her cheek.

“You’ve had your fun, my friend,” she said.

He strode closer while his friends hung back, smirking in anticipation. “Do I know you?” he demanded.

She held out a hand for him to shake. “My name’s Merlyn.”

“So I don’t know you,” he said, stopping in front of her and ignoring her hand.

“No,” she agreed, a little miffed as she dropped her arm.

“Yet you called me ‘friend’.”

Merlyn feigned an overly sweet smile.

“That was my mistake,” she said.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Yeah,” she looked down. “I’d never have a friend who could be such an ass.”

She turned and started walking away but the knight snorted and said, “Or I one who could be so stupid.”

She stopped, cursing her pride for not letting him have the last word. He continued, “Tell me, Merlyn, do you know how to walk on your knees?”

She’d been asked that once before, in Ealdor. But in a completely different context. She hoped he didn’t mean it the same way. She faced him and his buddies warily. “No,” she said as he strutted closer, hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Would you like me to help you?” he asked leaning in threateningly and she stepped back defensively.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” she warned him.

He chuckled in disbelief, looking at the spectators. “Why? What are you going to do to me?”

She glared at him. “You have no idea.”

He opened his arms invitingly. “Be my guest!” he said. “Come on… Come on… Come on,” he
mocked when she didn’t move.

She gritted her teeth and tried to punch him in the throat but he caught her wrist and twisted her arm behind her back. She stomped on his foot but that only made him laugh so she hooked her foot behind his left knee and wrenched it forward, unbalancing him enough that she managed to twirl out of his hold. She backed out of his reach guardedly while he regained his footing but wasn’t bold enough to turn tail and run. She didn’t know how fast the knights were and she didn’t particularly want to be cornered and at their mercy in some alley.

She took another step away, not realising the danger until two men came up from behind and seized her arms tightly, kicking her knees out so they slammed onto the cobbles below. She hissed in pain and tried to struggle but their grips were firm enough to make her fingers tingle in pain. She stopped fighting and glared up at them instead, turning her seething eyes to the blonde knight when he neared.

“I’ll have you thrown in jail for that,” he said and she glowered.

“Who do you think you are?” she snapped. “The King?”

He bent down so his face was close to hers. “No. I’m his son, Arthur.” Then he nodded at the guards to drag her away with a satisfied smirk.

_Curse it all!_ She thought, stumbling slightly as she was hauled along. That was the prat she was supposed to guide in some epic destiny to unite the lands? Oh _hell_ no!

In the chill of the dungeons, Merlyn watched the sun sink lower in the sky, anxiety churning in her gut over what would become of Sunstrider without her. When she didn’t show up tonight with Sir Ulric’s dinner, would he decide that she wasn’t trustworthy and rid himself of the palomino stallion?

_God!_ Merlyn thumped her head against the cold, stone wall. She was such an _idiot_!

Chapter End Notes

_TBC..._

So that’s Chapter One. Hope you enjoyed
She waved at Gwen from the confines of the stocks as the cocoa-skinned woman passed by, shaking her head in fond amusement. Merlyn tried to shrug in a ‘what do you do’ expression but the shackles and heavy wooden planks wouldn’t let her. She looked away as a particularly mushy tomato splattered by her head.

She just wanted this day done so she could do damage control. She really, really hoped she wasn’t fired.

By the time she was released by a guard, it was midday so she fairly sprinted to the washhouses to clean up before dashing to Ulric’s chambers and beg for forgiveness.

The injured man wasn’t pleased at all. His glare warned of future punishments if there was a reoccurrence but he didn’t do anything more than verbally scold. In gratitude, Merlyn left to blend rosemary and ginger to add to his bath that evening for a relaxing, pain-relieving soak. After she went to the stables and begged them not to sack her – which, the stablemaster agreed after she agreed to clean the royal stalls by herself for the next two days. All the royal stalls… all of them.

Before starting the laborious task, she moved through the stable reserved for the royal family and stepped into the larger building attached for the knights’ steeds. At the far end, Sunstrider stuck his head over to inspect the newcomer and whinnied loudly when he recognised Merlyn. Going to him, she calmed his excited prance then haltered and led him out to an empty paddock so he could run off some steam while she worked. He nudged her once she unclipped him before realising she didn’t want him and leapt away, racing around the large yard like a yearling.

She mucked out the stalls with a ruthless intensity, working through her aching back and splintered hands until the last enclosure was laid with fresh straw. All she needed to do now was refill some of the buckets, which she quickly set out to do, a wooden pail in each hand.
Then she spotted Arthur and two of his friends strolling down the path and inwardly sighed. She lowered her gaze and pushed between them – since they were arrogantly taking up the whole path – and heard exclamations as they recognised her.

“How’s your knee walking coming along?” Arthur called behind her but she forced herself to keep walking.

“Aw, don’t run away,” he whined and she stopped automatically, mentally slapping herself for her pride and inability to let bullies win.

“From you?” she asked, turning her head to see him in her peripherals.

“Oh, thank god,” Arthur put on. “I thought you were deaf as well as dumb.”

“Look,” Merlyn said, turning around and tilting her head, unimpressed. “I told you, you were an ass. I just didn’t realise you were a royal one.”

Arthur shared a glance with his friends and she added mockingly, “oh, what are you going to do, get your daddy’s men to protect you… again?”

He laughed at her. “I could take you apart with one blow.”

She smirked coldly at him, mind flashing back to the incident in Ealdor. “I could take you apart with less than that.”

The prince scoffed, apparently amused at her attitude. “You sure,” he asked, egging her on.

She gritted her teeth and reminded herself of her duties. She said cuttingly, “Unlike you, I have responsibilities. If I fight you, I have to deal with the consequences – again. And thanks for that, by the way,” she added sarcastically. “I slept like a baby with the rats chewing on my clothes. Now, if you don’t mind, I have duties to return to. Go play with your swords or something with your minders.”

“You refuse to fight me now I offer it fairly?” Arthur asked, cocking his head at her.

Merlyn put her hands on her hips, pails knocking against her legs. “You mean you won’t get your daddy’s men to lock me up afterwards – like the last time?”

“That exactly what I mean,” the prince said. “So this time, when I beat you, you will be able unable to blame it on others.”

Arthur took a mace offered by one of his friends and said, “Here you go,” as he tossed it to Merlyn.

The black-haired girl dropped her pails as she tried to catch the odd-shaped weapon but missed. She bent down and picked it up as Arthur whirled a second mace around his head with annoying ease. He said, “Come on then. I warn you, I’ve been trained to kill since birth.”

“Wow,” mocked Merlyn. “And how long have you been training to be a prat?”

Arthur stopped circling his weapon and said with a huff, “You can’t address me like that.”

“I’m sorry,” she mocked. “h-how long have you been training to be a prat, My Lord?” she bowed slightly, lips quirked and the prince gave an incredulous smile before abruptly swinging the mace at her head.

She was very glad for quick reflexes as she dodged away, putting some space between them to
exclaim, “This isn't fair! I don’t even know how to fight!”

“Then let’s see how fast you learn,” he grinned.

She fumbled with unravelling the chain from the pole as she backed up but was forced to drop it and dive over a stand she’d unintentionally cornered herself against. She ducked and wove between several stalls of the market – silently apologising for the wares that were destroyed by the careless prince – but was cut off as he pre-empted her path. Instead, she grabbed a couple of eggs and smashed them in his face.

As he spluttered, she tried to slip by but a wild swipe of his mace caught her in the shoulder blade and she fell with a cry. She kicked a leg to keep him back and belly-crawled for a silver plate that had fallen along with several others of its products, turning over to frisbee it at the prince.

Not expecting the move – and apparently too cocky for his own good – it caught Arthur on the cheek and he yelped, flinching away to hold his face. Merlyn used the time to duck under the table beside her and out the other side, scrambling to her feet as Arthur shoved the whole stand out of his path, scattering the spectators.

He advanced on Merlyn, face stony as he whirled his weapon and the poor girl was backed into a brick building, no stalls nearby to hide behind. Therefore, in a fit of desperation, Merlyn dropped below the arc of the mace and lunged at Arthur, tackling his surprised self to the ground.

She tried to roll of to run but the prince used their momentum to flip them over and Merlyn shoved one hand against his face and the other attempted to keep the deadly mace from smashing in her head. She bucked under him and managed to wedge a knee against his ribs, so she used that and her hand on his face to roll him to the side and land on top. She grabbed his weapon hand in both of hers and smash it against the cobbles until he let go but unwittingly left herself open to a solid punch to her temple by his left swing.

Everything blacked out and when she came to, Arthur was standing over her, victorious but solemn. Merlyn slumped back in defeat, right eye spotting and ears ringing.

He offered her a hand and she forced her shaky arm up to meet it, letting him pull her to her feet. She almost fell to her knees again as her head rushed and vision disappeared but Arthur tightened his hold on her hand and gripped her arm until she was steady again.

He said, “You fight unconventionally but I cannot deny that it was effective. You’re an idiot but you’re brave.” He looked her face over, his cornflower-blue eyes mystified. “There’s something about you, Merlyn. I can't quite put my finger on it.”

Then he left, still regal and dignified despite the egg smearing his face and shirt and the red mark blossoming along his cheekbone. Contrarily, Merlyn felt like she’d been rolling in the stables and kicked by several of the horses.

As the crowd dispersed, Merlyn caught sight of Gaius among them, glaring at her with his infamous eyebrow raised. She groaned.

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“And you decided you would be the one to do it? You have responsibilities, Merlyn! You have duties! You threw it all away for pride?”

She growled at him, “I refuse to be cowed by men who think it is their right to lord it over those around them!”

There was a lull that Merlyn ignored, still pacing in her aggravation. Her right temple was pounding in time with her rapid heart and her entire left arm ached from the concussive blow to her shoulder. She flexed her fingers angrily.

Gaius’ voice surprised Merlyn with its gentleness. “Is this to do with the incident in Ealdor?” he asked.

The black-haired girl flinched at the reminder and glared at Gaius over her shoulder. “That has nothing – I don’t want to talk about it.”

She turned on her heel and retreated to her room, shutting the door firmly behind her. She hesitated on the threshold, breathing heavily before going to sit gingerly on the edge of her bed, emotions she’d kept tightly bound escaping her control. Homesickness roared to life under her breast and tears welled in her eyes despite her best attempt to squelch them. With a blink, they tumbled down over her cheeks and she surrendered to it, burying her face in her pillow.

Thoughts of her mother filled her head, taunting her with the separation. Her comforting, classically beautiful features, her kindness, her knowledge of herbs and medicine, her quiet despair as she stood on the street beside the rubble and debris that had once been their home. Merlyn's fists clenched in the fabric of her pillow.

She didn’t realise that Gaius had followed her into the room until she felt the bed dip under his weight. She choked off her cries, embarrassed.

“Here,” the old man said kindly. “Sit up. Show me where he got you.”

Without meeting his eye, she obeyed, unlacing the collar of her baggy tunic so he could pull it down at the back. He examined it as well as he could from the angle then said apologetically, “you’re going to have to take this off. The injury is too low.”

Gingerly, Gaius helped her free her hurting arm from the sleeve so she could pull it over her head one-handed, leaving her with only the bindings around her chest. Caringly, Gaius wrapped the bed sheet around her torso for modesty then dipped a cloth in salty water to dab on her damaged shoulder blade. Merlyn blinked back more stupid tears at his gentleness.

She whispered hoarsely, “I’m a monster, Gaius.”

He paused in cleaning her cut to glare into her wet eyes. “You are not a monster, Merlyn. Don’t ever think that.”

“You don’t know what happened in Ealdor,” she refuted huskily, shaking her head. “You don’t know what I did.”

“I know you,” he countered, touching her cheek with the back of his forefinger to catch an errant tear. “You are loving and kind. You have the most compassionate heart I have ever seen. You could never be a monster.” He returned to his task and added lightly. “In any case, with your clumsiness, you would be the worst enemy Camelot has ever seen.”

Merlyn snorted in wry amusement then hissed when he pressed a bit too hard on a tender spot.
“This will take a while to heal,” he commented, squinting at her back. “The bruising is deep within the muscle. Maces are a nasty business.”

“Yeah, well, so are fists,” Merlyn quipped reaching up to touch the knot on her temple, which still throbbed.

Gaius turned away to pour a spicily-smelling liquid into a small cup. “Drink this,” he said, pressing it into her hands. “It will help with the pain.”

After her final duties in the stable and bringing the reluctant Sunstrider back in, Merlyn took a long soak in the female servant’s bathhouse, acknowledging the few young women who praised her for her bravery but felt a little uncertain with the awe sparkling in their eyes. She was saved by Gwen when she came over, having come into the bathhouse to find her since she had her own home to bathe in.

She squatted by Merlyn's trough and gave the younger girl a reproachful shake of her head, counteracted by the fondness in her chocolate gaze. “I’ve been hearing quite a few stories this afternoon. There are several varieties since some of the townsfolk recognised you and others thought you were a young boy, but they all have one thing in common.” her dark eyes skimmed over the mottled purple blemish on her temple and around her eye. “You lost.” Her kind face puckered into a concerned frown. “Do you have any regard for your own life?” she admonished.

“Prince Arthur is a knight. You’re lucky he didn’t kill you!”

Merlyn grimaced at her lecture. “I didn’t mean for it to escalate as it did. It just… He’s such a prat.”

Gwen covered a startled chuckle with her hand. “You are something impossible, Merlyn,” she murmured.

Merlyn looked away and shifted, hissing a little when her left shoulder touched the bath edge. The maid touched her shoulder in worry and the pale girl smiled tiredly at her. “He managed to catch me with his mace – don’t panic,” she assured, seeing Gwen blanch. “He didn’t break anything; I’ll just be a little sore for a few days.”

“Let me see,” she said gently and obligingly, Merlyn pulled herself up in the wooden tub then leant forward to display the purple and black stain standing vivid on her creamy skin. “Oh my god,” Gwen gasped, wide eyes locked on her back. “This looks ghastly! You must be in agony.”

“Not a lot,” denied Merlyn, a dopey grin on her lips. “Gaius gave me something for the pain. Now it only hurts if I touch it.”

Gwen shook her head again. “Well, I realised the day I saw you stop that rogue horse that you were foolishly brave. Morgana will be eager to hear your story tomorrow; she’s been listening to Prince Arthur complain about the idiotic young boy who refused to submit. She finds it amusing that he didn’t realise you were a girl, even after close combat.”

“Yeah well,” Merlyn gestured to her small chest. “Not much to notice is there.”

“You’re young yet, Merlyn,” said Gwen. “But your feminine features should have clued him in, if nothing else. Morgana always says that you have lovely eyes.”

Merlyn climbed to her tired feet and Gwen aided her in stepping out of the bath before scooping up her towel. “And I always say that Morgana is deluded. Her eyes are wondrous, like the green seas
of the north. Thank you,” she added as Gwen helped dry her hair then wrapped her in the towel.

They walked to the cubicles near the exit that held her clean clothes and Merlyn began binding her chest. She found herself struggling when she couldn’t move her left arm behind her so Gwen quickly took over, commenting, “If you were to wear customary female attire, you would be able to wear a bodice and could do away with this step.”

“And then I would be spending all the time supposed to be labouring, tripping and causing havoc for my workmates.”

“I’m sure you’re not so bad,” said Gwen while she tied off the ends and picked up Merlyn's tunic.

The pale-skinned girl conceded, “I’m not so bad that I cannot walk a straight line but while amongst horses I believe trousers to be much more efficient. No one has complained yet.”

“I think that is because you are one-of-a-kind, Merlyn. No one knows quite what to do with you.”

“I will take that as a compliment,” she decided and Gwen smiled fondly.

“It was meant to be,” she agreed, running a hand over Merlyn's hair to smooth the messy strands. She took the blue neckerchief from the younger girl’s slack hold and stepped in front to tie it around her neck. She dropped it in surprise as she spotted the pink scar on the right side of Merlyn's throat.

“Oh,” she cried. “What’s this?”

Merlyn frowned in confusion before she touched the raised flesh and immediately flushed in embarrassment. “Oh, er, o-old injury; nothing important.” She picked up the dropped scarf and tied it around her own neck, being sure to cover the disfigurement. She smiled at Gwen. “I’d better join Gaius. He’ll have supper waiting. I’ll see you tomorrow, Gwen. Thank you for helping me.”

She scampered and Gwen was left frowning in disturbed speculation. Morgana had said something about injuries when Merlyn had arrived in Camelot but she’d purposefully been vague to preserve the girl’s privacy. However, Gwen knew Morgana and she’d recognised not only the protective spark in her green eyes but also a glint of righteous fury whenever the younger girl touched her neck – as she was prone to do when she was distracted.

Could it be what it looked like? Could Merlyn really have had her throat intentionally slashed sometime before coming to Camelot? Such a sweet, innocent, clumsy girl like Merlyn? It hurt Gwen's heart to imagine.

Merlyn lay awake that night, exhausted from tossing and turning but too afraid to sleep. Her mind was plagued by visions of her last night in her Ealdor home. It wasn’t so much the attack that haunted her, for travellers invading a house lacking male protection was a fairly common incident, though she and her mother had been lucky until that point. It was more the lack of control she’d demonstrated that tormented her.

Wild images of the roof cracking and crumbling to pieces and the feeling the floor under her back rolling like a rug being shaken clear of dust. An explosion of red and something hot and sticky spattering her face while she tasted copper within her screaming mouth.

She jerked awake, bile surging up into her gullet as she instinctively rolled onto her side to avoid being sick on the bed. She coughed and sputtered but even beneath the disgusting acidic flavour,
she could still taste in her mouth the blood of the man she’d accidentally killed.

After she purged her stomach, she staggered off the bed and cautiously opened the door separating her from the main room, peering out to check Gaius was still asleep before tiptoeing to collect a bowl of water and some rags to clean her floor. She gratefully rinsed the sour taste from her mouth, wishing she could banish the phantom copper flavour so easily.

She ignored the few tears that escaped her eyes as she furiously scrubbed the floorboards. She breathed deeply past any hitch in her chest; disregarded the ache her task brought her bruised shoulder muscle; revelled in the scattered and dull thoughts her throbbing temple caused.

Then she was done and there was nothing to distract her.

With a decisive huff, she left her room to go to the dragon’s cave. The first time for three weeks that she’d given in to the urge. She had some questions and opinions she would like made. She’d met her destiny yesterday and she was sorely unimpressed with his attitude.

She prepared to distract the guards to his lair with the same ‘toss-a-stone-through-the-dark-doorway-and-rush-past-when-they-investigate’ method but found she didn’t even need to when she discovered them both sound asleep at their post. Tutting in her mind at their incompetence, she gladly took advantage and stole a torch from its bracket as she passed.

“Dragon!” she called into the pitch-black cavern once she reached the cold depths of his prison. She felt pity well up at his suffering. He must be so miserable. A creature of the sky bound under the earth. “Dragon!” she called again.

There was an almighty gust of wind and the large reptile lowered himself onto his rock, chain chinking with his movements. “I’m here,” he said unnecessarily. “I did not think I would see you again so soon, young witch. You made it clear that you do not wish for anything to do with what I am.”

Merlyn met his golden eyes in the gloom of the cave but didn’t rise to his bait. She was not a witch.

“I met the prince yesterday,” she started conversationally. “He put me in prison. I met him again today. He beat me with a mace then punched me in the face.” She tilted her head at him. “I don’t think your prophecy is true. I would never help someone like him.”

She could hear the smile in the dragon’s voice as he replied, “none of us can choose our destiny, Merlyn, and none of us can escape it.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No way. You’re wrong. I’m just a stableboy and Arthur’s an idiot.”

“Perhaps it is your destiny to change that,” the dragon said before abruptly launching from his place and flapping away overhead.

“Wait!” she shouted. “Wait, stop! I-I’m not finished!”

The dragon ignored her and she slashed the torch through the air in agitation. She’d hoped the dragon would keep her occupied for a couple of hours or, at least, distract her enough with his prophetic words that her thoughts wouldn’t be able to wander. Instead, she just felt more constricted and oppressed by the curse of her magic.

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She ran Sunstrider further than she’d ever done before. The golden steed had sensed her turmoil when she tacked him up after cleaning all the royal stalls as per her agreement to keep her job. The moment she was settled on his back, he half-reared then proceeded to prance all the way down the road to the entrance, Merlyn not having the strength of mind or body to check him into steadiness.

The moment she was over the short bridge out of the city, she leant forward and let him go. They galloped all the way through the trees and out over hill and dale. She brought them in a big loop over the fields and whooped in glee when he leapt smoothly straight over a small river, worries temporarily blown away in the thrill.

She cooled him down on the return and stopped by another, deeper river in the forest. She let him drink and graze while she rolled her sharply throbbing shoulder and weaved a flower crown with the daisies and beautiful purple flowers that littered the bank. She also found a wild strawberry patch and munched on the tart sweetness of the ripe flesh, giggling when her curious horse took one from her hand only to spray her in the juices as he tossed his head and flipped his top lip back.

She returned to the city just as the sun was peeking out from behind the horizon and the morning bell tolled six. She shared some of her strawberries with the gate guards just as they were changing posts and handed Favian some extra for his wife who was nearing her due date. The rest she delivered to Gaius after untacking and rubbing down Sunstrider, giving him his breakfast before going along to pick up a few new poops while the other hands prepared the animals’ breakfasts.

Gaius was pleasantly surprised by her gift and added them to the watery porridge to add some sweetness. Merlyn pouted for not thinking of that and Gaius laughingly shared his portion. The juicy berries and bland oats mixed well together and Merlyn decided to keep it up for as long as the wild strawberries were fruiting. Bright from the onslaught of sugar, she fairly danced along the castle stairways to collect and deliver Knight Ulric's breakfast.

He grumpily swallowed the bitter tonic for his pain and ate the pre-cut meal of sausage and bacon one-handed while she tended and re-splinted his broken arm. After he was dressed for the banquet that afternoon, Merlyn left to start her rounds, stopping by Morgana's chambers first.

She stepped through the open doorway but the king’s ward disappeared behind the dressing screen before she could greet her. The comment about Arthur made Merlyn snort in amusement, and, when prompted, handed over the requested dress to the other woman before speaking up.

“T’m not Gwen, My Lady,” she said and grinned at Morgana when she peered out in surprise.

“Oh, right,” the younger girl remembered, having taken another pain tonic with breakfast. She rolled her eyes. “Prince Arthur decided to teach me to fight without actually telling me anything.”

Morgana looked horrified. “I didn’t realise he was so rough. He made it sound like you two rolled on the ground more than fought.”

“That’s mostly true,” she agreed with a self-deprecating smile. “He just ended it with a punch.”

“T’at arrogant –” she sputtered in fury. “I should clip him around the head. Challenging a younger, inexperienced girl to a mace fight!”

“I’d like to see that,” Merlyn laughed. “But don’t worry about it. I brought it on myself with my inability to let conceited toerags posture about. And he didn’t realise I was a girl, not even when we were rolling in the dirt.”
Morgana laughed beautifully at her comment and said, “That’s what I love about you Merlyn. You’re not afraid to speak your mind. Arthur just doesn’t appreciate the truth of his character. And he’s as blind as a bat if he can’t see you’re not a boy.”

Merlyn shrugged as Gwen returned and Morgana picked up two dresses she wanted to wear for their opinion. Gwen was impartial but Merlyn was definitely inclined towards the tastefully promiscuous maroon one, though Morgana could look lovely in rags.

She was soon forced to leave them to finish her rounds and return to the stables for the homecoming of a two-day patrol – on a hunt for Mary Collins. Their horses would be tired and probably in need of leg poultices.

The hours ticked away as another, shorter patrol returned and several workers – including her – were reassigned to the castle to help ply the nobles with food and drink for the coming festivities. She was glad to be there just to see how Morgana’s entrance was received by the male population. She and Gwen sniggered at Arthur’s gobsmacked remark and watched as he sidled over to her, as helpless to her thrall as a moth to flame.

“Some people are just born to be queen,” Gwen commented, chocolate eyes following the pair.

Merlyn gasped, “No!”

“I hope so,” the caramel-skinned woman said, tilting her head at the couple. “One day. Not that I’d want to be her. Who’d want to marry Arthur?”

“Oh, come on, Gwen,” Merlyn joked with a sly grin. “I thought you liked those real rough, tough, save-the-world kind of men.”

The maid huffed a laugh and nudged Merlyn on the arm, mindful of her bruised shoulder. Merlyn retaliated by poking her in the cheek then scurrying off to refill Sir Ulric’s goblet before she could get revenge.

Eventually, the nobles drifted to their respective seats and the servants faded into the background. Merlyn watched Morgana smirk smugly at Gwen as Arthur’s eyes followed the noblewoman to her seat and she stifled a laugh, moving to a decent spot by the servant’s exit at the top end of the hall. In Ealdor, the best singer she’d listened to was a young, puerile minstrel. His voice had been sweet but the cracking of adolescence had disharmonised his pieces.

King Uther announced Lady Helen of Mora and the regal woman stepped forth from the doorway as the music began. Her voice was beautiful and rich in a language Merlyn was unfamiliar with but she felt the cadence wash over her in a sensual, calming wave. She sighed in relaxation and leant against the arch of the exit before her focus was drawn to the several other people affected similarly.

In fact, everyone seemed to find the performance peaceful for they were all falling asleep.

And suddenly, the sleepy weight pulling her body to the floor felt menacing. She dragged her heavy arms up to cover her ears and watched in alarm as cobwebs crawled over the sleeping bodies and candle flames winked out of existence, leaving the spellbound room cold and ominous. Through it all, Lady Helen approached the royal table slowly, her voice growing angry and higher and her furious gaze set on Prince Arthur’s slumped, cobwebbed form.

She drew a knife and Merlyn’s heart leapt to her throat.

She jumped forward and shouted, “Hey!” picking up the first thing from the long bench in front of
her and lobbing it at the sorceress – for that was what the woman must be.

The goblet hit the startled Lady on the shoulder and her hymn cut off. She saw Merlyn, the culprit, and angrily swiped out an arm with a harsh word. Merlyn saved herself by diving behind the pillar then scooped up the flagon she’d abandoned for the show and hurled it towards the sorceress. It hit her in the arm and the wine that had still been in there splashed over her dress, drawing a series of curses. Merlyn took the chance to dart from behind the pillar and across the short, open space, skidding on her knees behind the royal table to reach the prince’s chair. He was just starting to twitch into wakefulness.

She grabbed his arm and shook it. “Arthur! Wake up! Wake up, you great lump!”

She heard Lady Helen snarl and peered over the tabletop to glare at her. “Leave him alone you deceitful hag!” she cried, grabbing Arthur's silver platter and frisbeeing it at the woman.

More prepared, the noble woman flicked it away with a hissed spell but Merlyn chucked another thing then another until a spoon slipped past the woman’s defense and clobbered her on the head, distracting her enough for Merlyn to wrench the stupid prince’s heavy frame down beside her.

He landed with a grunt and mumbled, “What the hell?” as he picked web off his face. Merlyn rolled her eyes.

“Sorry to interrupt your beauty sleep,” she hissed, looking under the skirt of the tablecloth to peer at Lady Helen, who’d noticed the court waking and her target hiding. “But you have an assassin after your hide. Do you mind waking up and dealing with it please?”

“I have a what?” he asked just as Lady Helen shouted, “Ætslide bencthel!” and the entire long table they’d been cowering behind skidded off to the side, knocking the King and Morgana over and leaving the prince and peasant utterly exposed.

“Assassin meet prince, prince meet assassin,” quipped Merlyn sarcastically. “Now can you please do something about it!”

“Guards!” yelled the King as he untangled himself and Morgana from the furniture.

Several knights tried to run to the prince’s aid but were thrown away like ragdolls, just as the guards were when they neared. Merlyn used the commotion to push Arthur towards the pillar near the servant’s exit but Lady Helen seemed to have had enough for she whirled towards them and threw the knife with deadly aim.

Merlyn gasped and time slowed.

The younger girl shoved the prince to the ground and twisted out of the way as the knife spiralled passed her nose. Time returned to normal as it struck the stone behind them with a spark, clattering to the floor and an unbalanced Merlyn tumbled onto Prince Arthur. He let out an “oomph!” as she landed on his chest but she didn’t bother apologising, rolling off to grab the knife, flinging it back at the sorceress before she could think.

Perhaps magic helped or maybe her aim was just that lucky but, either way, it struck true, imbedding deeply in Lady Helen’s breast. The woman had enough time to gasp softly before she tumbled to the ground like a marionette with her strings cut.

There was a moment of silence before the hall erupted, shouting and questions and cheering. Merlyn stared at the growing puddle of blood and gaped in horror. Lady Helen’s visage rippled turned into the old woman, Mary Collins, drawing gasps and hushing the chaos.
Merlyn was disturbed from her staring when Prince Arthur sat up and she was forced to sit on her heels or bash heads with him. The blonde knight stared at her then at the dead Mary Collins then back at her again. Merlyn stared in return, wide-eyed.

“You save my boy’s life,” the King’s voice said behind her and she turned away from the prince to look at the fearsome man towering above her. “A debt must be repaid.”

“Oh,” Merlyn said. “Well…”

“Don’t be so modest. You shall be rewarded.” In front of her, Prince Arthur climbed to his feet, silent.

“No, honestly, you don’t have to, Your Highness,” said Merlyn awkwardly, thanking the stars that they hadn’t noticed her slow time.

“No, absolutely. This merits something quite special,”

“Er…”

“You will be rewarded a position in the royal household. You shall be Prince Arthur’s manservant."

The court burst into applause and drowned out Arthur's outraged, “Father!”

“W-what!” Merlyn squeaked, panic washing over her. She was a girl, dammit! A GIRL! “W-wait!”

But the king had already left to deal with the old woman’s corpse, judging the matter finished. She met Arthur’s disgruntled gaze with a flustered one of her own before he turned and walked away, leaving her alone on the floor.

Hours later, in the silence before the witching hour, Gaius quietly joined her in her room, shutting the door carefully behind him. Merlyn stared at him from where she hovered uncertainly beside her bed.

“Gaius,” she whispered and he shuffled over to take her trembling hands.

“Hush, Merlyn. You did a good thing this evening,” he said pulling her to sit on her bed with him.

“I used magic again,” she croaked, throat tight. “I used it and killed someone. Again. Why can I never stop hurting people with it?"

“You are a hero, my dear girl,” he refuted firmly. “You saved the prince from a grief-maddened sorceress. You had no choice.”

“Why did she do that, Gaius?” Merlyn asked. “She murdered Lady Helen for no other reason than to use her image for assassination then she killed Bronwen – who knows what for!” Merlyn's breath caught in her chest. The blonde chambermaid had been chatty and friendly with everyone in the castle, and so excited to serve Camelot’s finest singer. “Justin is inconsolable,” she added quietly. “They were to be married in a week.”

“Grief can cause the most reasonable person to do unimaginable things,” he said gently. “Mary Collins had just lost the last of her family in the most dishonourable way. She needed something to keep her from falling into utter despair and vengeance gave her purpose.”
“And magic gave her a means,” finished Merlyn, looking at her hands. “That is why I cannot use it, Gaius. It gives us too much power… because of it; Mary Collins was able to become a worse tyrant than the King.”

“Magic is a force beyond that which we can understand. It can be studied and mastered and revered but never entirely understood. It is to be respected. But it cannot be feared, Merlyn, for that fear will consume you.”

“How can I not fear it when I have no control over it?” the young girl asked, voice shaking as she admitted her weaknesses. “I’ve tried – I’ve tried so hard to stop, to smother it, to beat it down but it itches under my skin until I cannot stand it any longer. I’m so afraid, Gaius. If I lose my temper or I am startled to react without thinking… I feel how easy it would be to snuff out a life. All I need to do,” she said lifting a hand with her fingers curled like claws. “Is close my fist,” she dropped her arm and turned to the old man beside her. “I can stop a heart beating in its tracks. Tell me; how is that a good thing?”

Gaius touched Merlyn’s cheek tenderly. “Magic is neither good nor evil, it just is. It is the wielders who make it so.” He took a hold of her hand and squeezed it. “You have this power, my girl. You can stop a heart with a twitch of your fingers,” he patted the digits. “But you will not,” he assured. “Because you are not evil, greedy or hateful. And you are not a monster. The magic that flows through your veins responds to your generous spirit and kind soul. Your destrier, the other creatures, they can sense it – as can everyone around you. You do not see it but you are felt wherever you go. The children you play with, the small tokens you bestow on the guards, the care you show for your friends… your compassion, Merlyn, will never let you stray into darkness. But you must trust yourself.”

“How can I?” she begged, gripping his hand. “How can I trust what I cannot control?”

“You saved my life not three days ago,” he reminded her. “You saved Prince Arthur's life only two hours past. Even without control, your instincts guide your magic. This may be what you have been searching for; a purpose to your gifts.”

“To save lives? Or to save Arthur's life?”

“That is up to you,” Gaius said and Merlyn shook her head tiredly, words from a certain golden dragon echoing in her thoughts.

“My destiny,” she sighed.

“Indeed,” offered Gaius. He let go of her hands and picked up a cloth-covered book from beside him. He must have carried it in but she hadn’t noticed. He touched the cover affectionately and said without looking at her, “this book was given to me when I was your age but I have a feeling it will be of more use to you than it was to me.”

He handed it over and, curious, Merlyn unlatched the old but well-cared-for clips to look inside. Her eyes went wide and she gawked at Gaius. “But this is a book of magic!” she whispered in awe.

“Which is why you must keep it hidden,” he replied. “If lack of control is what you fear then I believe this will help discipline your mind.”

Reverently, she touched the leather front as her throat tightened. She looked up at him with teary eyes. “Thank you,” she choked out. “I will study every word.”

Someone knocked on the door to Gaius’ chambers and a guard’s voice said through the wood,
“Merlyn, Prince Arthur wants you right away.”

Gaius patted her knee and stood up with the creaks of age. “Your destiny is calling. Better go see what he wants.”

Merlyn snorted. “I doubt I’ll be employed much longer after I tell him his father mistook my gender. I doubt it’s appropriate for a girl to be a personal servant to a prince,” nevertheless, she stood up and hid the book temporarily under her mattress. Seemed like she wasn’t going to be able to sleep in it tonight anyway.

“It is rare but not unheard of.” He pinned her with a raised eyebrow. “Just be sure, that if he decides to keep you, you do not lead others to assume it is for the wrong purposes.”

“Wrong purposes?” Merlyn asked with a bemused frown. “I do not think he will order me to break the law, Gaius. He has a reputation to uphold. And besides,” she gestured back to the hidden book. “I break the law every second I breathe.”

She moved past him with a reassuring smile then bounced over to the chamber door where the guard was waiting to escort her. She beamed at the stranger, “hello,” she said. “Take me to your leader!”

Chapter End Notes

And there ya go. I don’t really write my stories with chapters in mind, so when I want to post it, I have to find somewhere to break it up. The first chapter in particular, felt too long to paste in one go so I’m sorry about the crappy ending last chapter. This one is better at least.

I’ll post the next one up in about a week. Love to hear what you think!
Cheers!
B
Okay, so she kind of, maybe, possibly chickened out on telling Prince Arthur that she was, in fact, a girl when she went to see him. But it wasn’t her fault entirely! Honest!

When she arrived, she barely had a moment to take a breath before the blonde prince was laying out her duties, not looking up from the reports detailing that evening’s unrest. She had a second to glance around the darkly lit, lavish chambers before she was ordered out with one day to sort her affairs. She was to report the day after with breakfast. “By the eighth bell,” he said and waved her away.

So she had a day to give the stablemaster her notice and reassure Knight Ulric that she could continue her duties as his unpaid servant without hassle. Or, at least, she hoped without hassle.

Before she returned to Gaius for the night, however, she detoured to the dungeons where the dragon dwelled. The guards were just as easy to slip by as usual, gossiping like little old ladies about the night’s events, and she reached the dark cavern swiftly. Before her, the dragon slept, his long neck tucked neatly over his folded legs and under his wing, his golden scales illuminating the shadows with a faint magical glow and voided the necessity of a torch.

She felt a little bad for coming into his abode uninvited and waking him but curiosity overrode decorum.

“Dragon,” she said, thinking she should soon ask his name for something more personal to call him. “Dragon.”

The golden beast sucked in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh, lifting his head from his wing to glare at the one who disturbed him.

“Young witch,” he grumbled. “For one denying her birthright, you seem particularly devoted to breaking your oath.”

“I came to seek answers,” she said, feeling chastened at his words. “I understand now that I may have been too harsh in my decision. There was an incident tonight; a grieving mother used magic to try to kill Arthur and he was only saved by my use of the same.”
“And so it begins,” the dragon said.

She lifted her head. “I wish to learn what you know of mine and Arthur’s future.”

“No person, no matter how great, can know their destiny. You must live and learn, as all beings must.”

“But how will I know if I am doing the right thing? What if I mess everything up?”

“You will do as you are meant as you are meant to do it,” he said, cryptic and pointless.
“Glimpsing one’s future can do more harm than good, Merlyn. You will find wisdom in taking each day as it is and thinking on the next only as it arrives.”

“But that makes no sense!” the black-haired girl cried, frustrated and tired of his riddles. “You are telling me that I am part of some great destiny and yet you will not even let me know what that entails. At least tell me how to control my magic so I can use it without fear of hurting others.”

The dragon moved his head closer, peering at her from one glowing eye. She felt the dry heat of his breath in the air and her temples prickled with sweat. He said, “Your magic is as much a part of you as your blood and your breath. Do not fear it and it will not lead you astray.”

Merlyn threw up her hands. “You are about as useful as Gaius!” she snapped.

The dragon’s nostrils flared and his pupils narrowed into slits, unnerving Merlyn as she realised she had offended him. He drew back and spread his wings in preparation to leave. He said imperiously, “listen to those with more knowledge than yourself and you will find your path runs smoother.” Then he leapt away and, with a great flap that almost blew Merlyn to the ground, he was gone.

By the time Merlyn finally made it to bed that night, the hour was past late and the city was quiet. She fell, exhausted, onto her sheets but rest was a long time in coming, thoughts plagued with the dragon’s words. Consequently, she slept in too late to take Sunstrider out before breakfast so gifted him with a bite of her apple and a promise to ride later. She also gave official notice to the grizzled old marshal, who’d already heard the tales from the stableboys assigned to the banquet. He shooed her off with a grunt of acknowledgement and she left a satchel of arthritic blend tea on his small office desk in thanks.

Next, she rushed to the kitchens and collected the juiciest pork sausages on display and a wedge of cheese to melt in the still-hot bun before carrying it and a large mug of good, steaming black tea to the knight’s wing. She edged open the door to see Sir Ulric twitching restlessly in his large bed, the last of the pain medication waning in his system.

She put his mouth-watering breakfast on his two-man table before pulling out a dose of his pain meds and pouring it into his tea. She went to his drawers and gathered the supplies to tend his arm then set out a pair of balmy clothes since the autumn day was fairly warm.

Knight Ulric jerked awake as she was sweeping the floor by his changing screen and he grumbled as he sat up, taking the tea offered and sipping at the moderately hot beverage to ease the ache in his forearm. Then he paused with a frown and squinted at her.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Merlyn blinked at him. “Tending to you, sir?”

He pushed the cup back into her hands and gestured her to leave. “You are Prince Arthur’s servant
now; you cannot be seen serving another without his permission; it is disreputable.”

“But what about Sunstrider?” she asked.

“He will be reoffered to the local courser to sell but I doubt they have changed their minds. The butcher is where he will end up.”

“You can’t do that!” she cried. “He doesn’t need to die, please! I am willing to continue working for his keep. Servant’s pay is greater than that of a stableboy’s; perhaps I can cover some of his expenses myself.”

“You may be able to pay for his feeding but nothing more is within your reach.” his eyes roamed over her face. “You would be willing to go behind the prince’s back to continue serving me?” he asked sceptically.

Merlyn nodded her head earnestly. “Yes – though I may not be as available as I was previously. But, please, I’ll do everything as before. I’ll still deliver your breakfast and dinner and draw your baths with relaxing salts. Please,” she begged. Regarding Sunstrider, her pride was unimportant. She wasn’t beyond grovelling for his life.

But thankfully, she didn’t need to as Sir Ulric conceded with a sigh. “No one is to know of this. It would dishonour the prince.”

“Yes, definitely, okay,” Merlyn babbled, relieved. “I can still deliver breakfast at seven but cannot linger. I am unsure about my other duties at this point but know that if I ever fail to show, I will make it up doubly and rework my schedule.”

He grunted and shooed her so he could get to his breakfast.

And that was how she became Prince Arthur's ‘man’ servant.

For a couple of days at least.

She lacked the time to take Sunstrider out for their usual dawn trail ride so instead, worked him in the flat arena as the sun lightened the sky. She put him through his paces, feeling a thrill as he responded without reins, – which was good because she’d slept awkwardly on her bruised shoulder and it was aching.

She cooled him down as the dawn bell rang then unsaddled and released him into the far yard, hurrying to the bathhouse to clean up before collecting Sir Ulric's usual breakfast.

The healing knight was sorted quickly and, as she returned to the kitchen for the prince’s plate, apprehension settled like a lead weight in her belly. This morning, she was going to tell Prince Arthur that she was a girl and hope he didn’t think her deception was deliberate. It could end with him accepting her, dismissing her or demanding a public flogging. She really hoped it wasn’t the latter but with her luck and his pride...

By the time she knocked and was bid entry, her imagination had created all sorts of terrible scenes and her hands shook with nerves. She couldn’t speak past the dryness in her throat.

The prince was behind the changing screen so she set out his platter full of meat and cup of sweetened tea on his rich wooden table. She stood back as he walked out in his gambeson and sat down to eat, barely sparing her a glance. Twitchily, she wandered over to tie the curtains back for
the day and jumped when the prince spoke; “once I’ve eaten, we’ll be heading to the armoury. We will be training privately on the north ramparts this morning. I want to practice before the tournament tomorrow.”

She didn’t truly grasp what he meant by ‘we’ until they were inside the armoury and he was being outfitted by his old servant, Morris, while Merlyn fumbled with donning a spare set.

“Don’t you have knights for this sort of thing?” she asked, struggling with the buckle of the stupid forearm brace thingy.

The shink! of a sword being sheathed was heard before he answered. “I’ll be challenging many of them during the tournament. I’d prefer them not to see my tactics.”

Merlyn paused in her armour adjustments and frowned at his back. “Shouldn’t they already know your tactics since you train them?”

Prince Arthur ignored her and gathered several more weapons from the bench then strode out the door with a called, “come on, Merlyn. I don’t have all day!”

Morris gave her a pitying shrug when she looked at him so she gave up on her forearm, brace, strap whatever to grab her too-large sword belt and helmet, rushing after him with a sigh.

She followed him down several flights of stairs and through a number of narrow passages leading to the north side of the citadel for their ‘training session’. Personally, she suspected he just wanted to use her as a practice dummy. The gleam in his eye spoke of anticipation.

Nevertheless, she’d had enough time to get over her initial tongue-tie and decided to try to broach the topic of the little misassumption regarding her gender. She jogged to catch up to him and said hesitantly over his shoulder, tottering to avoid catching his heels, “hey, um, sire? There’s something that I’ve been meaning to talk to you about –”

“You’re not being paid to talk, Merlyn,” he interrupted as they ducked through the last arch and strode out onto the gently sloping field above the walls, empty of anyone but them.

“Yes, but I really think this is important to our working relationshi –”

“There’s nothing I think we need to discuss,” he interrupted again. “I tell you what to do; you do it. Easy peasy. Even an idiot like you should be able to manage it.”

“I’m not talking about orders,” she denied. “Although some of the jobs you’ve told me are frankly degrading –”

“That’s a big word, Merlyn. Are you sure you know what it means?”

“Are you sure you do?” she retorted. “A personal servant is not expected to be used as a footrest or target practice or –”

“A servant is paid to do what they are told. I tell you I want to rest my aching feet on your back, I expect you to get on your hands and knees and let me.”

“I’m not your slave. I have some right to say no to unreasonable orders – but that’s beside the point,” she said with a wave of her hand. “What I’m trying to say –”

“This here’s a good spot,” he interrupted – again – not even pretending to be interested. She bit her tongue to stop herself from yelling at him.
He continued speaking, oblivious as he stomped a circle on the spongy ground. “No holes to twist your delicate little ankles but a few rocks to keep you thinking about footwork.” He turned to face her and straightened up his own forearm brace thing. “Ready?” he asked, dropping his extra weapons to the side.

Merlyn sighed and tossed her hope of having this conversation done now into the wind. She put the oversized helmet on her head and squinted at him through the slit. “Would it make any difference if I said no?”

The blonde knight scrunched his nose as he mock-thought. “Not really,” he decided.

Merlyn struggled to draw the long sword from its scabbard and the prince rolled his eyes. He drew his own weapon and, as soon as she stepped defensively, he attacked, calling each strike for her defense. Not that it helped any.


“Head? Ow!” she flinched away from the loud clang in her ears when his sword hit her helmet.

“Come on, Merlyn,” called the prince. “You’re not even trying!” she tottered towards him but he danced around and tagged her on the back with the broadside of his weapon.

“Ow! I am,” she said. “I can't see in this thing,” she tapped the too-large helmet on her head. “And the sword is too heavy. It hurts my wrist.”

“Once more,” he said, ignoring her complaints and stepping into position.

“Oh no,” she groaned but tried to rally as he attacked, the heavy weapon sluggish in her inexperienced grip.

“To the left. To the right. And left. Head!”

She tried to duck but her sword tip stuck in the ground and the hilt buried in her belly instead. She wheezed and staggered as the broadside of his sword clanged against her helmet again, scrambling her balance.

And so it continued for several hours.

The ‘lesson’ finally ended when Merlyn fell backwards and smacked her bruised shoulder against a half-buried rock. She curled into a ball to ride out the stabbing pains and Arthur finally conceded his victory. She wished she could just trip him over with magic but until she learned some spells and control, she was too afraid of hurting him. She also wished she could go to Gaius over lunch and drink down a pain tonic but the prince wanted his food and Sir Ulric’s dirty clothes needed to be taken to the laundry plus she hoped to catch Gwen to beg for armour coaching that evening.

The cocoa-skinned woman agreed immediately with a sympathetic smile. “Have you told him to the truth yet?” she asked.

“I will,” Merlyn defended in a high voice. “I mean – I tried earlier but he doesn’t listen. He talks over me all the time and orders me about with no regard for what I’m trying to say. I think I’ll have to shout it out for him to hear,” she fidgeted, touching her covered throat. “I’m worried he will think I’ve hoodwinked him now and have me flogged.”
Gwen’s eyes followed her hand for an instant before she touched her arm and reassured her, “I don’t believe Arthur is like that. Despite his attitude, he is not without compassion and understanding.”

Merlyn snorted in scepticism but felt a little better nonetheless. They parted with a promise to meet at her home after the dusk bell and the younger girl darted off to collect some water to heat for the prince’s bath. She also took the opportunity to check in on Sunstrider, who was playing like a colt with a bay stallion through the fence.

She was glad there were servants specifically hired to lug bathwater up to the royals because without them, it would have taken six trips up the many staircases with heavy pails instead of only two. She thanked the two burly men as she propped the cauldron over the hearth then lit the kindling and filled the pot. Once she learnt the spell to heat things remotely, she was definitely utilising it for tasks such as these.

She gave them both a grape vine for their trouble and they blinked in surprise. She smiled and whispered, “He’ll never notice.” then waved goodbye.

Prince Arthur returned to his chambers just as she poured the last of the heated water into his bath and checked the temperature. He didn’t acknowledge her as he marched behind his changing screen and started to strip. In the distraction of picking up his dirty clothes, she forgot that he didn’t know she was a girl and thus, as she neared to pick up the clothes he’d just discarded, she forgot to avert her eyes as he stepped out.

She squeaked in surprise and the basket of laundry tumbled from her arms. She spun away, covering her eyes. Not again! Her mind cried.

Behind her, Arthur, bare as the day he was born, scoffed. “Don’t be such a girl, Merlyn.”

There was nothing for it. Before she could censor herself, she blurted, “but I am a girl, sire.”

There was silence behind her then a scandalised, “what?” and Merlyn had a wicked sense of déjà vu.

Merlyn peeked over her shoulder between her fingers but he was still standing there in all his glory, not even covering himself with his hands. His eyes were wide and his mouth agape. She definitely had rotten timing for these things.

She babbled to break the tense mood, hiding her face once more. “I’ve been trying to tell you this whole time,” she began quickly. “I-I’m not a boy at all. But I swear I wasn’t deceiving you deliberately, there just – just didn’t seem to be a right moment and everything’s been so busy with me learning my duties and you ordering me about and not listening to my words and I really don’t want to be flogged because I honestly didn’t mean to lie to anyone –”

“– Merlyn –”

“It just kind of happens on its own with everyone making these assumptions because I wear leggings and tunics and have short hair! I like to wear breeches because it makes it easy to do my chores and ride and I never had trouble in Ealdor. Several of the women there wear trousers too because working in the fields is cumbersome in a skirt and I didn’t think it would really matter in Camelot and the times I was mistaken for a boy weren’t that big a deal –”

“– Merlyn –”

“But then I saved your life and the King called me your manservant and I was terrified to correct
him in front of everyone – I mean, goodness, he’s the King! And I really didn’t want to spend another night in the dungeons. Please don’t send me back there.” She sucked in a deep breath after her verbal diarrhoea and didn’t dare look back.

“Merlyn,” said Arthur. “Shut up!”

She thought it was a bit of a delayed order but didn’t bother pointing that out, letting the silence stretch into desperately uncomfortable territory as Arthur absorbed this revelation.

Finally, there was a rustle of fabric and Arthur cleared his throat. “So… you’re a girl?” Merlyn felt safe enough taking a second glance behind her and let out a relieved breath when she saw he’d wrapped a bed sheet around his lower half. She was too used to seeing toned torsos to be embarrassed that his was still uncovered. In fact, he looked almost comical with his mouth half-open and his finger pointing at her dumbly.

“You’re a girl,” he repeated.

Merlyn shuffled nervously on her feet, fingers twisting together. “Yes,” she affirmed.

He was still pointing at her with a bewildered look on his face. “You’re a girl and you just saw me naked,” he said.

She giggled hysterically and covered her blushing face. “Yes,” she said.

“But you’re my manservant!” he cried.

_Honestly!_ She thought, peering at him from between her fingers. And he called _her_ an idiot. “I guess now I’m your handmaiden?” she corrected with a shrug.

“But that’s not allowed,” he rejected. “I can't have a handmaid. I’m male!”

“Yes,” agreed Merlyn dryly. “I noticed.”

This time, he blushed and shifted in embarrassment but she continued earnestly, dropping her hands from her face; “I don’t see what the problem is. As long as I don’t hang around for the _– ahem –_ washing and scrubbing then there isn't a problem. I managed it when serving another man – and besides –” she continued lest he ask whom or when. “Most people already know I’m a girl and they haven’t spoken against it.”

“Who knows you’re a girl?” demanded Arthur.

She shrugged. “Most of the stableboys, some of the guards, all of the female servants since I wash with them in the bathhouse, Gaius, Gwen, Morgana –”

“Morgana!” cried Arthur, outraged. “How does she know?”

“I haven’t exactly been keeping it a secret,” Merlyn berated lightly. “It’s just most people don’t bother to look beyond what they expect. They see short hair and trousers and assume I’m a boy. Morgana is quite amused at how unobservant you are.”

“Yes, well,” he muttered with a scowl, turning away. “It’s not my fault I was expecting my manservant to be a man.”

“I didn’t sign up to be your servant,” Merlyn said with her hands on her hips. “That was your father’s doing.”
“That’s true,” he allowed and she blinked in surprise. He agreed with her? She peered at him. Had he taken ill?

He turned to her suddenly and waved a hand at her attire. “You can't keep wearing that,” he decided. “It’s not proper.”

Merlyn looked down at her clothes and frowned. “Wearing trousers isn't illegal. How am I to run after you and Gaius and – and –” she cleared her throat. “How am I to do all my chores in an unwieldy skirt? You already complain about my dawdling after one day!” she shook her head at his silliness and bent down to gather up the scattered clothes.

“My father thinks you’re a boy,” he said. “Most everyone thinks you’re a boy. I mean, you were a very pretty boy – not that I was looking!” he denied quickly. “I just assumed you were a tall child since your voice was so high – how old are you?”

Merlyn bit her lip to stop a grin at how adorably awkward he was being, words jumping around like a frightened hare. “I’ve seen sixteen summers,” she said.

“Really?” Arthur said in surprise. He looked her up and down and Merlyn scowled, lifting the once-more full basket in her arms.

“Yes really,” she retorted a little defensively. “Ealdor is a small village separate from the main travel routes. Eating healthy often came second to eating at all. Girls usually develop late.”

His cheeks pinked again as he averted his gaze. “Er, yes, well… there is still the matter of my father’s assumptions. I cannot go to him and refute his announcement candidly; you would be flogged for misleading him. If you take to wearing feminine attire then once he sees you, he would be unable to declare you dishonest. He will most likely assume he made a simple mistake.”

“He did make a simple mistake,” Merlyn pointed out.

Arthur looked at her, askance. “I can't tell him that.”

“Then let’s not bother with it at all,” she decided, hugging the clothes hamper to her chest and turning for the door. “I don’t particularly want to be flogged for the King’s error and I have no dresses for you to force me into anyway. I think we should leave everything as is and concentrate on the tournament tomorrow.” She opened the door and called over her shoulder, “I'll get your dinner from the kitchens. You’d best bathe quickly before the water gets too cold, it took me ages to heat.” And with that she scampered.

She was exhausted by the time she made it to Gwen's that evening – late because she had to collect another pail of cool water to counteract the cauldron she accidentally boiled for Sir Ulric’s bath when she scurried off to return Prince Arthur's finished plate to the kitchens.

Her stomach reminded her voraciously that she hadn’t eaten since breakfast but the need to learn armour etiquette overruled her hunger complaints – she would feast when she returned to Gaius’ chambers. And take a pain tonic for her shoulder. The poor bruised muscle was throbbing like mad from the abuse it had received that day, landing on the protruding rock that morning then straining against the weight of two pails of water that evening. She definitely needed to look up some healing spells because she didn’t want to end up permanently crippled from it not healing correctly.

She apologised to Gwen for her tardiness when she opened the door but the maid waved it away, beckoning her inside happily. Merlyn gratefully dumped the pieces of her spare set of armour on
the table and flexed her left hand out of its cramp, feeling the pain travel up her arm and into her shoulder muscle. Yup, she was looking into those healing spells the instant she had the chance.

“Is your shoulder paining you?” Gwen asked in concern.

“Only because I haven’t had a chance to rest it today,” Merlyn assured her, looking around and noticing the absence of another person. “Where’s your father?” she asked in concern.

“He decided to do some minute jobs in the blacksmith to give us some quality ‘girl time’ as he called it.” The cocoa-skinned woman shook her head fondly. “As if learning about armour is a feminine pastime.”

“I didn’t mean to kick him out of his own home,” the younger girl worried. He was a lovely man who lived for his daughter. She hadn’t meant to exploit that by forcing her presence on them.

“Oh no,” Gwen reassured her. “That’s not it at all. You’re lovely to him, Merlyn. He’s just being overly conscientious is all. Don’t worry about it; truly.”

Merlyn's stomach chose that moment to growl like a feral dog and her pale face flushed in embarrassment. “Sorry,” she muttered, laying a hand on her belly. “I was delayed in the castle and wasn’t able to stop for supper.”

“Would you like something?” the dark woman asked, turning to her icebox before Merlyn stopped her.

“I’m perfectly fine,” she said. “My stomach can wait another hour while I learn armour assembly. I have a good meal waiting for me at Gaius’, but thank you,” she added, knowing just how generous an offer of food was for people like them.

She stood up and Gwen began putting each piece on, identifying them, showing her where the buckles sat and how snug it was supposed to fit. She returned to Gaius’ chambers with a full head and empty gut but soon remedied one with the best tasting broth she’d ever eaten – or maybe that was her hunger talking.

She returned to the castle not long later to turn down the prince’s sheets and stoke the fire for the night, also returning the armour to its rightful place in the armoury. Prince Arthur reminded her to be there by the seventh bell the next morning and Merlyn bit her lip to hide a grin at how obvious he was being with his discomfiture, shooting her bewildered glances when he thought she wasn’t aware. Clearly having trouble assimilating she was a girl.

She would have commented on it but she was much too tired to linger. When she fell into bed that night, she was asleep before her head touched the pillow.

The next morning, her shoulder was much too stiff and sore to ride – or do much of anything really. Landing on the protruding rock definitely damaged it more than she thought. So, with a mental apology to her destrier, she forwent the outing and instead cracked open her magic book for the first time to seek a remedy in the grey light of dawn.

Flicking through the pages full of enchantments and rituals brought a thrill of fear and rebellion. She’d never heard of words such as Ástrice or Forberne but something in her blood responded to them, even simply incanting in her mind. However, she wasn’t there to look on whim, as much as she wished she had time, so she flipped on.
Deep into the book, in the more complicated-looking chapters, she found a few promising descriptions. *Gestepehole. Purhhaele.* To cure; make well.

“Gestethe… hole… Purr… hale…”

That wasn’t right. Even without understanding the language and only a minimal grasp of the old symbols, it didn’t feel right on her tongue. She tilted her head and read the paragraphs on intonation then tried again, holding her right hand over her tender shoulder muscle. “Gestathole. Thurhhaele… Thurhwaide… Thurh-windle… Gestathole. Thurhhwindle… Gestathole. *Thurhhwindle… Gestathole! Thurhhwindle!*”

She gasped when she felt a tingling in her shoulder blade and the sudden relief of pain. She froze for a moment before a wave of tiredness washed over her limbs. But it wasn’t debilitating so she let it go in favour of probing the prickling area. She flinched when she tapped a tender spot but it felt shallower in her skin and hurt a lot less. She rolled the joint and lifted her arm but other than the ache of a light bump, she felt no pain. She laughed in giddy delight and jumped off her bed, eager to share her accomplishment with Gaius.

She was gentle but unrepentant as she woke the sleeping man, beaming at him brightly as he squinted up at her grumpily. It soon changed to astonishment when she shared her news.

“Healing spells are one of the most difficult aspects of magic to master,” he explained, sitting up and motioning her to remove her shirt, curiosity not leaving time for modesty. “Many powerful sorcerers are unable to achieve even a semblance of remedial practice without herbal and runic aid.” he inspected the healing green and yellow remains of the black and purple mess her shoulder blade had been previously.

Merlyn preened under the indirect compliment but said seriously, “if I’m to start using my magic again, I must be able to control it. The language of the spells; I wish to learn it fluently. Will you teach me?” she peered at Gaius behind her.

“I am long out of practice but I am willing to try if you’ll bear with an old man’s memory.” he paused then added; “though, I need hardly remind you that the discovery of any form of enchantments will get you killed.”

Like she could forget. The burning woman still haunted her dreams.

Once he was satisfied and let her leave, Merlyn popped out to the stable yards where she’d left her palomino boy for the night and gave him an apple core in apology for the lack of exercise. Sometimes it was really inconvenient that he wouldn’t let anybody else on his back – during those times when her ego wasn’t being stroked by his monopoly, that was.

The rising sun warmed her face for the new day and the cold water from the courtyard pump washed the residual fatigue from her limbs. She tended to both knights mechanically – Sir Ulric needing nothing more than a serving of breakfast since he couldn’t compete – but when the time came to dress Prince Arthur in his armour out on the fields, she promptly forgot the tips Gwen shared the night before.

She struggled with the vambrace and the prince soon grew irritated enough to comment snidely, “You do know the tournament starts today?”

“Yes, Sire,” she agreed. She turned her attention to the gorget, fixing the buckle and asked, “You nervous?”
Arthur gritted his teeth and said, “I don’t get nervous.”

“Really?” the servant asked. “I thought everyone got nervous.”

“Will you shut up!” he cried abruptly, losing his temper. Merlyn pressed her lips together, unaffected but understanding his rudeness. Definitely feeling the pressure.

She grabbed his ceremonial cape and tied it around his neck then handed him his helmet to finish. She stepped back to see the full effect and smiled. “Great, yeah. I think you’re all set.” He looked fabulous in the complete regalia. Like a true prince.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” he snapped and she blinked in confusion. “My sword!”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, sorry. Guess, uh, you’ll be needing that.” she picked the weapon from its stand and presented it to him. He snatched it from her and marched off without another word.

“That went well,” she commented to no one. A true prince indeed, she thought with a quirk to her lips. Temper and all.

Knight Valiant was definitely a creep. He had that aura that made her want to run in the opposite direction. His flat brown eyes sparked with the awareness of dark secrets and his lips twitched with cold amusement. He was ruthless against his opponents and revelled in the crowd’s cheers like a drunkard revelled in his first pint. He scared her a little.

The only positive she could find was that Prince Arthur didn’t like him either – though his seemed to stem from the divvy of attention and his father’s good opinion.

The next morning, after learning a few household spells for Arthur's chores, Merlyn went to the armoury to collect his gear – mourning another missed ride with Sunstrider through sheer exhaustion. The poor boy was probably going spare with boredom.

The sound of a hiss distracted her as she gathered up the armour and she glanced around the empty room warily.

“Hello? Is there someone there?”

The hissing stopped when she spoke but she tracked it to the rack of competitor’s shields. She crouched down for a better look at the yellow one. The shield had three snakes painted dominantly and the hissing had sounded very much like them. She cocked her head at the nearest one and it blinked at her.

Like – blinked. For real.

Fascinated, she reached out to it but the tip of a sword touched her chest and she froze. Slowly, she stood up; hands held out disarmingly and met the cold glare of Knight Valiant.

“Can I help you with something, boy?” he said dangerously.

“Nope,” she said quickly. “I’m good. I-I was just… I was, erm, gathering my master’s armour.”

The shorthaired knight frowned and his sword point moved up from her sternum and pressed against the underside of her chin, compelling her to lift it. Then he grabbed her jaw with his hand and exclaimed, “You’re a girl!”
Her eyes widened at his discernment and her muscles coiled pre-emptively but she fought down the fight or flight instinct. Neither would serve her well unless she could catch him unaware.

Sir Valiant smirked at his new knowledge. “Does your master know, girly?”

“He knows,” she said, wrenching her face free of his grip and rubbing her cheek where his fingers had dug in. His sword was lowered to his side but he wasn’t sheathing it. “I’m not hiding my gender. I simply prefer breeches.”

“Hmm,” he said, looking her over and enjoying her involuntary squirm. “But such sexless clothes rarely do a woman justice,” he stepped forward and Merlyn backed up unsteadily.

“I’m not a woman,” she breathed, panicky. “I’m just a girl. N-nothing to bring justice to.”

Her back hit a wall and he leaned in, not touching but in her space. She fisted her hands in anticipation and turned her face away.

“I think many girls are woman enough when they need to be,” he whispered, enjoying her discomfit.

Then he pulled back and sheathed his weapon. “I believe your master will be wanting his armour,” he said, the cruel glint in his eye sparkling and a smirk lingering on his thin lips. “Best be on your way.”

“Yes,” she agreed on a breath and edged along the wall until she was far enough away to dart around the table and scooped up Arthur's equipment. She scurried out the door and jogged down the corridors, stumbling on until she felt far enough away that a minor meltdown wouldn’t be her undoing.

She ducked into an alcove and let the armour tumble from her hands, letting the wall support her as she bent over her knees and tried to breathe through the catches. Her hand lifted to her throat beneath the neckerchief and traced the raised flesh of the ugly pink scar marring her skin. Her eyes burned but she squeezed them shut to stop the tears and focused on her pounding heart.

Too close, her mind whispered raggedly. Too close. Too close. Too close.

“You did all this on your own?” asked Prince Arthur, gazing over the armour laid out ready on the table in surprise.

“Yes, sire,” said Merlyn, omitting mention of the magic that aided her. That book was fantastic.

The blonde knight nodded absently then remarked, “Now, let’s see if you can get me into it without forgetting anything.”

She did that too — without the use of enchantments.

She grinned lopsidedly at Arthur's impressed expression before he wiped it away and followed after him to the tournament grounds.

He won his bout and they stood to the side, watching Knight Valiant win his. Gaius jogged out to the downed Sir Ewan in the middle of the grounds and Merlyn said in concern, “I think he’s badly hurt.”
But Sir Valiant didn’t seem to care as he strutted like a proud cockerel to the bloodthirsty crowd.

That evening, Merlyn hurried back to Gaius’ chambers with the prince’s gear and saw Knight Ewan still bedbound and unconscious.

“How is he?” she asked, dumping her armful onto the table as she passed.

“It’s most odd,” said the old man, beckoning her nearer to peer at his throat. “Look at this. See these two small wounds. Looks like a snake bite.”

“How could he have been bitten by a snake? He was injured in the sword fight.” She continued to inspect the wound as Gaius moved back to blend something together.

“The symptoms are also consistent with poisoning: slow pulse, fever, paralysis.”

“Can you heal him?” she asked, turning to look at him in worry.

“Well, if it is a snakebite, I’ll have to extract the venom from the snake that bit him to make an antidote.” He lifted the vial to eye level and stirred the mixture within.

“What happens if he doesn’t get the antidote?”

Gaius sighed. “Then I’m afraid there’s nothing more I can do for him. He’s going to die.”

“What if I…” Merlyn hesitated, still feeling at odds with working her magic, but ultimately pushed on; “what if I use my –”

Gaius’ hands clamped over her own, startlingly firm, from where she’d been moving them towards Sir Ewan’s punctures. Her eyes shot up to his own and found them deadly serious. “You must never utter those words while in the presence of other people,” he said. “Even those lacking consciousness. The mind remembers and forgets what it will and I’ll not have you burn for your carelessness.”

He released her hands and she swallowed sudden nerves. Tentatively, she murmured, “still… couldn’t I… help?”

Gaius shook his head, turning back to his work now the danger had passed. “We must cure Knight Ewan with the ways provided to us by Camelot’s laws. We are under too much scrutiny to work unquestioned miracles, my dear.”

Merlyn pursed her lips in thought. A snakebite in a swordfight; how was that possible?

An inkling of suspicion grew in her mind. “He was fighting Knight Valiant,” she murmured aloud.

“What’s that?” Gaius asked, glancing over but she didn’t answer, not wanting to share until she could be sure.

“Nothing,” she said as she darted out the door.

She spied on Valiant, stupidly revealed her position then ran away before she was caught. She rushed back to Gaius to reveal what she saw. And grew frustrated and hurt when the old man questioned her honesty.

“I know magic when I see it,” she snapped.
“Perhaps,” he said getting up to join her. “But do you have any proof?”

Merlyn gaped at him. “Don’t you believe me?”

“I fear you’ll land yourself in trouble. How will you explain why you were in Valiant’s chambers?”

“What does that matter? He’s using magic to cheat in the tournament!”

“But you cannot go accusing a knight of using magic without proof. The King would never accept the word of a servant over the word of a knight.”

“What? So what I say doesn’t count for anything?”

“I’m afraid it counts for very little as far as the King is concerned. That’s just the way it is.”

Merlyn scowled and spun away, storming to where Knight Ewan rested, sweating and sickly. She felt empathy and anger rise up inside and grabbed the cloth from the water basin to dab his face. He was suffering needlessly.

She faced Gaius determinedly. “I can heal him,” she said firmly.

Gaius looked up from the tome he was scanning and blinked before realising what she meant. His face darkened in disapproval. “No, Merlyn,” he scolded. “Don’t be stupid.”

“He needs the venom from the snakes in the shield! If he doesn’t get it then he will die. You said so yourself!”

“His life is not worth more than your own. I can make him comfortable until Knight Valiant reveals himself or Knight Ewan passes. There is nothing more to be done.” He was obstinate but Merlyn could be stubborn too. She stood up in outrage.

“I can save him!” she cried angrily. “Perhaps he saw what struck him. You said the word of a servant is nothing. What about the word of a knight against a knight? I can stop Valiant before he hurts anyone else! Why won’t you help me!”

Gaius took of his spectacles and walked over to her, taking her hands in his. “There will come a time when your skills will be recognised and you will be able to act without fear or repercussion but that day is not this day. You are destined for great things, my girl, but you must be patient.”

Merlyn pulled her hands free of Gaius’ gentle hold, glaring with glistening eyes. “I agreed to study magic so I could learn control and no longer fear it. What is the point of such gifts if I am unable to use them to help people? No,” she said. “I’ll not stand idly by and let someone die whom I could save. My life is worth no more than any man, woman or child and they deserve my full effort.”

She turned away from the old man and wrapped her hands lightly around Knight Ewan’s neck. She closed her eyes and said the same spell she’d used on herself.


Gaius put a hand on her shoulder in support but Merlyn didn’t turn around. He said, “Healing spells are notoriously difficult. But if the snake truly came from Knight Valiant’s shield, it may be that its venom is magical in nature and will only respond to an antidote from the same source.”

“Or it could be that I am simply doing something wrong,” she replied, looking at the knight’s
sickly features and feeling his sluggish pulse under her palm. She turned to glower at Gaius. “I refuse to bow to Valiant’s sadism. He will be brought to justice.”

She stepped around him and strode out the door, ignoring the exasperated, “Merlyn!” that Gaius threw after her.

She snuck back to Valiant’s chambers and pressed an ear to the closed door. She could hear the slight scuffle of boots on floor and the creak of a chair so settled in to wait for him to sleep.

It was late and chilly by the time all sound ceased in the room save the sighs of deep sleep. Merlyn had wrapped her scarf around her head and mouth to stop her nose going numb in the cold corridor and didn’t bother to remove it as she moved to the nearby torch still clinging feebly to life.

She smothered the flame then returned to the door and whispered, “Aetynan.”

The door clicked open and Merlyn gazed through the crack to see the room half lit with the embers in the hearth, the warmth washing over her chilled cheeks. Valiant was unmoving on his back in the big bed so Merlyn crept over to where his shield was propped, freshly cleaned. She squinted at the painted snakes on its front but they didn’t so much as blink this time. She hooked her arm through the holds and hefted it up but froze when Valiant sighed and rolled onto his side, facing her but still asleep. She waited several seconds with baited breath but his eyes didn’t open. She breathed silently in relief and moved, anticipation building as she neared the door.

Then the painted snakes hissed and one stuck its head out toward her, freshly animated. She jerked back and flung the shield away instinctively, cringing as it clattered noisily to the floor. She spun around to face the bed and found Valiant already upright, a menacing grin on his face and a short knife in his hand. She dived to the side as he flung it and heard the thud of it stick in the door above her head.

She had a moment to realise just how stupid her plan had been before she was pounced upon by Valiant. He grabbed her hair and yanked her upright before gripping her throat and slamming her against the wall. The breath whooshed from her body at the force and he snarled in her face, “A peasant should know better to steal from a knight!”

She wheezed through the hand holding her throat tightly but not yet strangling. “A knight… should serve with honour… and honesty.” She gagged and added in a rasp, “You have neither.”

Her air cut off completely as his grip increased and his face went red in fury. He smacked her into the wall again and her head connected with a crack, blackening her vision and making the world spin. He ripped her scarf from her head then pushed her into the wall with his body, his hot breath blowing in her ear, stubble scratching her cheek as he hissed savagely, “good thing no one cares what a servant thinks.”

He pressed his nose to her temple and sucked in her scent. “I’ve been meaning to find relief since I arrived. You’re as good as any bar wench; probably tighter.”

Her senses were knocked askew from the buzzing in her head so she only heard every second word but she knew damn well the feel of her breeches being loosened by hands other than her own. She grabbed the offensive fingers and dug her nails into his skin, her other hand going to the one around her throat. However, he used his weight to shove her back into the wall a third time and her grip loosened enough for him to backhand her to the floor. She cried out as she landed roughly, hand automatically going to her split mouth but he gripped her hair and dragged her to the bed
before she could think to do anything else.

He bent her over the edge and mashed her face into the rumpled covers while his other hand went to her belt and started to tug it down, her struggles ineffective.

*This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t happening again.*

With inhuman strength or magical aid – she didn’t know – she propelled off the bed and slammed her head against Valiant’s chin, sending him flying backwards in surprise. She staggered over his flailing feet and rammed into the door in her haste to escape. She wrenched it open and dashed out into the corridor, loosing a scream when she felt unfriendly fingers grab at her sleeve.

She ran with her heart in her throat, hearing feet thundering behind her but adrenalin kept her feet light, driving her on and on and on.

*Run, her mind hissed like one of Valiant’s snakes. Run. Run. Run.*

By the time exhaustion caused her legs to fold underneath her, she had lost all sense of direction, astray somewhere beside an exterior corridor. She curled herself over her knees and tried to breathe through the shivers wracking her frame, tried to ignore the taste of blood in her mouth. It was her blood. *Her* blood this time.

She wished for her mother. She wished for Gaius. She wished for –

“Merlyn?”

Morgana.

“Merlyn!” a soft hand touched her shoulder and she jumped before lifting her head.

“Morgana,” she whispered, hoarse from the strangulation and emotion. She saw the highborn on her knees beside her, nightgown and cloak splayed on the dirty floor and green gaze wide with alarm. Tears welled in Merlyn's eyes and she threw herself at the older woman, sobbing in relief of a friendly face.

“Shh, shh,” Morgana hushed, stroking her hair and rocking them subconsciously. “You’re okay. You’re okay.”

“I was so scared. I was so scared – it was happening again. He was chasing me – I failed –” she coughed and it scraped in her throat like fire but Morgana needed to know. “I failed to get the shield and now he knows – he knows I know and everyone is in danger –” she coughed again; “oh, my throat!” she tried to speak but it hurt too much, was too constricted to let sound out. She put a hand to her neck and felt the swelling and tenderness beneath her palm. She was desperate for a sip of water.

“Let me see,” said Morgana softly, leaning away and gently removing Merlyn’s hand. The instant her sea-green eyes locked onto the damage, they blazed in fury. “Who did this?” she asked, voice trembling with emotion.

Merlyn rasped in a breath to try to answer but even that caused her to fold over in a coughing fit, tears leaking out of her eyes from the pain. She collapsed against Morgana once she ran out of strength and let the older woman’s comforting rosemary scent fill her senses as the rest of the world faded into obscurity.

Morgana felt deep concern well up when the younger girl grew limp in her arms. She smoothed a
hand down her shoulder-length ebony strands and wavered over leaving her there to get help or try to carry her to Gaius. The choice was taken from her when the troop of boots stomped nearer and two night guards turned into the hallway. They stopped short in surprise, hands going to sword hilts before they recognised Morgana.

““My Lady?” one exclaimed and rushed forward, eyes darting around warily. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she said, grateful for their arrival. “Yes I’m fine, but my friend is not. She has been attacked by an unknown assailant. I need your aid to take her to the Court Physician.”

“Of course, My Lady,” the guard said and bent down to carefully scoop Merlyn up but the girl seemed aware enough to fight their touch, latching onto Morgana.

“Don’t touch me. Let go,” she rasped, fingers curling into Morgana's cloak and the guards hesitated, unsure.

“Shh, it’s okay Merlyn,” murmured Morgana, stroking her hair. “I’m right here. You’re okay.”

Merlyn blinked back into semi-consciousness as one of the guards managed to scoop her up with no more struggles. Her hand was being held by Morgana and, seeing her aware, the older woman said reassuringly, “we’re taking you to Gaius. He’ll be able to help you more than I.”

But Merlyn shook her head. “No,” she whispered. “I don’t want him to see me like this. Please don’t take me there.”

“You’re injured, Merlyn. I don’t know how badly.” Morgana squeezed her hand comfortingly. “He’ll not be angry.”

“He’ll be sad,” agreed Merlyn hoarsely. “Let him rest. Please… My fault… being stubborn and didn’t listen to his warnings. Let him rest.”

Morgana hesitated and the guards waited for her decision, the one holding Merlyn trying to be gentle. Finally, the noblewoman conceded with a bow of her head.

“You may sleep in my chambers tonight,” she said. “But only if you vow to be treated by Gaius first thing on the morrow.”

Merlyn nodded then groaned as the world spun and her head throbbed blindingly. The world fazed out until she felt the soft pressure of a mattress at her back and the pressing of a teacup into her hands. “Here,” whispered Morgana, helping her sip the warm drink. “This will help ease a little of your pain.”

Merlyn only managed a sip before the hot liquid seared her swollen throat and she was wheezing and coughing at the rawness.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” fretted Morgana until Merlyn finally managed to suck in a breath and reply.

“Own fault. Wasn’t thinking,” she said, eyes tearing up from her coughs. “Water please,” she asked and it was quickly pushed into her hands. She sipped gratefully, the coolness a blessing.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t see Gaius?” Morgana pressed, regal features twisted in worry. “Your symptoms are serious.”

“Will you tell me who did this?” the older woman asked. “Let justice deal them a swift blow.”

Valiant’s words came back to her; ‘good thing no one cares what a servant thinks’ and Gaius’; ‘The King would never accept the word of a servant over the word of a knight’. She shook her head slowly. Morgana would believe her but her rash temper would, more than likely, land them both in trouble. And she would not see the other woman’s reputation sullied.

“Tis nothing that will happen again,” said Merlyn. “There’s no need to cause a fuss.”

“No need!” exclaimed Morgana, green eyes igniting with righteous fury. She leaned closer to the younger girl to emphasise her seriousness. “You’ve been attack! I would have this offender hanged for his crime.”

“I know you would,” said Merlyn, grabbing Morgana’s hand and smiling at her tenderly. “You are as fiercely protective as a lion of her cubs. But the matter is going to be dealt with soon enough… I promise. Tonight was just a mistake on my part.”

“Were you… was it a –” Morgana looked highly uncomfortable but pushed on; “are you harmed… anywhere else?” she asked carefully and it took Merlyn a moment to understand her question, Morgana’s gaze darting to her unlaced trousers.

“No!” she blurted in reassurance. “No; managed to escaped. He – he tried but I escaped.”

Morgana’s features were dark, eyes still alight with ferocity but she seemed to be tempering it for Merlyn's sake.

“I wish you would tell me so I could help,” she grumbled.

“You are helping!” said Merlyn, blinking burning eyes. “You found me, protected me, let me reside in your chambers – on your bed – when I should be under Gaius’ thumb. I will never be able to thank you enough for finding me.”

“I’m glad you are safe,” said the other woman, moving to recline beside her on the large bed.

“As am I,” agreed Merlyn, sinking back into the pillows. Then a thought niggling at the back of her mind drew forth and she looked toward Morgana questioningly. “If I may be bold,” she croaked. “Why were you out of your chambers tonight?”

“I…” the highborn hesitated then picked her words carefully. “I thought I heard a noise in my chambers and it woke me. I could not find anything amiss but I felt that something had changed; I was sure of it. So I left my room and followed my instincts. It led me straight to you.” She dipped her head but gave a pleased smile. “I am glad that I found you, whatever the reason. I would not have wanted you discovered by the guards alone in your state.”

“Thank you for being there, as fortuitous as it seems. Perhaps destiny had a hand.” She meant it as a joke but Morgana's features tightened and she looked away. Merlyn wanted to ask what was wrong but the aftermath of the evening was dragging her down like a stone dropped in a river. She feared sleep would embrace her before Morgana could finish her words.

And, bless the noblewoman, she seemed to realise it. “Sleep, Merlyn,” she murmured, brushing a hand over her forehead. “I’ll be here when you wake.”

And every time Merlyn awoke from a night terror that eve, Morgana was there, as promised.
The last nightmare woke Merlyn as the predawn light graced the sky, unseen by her as the heavy curtains were still drawn. Instead, it was the flicker of a single candle on the bedside table that drew her gaze. She stared at it lethargically from where half her face was cushioned on Morgana's belly, not wanting to move but knowing she needed to. The other woman was asleep, arm curled loosely around Merlyn's shoulders and the girl felt a surge of affection erupt in her chest at her care. Morgana was the King's ward. She had everything she could want and more; there was no gain in her being kind to those of a lower station and yet, kind she was. Beyond kind. She was benevolent.

And that was why Merlyn needed to move. She refused to take advantage of her good heart – and there much she needed to do, much she needed to plan. She’d failed in retrieving the shield and so Knight Ewan was still suffering. She needed to confer with Gaius on the next step, and, perhaps, beg forgiveness for her attitude – and ask for some pain relief for her throbbing head and back.

She also needed to brace for a retaliation from Valiant, as much as the thought sent shivers down her spine. If he decided she was a threat, he would try to silence her. She hoped his belief in a servant’s worthlessness held true, for it might save her from his wrath. Why draw notice to someone when they were not noticed otherwise?

Nevertheless, she had to move. Carefully, she extracted herself from Morgana's embrace, muffling involuntary grunts of pain as her stiff muscles made themselves known. Once off the bed, she hunched like an old crone, awaiting her body to adjust to being upright before shuffling to Morgana's writing desk. She grabbed a scrap piece of parchment – not wanting to sully a fresh scroll – and wrote an inadequate thanks and explanation for her absence in her barely legible scribbles. As isolated as Ealdor was, it meant writing implements were few and far between, most of the townsfolk not even knowing their letters. So, as much as Merlyn adored Morgana's loopy cursive, her own prose was more akin to chicken scratch than script.

Either way, she hoped Morgana understood her leaving, placing the note on her nightstand before she exited.

Slower than she liked, she moved through the gloomy castle, surprising herself with her skittishness. She checked corners before turning down them and jumped at the noise the wind made through the empty halls. By the time she reached Gaius' hallway, she was shaking with excess nerves.

She wasted no time ducking inside and slid the rarely used bolt home only to turn and squeal when she saw Gaius standing by his bed in his nightgown, holding a burning candle.

“Gaius!” she gasped, putting a hand to her chest where her heart pounded like a drum. “You frightened me.”

“So I saw,” he said, squinting at her through the shadows. “I didn't expect you back tonight,” he added. “You seemed determined to not to return until you were successful – though with what, I can only imagine.”

She took his slightly berating tone with a bowed head, knowing it was only going to worsen with her report. What he said next startled her out of her guilt.

“You’ll be happy to hear that Knight Ewan is improving,” he said, moving over to the prone warrior. “His fever has broken and his heart rate stabilised. It seems your gift is as stubborn as your will,” he jested. “You have worked a miracle.”

Merlyn moved off the door to examine the knight herself, finding that Gaius was indeed correct in
his verdict. “Why is he not awake?” she asked.

“He appears to be in a healing coma,” the old man explained. “Such things are difficult to predict, so I am unsure when he will awaken. Perhaps by tomorrow evening.”

She touched the back of her hand to Knight Ewan’s cool cheek and said, “I am glad he is recovering. No one should suffer for the cruelty of others.” She looked over at Gaius. “What will we do if Knight Ewan wakes and remembers nothing?” she asked. “We have no proof.”

“If that is to happen then there is little to be done,” the old man sighed. “We must simply hope it does not.”

Merlyn chewed on a thumb before blurtung out, “I went to Valiant’s chambers.”

Gaius sighed again and shuffled over to the table, sitting down with a tired groan. “I suspected as much,” he said. “There was little place else you could go with your thoughts as they were.”

Merlyn blushed at the reminder of her earlier temper but pushed on, moving to join him. “I waited until he was asleep then broke into his room, intending to steal the shield.”

Gaius’ eyes widened in shock. “Merlyn!” he exclaimed.

“I had it in my hands and almost made it to the door when he awoke,” she continued, unable to stop now she’d started. “I think he suspected my motives somehow and waited for me. The painted serpents moved off the shield and I dropped it in surprise. When I turned around, Valiant was there.” Her voice shook minutely. “He had this cold grin on his face, like everything went as planned. We struggled. He... he tried –” she took a fortifying breath, avoiding her guardian’s horrified gaze. “I knocked him back and managed to flee. Morgana found me and cared for me, though I refused to reveal who accosted me. I know her temper and she would be unable to hold her tongue. I don’t want Valiant slapped on the wrist for assaulting a servant,” she admitted, knowing she should feel guilty for her vengeful urge but resolute enough to carry Gaius’ judgement be it ill. “I want him punished for daring to use magic in such a terrible way. He is what drives the King to hate and fear. He is what condemns us all.”

“Merlyn,” said Gaius quietly. “Where are you hurt?”

She met his worried blue eyes and reassured him; “he failed to undress me, Gaius, fear not. My back and head are sore and I may need a tonic for my throat but I am well.”

He didn’t look any happier so she added, “I will rest easier when he has been punished. He knows I know of his deception, and I fear he will think you know also. I don’t know if his serpents can travel beyond his shield and I will hate myself if you are injured because of my stupidity so I beg you, please, please be careful.”

Gaius said nothing for a moment, watching her. Then he heaved himself off his seat and hobbled closer. “You are not stupid, Merlyn,” he said and began probing her skull with his fingers. “You are much too compassionate and impulsive, which is a very dangerous combination. One you will need to learn to curb if you wish to reach half my age.”

“And what is your age, Gaius?” asked Merlyn, an impish smile pulling at her lips. “Did you come before or after the first trees?”

He touched a tender spot on her head and she yelped. “Respect your elders or you may find yourself cleaning the leech tank,” said the old man smugly.
Merlyn grimaced at the thought but was satisfied at easing the heaviness in the air. Gaius was in his seniority and she hated to cause needless stress. Perhaps there was a spell that could calm excessive worry.

A thought occurred to her.

“Gaius,” she said slowly. “When Valiant’s serpents rose from the shield, their likeness remained imprinted on the metal. Do you wonder, if it were damaged, would that destroy the spell?”

“I am unsure,” pondered Gaius, moving onto her neck and shoulders with his sure fingers. “But I doubt it could be marked by an ordinary weapon; rarely does magic allow such weaknesses.”

Merlyn turned to the old man, hope blossoming and mind churning. “So if I aim to destroy the shield instead of reversing the spell then I may succeed in stopping Valiant?”

“I believe so,” he said. “But, consequently, Valiant’s deception will be unchallenged and he may simply replicate the enchantment. You will not be able to accuse him without proof.”

Merlyn scowled. “And so my failure to steal the shield only grows.”

Gaius stopped assessing her tender shoulders and said gravelly, “I would have you alive and safe over retrieving an enchanted object, my girl. Your life is worth more than ousting a dishonourable knight.”

Merlyn said nothing and he returned to his task, leaving the black-haired girl to mull over her options. As soon as Gaius was satisfied with his prognosis and she gulped down an awful tasting pain tonic, she collected her magic book and sat down to scour the pages for inspiration. If nothing else, she could learn a few more spells in the night.
Valiant is the Victory

Chapter Summary

The consequences of Merlyn's actions begin to take effect. Can she save Knight Ewan? How will Valiant be stopped? And exactly what is becoming of Arthur and Merlyn's relationship?

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the Comments and Kudos guys! You're the best!

As soon as the sun peered over the edge of the forest surrounding Camelot, Merlyn left her study to visit Sunstrider. She knew the stallion had to be going spare without his usual exercise but things had simply been too busy. She hadn’t even had time to move him into the paddocks outside the castle walls. The fields there were acres of pasture and forest; he’d certainly be able to run to his heart’s content.

He skidded up to the fence when she arrived and she patted his nose in apology even as she fed him a chunk of stale bread. “I’m sorry, I can’t take you out today either. There’s much too much happening – but I promise, after this is all over, I will take you on a long hike in the forests and let you fly over the knolls. I know how you love to run.” He snuffled her forehead and lipped her hair before leaving to graze, realising that there was to be no work at that moment.

Reluctantly, she left to gather a plate from the kitchens for Knight Ulric, grateful she had managed to heal her split lip in the night. Such a visible mark would draw questions she loathed to answer. On the other hand, her throat still rasped since Gaius had refused her attempt to treat the delicate area, worried about causing permanent muteness. Instead, she settled for sounding like a battle sergeant for a few days.

She set out the knight’s meal, drew back the curtains then nudged the man awake before ushering him out of bed. She shoved him towards the changing screen with a set of underclothes then helped him into the rest of his outfit.

She re-splinted his arm while he ate and was happy to announce, “Another couple of days and the splint will no longer be necessary. It will still need bandaging and you must be careful for the rest of the month but it is healing nicely.”

“Good,” he grunted. “I tire of being an invalid.”

She soon returned to the kitchens for Arthur's breakfast and backed into the room to find the prince already up and ravenous. She helped him with his shirt and trouser ties before he sat down. She could tell he was nervous as he ate, speaking little and thinking more, but he refused to acknowledge it, even as they marched down to the tournament grounds. She gathered his gear from the armoury – not seeing Valiant’s shield anywhere – then returned and set about prepping him. She left off the pauldron and gloves until it was closer to Arthur's bout and, together, they moved
to the edge of the arena to watch the fights. The prince talked strategies and tactics that went straight over her head but she knew it made him feel better so she simply nodded and hummed, happy to rest her voice.

In the stands, Morgana and Gwen watched them with keen eyes. Morgana had woken to the scent of a hot breakfast and an empty bed, scanning the room frantically before her eyes landed on a note on her nightstand. Morgana had shared the incident with her maid, needing the ear of another to share her worries. Gwen had been suitably horrified and, together, they planned to discover the swine that would harm their friend.

All they had learned so far was that Merlyn was exceptionally gifted at hiding pain. Nary a grimace or wince had escaped her, though Morgana sensed the aid of Gaius with that. Indeed, had she not seen Merlyn last night, she would not know to think she had been assaulted at all.

But then something interesting happened. Knight Valiant marched on the scene, yellow cloak blowing, and caught Merlyn's scanning gaze. Swiftly, the knight detoured from his path and strode towards them, expression politely neutral. So subtle that Morgana was sure it was subconscious, Merlyn edged back so Arthur was at the forefront – not so strange a thing considering he was the prince, until she took in how the girl pressed against his side like a shy child.

Merlyn said nothing as the two men conversed and refused to meet the foreign knight’s gaze, busying herself with adjusting Arthur's gorget. The instant Valiant disappeared, Arthur turned to her and said something with a confused frown. Merlyn crossed her arms, expression defiant, and snapped something back that caused Arthur to laugh.

Sensing the scene concluded, Morgana looked to Gwen. “Did you see that?” she demanded. “Surely the brute cannot be Sir Valiant. He is a knight!”

Gwen’s dark features were pinched in concern and speculation, still watching the pair by the arena. “Perhaps that is why she refused to tell us,” she said. “She thought we would not believe her.”

“That’s preposterous!” the highborn said, offended by the idea. “Merlyn knows we can be trusted. If she had shared his identity, I would have had him strung up to be flogged in a heartbeat.”

Gwen met Morgana's fiery gaze. “That could be why she didn’t,” she suggested. “The word of a servant against a knight means very little without proof, even with the support of the King’s ward. She may be disgraced in front of the council and lose her job.” She shuddered. “No one in the city would hire her after such an incident.”

Morgana shook her head, disgusted. “Such disparity in ranks breeds corruption and lies. As King, Uther should be trying to correct the inequality; instead he only aids it.”

Unwilling to comment on such dangerous topics, Gwen let the statement hang and they both turned back to watch Merlyn and Arthur, prepping for the prince’s bout.

By the arena, Merlyn stared across the field where a boy had to climb upon a stool so he could place the helm on their opponent’s head. The knight was very tall, with thick arms.

“You’re telling me you have to fight that?” she asked, gulping.

“Yes,” said Arthur, not sounding as concerned as he should be in her opinion. “He is as strong as a bear, but he’s slow.”

“Ah,” she said, realising. “And you’re fast.”
“Exactly.”

She finished attaching his pauldron and straightened the ensemble against his neck, smoothing the chainmail under the metal. Arthur raised an eyebrow at her and she realised she was fussing. With a sucked breath, she stepped back and put her hands on her hips, examining him.

“Knock him dead,” she said, grabbing his sword from the rack, then amended hastily; “only don’t do that. He looks like a beast but I’m sure he is a lovely man underneath all that armour.” She looked over and saw him snatch his weapon from the boy without thanks. She frowned.

Arthur snorted and yanked his own sword from her hands, walking away without a word. She crossed her arms and tilted her head. “Perhaps it is a requisite of becoming a knight,” she pondered to herself. “One must be arrogant and rude.”

Her eyes caught on Knight Leon, quietly removing his armour after his bout and amended, “though there are always exceptions to the rule,”

She went over to help. “Good day, Sir Leon,” she greeted him.

He stopped struggling with his vambrace to look up at her. “Greetings,” he said with a smile, curly hair falling into his eye. “How fare you today?”

“Ready for this tournament to be over,” she admitted, letting her tiredness shine through with a small smile. She held out her hands; “would you like a hand?” she offered and Sir Leon accepted with thanks.

“It is very unlucky you lost your bout,” she commented to the quiet knight. “You are very talented.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgement and said, “It is the minor things that sway a battle,” he said. “I allowed my footwork to grow sloppy and Knight Valiant took advantage, as was his right. Nevertheless, I am happy to have made it this far in the tourney.”

“You know where you need to improve,” said Merlyn. “That already places you above many other combatants.”

He smiled at her praise and asked after her new employment, having been there during the incident with the singing sorceress. Amusedly, she shared the tale of Arthur’s misconception of her gender and the incident that resulted, laughing at the mix of horror and amusement painted on his features. He seemed torn between worry for her virtue and delight at her description of the prince’s reaction.

When Arthur appeared, sweaty and victorious after his bout, Sir Leon avoided his eye, complimenting him on his win. The prince thanked him.

“It is a shame you lost your match,” he said. “It was a close contest.”

“Thank you, sire,” said Sir Leon with a dip of his head. “It appears my footwork is my downfall.”

“Then you know where improvement must be sought,” said Arthur. “I will see you at the feast tonight?”

Sir Leon concurred then gathered his things and turned to Merlyn. “I thank you for your aid,” he said, bowing to Arthur before he left.
The prince turned his blue eyes on her. He raised an eyebrow. “Should I be worried Sir Leon is going to steal my servant?” he asked.

Merlyn frowned at him. “Sir Leon prefers to do his chores himself. Why would he want me?”

Arthur rolled his eyes and shook his head, dropping the matter. “Come, Merlyn,” he said, striding away towards the castle. “I need my armour tended to before tomorrow, a bath drawn and an outfit prepared for tonight. Lord knows how tedious it is going to be listening to my father gush about Knight Valiant all evening.”

Merlyn shot a look back at the board. Sure enough, Valiant had won his round and he and Arthur were set to combat the next day. Her gut churned in dread. She had to remove Valiant’s shield from his care, whether or not he was caught for his crimes mattered not at this point. Arthur was the superior fighter so Valiant would need to fall back on his enchantment to win. She could not let that happen.

Merlyn hovered outside Arthur’s bath chamber as he washed, wavering between telling him about Valiant or leaving it be. It would be nice to have the security of the prince knowing her plan but, more than likely, she would be forced to use her magic and the risk of discovery was great with him informed.

In the end, she was silenced before she spoke. Arthur was in a foul mood and snippy with her every time she opened her mouth. She sent him off with relief.

She paced in his room a little while, tidying and straightening items as she steeled herself into making a move for Valiant’s chambers again. After a third round of fluffing pillows and neatening papers, she forced herself from the room.

First, she checked that Valiant was already in the banquet hall then she hurried to the guest wing and his chambers. She unlocked the door, ducked inside and saw the shield sitting prominently on a chair, almost as if to tease her with its accessibility. She grabbed a sword from the racks, checked the shadows for threats then crept forward slowly. Hopefully, if she could work the spell, she wouldn’t even need to remove the shield from its place.

She lifted her hand. “Oc weles.” Nothing happened.

“Ocweles.” Again, nothing.

“Ocsweles. Ocswele. Ogswele!”

The sound of feet approaching startled her into silence but they passed without pause. She lifted her hand to try again when the door slammed open and she spun around to find Valiant standing, dauntingly, in the entrance. Fear froze her for a moment too long and she failed to even lift the sword before it was knocked from her hands.

Valiant gripped her by her hair and snarled; “you are a menace! I will have you dealt with!” then he dragged her from the chambers and all the way to the dining hall, shaking her when she struggled.

The guards on the door stepped forward at their arrival and one cried, “Sir!” in indignation.

Valiant growled, “Open the door,” and, after a moment’s hesitation, they did.
When they marched through, all celebration hushed. Arthur stood up as he recognised Merlyn and Valiant threw her to the ground in the middle of the hall.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded the King.

“I found her in my room, sire, standing before my shield with a sword in her hand. I know not if she planned to steal or damage it but I will not stand for it. This is not the hospitality I would expect from a city such as this.”

“Believe me, Sir Knight, this is not our custom. Who are you?” demanded the King.

“She is my servant,” cut in Arthur, striding around the table to reach her side.

“You ordered her to sabotage my weapons?” demanded Valiant.

“Of course not!” snapped the prince. “I know nothing of this.”

“What say you, girl?” ordered King Uther, turning the full force of his glare on her. “Do you deny these claims?”

Merlyn sat up on her knees and said shakily, “I – no, sire, but I only –”

“Guards!” he called and two ran in promptly. Merlyn panicked.

“Valiant’s using magic to cheat in the tournament!” she shouted. “His shield is enchanted! Please! You must believe me!”

The King was beside himself with rage. “How dare you accuse a knight of such treachery! Take her to the dungeons. She can be dealt with in the morn.”

“No – wait!” the guards scooped her up and dragged her backwards. She struggled instinctively. “Wait! You must believe me! Please –” the double doors shut between her and the hall, muffling her cries. In her wake, the hall was thick with tension.

Valiant said, “I can bring forth my shield if you wish to inspect it, My Lord.”

King Uther waved him off. “No need,” he said. “The girl was obviously seeking gold or acclaim. She will receive a public flogging before the final match then banishment from the city to impress upon the people the price of slander.”

“Sire,” argued Arthur. “Merlyn is my servant. She is not one to seek fortune or fame. There must be more going on.”

“My lord,” said Valiant, eyes on the prince. “If your son ordered his servant to sabotage my weapons because he is afraid to fight me, then I will gladly accept his withdrawal.”

“Is this true?” demanded King Uther. “Do you wish to withdraw from the tournament?”

“No!” cried Arthur, outraged.

“Then what am I to make of this incident?” he said. “What does the girl seek?”

“I know not,” said the prince through gritted teeth. “I bid to find out.”

The King waved him away and Arthur strode out the door, embarrassed and livid. He made his way briskly to the dungeons and nodded to the nearby guard to dismiss him.
He turned to his servant, who was pacing within her cell, and snarled, “What were you thinking? Sneaking into a knight’s rooms and accusing him of sorcery! Have you any idea how you made this look?”

“Valiant is using magic,” said Merlyn earnestly, coming to the cell bars and curling her hands around them. “His shield has three serpents inscribed on their surface. They’re enchanted to come alive and strike his enemies. Knight Ewan was struck during their fight, pinned under his shield so no one could see.”

“Valiant wouldn’t dare use magic in Camelot,” denied Arthur. “Your actions have disgraced me. Valiant alleged that I sent you to sabotage him because I was afraid to fight! Do you have any idea what that does to my reputation?”

“I’m sorry!” Merlyn cried. “I didn’t want to come forth until I had solid evidence. Knight Ewan is supposed to awaken soon but I was afraid to wait lest I lose this chance and Valiant uses his shield against you tomorrow. Please – you must believe me! I only wanted to help!”

“Well, look where your help has landed us. I’ve been shamed before the entire royal household; my father can barely stand to look at me and you are to be publicly flogged and banished from Camelot!”

Merlyn blanched, a hand going to her throat. She looked horrified and Arthur clenched his teeth. His anger dissipated slightly and he stepped closer. “Why did you not come to me first?” he asked. “I am your master.”

Merlyn met his eyes, her own raw with emotion. “I – I had no evidence,” she stuttered, fingers burying in her neckerchief. “I had no way to prove my claim.”

The prince pressed his lips together in displeasure. “You should have trusted me to believe your suspicions,” he said and she frowned, confused.

“Would you have believed me?” she asked. “I’ve been told since the day I arrived that the voice of a servant means little in the eyes of nobility. I did not think my opinion would matter without proof.”

Arthur looked down. “The King wouldn’t accept your accusations without support – nay, he would not allow you to speak at all. But he does not know you.” He stared into her eyes, his burning with conviction. “You have only been my maidservant a short few days but I would like to think I have some talent at judging a person. I would like to believe that you could manage the same.”

She closed her eyes, leaning her forehead against the bars. “Despite what I may like to think, Arthur, you are surprisingly difficult to categorise. Both prideful and compassionate; wearing bravado like armour yet also gallant and honourable.” She opened her eyes and saw the blush he was trying to prevent. She smiled sadly. “I’m sorry I brought you shame.”

Arthur sighed and shook his head. “If what you say is true…”

“It is.”

“Then Valiant is dangerous and you are lucky to have been brought before the King and not silenced by his hand.”

She looked down and swallowed, the swelling in her throat lessened but still raw, reminding her of the truth in his words. She said quietly, “Please don’t fight him tomorrow. He’s merciless and cruel; he’ll not hesitate to cheat.”
“Let me deal with Valiant,” said Arthur. “Worry for yourself. Where will you go after tomorrow?”

“To Ealdor, I guess,” she said, not wanting to think about it. “Return to my mother.”

“Will you make it that far?” he asked. “You will be weakened and in pain.”

Merlyn forced herself to keep breathing steadily. “I will have to,” she said. “Gaius will be able to give me initial treatment. It will have to be enough. My mother is the village healer so she’ll tend to me when I arrive.”

Arthur’s jaw was clenched and silence fell between them. He stared at her, emotions on his face that Merlyn couldn’t decipher as she stared back, afraid for both herself and Arthur. More than likely, she would live. Possibly permanently crippled if the whips dug deep enough but alive nonetheless. If Arthur failed to stop Valiant, only death would follow. She couldn’t stop herself from reaching through the bars and grabbing one of his hands.

“You cannot let him pin you,” she said desperately. “You are the superior fighter. As long as you don’t let him get too close then he will be unable to use his shield. You cannot let him pin you.”

Arthur gazed down at their hands with a pensive frown. She would be embarrassed but her worry smothered any such restraint.

He squeezed her fingers lightly before releasing them and stepping away. “I must go speak with the King,” he said, turning towards the exit. “Perhaps I can lessen his temper.”

Merlyn nodded, smothering the longing for him to stay. She was alone and afraid; she wanted company. She didn’t hold much hope for a lighter punishment; the King was more stubborn than his son and he did not understand the meaning of mercy.

“Perhaps you can ask him to exchange Valiant’s shield for another,” she said as he neared the staircase. “He cannot use it if he does not possess it.”

Arthur paused and shot a look back. “I will see,” he said, then disappeared up the stone steps. By the tone of his voice, he held about as much hope as Merlyn of that ever happening.

After he left, the guard returned and took up his post, leaving Merlyn to pace and panic and make herself sick with anxiety.

As the first lights of dawn touched the sky, she looked out of the high bars on the back wall that showed the courtyard and saw a handful of servants bringing out the whipping pole. At the sight of the simple, sanded trunk of wood, the first tears pricked her eyes. She was terrified of her coming punishment. What if she was paralysed, as she had heard sometimes happened if they struck over the spine? How would she reach Ealdor then?

She wept silently until the sky was light and two guards came to retrieve her. They were silent but gentle as they opened the cell and clipped a chain to her manacles, leading her up into the morning. A small crowd had gathered to watch but Merlyn couldn’t bear to search them for Gaius. Gods, she hoped he didn’t find out until after the punishment was dealt. She couldn’t stand to have him watch.

“Come,” murmured a guard and led her to the small platform framing the pole. He placed a hand under her elbow as her knees shook and guided her up the steps. He unhooked one manacle to thread the chain through the eyelet of a bolt nailed into the far side then reattached it to her wrist, effectively forcing her to hug the wood.
She didn’t hear King Uther stand up, nor the speech he made. Blood was pounding in her ears and she had a stupid, hysterical thought that her shirt was going to be ruined once this was all done.

What she did hear was the light slap as the cat-o'-nine-tails was unravelled and the creak of wood as the punisher shifted his weight on the platform. She shut her eyes and braced herself, a small whimper escaping as she dug her nails into the pole, feeling similar imprints from other victims.

“Wait!” someone called. “Wait!”

Merlyn gasped in relief. Gaius!

“What is this?” demanded the King. “Why have you called a halt, Physician?”

“I come with Knight Ewan, who battled Knight Valiant in the tournament. He was gravely injured, poisoned by the venom of a snake. He can confirm Merlyn's account.”

“Speak, Knight Ewan,” King Uther said.

And he did, displaying the puncture wounds when prompted.

Valiant was seized and relieved of his weapon and a call for his shield made. Then, while awaiting the guard’s return, Knight Ewan added, “I would also accuse Sir Valiant of unknightly behaviour towards a damsel.”

There was a moment of silent surprise before King Uther said, “And who is this girl?”

Merlyn was frozen, horrified and confused as the knight said, “The servant, Merlyn, My Lord. I was still healing, unable to move or speak when she returned the night before last, in the wee hours. She was shaken and scared and I overheard her speaking to Gaius of Valiant’s sorcery and his assault when she tried to investigate.”

“What say you to these accusations, Knight Valiant?” said the King.

“I say Knight Ewan was hallucinating, fever-dreaming. He was ill and has only just awoken. His judgement is not sound.”

The King sounded tired and frustrated as he called to the guards, “release the girl and bring her to me.”

It was done so with Merlyn tripping and stumbling in her shock, having to be aided by the guard up the broad staircase to the terrace. She was halted before the King, with Arthur at his side, and the older commanded, “What say you to Knight Ewan’s petition?”

She looked over at the freshly revived knight and saw support and determination in his gaze. She turned back to King Uther and said quietly, “what he says is true. I managed to escape before he…” her tongue tripped over the next word and she let it go. “I was found by the Lady Morgana who cared for me until I was well enough to return to Gaius. I did not know Knight Ewan was aware.”

Arthur made a choked sound but King Uther turned to another guard. “Have the Lady Morgana brought from her rooms.” The guard hurried off.

The King rubbed his brow and turned to Valiant. “You still condemn Knight Ewan’s claim?” he asked.
Valiant stared at Merlyn with hate in his eyes and growled, “I do.”

“Very well.” He gestured to Merlyn. “Have you any proof of his attack?”

“Sire,” Arthur and Gaius protested together. Gaius added, “This is hardly appropriate for the courtyard.”

“I will have this dealt with now,” barked the King. “Show me your injuries, girl! Your virtue will not be lost.”

Hesitantly, Merlyn reached her manacled hands up to her neckerchief and untied the faded fabric. She took a breath and pulled it from her neck, displaying the dark bruises for the assembly to see. They were clearly the imprints of a hand. She stopped, clenching her scarf. “Must I undress?” she asked hoarsely and Gaius left his post to come to her side, scowling at the King.

With a sigh, he waved her back. “There is sufficient evidence of an assault,” he said and Merlyn let out a shaky breath, leaning into Gaius when he put his arm around her, unable to meet Arthur’s stare.

“You’re doing well, my girl,” her mentor whispered into her ear. “Only a little longer.”

Both the shield and Morgana arrived then; one promptly and the other harried. “Merlyn!” Morgana cried and grabbed her hand. “I heard that you were to be punished for misconduct and knew something had to be going on. I was denied –”

“Later, Morgana,” interrupted the King before he turned back to the shield in his hands. Merlyn stepped closer in worry.

“Beware, My Lord, they appear unexpectedly.”

The King shot her a look but held it a little further away. Arthur and a couple of guards drew their swords.

“How is it enchanted?” he asked. “How is the sorcery revealed?”

“Knight Valiant calls them forth,” said Knight Ewan. “He told them to bite me and they arose to do so with little fanfare.”

Attention turned to the disgraced warrior. The King asked, “Do you still claim innocence?” Valiant said nothing.

“Take him to the dungeons for interrogation,” the King ordered the guards and they turned to obey.

Suddenly, Valiant hissed, “strike!” and the serpents rose up to attack the King. Arthur was quick to behead the first but the second slipped past his guard when King Uther threw the shield away. It sank its teeth into the King’s arm and he roared, stabbing it with a small blade he pulled from his sleeve. Nevertheless, the damage was done and he sank bonelessly from his throne.

There were shouts of, “protect the royal family!” and the small amount of guards swarmed around Morgana and the King, dragging them inside. Morgana protested their action but was unable to struggle free, vanishing into the castle swiftly.

Valiant used the chaos to knock his two guards aside and steal a sword. He fought off an advancing sentry, knocking him clear over the railing to the courtyard below. He locked eyes with Merlyn, who was being ushered away with Gaius by Knight Ewan but the two remaining guards moved to
engage him and she lost sight. She turned around only to yelp as the third serpent launched at her face.

She dodged to the side, falling into Gaius and knocked the old man into Knight Ewan, sending the lot of them tumbling to the ground. The snake used the opportunity and sprung at her once more, leaving Merlyn unable to evade in time. She flinched but Knight Ewan’s sword sliced it in half, barely a hairsbreadth of an inch away from her cheek.

The head fell to the side, twitching, and Merlyn grabbed it, shoving it at Gaius. “Take this to your chambers and create the cure. The King was struck!”

He took it obediently, events having staggered his sensibility and clambered to his feet. Merlyn followed and grabbed Knight Ewan as Gaius hurried away. “Protect him. He’s the only hope King Uther has to survive. Guard him!”

Knight Ewan grabbed her wrist gently where she was pushing him. “He is not the only hope,” he said quietly then stepped back and took off to complete his task.

Merlyn was left gaping, the horrifying realisation that Knight Ewan knew of her magic shorting her brain. He knew she had magic. A knight of the realm knew she had magic!

“Oh no,” she gasped, hyperventilating. “Oh no, oh no, oh no!”

Her distraction meant she didn’t notice the impending threat until a heavy body slammed into her back, knocking her to the ground. She wheezed under the strain of the sentry’s weight but managed to roll over, his bulk falling to the side. She looked into the man’s face and saw his eyes were closed but a quick inspection had her feeling breath on her fingertips: unconscious, not dead.

A shadow fell over her and she looked up to see Valiant, sadistic leer on his face. “You have ruined my life,” he growled. “I will have yours as payment.”

He lifted his sword to impale her and she felt magic surge like a tsunami under her skin, about to burst without her consent. “No,” she whimpered, raising her hand instinctively as the weapon began to descend.

A spray of blood misted over her face and Valiant’s movement faltered. He looked down and she followed his gaze to see the point of a sword erupted from his gut.

“You will not harm her again,” a voice growled.

With a wet squelch, the blade retreated and the disgraced knight fell to the side, revealing Arthur. He was grim-faced and angry but concern overtook his features when he met her eyes. She could only imagine how frightful she appeared.

He dropped to his knees and pulled her into a seated position, letting her lean on him as she gasped for air. “Are you well?” he murmured, hand moving up to smooth over her hair. “Were you hurt?”

“I’m alright,” she mumbled into his shirt, staring over his shoulder at the mess Valiant wrought. So much unnecessary destruction; so much needless pain.

Merlyn shivered, still feeling the zing of magic itch under her skin. She’d almost outdone his violence a hundredfold, in the same horrible way she’d done in Ealdor. How would Camelot’s glorious white stone hold up when the very earth rebelled against it? Would it remain untouched and whole, as its structure boasted? Or would it crumble into dust as her mother’s home had done? She shuddered more forcefully. How many people would die in the destruction?
“You’re ice-cold,” said Arthur, disturbing her morbid spiral. He touched her hands, feeling their temperature then drew back to cup her face. “You look like a ghost.” His features were pinched with worry. “You are anything but alright, Merlyn. You need to visit Gaius.”

“No,” she denied, his word jolting her senses back to working order. She took his hands from her face and squeezed them. “Gaius is working on a cure for the King. I am merely shaken; it will pass soon.”

“So my father will be well again,” said Arthur, relief weighing his shoulders. “That is good news.”

“Yes,” concurred Merlyn, gaze drifting back to the unconscious guards and the ones tending them. “Is anyone seriously hurt?” she asked.

“I know not,” said the prince. “Though, I believe his intent to reach you saved the men from much of his rage.”

“There was one guard – he was knocked clear over the balcony. Has anyone examined him?”

She clambered to her feet with Arthur’s aid and went to the edge of the staircase, looking over to see the guard still prone and two men about to lift him onto a stretcher.

“Halt!” she cried. “Don’t move him!”

They stopped, looking up to find the owner of the voice. She used the time to rush down the stairs and meet them, leaving the prince behind. When she reached their side, she dropped to her knees and held her hand close to the prone guard’s nose, feeling his breath on her fingers. She looked up at his companions and explained; “he has fallen from a height. There is no telling what kind of damage has been done. Before we move him, we must check that his bones are all where they are meant to be and that his spine is not misshapen. If it is, then moving him is dangerous, for his spine tells his body how to work. If we do not support it when it is broken then it can cause permanent paralysis or death.”

They drew back in shock at the realisation and one, a young man not much older than herself stuttered, “forgive me, healer, I did not know.”

“You are forgiven,” she said but didn’t bother correcting his assumption. Respect was brought with that title and she planned to use it to help her patient. “Please remain while I examine him, I will need your strength soon.”

They consented and she set to her task, starting at his head and moving all the way to his boots, pressing along his body to feel for incorrect shape. His leather armour made it difficult, stiff and thick as it was, and she could only imagine how much worse chainmail would be.

“His leg is swelling,” Merlyn said as she gently examined his lower left limb. “I cannot tell if he has a mild fracture or impact damage but it is not as bad as I feared. His spine is intact from what I can determine.” Under her instruction, the guards carefully lifted their comrade and placed him on the stretcher. When they lifted him and looked to her for further direction, she realised that she had nowhere to take him.

She looked back up to the terrace and found Arthur directly above her, discussing something with Sir Leon. “Art – er, Sire!” she called and the prince stopped speaking, peering down at her with a raised eyebrow. “Is there somewhere to take the injured? Only; Gaius has little room for so many patients and is currently occupied with the King.”

“The side chamber off the main hall,” he said. “Use it.”
She nodded and, before she knew it, she was setting up with half a dozen guards as her patients. It kept her busy for a couple of hours at least.

At one point, Gaius appeared, having treated the King and deemed him stable. Merlyn immediately took him to the sentry with the injured leg, now awake and hurting, since she didn’t trust herself with the heavier pain tonics. He was the worst wounded, thankfully, and Gaius soon had him treated and transported to the Physician’s chambers for observation. Before he left, the old man touched Merlyn on the shoulder.

“You have done extraordinary, my girl,” he said, holding her gaze with his own. “I couldn’t be prouder of you than if you were my own daughter.”

Tears pricked her eyes unexpectedly and she ducked her head to hide them, laughing at her own sensitivity. “Thank you, Gaius,” she said, a little wobbly.

“Once you are finished here, I would like you to rest. Find Morgana or Gwen. I fear shock may start to take effect soon.”

With his mention, Merlyn remembered all the reasons she should be in shock – not least because someone from a kingdom with an unknown stance on magic knew her secret. “Where is Sir Ewan?” she asked, faux casually. “He was with you when you headed towards your chambers.”

Gaius raised an eyebrow at her. “He guarded me until the danger had past, as per your instructions.” Merlyn blushed at his pointed stare. “I believe he is now with Arthur in the throne room, recounting his events for recording.”

Merlyn’s heart skipped a beat but she hid her panic by gathering the rolls of bandages together. “Did he seem… was he acting strangely?”

“Not that I could tell, though I admit, I know Knight Ewan very little. What is this about?” he pressed, stepping closer and lowering his voice.

Merlyn almost blurted out the truth but adrenalin-induced anxiety and the remaining patients with working ears stayed her tongue. She would tell him later, if he didn’t discover it when she was clapped in irons. She shuddered, fingers circling her wrists as she remembered the feel of cold metal.

“Merlyn?” said Gaius, dragging her back to reality. She blinked at him, having quite forgotten his question. Her distraction seemed to decide something for him. “Come,” he said, taking the equipment from her hands and leading her towards the door. “Return to our chambers and make yourself a hot cup of tea, you know which brew. You’ll feel much better.” She opened her mouth to point out the remaining patient but he pre-empted her, nudging her through the exit; “I’ll finish up here,” he insisted. “Go.”

She stared at him but he turned away, moving to complete her task. She blinked dumbly the wall. Where should she go?

She didn’t think she would find rest in her quarters, if only because there was an unfamiliar, injured man on the other side of the door. And she felt ill prepared to recap the last few days, which ruled out seeking the majority of her friends. She just wanted somewhere quiet and calm. Peaceful and still; out of everyone’s way.

An inkling of an idea trickled into her lethargic brain and she obliged it, turning her feet towards the royal wing. The King had been gravely wounded; Arthur would be tied up reassuring the city
that he was healing and hadn’t been slain. Merlyn didn’t envy him for an instant and it meant that his chambers would be empty, which meant peace and quiet.

The room was as it was yesterday, though another servant must have been in to tidy since the sheets weren’t strewn across the bed and the fire had been stoked. She immediately detoured to the plush chairs before the fire and sank gratefully into its depths. She’d never been in a cushioned chair before but thoroughly enjoyed how it felt.

She curled up and rested her head on the armrest, letting the sight of the flames lull her into a stupor. She didn’t even remember falling asleep.

At one point, she was disturbed by foreign arms sliding under her body, but a musky, indefinably comforting scent touched her nose and calmed her before she truly woke. It called to some deeper instinct within and she curled towards it instead. Her awareness drifted.

Merlyn was the most comfortable she ever remembered being in her life. It felt like she was lying on a cloud. With a happy hum, she dragged her pillow closer and buried her face in it, smelling musk, soapwort and something tantalisingly obscure. She spent several long minutes contentedly dozing before the day’s events resettled in her memory. She shot upright with a gasp.

Bright sunlight slanted across the rich, wooden floors, lighting alongside the large, four-poster bed she resided upon. Arthur’s four-poster bed.

“Uh oh,” she said dumbly then scrambled for the edge of the bed, as if escaping it now would annul her earlier pillow cuddles. In her haste, she tangled in the ridiculous number of bedspreads and her final lunge turned into a face plant with the floor. “Ow,” she groaned.

She rolled over and, after a little work and belly muscle, managed to slide her legs free of her impromptu cocoon. She was very glad Arthur was not present.

She scrambled to her feet gingerly, stiff and sore muscles protesting movement. She felt pitiful and contemplated simply returning to the bed before blushing a brilliant red at the scandalous thought. She hesitated a moment before straightening the covers and fluffing the pillows, weighing up stripping and replacing them entirely. But that would take time she wasn’t sure she had; heavens knew what she would do if anyone walked in, her guilt would be all over her face.

Once satisfied with tis neatness, she looked out the window to find the day still in its prime, the sun was high and the city bustling with life. Her sense of time was discombobulated. It felt like that morning had happened an eon ago; so much had happened.

She turned away from the window and left the room, edgy and nervous. Her secret was known by a knight, one sworn to loyalty and honour. In Camelot, loyalty would be denouncing her to the King. Honour would be standing proud while she burned.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, Knight Ewan rounded a corner ahead and stopped short at the sight of her. “Miss Merlyn,” he said, bowing his head as if she deserved his respect.

“Knight Ewan,” she responded cautiously, slowing to a halt a few metres away. “What brings you this way?” the visitor’s wing was on the lower level in a different part of the castle. He had no reason to be up here.

He seemed to sense her caution and remained where he was. She noticed that he bore no sword and was confused.
“I came to find you,” he admitted. “I spoke with the Court Physician and he revealed your location. I wished to see you before the day was done.”

Merlyn said nothing, adrenalin spiking with her heartbeat. Faintly, she wondered how Gaius even knew where she was.

“I wished to talk with you,” he continued. “I am from the eastern land of Dumnonia. It is a private, unassuming kingdom… and magic is not banned. I know not why you have come to Camelot, nor why you stay, but my people do not abide the same prejudices as the mighty King of Camelot. I have seen no reason to accuse you and trust that your intentions are pure. I owe you my life and, on my honour, I will not ignore that. You have my silence and my acceptance.” He bowed, right arm over chest. “If you have need of me, call. One day, I will repay my debt.”

And with that, he left.

Merlyn stared after him for a long time, brain refusing to assimilate what just occurred.

...Merlyn was lazing upon Sunstrider’s bare back, soaking in the crisp breeze as the sun crept towards the city walls. She was so ready for this day to be over.

She’d sought out a quiet place to digest the day’s events and the paddock was the only place she could think that none of her friends would be. Sunstrider had been very pleased to see her, despite her neglect over the last couple of days and she’d clambered up the fence to slide onto his bare back.

He accepted her without complaint and, once he realised she wasn’t going to give him instruction, turned back to grazing. She sat back to front, cheek pressed to his rump, simply listening to the city. Thankfully, the stableboys left her alone and she remained undisturbed as the sun inched towards Camelot’s west defense.

“I do hope Knight Ulric knows that you’ve taken to using his steed as a lounge chair,” a cultured voice drawled. She looked towards the fence and saw Arthur leaning against the rails. Sunstrider’s ears flicked in the prince’s direction but deemed him of little importance. Merlyn wished she could do the same.

“I’ve been in a lounge chair,” Merlyn replied, sitting up. “As much as I love Sunstrider, he is not nearly as comfortable.”

Arthur looked down, appearing slightly embarrassed, though for what, she couldn’t say. The tension rose in the air but Merlyn was not of a mind to deal with it. She extended a verbal olive branch.

“I heard from Gaius that the King is cured,” she said.

He looked up at her from under his eyelashes, unintentionally displaying just how long they were. The expression was surprisingly coy, an emotion she didn’t know he could express. “I heard it was thanks to your quick thinking,” he said. “Despite the ordeals you faced these past days, you still thought of the King first. That is the trait of a true servant of the realm.”

Merlyn smirked. “Well, you certainly aren’t ready to be king,” she jested. “Goodness knows what would happen to the land under your rule.”

Arthur pulled an offended expression. “I’ll have you know that I’ve ruled in my father’s stead
many times. Even king’s must visit their allies occasionally.”

“Sounds exhausting,” she replied, lightly mocking and the prince shot her a glare. Silence fell between them again.

“The tournament is to be concluded on the morrow,” said Arthur. “I’m to combat the runner up, to show the city that our lives will not be disrupted by the soulless misdeeds of sorcerers.”

“You know that Valiant wasn’t a sorcerer,” Merlyn pointed out. “He merely used a magical object to further his ends.”

“It matters not,” he said resolutely. “He nearly succeeded in his quest and in killing the King because he possessed an enchanted object. Magic corrupts, no matter the form it takes.”

Merlyn said nothing, unable to muster the resolve to argue. His opinion hurt her heart and she looked away to hide the expression on her face. Sunstrider seemed to sense her distress and swung his head around to lip at her trousers. She reached back and stroked the half-sun mark on his forehead, grateful for the moment to regain composure.

Arthur said thoughtfully, “I’d heard that Knight Ulric’s steed would only answer to one.”

“You heard correctly,” she said softly, knowing they were edging into dangerous territory. Who knew what he would do if he discovered Merlyn was serving another – though, she guessed it hardly matter now, she wasn’t employed by him anymore. “It is I.”

“So you are the peasant who showed him such cheek on the training grounds,” he realised. “And you were there that morning in the lower town.”

“I was,” she admitted. “And I still take him out to collect herbs for Gaius, so please, try not to arrest me again.”

She’d meant it as a jest towards that first night they’d unwittingly met but, with her earlier detention still raw, the joke fell flat. Arthur winced and looked away, shifting in discomfit. He took a breath then glanced back at her, an unidentifiable emotion in his eyes.

“What I said in the dungeons still stands,” he said. “In future, I wish you to come to me with any suspicions, no matter how unbelievable they may seem. I want you to trust me with your opinions.”


“No, you didn’t,” he cut in without heat. “Our relationship has been brief and clearly not enough to build confidence. I want you to know that from now on, I will take your doubts or concerns under advisement. If – if anything like what occurred with Valiant – where you are threatened or harmed, no matter by whom – happens again, come to me immediately, even if you must interrupt an appointment with the King or disturb my slumber. I refuse… I’ll not have such acts permitted under my watch.”

Merlyn stared at him, a well of emotion surging at his sincerity. She had to blink back the burning in her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered. “That means a lot.”

He looked awkward but determined. “I mean it, Merlyn,” he said. “I need you to trust me.”

She dropped her gaze, desperate to lighten the mood. “I thought I was no longer your servant,” she joked lightly. “I thought I was free of seeing your ugly mug every day.”
“If only you could be so lucky,” he replied with a forced grin that turned into a true one when he added, “also; the King has realised you’re a girl now. He has yet to mention it but I saw the confusion in his gaze. It will not be long before he questions your attire and intentions. Therefore, I’ve organised with Guinevere to take you to gather some materials for a few simple dresses, to attire you as a servant to the prince should be.”

Merlyn gaped at him. “I – what?”

“She will collect you in the morn, once finished serving Morgana. She will be paid for her time and you will return to work the next day. I have Morris attending me until then.”

“Does your father know you’re hiring me back?” she demanded.

Arthur looked vaguely uncomfortable. “The King understands the loyalty you displayed and he cares not for who serves me as long as they are no thief, sorcerer, assassin or disrupter of the peace.”

Merlyn thought it ironic that the fourth described her better than the second. To quibble over semantics, Merlyn was a witch, not a sorceress – and in her mind, that made all the difference.

“You know,” she said with a tired smile. “Disrupter of the peace may well be my middle name. Even in Ealdor, I had a hard time conforming.”

“Of that, I have no doubt, Merlyn,” he replied, and she knew from the way he said her name that things were back to normal. Or – as normal as it ever was with the Prince of Camelot.

Though, the way his hand lingered on the small of her back as they walked towards the castle was new. Not that Merlyn minded in the least, shooting him furtive glances when she was confident he wasn’t aware.

That night, Prince Arthur made it back to his quarters late, blankets already turned down and fire stoked for the evening, thanks to Morris. Having already eaten with Morgana and his father, he didn’t hesitate to shed his clothes and flop into the preheated sheets. He groaned in delight. Having a competent servant almost made up for the lack of personality… but – his thoughts drifted to the short-haired, impish girl who had taken up the mantle – he wouldn’t trade her quickly. She was too much entertainment.

He buried his face in his pillows and dragged his blankets up his body, sucking in a deep, contented breath. The scent of hay and flowers tickled his senses and he hummed. Morris must have used a new freshener. He drew another chestful of air and decided that he like it. It called to some deeper part of his brain and coaxed it to relax. So he did, cuddling the pillow close and falling into a deep, peaceful sleep.
The early evening was beautiful. Different to the morning glow in a mysterious, magical kind of way. The red-hued light slanted through the forest and appealed to her sense of splendour. As her steed’s limbs warmed, she let him stretch into a breathtakingly fast pace and revelled in the powerful surge of his long stride. She whooped in glee as he broke through the last of the trees and galloped over the rolling knolls. They skipped along game tracks in the grass, trusting the spindly paths to be free of rabbit warrens or potholes.

Sunstrider was in his element and leapt in the air to show his exuberance. Only because she was expecting it, did she stay on his back, though she knew unseating her wasn’t his intention. He just had too much energy to keep contained.

Gently, she turned him along several trails until they were cantering along the edge of another part of the forest, headed pack in the direction they came. Yet, neither of them were eager to return, so she eased him into a walk and directed him from the open plain, back into the woodland to her right.

As she settled into the leisurely stride, Merlyn's thoughts inevitably recapped the day’s events.

As Arthur promised, Gwen had arrived promptly at Gaius’ chambers after tending Morgana to take her shopping. What he hadn’t predicted, was Morgana hearing of Gwen's plans and promptly joining them.

Now – Merlyn liked pretty dresses and patterns and ribbons as much as the next girl but Morgana was a force to be reckoned with. She bullied Merlyn over rich fabrics and intricate designs and even had Gwen take her measurements like she was some highborn. The only concession the regal woman gave was of her needing a few everyday dresses for work and breeches to ride in.

Most frustrating of all, Gwen had watched all this from Morgana's side, a laugh bubbling on her lips and completely refusing Merlyn's silent pleas for salvation.

Thankfully, the final bout of the tournament was scheduled for midday and Morgana had left to join the healed King. Merlyn had also watched to show her support. The knights put on a good show, several openings being left unexploited until the crowd was suitably riled and the true battle began.

Unsurprisingly, Arthur won, but after the bout ended, the visiting noble clasped arms with the prince and the crowd screamed in delight.

Arthur removed his helmet on his way to the pavilions and locked eyes with Merlyn. She grinned
proudly, giving him a thumb’s up, and he rolled his eyes, unable to hide the pleased quirk of his lips. He disappeared into his tent, followed by Morris, and Merlyn had been left with spare time Gaius gladly utilised with chores.

But now she was free until the next morning and she intended to enjoy her evening as much as possible.

The path she was on was unfamiliar but she knew the area well enough to direct Sunstrider towards a small grove that stretched alongside a narrow stream. Once there, she untacked him and turned him out to graze, laughing as he sat with a happy groan and set to rolling like he was fighting itch.

“Don’t muddy yourself up, boy,” she said. “I haven’t a brush to clean you with.”

Of course, he didn’t respond, snorting and shaking his body as he returned to his feet before searching for a perfect spot to graze.

With a whiff of the sweet air, she moved to a patch of wildflowers growing along the shaded bank and checked their health. She chose a few older flowers to weave into her hair and was very happy to find some lily-of-the-valley blossoming. The ground cover plant usually bloomed spring to early summer, but it wasn’t entirely odd to see it thriving midsummer; the climate of the grove must be a sweet spot. But she wasn’t complaining. She carefully plucked a few stalks and wrapped them in her neckerchief to take back, intending to make some more soap and oils. Lily-of-the-valley was her favourite scent, even though the flower was toxic to ingest.

Once satisfied, she moved to the stream and washed her hands, splashing her face with the chilly water. Camelot summers were warmer than Ealdor’s but in the shadow of the trees, she could forget that it was the hot season at all. The air remained brisk and the water cool to touch, a good escape from the stifling city.

She heard a twig snap across the stream and jerked her head up, only to gape in awe as she laid eyes on the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

A unicorn, her mind stuttered.

Before her, gazing serenely through its thick grey forelock, was a unicorn.

Merlyn was afraid to move – afraid to blink lest this magnificent beast disappear like a wisp of smoke. It stared back, seemingly unruffled by her frozen stature, liquid brown eyes wise with knowledge.

It was Sunstrider who disturbed her from her daze, stepping up beside where she squatted to stare at the mystical creature with his ears pricked. Simultaneously, the animals stretched their long necks and breathed in the other’s scent, appearing to have whole conversations with each puff. Before long, her steed stepped back and dipped his head in what her crazy mind said was a bow then went back to eating as if nothing had happened.

The unicorn tilted its gaze towards her again then lifted a leg and pawed the ground once with its cloven hoof. With that said and done, it turned away and ventured back into the foliage. Quicker than should have been possible, the moon-white creature disappeared among the leaves.

Merlyn only realised she was crying when she felt the salty liquid drip onto her hands. She sucked in a ragged breath and tried to recompose herself, not even sure why she was so emotional.

She didn’t return to the castle until the night was deep, and the guards were disapproving as they
let her in a side door. She gave them some strawberries for their troubles.

The next day, she crawled out of bed early to work Sunstrider in the arena, knowing she wouldn’t have a chance later, then she rushed off to give Knight Ulric his breakfast. Once he was tended, she fetched Arthur's meal and set out his clothes for the day, dragging his grumbling self from his bed and tidying as he ate. He had a meeting with the King that rang long into the day, leaving Merlyn time to help Gaius with his deliveries then learn a bit of the Old Language. Gaius was hesitant, even after his promise to teach her, as a deeply ingrained need for secrecy occasionally tied his tongue.

To ease his fretful mind, Merlyn scoured the magic book until she found a suitable spell to muffle their words beyond the room. Any eavesdroppers, intentional or otherwise would not be able to hear him speak of inflections, conjugations or sentence structure on a forbidden dialect. He was reluctantly impressed.

When her time with him drew to a close, Merlyn grudgingly returned to the castle to gather first Knight Ulric's dinner then Arthur's, using the time he ate to reheat water for his bath. She absently listened as he recounted the day’s discussions – the aftermath of Valiant’s betrayal calling for a conference on the trustworthiness of foreign dignitaries and the measures they could exercise to halt future reoccurrences.

Merlyn said to him, not really thinking about her words, “Wouldn’t it be helpful to have someone on staff who could detect hostile spells, so it can be acted upon before the attack.”

“Merlyn,” drawled Arthur, in that particular tone she was finding he used when he thought she was being especially stupid. “Only a sorcerer would have the power to detect another’s magic, making themselves just as corrupt and dangerous. It would be like trying to fight fire with fire. All you end up with is a bigger flame.”

Merlyn stayed silent, unwilling to start on this particular debate. Instead, she poured the last of the hot water into his wooden tub and said, “your bath is ready, sire, and your towel over that chair. I’ll send the bath boys to tidy in twenty minutes, if that is agreeable.”

“It is,” he said, pushing away his plate and standing to remove his shirt, clearly growing used to her presence.

“I’ll take my leave then,” she said and bid him goodnight, grabbing his plate on the way out.

She was exhausted by the time she made it back to Gaius’ chambers, wolfing down the lukewarm meal he left for her then going straight to bed. She would have to amend some of her schedule to make it to the bathhouse on the morrow. She did not want to start stinking like the pigpens.

The next two days were more of the same, though she accompanied Arthur in his training with the knights instead of helping Gaius. On the evening of the second, Gwen stopped her in the hallway. “Come,” she said, grabbing Merlyn's hand. “Your dresses are finished.”

“Oh,” she replied, a little hesitant in her joy. Looking at fabrics was one thing; wearing them was another. “They’re not too lavish, are they?” she asked as she was led towards Morgana's chambers.

Gwen shot her a grin. “I think you’ll be happy. Though, there are two that are gorgeous.”

She sighed in wistfulness and Merlyn said, “I don’t have much use for pretty dresses; I have nowhere to wear them. If you wanted, you could –”
“Oh no, Merlyn, no. They were made for you. I would never do something like that. Besides,” she said with quirked lips. “I don’t think our figures are compatible.”

“Oh,” said the blue-eyed girl, looking down at her shapeless form. “Right.”

Gwen shot her a look for her tone but didn’t reply, instead stopping before Morgana's door and knocking. At her call, they entered and the highborn lit up with excitement.

“Come,” she said, beckoning her closer. “Come, come. I want to see you try them on.”

The girl looked at the cluster of material on the four-poster bed and said forlornly, “all of them?”

“Of course,” said Morgana with a laugh. “How else will we know they fit?”

And so she was stripped, her chest unbound and shoved unceremoniously into her first dress. She grimaced as the tunic was laced by Gwen. “I did not miss these,” she commented but had to marvel at the range of movement she still possessed when finished. “This is much better than my old dress in Ealdor. The stitching would push the girdle into my hips when I bent.”

“That meant that your girdle was too large,” said Gwen, already unlacing the dress for the next one. “These should be as comfortable as dresses come, fitted to your shape as they are.”

Merlyn looked to Morgana, who was watching in satisfaction. “Thank you, Morgana,” she said. “I had not even thought of such things.”

“My pleasure,” said the royal, looking for all the world like the cat who got the cream.

Merlyn was happy with her three work dresses; the under-dresses were modest and full-sleeved, the girdles thick and practical, and the overdress shaped her body nicely when laced. Then came the two ‘celebration dresses’ as Morgana dubbed them. They were much more daring, not as exuberant as Morgana's fashion thank goodness (she feared the King’s reaction were she to show up so opulent) but they were styled and layered and very beautiful.

She felt like a little girl playing dress up when Gwen finished lacing the first one. It was rich blue and had a neckpiece that wrapped around her throat and attached to the dress at the back, like a peculiar blend of scarf and choker. She’d never seen such a design before and Morgana explained; “I thought, since you enjoy having something around your neck, you might prefer this over bareness. I think the fashion is innovative, soon all the ladies of court will be wanting the same.”

Merlyn was touched. “Thank you,” she said, feeling like the sentiment was entirely inadequate for her thoughtfulness. Once the women were satisfied with the fall of the dress, they changed it out for the last, which scooped low in the front but was given some modesty by the lace that covered the entirety of her chest and collarbone to attach around her neck in a choker. The dress left her shoulders and top of her back bare and fell to her hands in long bell cuffs while the bodice was a true corset, pulling in her waist and pushing up her diminutive breasts. It was lovely, with a touch of promiscuity.

She covered herself. “I feel like a harlot,” she hissed. They had the gall to snort at her.

“You look lovely,” said Morgana. “You’re just not used to figure hugging outfits.”

With that, the dress was removed, re-hung and two pairs of breeches handed over. She was much more enthusiastic with these; practical items that they were, and grinned as they fit perfectly. She reluctantly removed them and the entire lot of fabric was handed over.
Merlyn said, “As beautiful as these two dresses are, I have no cause to wear them. They’ll sit on their hangers and waste with time. I don’t wish for your gifts to squander so.”

“There will be cause,” said Morgana, a flicker of something else in her sea-green gaze. “I believe that, one day, you will wear them with splendour and have the eyes of all the men in court upon you.”

Merlyn laughed at the ridiculous statement but felt she couldn’t argue. Something in Morgana’s tone spoke of absolute certainty and it cowed the younger girl’s insecurities.

The next morning, after releasing Sunstrider back with his paddock mate, Merlyn carried her blue servant dress to the bathhouse and prepped for the day. Her hair was brushing her shoulders now and she wove little blue forget-me-nots into it before tying the wet strands back. Next, she tackled the dress, feeling utterly self-conscious as she tightened the laces of the bodice and smoothed it against the under-dress.

She’d not worn a dress since her first bleeding in Ealdor and her mother had presented her with one of her own outfits resized as celebration. She’d worn it proudly only to be mercilessly ridiculed by the girls while the boys threw stones. She had never been popular – the worst kept secret of her magical abilities had kept them afar, alongside her status as a bastard – but that day had hurt her deeply. And she knew, she knew that to expect such treatment in Camelot was ridiculous. She was hardly known from the stones underfoot, but the anxiety was there nonetheless.

Still, refusing to be late because of such timidity, she steeled her resolve and set out to collect Knight Ulric’s breakfast. As she reached the kitchens, a couple of kitchen maids she was friendly with cooed over her outfit and pressed a delectable looking pastry into her hands. Knowing better than to argue, she thanked the ladies for their kindness, scooped up Knight Ulric’s breakfast and dashed out while munching on her treat.

She swept into Knight Ulric’s quarters, set out his breakfast, nudged him awake, opened the curtains then prepped his clothes before dashing back out again. His eyes were only just adjusting to the light before she was gone.

She collected her second tray from the kitchens and marched up to Arthur's chambers, feeling a little more positive about her attire. She entered, set out his breakfast then moved to the heavy curtains to the east of Arthur's bed. With a cheeky grin, she shoved them back with a little help from her magic – just for dramatic effect – and said loudly, “Rise and shine, My Lord! Time moves ever on as you laze about in bed.”

There was a loud groan and mumbled words into his pillow but she ignored them. She danced over to his bed and tore the blankets down only to squeak and spin away as she saw his backside clear as day. He yelped and scrambled, falling off the bed and taking out the backs of her legs. She toppled, knees colliding with the ground as he landed on them.

They held still a moment then Arthur said sternly, “do not turn around,” before he clambered off and wrapped himself in one of his sheets.

Merlyn waited until she was certain it was safe before climbing to her feet and facing him. Her cheeks were burning hot and she saw his were too.

“Why are you not wearing clothes?” she asked, utterly mortified. “Oh, why didn’t you warn me!”

Arthur swelled indignantly. “Don’t blame me,” he said. “You’re the one who barged in here and stripped away my covers before I had time to stir!”
"I was waking you, Arthur, as is my duty!" she covered her heated cheeks and moaned. "Now I've seen you front and back! My virtue is lost!"

"Don’t be so dramatic," the prince said, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "We tell no one of this and it will be forgotten."

"You may forget," said Merlyn and waved at him up and down. "But my eyeballs have your image burned on their insides. I see your buttocks every time I blink."

"Merlyn!" Arthur growled and the black-haired girl couldn’t help it, she burst into hysterical laughter. Just a glance at the prince’s embarrassed face and she couldn’t stop herself.

He waited impatiently for her to regain her senses, redness fading from his chest and cheeks. She turned away from him and waved to the table, wiping laugh-tears from her eyes.

"Once you’ve – once you’ve dressed – breakfast," she managed.

She shook her head and sucked in deep breaths to try to temper her giggles. Arthur strutted off behind the changing screen with all the dignity of a ruffled rooster but she swore she saw a hint of a smile on his lips.

She straightened his sheets, opened some windows and dusted a little while he ate but she sensed his gaze on her more than once. Finally, she turned to him, arms out wide. “So?” she asked, twirling. “What do you think?”

He shifted his eyes away, as if guilty over being caught staring and said gruffly, “you look like a girl, finally.”

Merlyn snorted. He always had to be contrary, didn’t he? People compliment her on her appearance so he insulted her previous look. She shook her head at him fondly and returned to her duties.

Yet, his glances didn’t let up and the silence was heavy, finally drawing her to a halt. She put her hands on her hips. “What’s wrong?” she queried. “If it’s too strange, I can always change back.”

“No,” said Arthur, shaking his head. “It’s fine. I’m just not used to seeing your –” he gestured to her curves then cleared his throat in embarrassment.

Merlyn looked down at her modest getup; the bodice of the tunic accentuating what it could of her slight breasts and narrow waist. “I feel like a child playing dress up,” she muttered to herself, turning back to work. Arthur said nothing, stuffing more food into his mouth.

Two weeks passed.

Gaius praised her for her natural aptitude with the Old Language, impressed with the rate she was learning. It kept her driven as bone-deep tiredness took a hold of her labouring body, her workload wearing her thin. She felt terrible for Morgana, who was suffering the same, but from night terrors instead of self-inflicted stupidity.

She’d questioned Gaius on remedies and he admitted to the tonic the highborn already drank, which was very potent and had never failed on another patient. Wanting to ease her friend’s suffering, Merlyn searched her book for magical aid but found only information on seers and dreamwalkers, not regular old nightmare cures.
If only there was an enchantment that could heal the consciousness and not simply physical
damage. What a help that would be.

One predawn morning, just as Merlyn was dragging her chilled body from her warm bed, there was
a knock on the physician’s door, waking Gaius. She heard the old man groan his way upright and
peered out of her room to see who would come at such an hour. The Court Physician unlatched and
opened the door to greet the guard holding a lantern outside. They exchanged quick words before
the old man turned and headed her way. She stepped out to meet him, holding a lit candle.

“What is it Gaius?” she asked, a little worried. “Is there an emergency?”

“No emergency,” he said, gathering his medical equipment by candlelight as she trotted down the
stairs. “But a body has been found that needs examination. I will require your aid.”

Merlyn gulped. She’d never dealt with dead bodies before. In Ealdor, it was allergies or fevers or
injuries. When there was a death, it was by consumption or age and her mother left her behind
while she and the elders tended them.

She guessed in a city, the emotion behind preparing the dead was a little colder. Too many people,
after all.

She stood back in the grey dawn as Gaius squatted beside the corpse; male, early thirties, lying in
the street like he’d fallen where he walked.

“Aren’t you scared?” she asked as he touched the man’s clothes.

“Of what?” he asked.

“That you might catch whatever it is?”

“I’m the Court Physician, Merlyn. This is part of my job. Most of the time there’s nothing really to
be scared of.”

He pushed the body onto its back and Merlyn grimaced at the pasty skin lined with black veins and
the milky, sightless eyes. “You were saying?” she said nervously.

“People mustn’t see this,” he commanded. “They will panic.”

Merlyn sighed, unravelling the thick hessian she carried and laying it over the poor man. Then she
drew the cart closer and beckoned the watching guard near.

“Come,” she said. “I need your strength to lift this body into the cart. Touch only his clothes if you
can and clean yourself and your clothes once we are done.”

The reluctant guard did as told and nodded at her thanks before leaving. The old man and girl each
hefted an arm of the cart and wheeled it towards the upper town. As they crossed through the guard
tower and over the drawbridge, Gwen appeared, her arms full of flowers. She explained they were
to cheer Morgana, her nights still plagued with terrors.

“They’re beautiful,” said Merlyn, an idea tickling at the back of her mind. “She’ll love them.”

Gwen smiled at her and popped a purple flower behind the younger girl’s ear, complimenting on
how it went with the colour of her skin. Merlyn hadn’t taken Sunstrider out so her hair was loose
and undecorated and she thanked the cocoa-skinned woman as she left.
When the pair reached the base of the tower stairs leading to Gaius’ chambers, Merlyn almost whimpered before remembering a feather-light enchantment from her books. She glanced to the guards bracketing the outside of the entrance then looked down to hide her golden eyes and whispered the spell.

When the pair went to lift the body, Gaius almost over-balanced in surprise. He shot her a glare but was unwilling to scold with prying ears so close. She gave him an innocent smile and, together, they lugged the corpse awkwardly up the stairs.

Merlyn was so caught up watching Gaius examine the body that she didn’t realise how late the day had grown until Arthur came yelling at the entry.

“Merlyn!” he shouted and the black-haired girl gasped in realisation before darting to greet him at the door.

“Sire!” she said, seeing his anger. “I’m so sorry I’m late.”

“I thought you were ill or injured,” he said, looking her up and down. “That there was some reason other than laziness to account for your absence.”

“Uh – Gaius – he required aid for an unusual death in the lower town. I apologise, I didn’t realise how late it had become.” Inside she was cursing. Knight Ulric was going to be furious. Oh botheration! She hoped she could beg his forgiveness.

Arthur looked over her shoulder to the body that rested on the examination table but she put her hands on his chest to stop him moving closer. “I – er – the method of death in unknown at this point, Arthur, I wouldn’t risk it.”

He looked down to her hands on him and she quickly dropped them, blushing.

“Tell Gaius that the King wishes to see him immediately. There’s been another suspicious death in the council chamber.” And with that, he left.

She closed the door and turned to Gaius, who already heard Arthur’s words. Grimly, they gathered their gear and headed off.

The city was in an uproar. Arthur was conducting door-to-door searches for a sorcerer who could be anywhere while Merlyn was officially helping Gaius until a cure was found. She was champing at the bit, knowing she could help, even if only a little, but Gaius kept a firm rein on her impulses. Even when faced with a dying man.

“Have a look,” the old man said, gesturing to the guards spread out over the city. “They’re suspicious of everyone. This is not the time to be using magic. Science will lead us to the source of the disease.”

Later, as Gaius examined the contents of the corpse’s stomach – the acidic stench turning Merlyn’s gut – she asked desperately, “why would someone use magic like this? Cause all this-this pain and death?”

“Magic corrupts,” said Gaius lowly, eyes still on his task. “People use it for their own ends.”
“But magic is not evil,” she pressed, anxiety itchy under her skin. “You helped me believe that.”

“It is neither good nor bad,” he said, glancing at her. “It is how you use it. Unfortunately, in Camelot, you will find many of those who seek the forbidden power only do so to further their dark ends.”

Arthur and his guards burst in before she could reply and she jumped at the crash of the door hitting the wall. The prince directed his men to investigate then turned to the physician.

“Sorry, Gaius, we’re searching every room in town.”

The old man pursed his lips but gestured him to continue. Arthur asked a few benign questions then pointed to the door at the back of the room. “What’s this room up here?”

Merlyn stepped forward awkwardly. “Er, it’s mine,” she said, feeling slightly violated as a couple of guards marched inside.

Gaius came to her defense. “And what do you expect to find in there?” he demanded.

Arthur looked unhappy. “I’m looking for material or evidence suggesting the use of enchantments,” he said then followed his men into the room.

Merlyn’s belly swooped and she chased after him, heart skipping a beat as one of the guards opened her bedside drawer. She squeaked and ran over, slamming it shut.

“What is this?” Arthur demanded, coming over.

“I – it’s my –”

“Step aside,” he said and after a moment’s hesitation, she did, blushing furiously.

He opened the drawer and blinked at the contents. Pantaloons and chest wraps lay clustered together, blatant for the men to see.

Arthur closed the drawer quickly. He cleared his throat. “We’re finished here,” he called and the guards filed out. He stopped by Gaius and asked, “How long do you think it may be before you find a cure?”

“It depends on how many interruptions I have,” said the old man pointedly.

Arthur took the hint and they all exited. Gaius closed the door, turning to Merlyn. “Where did you secrete that book?” he asked.

“With my underclothes,” she grinned.

He shook his head in amusement but said, “We must find a more permanent hiding place. The next search may not be so respectful.”

“I will look for one,” she agreed. “But first, we must *use* it.”

Gaius stared at her incredulously. “Don’t be stupid,” he snapped.

“I have a legacy,” she stated, lifting her hands. “I have this power, this – this *great* power, but what am I to use it for, if not to help those in need? You keep telling me it’s not for playing tricks.”

“You want to practice magic when the King is hunting for sorcerers? Are you mad? Merlyn…” his
She lost her temper. “I cannot be patient while people are out there dying, suffering for the cruelty of someone warped by greed, or hate or whatever motivation they’ve found to be this evil. If I’m to be the catalyst for some great destiny, then I cannot wait for it to be safe to act.”

“Your time will come,” he started but she cut him off.

“I could have cured that man we saw,” she bit out.

“I know it’s tempting to use the way you find easiest, Merlyn…”

“It is when it would save a life!”

“But it is no good just saving one person,” he shot back, silencing her. “We have to discover how this illness is spreading.”

“Arthur is out there right now –”

“A sorcerer who’s powerful enough to do this will never be found in a search of the town.”

Merlyn deflated, hearing the truth in his words. “So what can we do?” she implored.

Gaius’ craggy face was grim. “Hope that science can find the answer before we all perish.”

The situation worsened. A curfew was imposed and the lower town sealed off. The atmosphere over the city was bleak.

Finally, Gaius made a breakthrough and deduced the disease was carried by the water, sending Merlyn off to gather a sample. Then Gwen was flying past, tears pouring down her sweet face and begging Gaius to cure her father.

“I wish there was something, anything, but so far, the remedy is beyond what I can achieve,” said Gaius gently. He took her hand. “I’m sorry, Gwen.”

The distraught maid shook her head in horror and ran from the room. The old man’s face was sagged in jadedness and he said to Merlyn; “perhaps you should follow. She will need all the support she can in these next few days.”

Merlyn shook her head slowly, brow furrowed in thought. “How long until you confirm the water’s impurity?” she asked

“It’s hard to predict,” he said on a sigh. “Too late to be of help to Gwen's father, I fear.”

“You said – you said that magic was responsible,” Merlyn continued and Gaius nodded, watching the thoughts churn on her face. “And for such a powerful curse, there must be evidence left behind. That is one thing I learned from my studies.”

“Powerful magic always leaves a mark,” Gaius finished.

The young girl met his gaze, hope shining from her blue eyes. “If I venture down to the water cavern, perhaps I can find a clue, something that will lead me to a way I can break this spell.”

“I do not know if the water is truly the cause at this point in time. I must conduct my test to
“I’m not going to sit around and wait for Gwen’s father to die! Tom is a lovely man and neither he nor she deserves this suffering.”

She fetched a pail to carry whatever may need to be and headed towards the door. Gaius halted her long enough to pass over the keys to the access tunnels. He said, “be wary, Merlyn, whoever is causing this will not like you trespassing in their business.”

“I’ll show them who’s trespassing on whose business,” she growled, stomping down the stairs. “How dare they think they can come into my home and act so callously. Daring to pervert such a gift and only worsening the King’s hate. Stupid, small-minded, evil…” she grumbled to herself all the way to outside of the castle walls, unlocking the entry doors and lighting a torch.

She quietened as she entered the darkness, stepping cautiously down the steep incline to the tunnels, sweeping her torch back and forth to disperse the shadows. There was a growl but the echo of the labyrinth prevented her from locating the origin. Her heart thumped madly in her chest. The light from her torch only brightened a small circle, leaving the rest of the tunnels buried in darkness and she wondered momentarily if her temper had gotten the best of her. She may have a destiny and naturally possess magic, but she was untrained and inexperienced with battle spells; it would do no one any good if she was felled, and it would certainly not help Gwen's father.

With that in mind, she should have been more prepared when she took another step and a big, muddy... *thing* leapt at her. She batted it away with the torch and it squealed, retreating too quickly for her to follow. Her heart thumped loudly in her chest and she decided she’d done enough discovering, backing towards the exit while keeping the torch between her and any threat. Or so she thought.

She was knocked aside as something slammed into her from the right. Her torch and pail went flying and she only managed to save herself by throwing up an arm. Sharp teeth latched onto the limb and she screamed in pain as a pulse of magic blasted the monster back into the darkness. She scrambled to her feet as fast as she could and dashed for the exit, tripping and sliding up the incline to the door as panic dominated her body.

As soon as she was beyond the entry, she slammed the wood shut and collapsed on the ground, clutching her bleeding arm. She moaned through the first waves of pain and stayed hunched over until the initial shock wore off. She didn’t look to closely that what felt like a deep injury, not wanting to examine how gruesome it probably was, and soon clambered to her feet to stagger back to Gaius’ chambers. He needed to know what she’d found and he could treat her at the same time. She drew several shocked cries from the guards she met but she screeched at them not to touch her. “The mud I wear is contaminated with the plague; I must see the Court Physician.” They backed off but escorted her, shooing civilians out of the way.

When she entered, Gaius gaped in horror. “Merlyn!” he cried, rushing over but sensibly stopped before laying his hands upon her. “I take it you found something.”

“I did,” she panted, her arm throbbing. “A creature seemingly made of mud or clay. I didn’t make it to the cavern. It was too quick, jumping on me before I reached the second crossway.”

“Did it hurt you?” he asked, taking in her hunched form, still unmoved from the doorway.

She nodded, holding out her arm but said, “The filth I’m wearing came from the beast. It’s polluted is it not?”
“Yes,” said Gaius, taking hold of her arm anyway and seeing the blood smearing with the muck. “But I will not leave your wound to become infected.” He guided her to a seat at the table and pushed up her ruined sleeve. His lips pursed at the punctures and tears that marred her skin but set about cleaning it without comment. “Tell me of this creature,” he said. “We must identify it if we are to hope for a cure.”

“It’s fast,” she said. “And afraid of fire.” She hissed as the physician poured something over her arm that burned and stung. “It moved on four legs and if it had eyes, they were too small to see. It was brown and felt grainy to the touch, like wet sediment, though its form was solid. Its back arched higher than its head and it had a big mouth with sharp teeth.” Merlyn shook her head and grimaced as Gaius removed some filaments from the punctures. “That’s all I can recall.”

“You’ve done well, dear girl, and have been very brave.” He hummed thoughtfully. “I believe I know the creature you describe… but it would take a powerful sorcerer to conjure it.”

“Do you know how it can be defeated?”

“I will have to verify its identity first but…” he looked towards the rows and rows of books upon his shelves with a regretful sigh. “I’m afraid I do not.”

Merlyn followed his gaze. “That could take days! Gwen's father will be dead by then.”

The physician turned back to the unhealthy-looking veins beginning to run from her wounds up her arm. “I fear so could you,” he lamented.

Despite Gaius’ orders to rest, Merlyn left his chambers as the day eased into evening. She hurried to the kitchens and pled with the cook to give her some of the custard and pasties alongside Knight Ulric's usual fare. She hoped to bribe him into not voiding their arrangement since she had been absent that morning. She promised the cook to help clean the pots after a feast and the woman finally conceded with a morbid, “If we’re not all dead by then.”

Thankfully, the knight had heard of her reassignment to the Court Physician and wasn’t angry with her for neglecting her duties. “Finding the cure to this plague is more important than my comfort. You are released from your responsibilities to me until this task is done.”

Merlyn bowed and retreated before he could change his mind. With a little time on her hands, Merlyn decided to check on Gwen. Perhaps if the maid heard of how much further they’d gotten in their investigation, she would have hope. At the very least, she would have a friend nearby for a little while.

She stopped by Gaius’ chambers first – he was in the courtyard, checking the collected cadavers for variations in death – to assemble a calming leaf blend and, after hesitating a moment, darted into her room to recheck the enchantment she had looked up previously. It had several variations depending on the patient’s gender and the type of sickness, but Merlyn saw this as the best option to healing Gwen's father.

She gathered the few ingredients for the poultice, whispered a binding over them then tied the cloth together with twine. She felt guilty as she left the physician’s chambers but resolved to use it only if Tom was too far gone. If science couldn’t save him, she would do so with magic.

When she reached Gwen’s home, she flattened her neckerchief over her collar to hide any black veins creeping up her neck and knocked on the door. The dark-skinned maid appeared, features
strained and tear stained, and Merlyn couldn’t stop herself from drawing her into a hug. The other woman accepted it gratefully, leaning into her as Merlyn stroked her curly hair.

“It’s going to be okay, Gwen,” she whispered. “We know what’s causing the disease. All we need now is to find the cure.”

Gwen nodded her head but said in a thick voice; “he hasn’t woken since last night. I’m afraid he won’t make it to morning.” Her breath hitched and Merlyn squeezed her tighter.

“It will not happen, I promise,” she said. “I’ll not allow it.”

Gwen pulled back, wiping her eyes. “You are an amazing, selfless person, Merlyn. But even you cannot defeat death.”

Merlyn quirked her lips in reply. “Who said anything about defeating death? I’ll merely delay it until your father is old and grey.”

The maid snorted and led her into the house. “You are ridiculous sometimes, you know that,” she said.

“I’ve heard it’s one of my prominent traits,” said the girl loftily before catching sight of Tom and feeling her humour evaporate. She moved to examine him and found his breath thin and reedy, his pale brow feverish and his skin lined with horrible veins. Before she could think twice, she pulled out the poultice and shoved it under his pillow, disguising the movement by taking his pulse.

“He’s growing worse,” whispered Gwen hoarsely from behind her. “Every hour, his breath grows shallower.”

Merlyn touched the man’s forehead with her own sickly-veined palm. “I have faith,” she said lowly. “Miracles happen sometimes and I believe both you and your father are worthy.” She stood up and guided Gwen to her table. “I’ll make us some valerian root tea. It’ll help calm your body so you find rest tonight.”

Merlyn stayed until curfew grew close then reluctantly left her distressed friend alone. Instead of returning to Gaius and his too-many books, the black-haired girl went to the next greatest source of information: the dragon.

With the city overfilled with guards, only one was left to watch the entrance to the dragon’s cavern. And he was fast asleep.

When Merlyn made it to the beast’s lair, she called out, “hello?”

“Hello,” the dragon replied mockingly, flying down from wherever he previously resided to land on the rock. “You have returned.”

“I need to know how to defeat an Afanc,” she said, not having the brainpower or willpower to play with words.

“Yes, I suppose you do,” he said loftily.

Merlyn sighed. “Will you help me?” she asked directly.

“Trust the elements that are at your command,” he said instead.

“Elements?” she parroted. “What elements?”
“The manifestation of prime matter; the building blocks to our very existence.”

Merlyn grabbed her aching head. “I don’t know what you mean!” she snapped. “What is it I have to do?”

“You cannot do this alone,” he rumbled. “You are but one side of a coin. Arthur is the other.”

“I-I don’t understand. Just tell me what it is I have to do.”

The dragon flew off, battering her with the wind from his wings.

“No! Please, help me!” she cried.

He laughed. “I have.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Thanks,” she muttered to the empty cavern.

She loitered a short time before drawing her thoughts together and heading back toward Gwen’s. She had a father to cure and elements to learn.

Whatever elements were.

The next morning, Merlyn felt terrible. She could feel slight lumps of the veins on her face and her limbs were shaky and weak. She had a constant sense of vertigo and her head pounded no matter what tonic she downed. She didn’t feel strong enough to cast even a basic charm and the first wave of fear settled coldly in her chest. She’d avoided thinking about her sickness, not letting her mortality truly sink in. But it hit her like a club to the head now.

She might die. Today.

If a cure wasn’t found, she probably wouldn’t make it to the next sunrise.

Terror clawed up her throat and she rolled into her pillow, fingers clutching her blanket desperately. The panic attack caused the pressure in her head to build and hot tears leaked weakly from her aching eyes. She didn’t want to die. She had so much left to do. She didn’t want to die.

The feel of fingers carding through her hair brought her back to reality and she turned her tired gaze to Gaius. The old man looked extremely worried and held some sort of tonic. He tipped it into her mouth when he had her attention and she swallowed obediently, though it tasted awful.

He smoothed her hair off her brow and said, “I must go tell Uther what we’ve found. Your pain should disappear soon and allow you to rest. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

“Wait,” she said hoarsely. “Elements. What are elements?”

Gaius looked nonplussed but, nevertheless, indulged her. “Elements are the building blocks of what makes up our world. The study of the four base elements is at the heart of every scientific process. Earth, water, fire, air…”

His words settled in her brain but she couldn’t, for the life of her, organise her thoughts. She lost time between the blinking of her eyes, finding Gaius gone and the light at a different angle on the floor.

Suddenly, the door to her room slammed open and Gaius was by her bed again, his craggy features
scrunched in dismay. “Merlyn!” he hissed and the black-haired girl struggled upright at his anxious tone, head spinning. “Did you use magic to cure Gwen's father?”

“… I –”

“Were you foolish enough to be so reckless?”

The answer was written all over her face.

“What have you done?” he cried. “Gwen's been arrested for sorcery!”

Merlyn breath stopped as shock settled coldly on her shoulders. “What?”

“I understand you thought you were being helpful, but did you not think it would be suspicious; the curing of one man?”

“I – Gwen's been arrested?”

Gaius sighed and sat, lifting her hand between both of his. “Arthur and the guards found a poultice beneath her father’s pillow. Uther believes she caused the plague and has sentenced her to death.”

“No,” moaned Merlyn, flopping back against her headboard. “No, no, no. I thought I was helping. I didn’t want Tom to die. That’s all. I thought the answer so simple.”

“An easy solution is like a light in a storm, Merlyn. Rush for it at your peril, for it may not always lead you to a safe harbour.”

Merlyn tucked her head and lifted a shaky hand to her temple. “I’m such an idiot,” she whispered.

The old man shook his head. “We’ve been over this, my dear girl. Your heart is too big and your impetus too strong, but you are far from stupid.”

A guard knocked on the physician’s door and Gaius was summoned to a council meeting. He left reluctantly and Merlyn was left alone with her very active imagination. The shock of Gwen’s arrest had given her a boost of adrenalin and she used it in what might be her last foolish act.

She staggered from her chambers and down the stairs, not bothering to change from yesterday’s clothes. She met no one on the path to the council chambers and if she were sound of mind, she might have thought it strange. As it was, she only registered the guards by the council room an instant before she flung the doors wide.

“It was me!” she cried, staggering into the room and checking herself on the handle before she fell face-first to the floor. “It was me who used magic to cure Gwen’s father!”

There was a moment of stunned silence before Gaius stood up. “Merlyn! Are you mad!” he demanded.

“I cannot let her die for me,” she panted and turned to the King. “I place myself at your mercy.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” said Gaius, also turning to King Uther.

“I do!” she retorted, room spinning.

“Then arrest her,” said the King to his guards before Arthur's cry stalled them.

“Father, please! I can't allow this-this madness! There is no way Merlyn is a sorceress.”
“Did you not hear her?”

“Yes,” he muttered.

“She admitted it.”

“She saved my life, remember?” he said pointedly.

“Dressed as a boy, yes,” shot the King, making her wince and sway, vision blackening. He continued; “why should she fabricate such a story?”

Right at that instant, Merlyn chose to be utterly dramatic and swooned in a dead faint. She didn’t even feel her body hit the floor.

She came to seconds later when Arthur and Gaius dropped down beside her. The prince’s face was horrified as he saw her infirmity up close.

“She’s ill!” he cried and the council members automatically shifted away. He looked up to his father. “She’s delirious. Guinevere is her friend; she must be trying to save her.”

“Very well,” said the King, dismissively. “Let her go. Don’t waste my time again.”

“No…” said Merlyn, reaching for anything to pull herself upright. Her fingers twisted in Arthur’s tunic and he scooped her up, carrying her from the room.

“Hush, Merlyn,” chastised Gaius, leading the way to his chambers. “You’re unwell and need rest.”

“How long has she been like this?” asked Arthur.

“Long enough for her time to be running short,” Gaius replied, his tone hard but worry bleeding through.

“There must be something we can do,” the prince said, his tone almost pleading.

“Elements,” Merlyn forced out, head spinning and thoughts slipping out of reach. All except for one. One idea that she held onto with her entire being. “Afanc… elements… water, earth… fire, air… to kill it…”

“What is she blathering on about?” demanded the prince but Merlyn drifted as Gaius explained.

Merlyn was confused when she awoke. She didn’t remember falling asleep – or going to bed. In fact, the whole previous day was a blur and her head was throbbing incessantly.

“Merlyn,” someone said and the black-haired girl rolled her head on her pillow to see Gwen and Morgana by her side.


The women took turns in explaining. Morgana and Arthur were the champions of the day while Gwen’s father was healed and the maid was first, imprisoned then freed.

“And I heard what you tried to do for me,” the dark-skinned woman added, taking Merlyn’s hand. “How you told the King and his advisors that it was you who healed my father. I cannot thank you enough for your selflessness but I admit that I’m very glad they didn’t believe you. It was a
reckless thing to do, Merlyn. Perhaps they would have burned us both and then where would you be.” The maid shuddered and Merlyn squeezed her hand.

“I had to try something,” she said. “I knew you weren’t the culprit of the disease. And, even if you did use magic to cure your father, you were only trying to help.”

Gwen smiled but looked nervous at her statement, eyes darting from Morgana to the door, as if expecting someone to leap out and shackle her for hearing such blasphemy. Merlyn couldn’t blame her though. The terror of impending death for a crime you didn’t commit would be traumatising.

Morgana, meanwhile, stared at Merlyn thoughtfully.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! Glad to get that out. I have no internet at the moment so scrabbling to get this out was a measure of frustration. Hope you enjoyed it!
The Poisoned Chalice

Chapter Summary

Nimueh stirs the pot and Merlyn takes the bait.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A week of peace passed in the city before a flurry of activity burst forth in preparations for the arrival of Lord Bayard of Mercia. It was to be a momentous occasion, marking the end of a long hostility between the kingdoms and, hopefully, the start of an alliance.

Merlyn was just focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. As with many of Gaius’ predictions, his warning of her spreading herself too thin was beginning to ring true. As much as she loved Sunstrider, she wished he would tolerate another on his back. He was a young, spirited stallion and needed lots of exercise and attention. She was turning into a zombie trying to keep up.

Also, Knight Ulric was growing irritable and short. His arm was nearing fully healed and he was growing frustrated with her warnings not to push it in combat training. She feared the end of their arrangement was nearing and worried for her steed’s fate.

Moreover, her studies had fallen the wayside; her time with Gaius spent more on herb lore and medical knowledge than magic. She suspected she’d frightened him with the Afanc incident and he was pulling back as a result. For now, she tolerated it.

The only thing she could say she had settled into was her position as Arthur's servant. They had found an accord since the plague and a measure of comfort had grown between them. He was deliberately snappish and judgemental while Merlyn was overly bubbly and oblivious. She enjoyed cracking his grumpy façade and bringing on a smile, even as he fought it the whole way. Alternately, he seemed to enjoy testing the limits of her tolerance, ordering her to complete ridiculous task after ridiculous task – even going so far as to use her as a footrest. Though, she’d stopped that quickly with a few good pulls of his leg hair.

Nevertheless, extra chores were not what she wanted or needed, even as she trudged her way to completing them. Arthur seemed to find her tiredness insulting.

“Come on, Merlyn,” he said one night. “It’s not like you're doing any more than Guinevere and I don’t see her complaining.”

“You wouldn’t, sire,” she said, polishing his armour by the fire. “Gwen is much more composed and respectful than I.”

Arthur snorted, chucking a grape at her head from where he was reading reports. She picked it up off the floor and popped it into her mouth, sticking her tongue out at him. He said, “That is something you certainly don’t need to tell me.”

“Pfft,” she scoffed, shooting him an impish grin. “You keep me around because I’m interesting. Don’t deny it.”
“I don’t need to,” he shot back. “You’re my entertainment, like the jester of the court or the village fool.”

“Hah,” she said and left it at that.

When she finished the armour and set it on the racks, ready for combat training in the morning, Merlyn bid him goodnight.

“It’s late,” he stated, eyes still on his papers.

“I’ll be fine, Arthur,” she said, knowing what he was asking. It had become a little ritual every time she worked into the night. If she didn’t feel comfortable trekking through the dark, he had a side chamber designed to house his personal servant that she could rest within. She’d never taken him up on it, somewhat enjoying the frigid, dusky journeys.

She tied her midnight blue cloak around her neck and said in parting, “Sleep well, sire.”

Another week passed and, finally, Lord Bayard and his entourage arrived. They were greeted in the throne room and officially welcomed to Camelot.

“The treaty we sign today marks an end to war and a beginning to a new friendship between our people.” The kings clasped forearms and the gathered people clapped in celebration. Merlyn thought it all a bit staged, though the sentiment between the two leaders appeared genuine.

Nevertheless, Merlyn trotted back and forth with the other servants settling in the dignitaries and lugging their bags, fetching things they decided they wanted and refreshing those who asked.

She was almost glad when one of Bayard’s servants knocked her over, if only because it gave her a moment’s rest.

“Sorry,” the girl said, sounding terribly apologetic, her things having fallen onto Merlyn.

“It’s alright,” replied Merlyn, letting her pull her back to her feet. “Let me give you a hand with that.” she stooped to gather up the fallen objects.

The girl looked at her timidly and Merlyn saw she had the prettiest blue eyes, brought out by the rich azure turban covering her hair. They rose to their feet and the physician’s ward held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Merlyn.”

“Cara,” she replied, shaking her hand. “You’re Arthur's servant. That must be such an honour.”

Merlyn grinned. “As much as caring for an overgrown child could be,” she jested.

Cara smiled and stepped around her. “It was nice meeting you,” she said then continued down the corridor.

“You also,” the black-haired girl replied, watching her go. There was something about her that drew Merlyn’s attention. She was very nice, but it was like a whisper in the back of her mind; Cara was special somehow.

Merlyn was in Arthur’s room, gathering his clothes for the upcoming feast when she caught a whiff of his ceremonial coat. She dropped the offending item and backed away, gagging.
“When was the last time these were cleaned?” she demanded.

“Last year some time,” Arthur replied uncaringly. “Before the Feast of Beltane.”

“Did it end in a food fight?” she asked, aghast at the stains.

“Don’t all feasts?” he replied.

“I wouldn’t know,” she said. “The airs and graces of the court are a mystery to me.”

The prince’s face was smug. “Not after tonight they won’t be,” he said.

Merlyn turned her surprised gaze to Arthur. “I’m going to the banquet?” she asked.

“No quite,” he said. “You’ll be there to make sure my cup doesn’t run dry. If I have to sit through
Bayard’s boring speeches, I don’t see why you should get out of it.”

Merlyn felt a trace of disappointment, wishing to wear one of Morgana’s beautiful gifts at least
once.

“So… will be there dancing at this ceremony?” she asked nonchalantly, unsure if it was that type
of celebration. She tried to appear casual, not wanting Arthur to know her interest but it clearly
didn’t work. Arthur raised his eyebrows and smirked.

“Perhaps,” he said, amused. “Though, even if it were allowed for servants to partake, who would
dance with a klutz like you?”

“Someone nicer than you, that’s for sure,” she retorted, a little stung.

Arthur laughed, oblivious as always.

Poison was not on her agenda for the evening – or ever for that matter. But, alas, destiny seemed to
enjoy throwing her curveballs.

As Merlyn snatched the goblet from Arthur’s surprised hands, the hall buzzed with surprised
murmurs and King Uther glared.

“What?” he demanded of her accusations.

“Merlyn, what are you doing?” hissed Arthur.

“Bayard laced Arthur's goblet with poison,” she said loudly, staring at the guilty lord.

“This is an outrage!” the man roared, drawing his sword. His men followed and the knights of
Camelot responded with the same. The tension in the room skyrocketed.

King Uther glared at the foreign Lord. “Order your men to put down their swords,” he commanded.
The doors opened and a flood of guards entered. “You are outnumbered.”

“I will not allow for this insult to go unchallenged!” Lord Bayard snarled.

King Uther turned to Merlyn, pale eyes hard like stone. “On what grounds do you base this
accusation?” he said.
"I’ll handle this," said Arthur, placating. He edged around the table and glared pointedly at his servant. “Merlyn, you idiot. Have we been at the slow gin again?” he tried to take the goblet from her hands but she shielded it from his grasp with her arms.

“Unless you want to be strung up, you will tell me why you think it’s poisoned, now!” ordered the King.

“He was seen lacing it,” Merlyn said, looking past Arthur to his father.

“By whom?”

She bit her lip. “I can't say,” she said regretfully.

Lord Bayard growled; “I won’t listen to this anymore.”

“Pass me the goblet,” King Uther said and Merlyn hurried to obey.

He looked into the goblet’s depths then turned to the other Lord. “If you’re telling the truth…”

“I am,” said Bayard, looking completely assured. It confused Merlyn: why was he so confident?

“Then you have nothing to fear, do you?” he held out the chalice and Lord Bayard sheathed his sword then reached for it, unafraid. King Uther drew back. “No. if this does prove to be poisoned, I want the pleasure of killing you myself.”

Lord Bayard snorted and King Uther turned to Merlyn. “She’ll drink it.”

“But if it’s poisoned, she’ll die!” cried Arthur, stepping forward.

He replied, completely unruffled; “then we’ll know she was telling the truth.”

“And what if she lives?” asked Lord Bayard, smile more of a snarl.

“Then you have my apologies, and you can do with her as you will.”

“Uther, please!” cried Gaius. “She’s just a girl! She doesn’t know what she’s saying!”

King Uther was cold with his words. “Then you should have schooled her better.”

“Merlyn, apologise,” demanded Arthur, looking panicky. “This is a mistake. I’ll drink it.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” she said, putting a hand on his chest to stop him moving closer. “It’s-it’s alright.”

She turned and took the goblet from the King, heart beating like a rabbit’s. She faced Lord Bayard, toasted him then did the same to Arthur, locking eyes. His blue irises swirled with worried, anxiety clear on his features. Merlyn was sure her own were probably shining with fear but she steeled herself. It was better this way.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she tipped the liquid into her mouth and swallowed, grimacing at the taste. She paused a moment then lowered the cup, peering into its depths in confusion. “It’s fine.”

King Uther waved to Lord Bayard: “she’s all yours.”

Merlyn's throat seized and a deep burning pain erupted in her gullet, flushing out over the entirety
of her skin. She choked for breath and her eyes rolled into the back of her head, oblivion swallowing her consciousness.

Her last thought was: *At least it was quick…*

It wasn’t quick.

It was very, very not quick.

From the void, pain was the first flicker of awareness she had. Pain, heat, suffocation, fire.

She was cocooned in an inferno; no escape, no relief, no defense. Her whole world was roaring and red.

Flames licked up her face, blackening and twisting her limbs. She tried to scream in pain but the very air was sucked from her lungs, swelling her sandpaper tongue; boiling the moisture from her eyes. Her very flesh crackled and popped, crisping and curling from her bones.

Through the white-hot haze of agony, Merlyn sometimes saw flickers of scenes. Flashes of Ealdor, her mother, Camelot, knights she didn’t recognised, magical creatures, Morgana, the dragon. And Arthur. Always Arthur. Training, writing, patrolling, talking with his father, fighting Morgana, battling mythical creatures, gazing at her through the flames like she hung the moon…

She felt coolness bloom on the back of her hand. A brief blast of ice that lasted scarcely a second against the firestorm but that she felt all the way to her heart. A voice caressed her ears, gentle and soothing against the hot crackle of the flames. “Hold on, Merlyn,” it said. “I order you not to die before I can save you. Do you hear that? I forbid it. Don’t make me risk my life for nothing…”

A cool touch on her cheek and she suddenly recognised the speaker. “Arthur…” she rasped, breath dry and thin. “Arthur…”

She blinked scalded eyes and saw Arthur galloping his brown stallion with careless abandon over the plains between familiar mountains. She wanted to reach out and smooth the tight pinch between his brows but she no longer had arms. They had burned away.

In fact, she no longer had a body. The inferno had scorched her into ash and dust, swirling off into the nothingness on waves of dry heat. All she felt now was a phantom of who she once had been.

…

Who had she once been?

Who was she now?

Questions…

Questions were meaningless.

Thought was intangible.

Time flowed inconsistently.

*Time* was meaningless.
Arthur.

Who was Arthur?

He meant something.

Foreign words bubbled, unbidded, over her non-existent lips, echoing with her non-existent voice.

“Him. Liffrea, wuldres wealdend, woroldare forgeaf…”

An image of Arthur walking through a forest beside his steed shone bright in her mind. She tasted magic on her imaginary tongue and tried to warn him. Magic. Here be magic. Arthur.

Her words tangled together. She didn’t even know if he could hear her.

A mythical beast arose and the prince battled it to a swift death. He turned to face a woman in a tattered red dress. Cara. Not-Cara. Her name was Not-Cara.

Together, Arthur and Not-Cara entered the caves.


“Arthur… It’s a trap, it’s a trap.” Her voice incanted: “Eft gewunigen wilgesithas, thonne wig cume.”


Not-Cara was shadows and taint and trickery. “It’s too dark,” she told Arthur as he dangled from the small outcropping in the mountain’s belly. He was radiance; gold and pure. He needed to shine. “Fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearne. Fromum feohgiftum.”

Her mind blazed blue, sight gone. A burn hotter than fire scorched her conscious thought. A split second of pure agony and then she was recovered. No longer in pain. No longer white-hot. She barely understood what it was to feel nothing.

Arthur was before her, clambering onto the ledge. He stared at her in wonder and she edged back to show him the way out. Instead, he saw a flower; one she could sense would heal her, and he reached for it.

“Leave it, Arthur,” she implored, seeing the red, hungry eyes of beasts rushing up from the dark places. “Save yourself. Go! Follow the light!”

She pointed to the faint glow above her, knowing that creatures of the deep would not venture there, before remembering that she had no arm. “Go!” she cried and he began to climb, following her upwards. “Move! Faster!”

He made it to the fissure in the earth and clambered out, rolling, panting, onto the grass. Merlyn felt like she was struggling to breathe too, though she didn’t have a body. She moved closer to check he was okay and the golden-haired prince stared at her in awe, still splayed on his back. She went to poke him but remembered she wasn’t real.

Or, she hadn’t thought so until he lifted a careful hand and touched her.

She gasped and shuddered, feeling like he had caressed her soul before the scene exploded into red flame and she found herself in the firestorm once more. She whimpered breathlessly as her reformed body was burned anew.
Time was perception.

Perception was inconsistent.

Inconsistency was life.

Merlyn’s pain was absolute. There was not one part of her that did not scream. She did not know time. She did not know thought. She was ember.

A brush of something not flame flickered soothingly to her right. It was gone quickly and the sensation scorched away. But she remembered it. Thought.

Then her nose was clamped and something foul poured into her mouth. She had not the energy to fight. She had not the energy to swallow. Silently, slowly, she choked. Time.

Time.

Time was moving. Restless. Eternal.

Time was life and life was pain. Merlyn gasped weakly as consciousness returned.

She felt so heavy. Her body, weighted and chilly and alien. Her head pounded in time with her sluggish heartbeat, pulsing in her ears. Her vision swam and shimmered, whirling like a spinning top and begging her to return to the abyss. But she sensed people nearby. She forced her dry, hot eyes to inch to her right and saw Gwen and Gaius hugging. She felt their misery like a too-thick blanket in summer.

“That’s disgusting,” she scraped out, trying to lighten the heavy mood. “You should be ashamed of yourself. You’re old enough to be her grandfather.”

They pulled apart and she saw their faces were streaked with tears. “Merlyn!” breathed Gaius, eyes wide in shock. “You’re alive.”

“No,” she denied hoarsely. “I’m the ghost come back to haunt you.”

Gwen launched at her and squeezed her tight. “I thought you were dead,” she sniffled.

“I’d hug you back,” muttered Merlyn into her shoulder. “But my arms aren’t working.”

The cocoa-skinned maid puffed a teary laugh and sat back, smoothing Merlyn's black hair off her sticky forehead.

“So erm… what happened?” Merlyn asked, glancing from Gwen to Gaius. “Last thing I remember is drinking the wine.”

Merlyn was still in her early stages of recovery when Knight Ulric paid her a visit, late the next morning. He wore his knightly gear and his face was pursed in discomfit. Discomfit she understood when he explained to her his new acquisition – freshly broken off the stud.

Her heart skipped a beat. “What’s to be done with Sunstrider?” she asked.

Knight Ulric looked away. “He’s been sold to the butchers.”
Merlyn's breath hitched. “Please reconsider!” she begged. “He’s a good horse. He’s talented and strong, with good conformation – and controls himself around the mares. Please, please don’t do this. I’ll be ready to work in the morn.”

Outside the room, Arthur, who had been on his way to visit Merlyn for the first time since her cure (and his release from the dungeons), stopped short. Indignation and affront swelled in his gut. Merlyn has been serving another behind his back?

“I will not spend all my coin stabling two horses in Camelot,” said the visitor. “Particularly as one is only useful to a servant. I am a knight. I need a steed to do my duty.”

“I’ve been paying for his feeding and care. You only need to pay for his housing. He-he doesn’t need to be in the royal wing now. He can be moved to the guard’s stables; surely that would cut costs? It would be but a copper from your pocket. Hardly noticeable to one as highborn as you.” her voice was desperate and the flattery grated at something inside Arthur’s chest.

He understood now. Knight Ulric was the man in the room. He was the one who owned the stallion with the appearance of an angel but the disposition of a demon. The beast he had wrestled with before a servant had showed him up. Merlyn, of course.

And, clearly, their arrangement had not ended with her new employment. An act that was prohibited and unknighthly; things he did not suspect of Sir Ulric before that day.

The fraudulent knight finished his conversation with a distraught Merlyn and the prince edged backwards as the man exited the physician’s chambers.

He stepped from the shadows as Knight Ulric passed by and said nonchalantly with his arms crossed, “so you’ve been moonlighting my personal servant all this time, Ulric? Have you no respect for your prince?”

“S-Sire,” stuttered the knight as he spun around, surprise and fear on his broad face. “I – it wasn’t intentional, My Lord. She had been working for me previously. If you recall the servant I hired to train my rogue destrier, it was her, sire, posing as a boy. She was talented with the stallion, I’ll give her that, but he refused to abide anyone’s wishes but hers and I grew tired of waiting for a steed that would not submit.” His tone turned slightly pleading. “She begged me not to slaughter him, My Lord. She said she would pay his way in labour. When she became your personal servant, she came to me and implored the deal to remain. I didn’t want to refuse the child, sire, she was adamant about keeping that beast. I’m sorry to say I agreed. Forgive me, Prince Arthur, I knew it was wrong.”

Now all the rushing about and exhaustion made sense. She’d been serving two masters plus helping Gaius and training the beast of a horse, whose temper was legendary to those within the castle. Arthur would have been awed by her stamina but he was too busy being annoyed at her stupidity. Honestly, why would she stretch herself so thin just to keep an unsociable steed?

Arthur mentally shook the questions away and stared at Ulric steadily. His once-friend shifted nervously under his scrutiny.

“To whom have you sold the horse Merlyn is so fond of?” he asked, surprising the knight with his line of question.

“The shambles,” he admitted guiltily. “I’ve not been able to sell him, not even to the coursers, and I cannot abide the expense he is affording for the pleasure of one servant girl. I’m to be getting another destrier from my breeder within days.”
Arthur frowned thoughtfully. “You say Merlyn has been handling him well?”

“Yes sire,” he said. “Wouldn’t recognise him as the same horse if not for his striking colour. I don’t know why because she doesn’t seem any more gifted than the other grooms.”

“Hmm,” said Arthur. “How much did the butcher buy him for?”

“Forty coppers,” said Ulric. “Beves wants his hide.”

Arthur stroked his chin and stared at the other knight again, contemplating his idea. On one hand, it would greatly cheer the sickly Merlyn and was a way to thank her for drinking the poisoned chalice but on the other, the foolish girl should have found another way to prove her claim than to brashly interrupt the ceremony.

But damn it all!

“I’ll pay eight silvers for the beast and his tack,” he stated decisively. “He’ll be moved beside Hengroen on the morrow. Are you agreeable?”

“My Lord,” said Ulric, a fearful, apologetic look on his features. “He’s already been bought. I believe Beves has already collected him for slaughter.”

“When was this?” demanded Arthur, stepping nearer. “What time was he taken?”

“I believe not two hours’ past. Though, Beves usually slays his beasts at dawn, when there is less chance of attracting scavengers.”

“Then we shall see him now so you can recompense him,” the prince decided, turning on his heel and striding away. Ulric hesitated for a moment before scampering behind, slightly bewildered.

What was so special about his new servant to warrant such measures? Surely, if he wanted to bed her, the wooing was excessive; it’s not as if she could say no to the soon-to-be Crown Prince of Camelot.

Merlyn awoke the next morn feeling a great deal better than death warmed over but still shaky and weak. Gaius warned that the feeling would linger another day or so but Merlyn was restless and upset, not in the right headspace to pass the time studying her magic book.

She sat in bed a little while, trying not to think of her sudden ease in duties but unable to keep her mind from the reason why. Feeling impending tears, she rolled onto her side and cuddled her pillow but a knock on her door disturbed her.

Quickly, she wiped her eyes and sat up. “c-come in,” she called, clearing her throat when her voice...
cracked.

The last person she expected to see opened the door and she lifted up her blanket to cover her nightgown in surprise. “Arthur,” she said. “I-I thought you were Gaius.”

He saw her state of undress and promptly looked to the wall. “Get dressed, Merlyn. I need you for something.”

Lethargy and grief weighed on her shoulders even as affection bloomed in her heart. This man – this prince had disobeyed his father and risked death for her, a mere servant. Nevertheless… “I’m not sure how capable I will be today,” she said regretfully. “I remain unsteady and weak. Can it not wait for the morrow?”

“I don’t need your proficiency; I need your presence. So ‘up and at ‘em; daylight’s burning’, as you so love to say.”

He strutted back out and Merlyn groaned theatrically, slumping against her headboard. She wasn’t truly reluctant. This was actually the kind of distraction she was craving – ignoring her exhaustion for now. Arthur demanded attention wherever he went; her thoughts would not easily wander in his presence.

Ever so slowly, she dragged herself from the bed and donned her only clean dress, a lovely lavender shade before venturing out of her room. Arthur stood by Gaius’ workbench, touching and fiddling with things like an errant child.

“I wouldn’t touch that,” she said when he went to pick up a vial of yellow liquid.

He glanced at her and raised an expectant eyebrow. She withheld a smirk as she explained: “it’s urine.”

His grimace and hasty retreat brought forth a snort. He shot her a scowl as he wiped his hand on his shirt. “What could the Court Physician possibly need with urine?” he demanded.

“It tells a surprising amount of information if you know how to examine it,” she said. “As with any part of the body.”

He looked her over critically. “Well your pallor is telling me you’re lucky to be alive.”

Merlyn ducked her head, peering at him from under her lashes. “I hear I have you to thank for that,” she said quietly.

He gazed at her with an inscrutable emotion before blinking and throwing a grin. “Yeah, well, it was nothing. A half decent servant is hard to come by.”

“I find a compassionate noble is far more difficult,” she returned pointedly.

His bravado faltered in the face of her sincerity and he took a moment to clear his throat before turning to the exit. “Come,” he commanded.

“What are we going?” she asked as she neared the door.

“You will see,” he said mystically and marched down the stairs. Merlyn followed at less than half his pace and was quickly left behind. She watched him stride across the royal courtyard as she just reached the arch into it and huffed a quiet laugh at his obliviousness.
He made it nearly to the other side before glancing back and realising she wasn’t there. She stopped and folded her arms in amusement as he twirled in search of her. His gaze soon locked with her own and he huffed in exasperation before trekking back.

He hooked his hand under her elbow in support and, together, they moved off again. “You are absolutely terrible with patients,” Merlyn chuckled.

Arthur lifted his chin pompously. “I’m simply used to a higher level of competence,” he retorted.

“As you said earlier, I appear as wretched as a ghoul. It’s a wonder you wish to be near me at all.”

“I’ve grown used to it,” he jested and Merlyn gasped in pretend outrage.

“You,” she said, unable to fight the grin pulling up her cheeks. “You are a prat.”

“And you are an idiot,” he retorted, pursing his lips to hide his own merriment.

Merlyn sighed in contentment, bumping into his arm. She was glad things were returning to normal. Or – almost normal – a new normal. She ducked her head as she remembered that there were no more predawn rides to plan or extra meals to deliver. There was no more Sunstrider.

Arthur drew her to a gentle halt and she saw they were standing before the royal stalls – the ones reserved for the royal family. She shot the prince a look out of the corner of her eye. “I know not if I have the strength to lift a pitchfork, let alone one piled high with dung.”

He merely smiled, looking far too proud of himself. “Why are you smiling?” she asked, the first hint of wariness sparking in her mind. Had he devised a prank for her? “What are you planning?”

He stepped aside and waved an arm forward. “After you,” he said, in what would have been chivalrous if she wasn’t sure she was about to fall prey to something. “Go on,” he urged.

With a resigned sigh, she tottered towards the servant door, throwing back over her shoulder, “if you’re planning some amusement at my expense, it usually works better when the target is unsuspect –” a whinny interrupted her. A high-pitched, very familiar whinny.

She stared at the door with her mouth agape, confused beyond all reason. Arthur nudged her from where he’d stepped up to her shoulder. “Go,” he said.

With a last, baffled glance, she hobbled to the door and stepped inside. And there, in all his glory, was Sunstrider.

When he caught sight of her, he neighed again, deafening her and the other horses in the building. He half reared in excitement then snapped at Arthur’s bay stallion, Hengroen, when the older steed flattened his ears in disapproval.

She moved towards him without consciously thinking and the moment she was within reach, Sunstrider shoved his nose in her face and snuffled her cheeks. She wrapped his big head in her arms and he lipped her belly through her shirt, accepting her smothering.

“I thought you were dead,” she whispered, stroking behind his ears.

When he had enough of her hug, he nudged her gently in the torso then rested his head over her shoulder, sighing happily. She was glad he wasn’t using any weight or she probably would have crumpled. She stroked his neck and glanced back over her shoulder to where Arthur was leaning against the door with his arms crossed, watching passively.
“How did you know?” she asked, breathless with joy.

He dropped his pose and walked closer, clasping his hands behind his back. He stared at the stallion nuzzling her hair and a faint frown overtook his features. Merlyn felt trepidation take root in her gut as realisation grew in her mind.

“I had a rather enlightening conversation with Ulric last night,” the prince started. “I found out some rather interesting news.”

Merlyn tucked her head, guilty and ashamed. Arthur said, the faintest trace of accusation in his tone; “did you not think I would discover the truth? That you could continue this duplicity unhindered, forever more?”

“Honestly?” she started.

“That would be nice, for once.”

Merlyn winced, unable to meet the prince’s eyes. She gave Sunstrider one last pat then stepped away, turning to face her master and his reprimand. “I had not thought that far ahead. I was given seconds to beg for Sunstrider's life and I offered the one thing I’m useful for. I had not thought much past keeping him alive another day.”

“That,” said Arthur, dryly. “Was very obvious.”

The black-haired girl peered up at his face and saw an exasperated quirk to his lips. She grinned sheepishly and he rolled his eyes.

He waved at the horse. “He’s yours now to tend and train. Any issues are yours to deal with and no other. You will be maintaining his hygiene alongside the rest of this stable, as per your previous instructions. I expect his gear to remain top quality, though for any expenditure, you may come to me.”

Merlyn gawked at him. “I – he’s mine? He’s – he’s truly mine?”

“To do with what you will,” he said, like it was nothing. Like it didn’t mean the world to her. Like he wasn’t being incredibly generous.

Merlyn startled Arthur and herself when she leapt at him. He flinched but her arms went around him in a tight squeeze. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Tentatively, his own arms embraced her, resting on her shoulder blades. Hers rested on the small of his back, her face mashed into his chest while she fought for composure.

A moment passed. Arthur cleared his throat pointedly, obviously growing uncomfortable. Merlyn drew back, a large smile splitting her face. Her arms slid to clasp his elbows as his hands rested, forgotten, on her waist. She laughed, giddy with happiness. “For one not used to displays of physical affection, you don’t give too bad a hug when prompted.”

Arthur scoffed. “Just because I don’t cuddle up to perfect strangers does not mean I don’t know how to be friendly,” he defended.

“Of course not,” she soothed, patting his hand. A loud snap of static zapped where their flesh touched and they both jerked back. Merlyn touched her chest where it had travelled up to her heart, causing it to skip a beat, while Arthur rubbed his fingers together and stared at her with a frown.
“What was that?” she whispered, blue eyes wide. “I’ve never felt its likeness before.”

“It was strange,” mused Arthur absently, thoughts turning inward. “Familiar…”

Merlyn grew concerned. “Arthur? Are you well?” she asked.

He blinked and returned to the present. “I’m fine,” he said, dropping his hands. “But Gaius will not forgive me for keeping you much longer. I do not enjoy his wrath.”

An impish smile overtook Merlyn's face. “But you are a prince,” she said. “Surely you do not feel fear?”

“I did not say fear,” replied Arthur, leading the way out of the stables. “It is a healthy respect for a man in a position to force me to drink terrible tonics if I do not act appropriately.”

“Then you are wiser than I,” chuckled Merlyn tiredly, feeling lethargy set into her limbs. “I cannot seem to control myself. Though I have a far greater punishment than that of a few bitter drinks. Come to me when you’ve had to clean the leech tank.” She shuddered and the blonde prince snorted.

“One of the perks of being prince,” he said. “I can leave the servant chores to the servants.”

“Don’t I know it,” she muttered good-naturedly, watching her feet drag across the cobblestones, tiredness making her feet heavy.

An arm wrapped around her shoulders as the other went under her elbow once more in support.

“Isn’t this unbecoming of a prince?” she murmured. “What if your father sees?”

“I wish to return you in one piece, without your clumsiness taking hold. And my father will need to learn that I cannot be as aloof as he regarding the lives of our people.”

“That is a noble trait to have, Arthur,” said Merlyn quietly, hearing the faint self-reprimand in his tone. “One that will make you a beloved king in the future.”

He flicked his eyes in her direction and she kept her features open and sincere. She meant every word. Now he needed to believe them.

He dipped his head in a fraction of a nod and they walked on in silence. Better than denial, at least.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas! Hope everyone is enjoying their holiday, whatever their religion, and I hope you also enjoyed this chapter. I know it was a little odd with Merlyn's POV under the influence of the poison, but unfortunately, not much could change this chapter without chucking something else in entirely to filler it. As long as none of you were bored, I'm happy. :)
Lancelot

Chapter Summary

Lancelot arrives, but so does the griffin. Why does it attack now? What possible motives could it have? And what will Merlyn do about it? Also, blooming love?

Chapter Notes

I’m so excited for this chapter. This is where things start turning from Canon. The consequences won’t yet be seen yet but they are coming, bit by bit. Happy New Year everybody!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Merlyn had so much more free time she barely knew what to do with herself. Sunstrider was revelling in the longer dawn rides and Merlyn had discovered several new circuits. One place in particular, the black-haired girl enjoyed, stumbling upon it while following the larger of a set of streams that watered the woodland.

The natural meadow was atop a small crest and would feel the full sun at midday. With the shadows of the large forest all around, it was a lovely place to see the sky and soak in nature. Along the edges, in the partial shade of the trees, grew a whole assortment of beautiful, aromatic plants. Aided a little by Merlyn's magic, they flourished and bloomed scenting the area richly. The rest of the clearing was blanketed by thick, soft grass that Merlyn loved to feel between her toes, shedding her riding boots at the first opportunity, despite the dew that lingered in the dawn.

It was there she was visited by the unicorn again.

Merlyn was laying on her back, spelled against the grass’s damp, absorbing the peace and quiet. She stretched her magical awareness in a way she never risked in Camelot and let the super sense guide her thoughts.

She felt Sunstrider grazing contentedly by her side. The ants in their anthills. The rabbits in their warrens. The birds in the trees. The insects in the air. A small herd of deer near the stream.

A white, pulsing, pure energy that overwhelmed her meditation and brought her back to herself like the snap of a taut rope.

She gasped and sat upright, heart thrumming with adrenalin. She looked to her right and met the liquid brown gaze of the unicorn, standing serenely by the trees as if asking permission to enter. She held out her hand in invitation, thinking it silly such a being should need it.

This time, Sunstrider didn’t even acknowledge the creature as it approached, stepping away as his grazed so that Merlyn was left alone. But she was far from worried.
She stared in awe as the unicorn stopped before her, still sitting on the ground like a numpty, and it lowered its head to take in her scent. Merlyn giggled as its whiskers tickled her face and carefully lifted a hand to touch its cheek.

It felt like the finest velvet under her fingers, soft and smooth. She traced its jaw and it leaned down to give her more access. Its long, fluffy forelock felt like baby’s hair and she brushed it away from its gorgeous brown orbs.

“Is that better?” she asked. “Able to see without a grey film.”

The unicorn whuffed in her face then shifted a little before promptly dropping to its knees and folding its hind legs with a groan of satisfaction.

She’d frozen as it moved but once it had settled, resumed her attentions, simultaneously proud and flabbergasted that such a powerful creature would deign to trust her with its presence.

She remained in that meadow a long time. Much longer than she should have, the sun creeping higher in the sky. The unicorn dozed under her ministrations, head growing heavier in her lap.

She, too, grew sleepy and, before she realised it, was waking under the midday sun with Sunstrider nibbling her hair. She looked to her side but the unicorn was gone, flowers sprouting where it had lain. She touched a petal gently, mourning the beast’s absence, but a small thrill of anticipation heated her chest. She would see it again. She believed that.

She returned to the castle with her thoughts in the clouds, and thus, didn’t see the prince until her steed stopped with a snort. She lifted her gaze and met his angry glare, freezing as she remembered the time. She smiled, sheepish.

“Where have you been?” he demanded as Merlyn dismounted, striding up to her side. “I was nearly ready to send guards out.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, contrite. “I-I went for a long ride and discovered a new meadow to the north of the city. It’s beautiful, Arthur, you should ride with me one morning and I can show you.”

“Unlike you, I have responsibilities and duties I cannot ignore to go look at clumps of flowers,” he retorted.

“Even you, my prince, would appreciate this place,” she returned, unaffected by his rudeness. She had been inexplicably absent for hours. “Come. I need to settle my steed then I am at your mercy.”

He would probably have her join the chambermaids in cleaning his and the knight’s chamber pots, or something equally horrifying. Merlyn shuddered in disgust.

“It is not my mercy you will have to weather,” he said smugly and she glanced at him in confusion.

“Gaius was quite worried when I approached him this morn and has only grown more so in the hours that passed. You would do well to reassure him before answering to me.”


“‘Oh no’, indeed,” he said.

“Wandering about the forest without telling anyone which paths you take! How are we to find you
if something goes wrong? Arthur was a hairsbreadth away from organising a search, with or without Uther’s permission. What was so important that you could not return in a timely manner?”

Merlyn blinked as Gaius’ tirade finally ended, having sat, slumped at the table as he paced back and forth. It took her a moment to register his final words and her earlier wonder sparked again.

“Gaius,” she said, azure blue eyes shining with flecks of gold. “I saw a unicorn.”

The old man faltered, shocked out of his irritation. “Are you sure?” he said, for lack of anything else to say.

Merlyn shot him a dirty look. “I would never mistake a unicorn, Gaius. Don’t be absurd.”

His cheeks puffed at her attitude but Merlyn was caught up in reminiscing. “It was so beautiful and pure. It laid with me, Gaius, with its head in my lap. It trusted me not to harm it. How could I not spend as much time with it as I could?”

The physician stared at her in astonishment, completely baffled by the turn of events. He had expected distraction or sleep or just plain thrill in exploring had kept her from returning. (His subconscious had fretted over bandits and vagrants and Nimueh, but he’d refused to delve too deep to preserve his sanity). To find out she’d been in company with such a rare, shy creature – that the beast had sought her out – confounded him more than it probably should have.

Merlyn was a magical being, as pure and light as the unicorn. It made sense that like would attract like.

Nonetheless, Gaius had her scrubbing the leech tank for the worry she’d caused. She took it graciously, dreamy expression firmly planted on her face while scum and slime smeared over her skin.

Merlyn was on the southern training fields, tightening the strap of Arthur's pauldron under his arm. The morning was fresh and the prince in a roguish mood, deliberately trying to sabotage Merlyn's composure in front of the knights. The night before he’d tangled in the removal of his shirt somehow, and had needed to call Merlyn for aid. Seeing his debacle and his sheepish red face through the head hole, she’d laughed so hard she’d snorted – something that she’d never done before. Now, he seemed determined to draw it forth, to her horror.

She slapped him on the chest to stop his cheek, hidden from the knights by his angle only to hurt the back of her hand on his chainmail. He chuckled at her as she shook it out and she retaliated by tightening his belt uncomfortably before stepping out of reach with an impish grin. He grunted, unable to loosen it easily himself because of his leather gloves and scowled at her before turning to the rest of the guild and his opponent.

“Right, you jumped up dung beetle, this is it. The final test. Pass this and you're a knight of Camelot. Fail, and you’re no one. You face the most feared of all foes, the ultimate killing machine. You face me. You are challenged to last one minute free combat. Dallin, third son of Stanhope, Lord of Somersaete.”

He drew his sword and nodded to the timekeeper. “Your time starts now.”

The battle lasted thirty seconds, most of it with Dallin testing Arthur's guard and not engaging. The prince quickly grew fed up and the fight ended in two moves.
Merlyn entertained herself with watching the way Arthur moved fluidly through each sequence, his footwork faultless, the twists of his torso effortless. He could be a wonderful dancer if he wanted to be.

She came back to herself when he marched towards her, disappointment marring his features. “I was sure he was ready,” muttered Arthur as she set to removing his gloves and vambrace. “His aggression in training had strengthened. I don’t know what happened.”

“He’ll be able to try again, will he not?” she asked, leaning up to unbuckle the gorget from the back of his neck.

“Not for a while yet – to preserve his honour and the respect of his defeat,” Arthur replied, gazing over at the discouraged contender.

“Well, you gave him a fair go,” she said. “I saw you hold off from several advantages, waiting for him to strike. Perhaps he is simply not made for war.”

Arthur looked down at her in surprise. “You know my tactics?” he asked.

Merlyn snorted. She wasn’t that good. “No,” she shook her head, stacking his removed armour. “I’ve been working with you for long enough now to know your stride. I could see the weight shift as you prepared your strike then the adjustment as you decided against it.”

The prince had a frown on his face. “You’ve been my servant maybe two months,” he said. “Surely you cannot know my movements that well.”

The black-haired girl shrugged, unconcernedly. “Maybe not. I’m only telling you what I saw. I could have read it wrong.”

Arthur stared at her a little longer before admitting; “what you saw was correct. When prompted, Lord Dallin shows skill, he simply lacks offensive strategy.”

“They’ll see him before he returns home and explain where he needs to improve. He may come back a different man,” she suggested, heaving his gear into her arms. “Is there anything else, sire? Do you wish to bathe now or later?”

“Later,” he said, appearing lost in thought. “I will run the men through some noncontact drills while they are here. Clean the stables and you are free until supper. I have some reports to read.”

She dipped her head and marched towards the castle, anticipation at a free afternoon lightening her step. She was oblivious to his eyes on her back and the unconscious way he watched her hips sway. He watched a little peasant girl run up and tugged on her skirt to stop her, saying something shyly when she had her attention. His black-haired servant smiled warmly and carefully plucked a stem of blue cluster flowers from her hair, tucking it in the little girl’s blonde strands with a sweet word. The little girl positively beamed and raced off through the archway – possibly to show her parents – and Merlyn went on her way like nothing had happened.

Arthur shook his head and turned away. There was no one in the world who was like Merlyn. She was a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. But, funnily enough, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Two weeks past uneventfully, then word reached the city of a large, winged beast terrorising the northern villages of Camelot. No one knew whence it came or why but two villages had fallen so
“Should we not ride out and provide aid?” Merlyn asked when Gaius told her of the situation. “There will be wounded and ill.”

Gaius didn’t look up from where he mixed a paste in a bowl. “There are guards headed out to provide relief and the village healers – if they have survived – will tend to them until they arrive. I must stock up in preparation.”

“Then can I not go in your stead?” she asked. “I know basic diagnosis and treatments.”

“You are first and foremost, Arthur’s servant,” the old man said on a sigh. “Unless the King decrees you leave, and as both Uther and Arthur are away surveying the ruined villages – you stay here. Now – I need some more mushrooms, yarrow and lemon balm. You will find the yarrow in the royal gardens but the rest will need to be sought in the forest.”

With pursed lips, Merlyn collected her herb basket but stopped and turned to her room to change into riding breeches. She would take Sunstrider out again; she could not quite remember where the lemon balm was and she figured he would enjoy some more freedom.

Her steed was happy at her arrival and danced around the yard as she gathered his gear, though he stood perfectly still as she tacked him. He set a strong pace towards the front gates until she checked his stride, settling into her control.

She guided him into a trot when they were away from the main thoroughfare and let him stretch his ever-ready muscles. Without slowing, they entered a well-used trail into the forest and moved along the paths to where she knew mushrooms grew well, shadowed by a broad, rotting trunk that had collapsed long before she came to the city.

However, he drew more riled the further she ventured and she was forced to ease him back to a walk, his sideways prances happening more than she appreciated. He was as tense as a bowstring under her legs and hesitated obeying each of her instructions. A little confused, she dismounted and checked him over but found nothing wrong, no stones in his feet or bur under his saddle. Finally, she gave up and tied his reins so he couldn’t tangle in them then continued on foot to begin her scavenge.

Sunstrider whickered at her back and kept unusually close, almost stepping on her heels more than once. She shooed him back a little then resumed her task only to find him sneaking up once more. She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “What has gotten into you today?” she demanded. “Why are you in my space?”

The palomino snorted and shifted his hindquarters, ears tense and twitching. She saw fear in his wide eyes and worry started to bleed into her thoughts. “What is it?” she asked, glancing into the trees, finally noticing the absolute silence of the forest animals.

A loud screech answered her and Sunstrider spun with a squeal, galloping back down the path. Merlyn stared after him with dismay before moving to follow, knowing that animals were much keener in sensing danger than humans.

She took only few steps before a great, grey blur with wings charged towards her through the trees. She screamed and dived to the side, dropping her herb basket in her haste. She reached for her plant dagger in her boot as the creature skidded to a halt and she scrambled to her feet to face it as it turned.
A big yellow eye glared at her hungrily from a large eagle’s head, attached to an oversized, four-legged, fur-covered body. She gaped, astonished, but the beast wasn’t nearly as captivated. It hissed and ducked its head before charging with intent. Merlyn lifted her free hand, no spell coming to mind but skin sparking with magic. However, the monster was diverted by a man who leapt from the foliage with a shout and stabbed it with his sword.

It screeched and spun, snapping its beak but the man swung his weapon at its face. His sword shattered upon contact but it forced the beast into a momentary retreat. The stranger sprinted towards Merlyn and she gestured towards the trees. “Come, come! Quickly!”

He grabbed her hand and tugged her into them. “Run!” he shouted, as the creature screeched close behind them.

They dodged to one side to avoid a swipe and Merlyn took control of their flight; yanking him towards the denser trunks and thicker undergrowth. They dived over a fallen tree and scrambled backwards into its shadow, quieting their rapid breaths until they heard the creature’s large wings beating into the distance, abandoning its hunt.

The black-haired girl turned to face her saviour, panting, “It’s gone. You saved my life. Thank you. Oh – I’m Merlyn.”

Lancelot,” the stranger gasped out before his eyes rolled into his head and he passed out.


Still nothing. Surely it would not be a struggle every time she tried. She was supposed to be some great witch. She rallied up her determination and incanted loudly, “Thrhhaele dolgbenn!”

A wave of tiredness washed her limbs and she felt Lancelot’s wound seal up beneath her palm. She opened her eyes with a drowsy grin and wiped the excess red away, seeing the wound had scoured like it was years old, not minutes. She checked his brow for unusual heat and smiled when she found none. He would probably need some replenishing tea and rest but he was no longer in danger. She’d done it!

A low whicker drew her gaze and she saw Sunstrider approaching. His ears were still twitching and his nostrils flared but his chocolate eyes were trained on her faithfully.

“You have perfect timing,” she said to him, not begrudging his earlier bolt. Horses were flight animals; speed was their one advantage over predators. She was simply grateful he had returned to her and not traipsed back to the castle.

She saw his focus move to her companion and he snorted when he smelt the blood. She stood up and told him, “You’re going to have to handle a stranger on your back, alright? Your stubbornness
is going to have to wait.” She touched his shoulder and pushed her intentions into him with magic. He shook his head and toed the ground but didn’t kick up a fuss when she mounted, fitting herself behind the saddle. She lifted Lancelot with a spell to sit in front of her and steadied his slumped form with another incantation, wrapping her arms around him for good measure.

Once satisfied, she clucked at Sunstrider and he took them back towards the city.

She should have expected Gaius’ disapproval for her use of magic but it hadn’t even crossed her mind. As he sat, examining Lancelot’s scar, he ranted at Merlyn for a good ten minutes. Things like; “What will he think when he wakes and finds his hour-old injury a mere pockmark? What do you think his mind will jump to, Merlyn?” and, “You are becoming reckless with your gift; you must exercise caution or it’ll not be long before you are discovered. I’ll not stand by while you burn.”

Merlyn did feel a little contrite, not having thought past stopping the bleeding, and his words were causing an anxious itch to form between her shoulder blades but, oddly enough, she had faith in this stranger. What little she’d observed; Lancelot was gallant, selfless, caring and skilled: he was a good man. Surely, no one like that would hold to callous prejudices as the King of Camelot did.

It took time, but eventually the physician wound down and his mind turned to the creature in the forest. “What did it look like?” he asked, grinding a tincture together.

“It was as large as the tallest horse in Camelot,” she said. “It had the head of an eagle but the body of – of a lion, I think. It was grey and it screeched and hissed. It had no intelligence in its eyes; only rage. There was so much rage. What kind of beast can it be to feel such consuming anger?”

“I know not,” said Gaius, pausing in his task, craggy face pinched in thought. “I’ve never heard of such an animal. I’ll have to scour my tomes. Meanwhile, you,” he added, staring at Merlyn with his eyebrow raised, “need to prepare for Arthur’s return. They are due to return tonight and he’ll be very displeased if you have no bath or meal ready for him.”

Merlyn grumbled and left to summon Arthur’s bathwater. She wished to remain until Lancelot awoke but she would simply have to hope that her impulsive actions did not beget her ruin.

Arthur, the King and their guard clattered into the courtyard as the sun touched the city walls. A handful of stableboys and servants were awaiting them alongside Merlyn, who approached as Arthur dismounted, his horse secured in the grip of a young teen. The King swept off with his servants but Merlyn removed Arthur’s gloves before they relocated, knowing he liked the freedom after wearing them for so long.

“How are the survivors?” she asked.

Arthur shook his head, more in grimness than as an answer. “They are distraught. Their homes and lifestyle were destroyed and the beast still roams free. They will be at Camelot in a few days – the
ones who had not perished on the road before we found them, that is. Strangely enough, the creature only sought human flesh; it left the cattle alone.”

“Where has it come from?” she enquired, puzzled. “No one has seen or heard of its like before, and yet it struck two villages within a couple of days to each other. Is that not odd?”

“Aye,” he said as they trudged up the staircase to the Royal Wing. “I was hoping Gaius discovered something in our time away. We have deeper knowledge now; hopefully it will aid him.”

She heard the subtle guilt in his tired tone and said, “There’s nothing more you could have done.”

He peered at her from the corner of his eye. “I have not slain the beast,” he said lowly. “So I have not yet done all I can.”

They reached his chamber door and Arthur opened it wearily, only to stop short when the scent of the bathwater wafted to his nose. He inhaled and frowned, and Merlyn explained, feeling suddenly foolish.

“It’s sandalwood. I – it’s to soothe you after the trial of the last few days. I figured it might work well with the relaxing salts.” She twisted her hands together as Arthur entered and approached the bathing room, saying nothing. “Rose works better in my opinion but I thought you might not like such a feminine scent. I can heat you different water if you wish it – though it may take a little time. I-I didn’t think to keep any in reserve lest you didn’t want it.”

“Merlyn.”

“Yes?”

“Shut up.”

She did.

He turned to her, gratitude on his face. “It was thoughtful of you,” he said. “And I plan to enjoy it to its fullest. I have never smelled pure sandalwood before; it is pleasant.”

Merlyn smiled, relieved. “Then let me remove your armour so you can soak while the steam still rises,” she said and he acquiesced.

Scandalously, he left the bathing door slightly ajar, though the tub was well out of sight. She didn’t think much on it, other than he must be truly tired; he was usually careful to keep particular boundaries.

She gathered his armour by the fire, checked the soup hovering on the edge of the hearth then set to cleaning his gear as she hummed contentedly.

Unbeknownst to her, the sound of her movements was what he was seeking. The sense of a friend’s company – and friend she was – to stave off darker thoughts.

He listened to her soft melodies and breathed in the musky, vanilla-wood aroma, letting the combination lull him into a welcome doze.

Gaius caught Merlyn when she returned from Arthur’s late that evening. She peered around his chambers in search of her saviour but Lancelot was nowhere to be seen.
“He retired to your room for the night,” the old man said, eyebrow raised challengingly. “I tidied to preserve your modesty.”

“Did he… what did he say upon waking?” she asked. Her mentor didn’t appear to be angry, stressed or worried so it couldn’t be too bad, could it? Perhaps he didn’t even remember being struck.

“He asked after his wound,” Gaius said, dashing her hopes. “I told him that he came to me with no such injury, only a body weary with exhaustion and hunger, which may have tricked his mind.” His brow lifted a little more pointedly. “He did not seem entirely convinced.”

Merlyn gulped. “Well, he hasn’t run screaming for the castle so there's hope yet.”

“Indeed,” he said neutrally then turned and headed for his bed. “I’ve laid out some blankets and a pillow for you by the fire. Until our companion has sorted himself out, that is where you will rest.”

The black-haired girl nodded. The man had saved her life, the least she could do was give him a bed until he found his feet. She resigned herself to aching joints and muscles, having become soft from slumbering upon a mattress. She knew reverting would be painful – mentally more than physically.

What she hadn’t expected, was the wave of nostalgia to sweep over her as she settled down. Once upon a time, this was her life. In the deep cold of winter, she and her mother would share the bed for warmth but otherwise, she had her nest of blankets and straw-stuffed hessian. It hadn’t been truly comfortable, but it had been hers.

She thought of her mother, Hunith, and the hard life she’d lived without complaint. Of her unconditional love and the small kiss she’d bestow upon Merlyn's brow before sleep. Homesickness arose like a king tide and pulled her under its embrace. She’d only written to her mother once since being in Camelot. Ealdor wasn’t along the regular trade routes and the villagers rarely left so messengers were a foreign, expensive concept. She’d paid the expense to let her mother know that she was alive and well, and her mother had replied with the same courier, wishing her the best and hoping she found peace.

Well mama, she thought, closing her eyes and tucking the blanket under her chin. I’ve not found peace but I have found purpose, and, somehow, I feel this is better.

The next morning, when Merlyn returned from exercising Sunstrider and feeding Arthur, Lancelot was awake and staring out the window to the lower town. When she stumbled in the door, he jumped in surprise and quickly clambered off his perch, as if his location was indecorous.

“Good day, My Lady,” he said with a little bow. “I hear I have you to thank for my safe arrival.”

“Please,” Merlyn laughed, waving away the title. “I’m no lady. Call me Merlyn. And I only acted as any decent person would to the one who saved their life.”

“Still,” murmured Lancelot, one hand moving to his belly and tracing over where she knew his new scar resided. “I cannot thank you enough.”

She nodded in acceptance and changed the subject, wanting to edge away from dangerous territory. “What were you looking at?” she asked, pointing to the window.

Lancelot smiled, happiness edging into his features as he glanced at the light outside. “Camelot,”
he said. “Ever since I was a child, I’ve dreamed of coming here. It is my life’s ambition to join the knights.” His expression turned wistful. “I know what you’re thinking; I… I expect too much. After all, who am I? They have their pick of the best and bravest in the land.”

“Lancelot,” she said.

“Yes?” he replied tentatively.

“They are going to love you.”

“They are?”

Merlyn grinned at his needless insecurities. “I’ve seen you in action,” she said. “You could shame the great Arthur himself.”

Lancelot scoffed. “I hardly think so,” he denied.

“In fact,” she said impulsively. “You know what I’m going to do? I’m going to talk to him right now.”

Lancelot looked very surprised. “You know Arthur?” he asked and the black-haired girl breathed a laugh. Did she know Arthur…

“Oh yes,” she said deviously. She definitely knew Arthur.

Arthur’s opponent slunk off the training fields with his tail between his legs, his embarrassing takedown and failure to make knighthood wounding his pride. The prince grumbled to her as she took the armour he was stripping while he walked.

“Grummund’s the third to fail this month. How am I meant to defend Camelot with rubbish like that?”

“Well,” Merlyn said, not believing how easy the lead in was. “I think I might be able to help.”

The Prince glanced at her, askance. “You, Merlyn? In case you’ve forgotten, you are a girl and haven’t the faintest idea of how to handle a sword.”

“I wouldn’t say I don’t have the faintest idea,” the black-haired girl grumbled. “But I wasn’t talking of myself. I know of a man with skills to contest your own.”

Arthur raised a sceptical eyebrow. “Yeah?” he challenged.

“He saved my life,” she added.

The prince stopped and shot her a frown. “When were you in danger?” he demanded.

“Oh – er… yesterday. I was out gathering ingredients for Gaius when I was attacked by this-this creature. I thought I was done for when a stranger jumped out of the bushes and attacked. His sword skills are very impressive. He’s staying in the physician’s chambers until he finds his feet.”

“Humph,” Arthur grunted, scowling for reasons that were beyond her. Was he not happy she had escaped unscathed? “That’s all very well and good, Merlyn, but you’re forgetting the First Code of Camelot.”
“The what?”

“The First Code,” he said, a mite smugly. “Only those of noble blood can serve as knights. So… unless your new friend is a nobleman…”

“I-I don’t know,” she said.

The blonde knight snorted. “It would be immediately obvious if he were,” he mocked.

“Why?” Merlyn retorted. “Because they’re all pompous and dim-witted?”

She ducked the shove he tried to bestow her and laughed, leaving him to grumble good-naturedly as she veered off back to Gaius’ chambers.

She paused before the entrance and felt her good humour settle into trepidation. Perhaps Lancelot was the son of a minor lord.

She took a breath and opened the door, finding the anxious nomad inside. “What did he say? Did you speak with him?”

“Yeah,” said Merlyn slowly, closing the door. Gaius was watching her closely from across the room. “You don’t happen to be of noble blood by any chance, do you?”


“It’s just that there’s this –”

“The First Code of Camelot states that only those of noble blood can serve as a knight,” interrupted Gaius, moving nearer. “Uther created the knights to protect this kingdom from those who wished to destroy it. He knew he would have to trust each of his knights with his life, so he chose them from the families that had sworn allegiance to him.”

“The nobility,” Merlyn injected quietly.

“And thus, the First Code of Camelot was born, and ever since that day, only the sons of noble families have served as knights.”

“But that’s not fair,” she said.

“Fair or unfair, that’s the way it is. I’m sorry, Lancelot. Truly, I am,” the physician said. He shot his ward a warning glance then moved back to his task.

“But what about becoming a guard, joining the army?” she asked, desperate to remove the crushed expression from her new friend’s face. “You still live in and protect the city, just like a knight, only without their stupid laws.”

Lancelot didn’t look any happier. “A guard’s main weapon is the pike. I know not how to use one nor is it my passion. You have been very kind and helpful, Miss Merlyn, but I think I will retire for a little while.”

She nodded, unhurt at his dismissal. His dreams had just been devastated by a law he could not circumvent; he was allowed his time to mourn. Merlyn’s mind worked furiously as she stared at the sunlight streaming through the window. She needed to know more on the Knight’s Codes.

She turned and headed for the door only to be stopped by Gaius. “Where are you going, Merlyn?” he asked suspiciously.
She put up her hands, conciliatory, and said, “I’m going to learn more on the Knight’s Code. Geoffrey of Monmouth enjoys boiled sweets; I’m sure we could both benefit from each other’s company a little while.”

Gaius shook his head in exasperation but let her go. She grinned and headed directly for the kitchens. She only had a small period before her presence was due back with Arthur so she wasted no time in her treks, soon arriving out of breath before the library.

The Court Genealogist was pleased with her gift and took a lemon sweet before leaning back in his chair. “Now, what do you want?” he asked and Merlyn winced at being so obvious.

She smiled sheepishly. “I was wondering about the Knight Codes of Camelot,” she admitted. “How the nobility managed to gain such faith and why it is only offered to the highborn when there are so many skilled men willing to die for their king. I understand the need to have the upmost trust in his knights, but would not there be a way to test such faith during training? So that the common man may also show his devotion?”

Geoffrey of Monmouth stared at her with a peculiar expression on his face and Merlyn soon grew uncomfortable. “You ask very curious questions, girl,” he finally stated. “Though your queries are valid. However, to understand why the hierarchy is as it is, we must go back to when Camelot was first founded, mired in chaos, and how the first families rallied beside the one who would become their King…”

“I’m so sorry I’m late!” Merlyn cried, dashing in the door to Arthur’s chambers, arms full of the tray of food. “I didn’t realise the passing of time, and the history of the knights is more interesting than I expected.” She started setting out his meal on the table. “Did you know that King Uther wasn’t actually the direct heir to the throne? He conquered it off his older brother, King Ambrosius, who was driven mad by a magical curse.” She paused in her movements, shaking her head at her own stupidity. “What am I saying? Of course you know – he’s your father. Bother! What a senseless thing for me to say!”

“Merlyn,” Arthur said and she looked over to see him sitting at his writing desk, staring at her with the same fond exasperation Gaius had used earlier. She told him thus and his glare increased, though a smile still pulled at his lips.

“You are by far the strangest servant I’ve ever had the displeasure of knowing,” he said.

She smiled and put her hands out wide. “You wouldn’t have me any other way,” she said brazenly. “Now come, eat while it’s still hot. The taxes can wait a little while.”

“These are actually reports on the damages to the people and villages by the creature. The lords’ want to be sure aid will come for rebuilding.” The prince rolled his eyes as he stood up. “Like we have ever willingly left our people to suffer.”

“That is true. You are much better rulers than King Cenred,” Merlyn told him. “He cares not for the outlying villages of his kingdom. As long as our taxes are paid, we are left to find our own way.”

“What of raiders and bandits?” Arthur demanded, shocked. “Even if he cared little for the people, the incursion on his lands would surely incite retaliation.”

Merlyn shrugged, moving away to prepare the bed as the prince sat down to eat. “We’ve only had
a couple of incidences, and nothing as dire as a raid. Ealdor is isolated, so we are lucky in that respect. It is mostly travellers seeking a warm bed that cause us trouble.” Her mind inadvertently slipped back to the night her own home was invaded and she shuddered before forcing herself back to the present. “Have you already bathed or would you like me to call for the water boys?”

“They have already come,” said Arthur, sitting at the table to eat. “And even set some to boil over the fire. They must like you.”

Merlyn smiled and glanced at him. “I find you achieve more when you make friends,” she said then snorted at the look he shot her. “Oh, right,” she jested. “How silly of me. You are the prince; therefore, friendship is below you. Why did I not remember before?”

“Shut up, Merlyn,” he huffed. “Go shine my shoes or do something servanty.”

She turned and bowed theatrically. “Of course, milord. Anything you ask, milord.”

He threw a chunk of bread at her and she caught it, stuffing it in her mouth with a wide grin. Then she moved to the hearth to change the water over.

They settled into a peaceful silence and Merlyn contemplated how to bring up her line of query. She didn’t want to offend or cause strife.

“What is it?” Arthur asked, startling the black-haired girl from her ruminations

“Sorry?” she asked, peering at him.

“I can hear you thinking,” he said. “You have on your,” he waved at his own features. “Pondering face.”

“I have a pondering face?”

“I have a pondering face?” he repeated, ignoring her question.

She bit her lip. “Well…” she began slowly. “I was with Geoffrey of Monmouth this afternoon and he was telling me of the history of knights. And I understand the First Code a little better now, displays of devotion and loyalty through trial and such, but is it not a little restrictive?” she asked. “Nobility has sworn an oath to serve, and that is all well and good, but has not the common man also done the same? They work to survive, yes, but there are some who have dedicated themselves to serving the kingdom in any way they can. The guards, for one. Is that not also an oath of fealty? How can they show their monarchs the depth of their devotion when they are not allowed to strive for more?”

Arthur was staring at her, surprise highlighting his face before realisation darkened it again. “This is about your new friend,” he said, something unpleasant in his inflection of the word. “If he is not noble-born then I’m sorry, but he cannot become a knight. That is the way it is.”

“But why?” Merlyn implored. “Lancelot is as skilled as any of your knights, perhaps more so than some. And yet, he is denied because he was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth? How can he prove his worth when there is no trial he can partake to sway the King?”

“Watch how you speak,” warned the prince and she ducked her head with a scowl. Tense silence fell for a little while as Merlyn moved back and forth to prepare his bath.

Finally, Arthur enquired, “You say he is skilled?”
She peered at him, cautiously. “As talented with a blade as any of your knights, and just as brave,” she said.

Arthur frowned at his empty plate, seeming to struggle with himself. He said, “Bring him to the training grounds late morn. I will test his mettle myself.”

Merlyn gasped in happiness. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she said, jumping near to give him a hug before remembering herself. “Oops, sorry,” she said as she drew back.

“I still cannot proclaim him a knight,” said Arthur gruffly, not meeting her eyes. “I am merely testing your judgment of his skills.”

“It will be enough for him to be recognised. He has had a hard life, I think. He doesn’t hold a lot of self-confidence despite his abilities. But I believe you will enjoy combating him; you are both true warriors.”

Merlyn returned that night to find Gaius asleep on his bed in the corner and Lancelot sitting at the table, flicking through one of the physician’s many tomes. His appearance was despondent and his movements listless, but Merlyn felt butterflies flap excitedly in her belly.

“Hello,” she greeted quietly and the man startled, not having heard her arrive.

“Hello, Miss Merlyn,” he returned and she rolled her eyes.

“Drop the Miss,” she said. “The formality kills me.”

He smiled faintly, lowering his gaze.

She bit her lip. “Why do you want to be a knight so much?” she asked, moving to sit beside him.

Lancelot met her gaze sombrely. “When I was a boy,” he began. “My village was attacked by raiders from the northern plains. They were slaughtered where they stood; my father, my mother, everyone. I alone escaped. I vowed that day, that never again would I be helpless in the face of tyranny. I made a sword craft of my life. Every waking hour since that day, I devoted to the art of combat, and when I was ready, I set forth for Camelot. And now, it seems, my journey ends. Everything I fought for, wasted.”

“Perhaps not,” she replied, her heart sore from his suffering. “I spoke with Arthur. He will not circumvent the First Code for you yet, but I have convinced him to face you in a friendly melee in the morn. I believe your skills will have him reconsidering the law, at the very least. What say you?”

Lancelot looked utterly flabbergasted. “I – you – that—that’s amazing! You are a wonderful person, Merlyn. Thank you! Thank you!” hope blazed in his brown eyes and Merlyn was happy to see it. A man as noble of heart as this one did not deserve the hardships fate had handed him.

“Don’t thank me yet, thank me when you beat Arthur tomorrow and he sees how skilled you are.” She said. “But first – you will need some armour and I know just the place to get some.”

The next morn, Merlyn and Lancelot stood inside Gwen’s home as the maid took measurements. Tom was already at the forge – unfortunately, for Merlyn would have loved to see how he reacted to Lancelot’s eyes on his daughter.
“This –” Lancelot cleared his croaky voice. “This is very kind of you, er –”

“Gwen,” the maid said, intent on her task. A little too intent in Merlyn's opinion.

“Gwen,” the brown-haired nomad parroted.

“Short for Guinevere.”

“Ah. Then thank you, Guinevere,” he fairly purred the name, though it clearly wasn’t intentional. He was flustered as Gwen wrapped the measuring tape around his bicep.

“Don’t thank me. Thank Merlyn,” she said, nonchalant. “Merlyn would do anything for anyone, wouldn’t you, Merlyn?” the black-haired girl squinted at the overuse of her name but stayed silent as Gwen said to Lancelot; “sorry, can you raise your arms? Thank you. Sorry. I think it’s great that Merlyn's given you this chance. We need more men like you.”

“You do?” he said, staring at her with wide eyes.

“Well, not me personally, but, you know… Camelot. Camelot needs knights. Not just Arthur and his kind, but ordinary people like you and me.”

Despite her refute of personal claim, Lancelot’s face was pleased. “Well, I’m not a knight yet, My Lady.”

“And I’m not a lady,” replied Gwen, giggling at the thought.

This flustered him again. “Sorry, my –”

“Okay, we’re done,” cut in Gwen, stepping away. “Er, I have some chainmail that will fit you and a right-arm pauldron, but that is all, I’m afraid. Most of our work is commission so we have little in reserve. Oh – there is a pair of vambraces that will fit you nicely, though they are unpatterned at this point.”

“That more than I could ask for,” said Lancelot, watching Gwen move towards the door.

Merlyn stepped forward. “Let me help,” she said. “I’ve been terribly rude and have yet to greet your father.”

Lancelot also stepped forward. “Let me –”

“No,” Gwen and Merlyn said simultaneously. Merlyn added, “We’ll be back quickly, but – girl talk, you know…”

Lancelot looked bemused but nodded and the two girls fled outside. Immediately, Merlyn grabbed Gwen's arm, beaming smile splitting her face. “I think Lancelot has eyes for you, Gwen,” she squeaked, hushed as they moved away from the door.

The maid blushed. “Don’t be silly,” she denied fruitlessly but a pleased smiled quirked her lips. Merlyn jumped, squealing in happiness as they moved through the growing crowds near the market.

“You like him too!” she cried. “Oh, this is fantastic! He’s a lovely man. Righteous and modest – and he’s so pretty!”

Gwen giggled. “I don’t think any man enjoys being called pretty,” she said, amused by Merlyn's exuberance.
“Oh, please!” the black-haired girl waved a hand. “He’s the prettiest man I’ve ever seen. His eyes are the colour of rich chocolate and he’s so bashful! He reminds me of a puppy.”

Gwen peered at Merlyn, a suspet smile on her lips. “You sound as if you fancy him,” she commented and Merlyn tripped over her own feet.

She stared at her friend incredulously, startled by the comment. “Me? Fancy Lancelot?” she demanded then laughed uproariously, clutching her belly and staggering to a halt.

Gwen stopped also and waited for her to regain her senses, unsure why it was so funny. Lancelot was kind and handsome: why wouldn’t Merlyn, who was also kind and growing ever prettier with maturity, be attracted to that?

“I’m sorry,” the black-haired girl said, still shortling and wiping her teary eyes. “I’m sorry, that probably seemed rude. Lancelot is a man I would be honoured to woo, I just –” she smothered new laughter. “I just imagined me trying to court someone.” She giggled. “Oh, heavens! What a disaster!”

Gwen shook her head fondly and grabbed Merlyn's hand, tugging her silly friend along. “One day,” she said. “You will find a man and he will love you exactly as you are; clumsy, impish, selfless, brave you. And you will look back on your doubt and laugh.”

Merlyn ducked her head, smile turning wry and a little bitter. “There are a few things about me that I doubt many people will understand.” Then she flicked her eyes to Gwen from under her lashes. “But I am not the one with an infatuated man waiting within her home, am I?”

“Oh, stop!” the maid cried, shoving the girl lightly. Merlyn laughed.

They left Gwen's home with little fanfare and a little bumbling on Lancelot's part. Merlyn kept her grin checked and eyes down while the brown-haired traveller recovered himself enough to take in their surroundings. He cleared his throat, faux casually.

“She seems lovely. Guinevere,” he said, gazing at the shops they were passing.

“She is,” Merlyn agreed, just as nonchalantly. “She’s one of the kindest people I know. Selfless. She leaves hardly any time for herself, which is a shame. She deserves love in all its forms.”

Lancelot peered at her from the corner of his eye, chewing on his words before he forcefully swallowed them down. He fell silent and ducked his head as they walked over the drawbridge to the courtyard, turning onto the path to the training fields.

She nudged him, wanting the glum expression gone from his face. “You deserve love also, you know,” she said. “Anyone who has suffered as you have and still remains honourable and hardworking deserves all the good things life can gift him.”

Lancelot shot Merlyn a wry glance. “I am not the only one who is worthy of happiness,” he said pointedly. “Nor the most admirable out of the two of us here.”

Merlyn snorted. “Well, I think that may be about to change,” she said, eyes seeing through the large arches to where Arthur was drilling several recruits. Lancelot followed her gaze and gulped.

“Happiness is a journey,” the black-haired girl said, smiling encouragingly at her new friend. “You look to be beginning yours.”
Arthur looked wholly unimpressed with Lancelot as Merlyn introduced them and the black-haired girl frowned at his attitude. She thought he had matured out of his arrogance and egotism, but apparently not.

She wished Lancelot well as he moved off to collect one of the training swords and Arthur snorted at her.

“What is your problem?” she demanded quietly. “You’re treating this as if it’s not worth your time. Why did you agree if you believe him beneath you?”

Arthur set his jaw and scowled at Lancelot as the man tested his chosen blade by the sword stand. He looked back at Merlyn. “If he cannot handle the hierarchy of Camelot then he is not welcome in our city,” he said.

She gaped at him. “It is not he who disputes your posturing,” she snapped. “Lancelot worships the ground you tread. It is I who sees you acting like the spoiled prince you were when first we met!”

He shot her a dark look then dismissed her completely, walking away to meet Lancelot on the grass. He drew his sword. They bowed. He struck.

Lancelot parried and they spun around each other. As angry as Merlyn was with the prince, she still admired his footwork and leaned against the rack of shields to watch.

She was happy to see Arthur did not appear to be striking to harm or humiliate; he was sparring and testing. His movements were liquid and his parries smooth. The two danced until Arthur managed to exploit a weakness in Lancelot’s defense and landed a blow to his stomach. The brown-haired man toppled to the ground and Arthur held his sword to his throat before stepping back, bout over.

Despite himself, the prince looked impressed. He held out a hand to pull his opponent back to his feet and asked, “Where did you learn to fight?”

Lancelot was breathing heavy, face alight with battle-fever. “I have no formal training,” he explained, wiping his brow. “I worked for lessons where I could and practiced via bandits and raiders.”

“They then you are skilled indeed. Merlyn wasn’t lying.” Both men glanced at her and she smirked.

“I know talent when I see it,” she defended. “That what happens when you’re surrounded by the mediocre.”

“Hah!” cried Arthur, a mock-insulted expression on his face. “For that, my maidservant, you can go clean out the stables. And be sure to scrub the stains away before you re-lay the straw, won’t you?”

Merlyn saluted with her hand over her chest and said, “as long as I never have to clean your chamber pots, then I am satisfied with whatever Your Highness commands.”

The blonde knight rolled his eyes and she laughed as she walked away. She might not bear witness to their next words, but she knew, as she knew Arthur, that he would not to let one as naturally talented as Lancelot get away without a fight.

And if Gwen and her new friend grew closer in the interim then Merlyn would certainly not complain. Both of them deserved love.
The people from the obliterated villages arrived the next day, drawing Merlyn back to scouring the books alongside Gaius to discover the beast’s identity.

“Where did it come from?” Merlyn muttered to herself, scanning the pages for a similar descriptor to her memory. “Why is it attacking now? What kind of monster has the parts of two different creatures combined into one?”

Gaius paused in his own perusals, head shooting up to stare at her. “What did you say?” he demanded, startling her.

“Er… ‘What kind of monster has the parts of two different creatures combined into one?’”

“Monster,” breathed Gaius, eyes distant as his mind worked feverishly. “That may just be what I’m looking for.”

“Alright…” said Merlyn slowly, more than a little confused.

Gaius hurried to his ladder and climbed it quickly. He paused halfway up and reached for a tome just out of his reach. With a thought, Merlyn spelled it down to land on the table, drawing her mentor’s disapproving glare, though he said nothing as he descended once more.

He wasted no time flipping open the book, until he reached a page that displayed a near-exact replica of the beast.

“That’s it!” cried Merlyn, staring at the title. “Griffin,” she read. “What’s a griffin?”

“A creature of myth and legend,” explained Gaius. “It is said to be born of magic and resides near hordes of treasure. Yet it is extremely introverted and dislikes the presence of mortal beings.”

“So why would it suddenly rampage villages?” Merlyn asked and Gaius scanned the page, looking for an answer.

He paused. “It is said that they are attracted to strong magic.” Merlyn gaped in dismay.

“Surely it would not sense me from so far away! And why would it suddenly take to attacking people as it moves?”

“You are unique, my dear, I know not the stretch of your influence. But as for attacking, that, I do not know,” murmured Gaius. “It doesn’t appear to make sense.”

“Are there any other books on griffins?” asked Merlyn.

Gaius pointed her to a couple on mythical beasts and she dug them out, sitting down to study the texts. Something was amiss: if it was only her magic that drove the beast mad then why did it not do so when she was young? Why now? And what other reasons could there be?

She only left her studies to tend to Arthur for the evening, prepping a bath and turning down his sheets. She was preoccupied with her thoughts and only realised the prince was there when he snapped his fingers in her face. She jumped then shoved him as he snorted.

“What has you so distracted?” he asked. “Surely, watching water boil is not that captivating.”

“Gaius realised what the monster is today,” she said. “It is a creature of myth and magic; a griffin.”
Arthur's humour instantly evaporated. “Did he say how to defeat it?”

“It is a creature born from magic. Apparently, only magic can destroy it.”

The prince kissed his teeth in frustration. “Always magic,” he grumbled. “Why is it always magic?”

Merlyn looked down. “I am not sure if the monster is truly a griffin or a creation to look like one,” she said. “There are disparages from the myths to what the beast is actually doing. They are supposed to be terribly shy of people, staying well away from civilisation and remaining near unchecked goldmines and treasure hoards. If the texts are true, then we should have remained oblivious to its existence. Yet, here we are.”

“What does it matter if it is real or created? The threat remains the same.”

“If it is created then there is a sorcerer behind it. Gaius has no proof, but there is only one powerful enough and hateful enough to achieve such a thing.” She met Arthur's gaze: “Nimueh.”

He tensed at the name, concern and anger bleeding into his visage. “Nimueh!” he snarled. “That sorceress needs to face swift justice. Has he brought his suspicions to Father?”

“He… wanted to gather more proof. The King can be a little… biased when it comes to magic.”

Arthur snorted. “That is putting it mildly,” he said dryly, turning and walking to the window overlooking the courtyard. He tapped his knuckles on the windowsill. “So you say only magic can defeat it?”

“That is what the books say,” she said. “Though, I know not if that would change be the monster a creation of Nimueh’s.”

“Can you find out which it is?” he asked.

“I think so, though I know not yet how. We are still searching.”

“My father believes the beast is coming to Camelot and I have no reason to doubt him. It struck first in Greenswood then Willowsdale, coming south from the northern plains. It will have devastating consequences if it assails our city and we lack proper defences.” He paused then said, “Return to Gaius and help him find answers. I will do without your services on the morrow. We need solutions.”

She bowed at his back and said, “The bath is ready for you; I will deliver your supper before retiring.” Before leaving, she added, “We will find a solution to this problem, Arthur, I promise you.”

The prince only hummed noncommittally, blue gaze still intent on the night outside.

Lancelot had retired to bed when she made it to Gaius’ chambers, though her mentor remained at the table, scanning pages by candlelight. She joined him and accepted the bowl of stew with a quiet word of thanks. As she ate, her mind rolled over thoughts.

“Arthur told me that the King believes the griffin is heading south towards Camelot,” she said.

Gaius looked up, his eyes shining tired and red behind his eyeglasses. He said nothing but his face
was expectant.

“The thing is: Lancelot and I encountered the beast two days ago. If it were headed here on a rampage, why is it waiting now?”

Gaius frowned, troubled. “This only leads credence to my theory. The griffin is not acting under its own power. If it is, indeed, a genuine beast then it is being controlled by a sorcerer of phenomenal strength. We must be careful, Merlyn, lest they sense your presence.”

“I must find a way to break it free of its enchantment,” she said, standing to head to her room for her book before remembering the resident sleeping in there right then. “Bother,” she said, slumping back into her chair.

“I don’t know if we have the time to look for such a solution,” Gaius murmured. “Whoever or whatever is driving the griffin will no doubt strike soon. We must search for the quickest and most discreet end.”

Merlyn frowned at his callousness. “But what of the griffin itself? It has been enslaved. It doesn’t deserve to die for that if we can help it instead.”

Gaius raised a critical brow. “And what would the King say when you are caught consortimg with the beast? Or, if you succeed, that he will let the griffin leave once he knows of its existence and the damage it wrought on his lands. No Merlyn,” he shook his head sadly. “I fear the fate of this beast is very near sealed, real or not.”

“But it’s done nothing wrong,” she lamented. “Who would abuse an animal in such a way? Especially a sorcerer with a magical creature.” She clenched her fists in anger. “Why are people so intent on misusing magic? How can they believe causing chaos and pain will solve anything?”

Gaius placed a weathered hand over one of hers. She glared at him, frustrations high. He said, “Magic is sought by people summed into three categories. The curious. The power-hungry. And the vengeful. All of them are steep slopes and all of them, to some extent, breed impatience and greed. It is the corruption of accessing such power.”

Merlyn looked stricken. “So you believe King Uther’s stance against magic is true? That it is a corruption?”

“No!” snapped Gaius, stern features imploring her to understand. “You are not hearing me. Magic itself is neutral; it is the caster whose intentions matter. Sorcery is a path – to the lighter or darker side of humanity. It is the person who decides which way to walk. And I only speak of those who seek such knowledge. You are unique, Merlyn, as I have said before. You cannot be categorised so simply.”

The black-haired girl smiled weakly, looking down. “My mother would definitely agree with you there,” she quipped then yawned in tiredness.

Gaius patted her hand before pushing himself to his feet with a weary groan. “I suggest we both find our beds for the night. The coming days are full of uncertainty; who knows when we will rest easy again.”

Merlyn hesitated then conceded with a nod. Gaius bustled over to his corner and prepped himself for the night while Merlyn did the same by the fire. She settled on her side, staring at the low flames and tracing the scar on her throat absently. When she was sure her mentor had settled into sleep, she climbed to her feet and ghosted out the door, not bothering with shoes or candlelight.
She travelled like a spectre through the halls until she reached the dungeon and the snoozing guards. She shook her head as she passed them and dashed down the roughly hewn slope to deep under the castle, the rock chilly on her bare soles.

When she reached the dragon’s cavern, she called out for him and he blasted her with a heavy gust of wind as he landed from high in the caves.

“Good evening, young witch,” he greeted, settling himself upon the rock. “What questions will you ply me with tonight?”

“I wish to know more on magical creatures,” she said without fanfare and the dragon cocked his head in curiosity. “Right now, Camelot is being besieged by a griffin intent on utter annihilation. It has not yet struck the city, though it may come at any time. In the books I have scoured, they say that the griffin is introverted and dislikes civilisation. Why is it now ignoring all instincts? Has this happened before?”

“All magical beings are connected to each other in one way or another,” said the dragon. “The onset of your destiny has stirred magic at its heart. It is no coincidence that there have been more supernatural threats against Camelot. Your very presence draws them near.”

Merlyn was stunned. “So it is my fault that the griffin is harming all these people,” she stated.

“I did not say that,” the great beast denied and the black-haired girl stared at him, confused and annoyed. “Griffins are extremely rare and dislike mortals intensely. They mate for life and dwell in undiscovered gold quarries. If you are seeing only one then its companion has been killed and it has been driven mad with grief.”

“I thought griffins could only die by magic,” said Merlyn.

The dragon tilted his head and blinked one large golden eye at her, causing her to realise she’d missed his point. “You think correctly,” he said.

“But who would… ah” she said. “Nimueh.”

“Indeed,” rumbled the dragon. “Not many who possess the power would wish to harm such a creature without cause. The High Priestess has both.”

“Can I not save the creature?” she asked. Grief was a terrible and debilitating emotion. She could not blame the griffin for striking out in its desolation. “Is there not some way to ease its anguish?”

The Great Dragon stared at her, expression indecipherable. “Losing one half of a whole is soul rending, Merlyn. Not many can survive it and even less with their sanity intact. You would be doing a kindness by destroying it.”

Against every instinct in her body, Merlyn searched for a spell to kill the griffin. She’d returned in the night exhausted and downtrodden and had awoken at dawn feeling much the same. Sunstrider had lipped at her lank hair when she led him to the large paddocks outside the castle walls. He’d sensed her upset and tried to comfort her as only an animal could so she’d given him a piece of stale bread for his efforts.

Lancelot awoke and left quickly, apparently impressing Arthur enough to gain a spot as spectator for the recruits and – if Arthur had time at the end – as a participant. The brown-haired nomad had been in a state of stunned disbelief when he’d told her but she’d congratulated and sent him on his
way with a cold-cut sandwich. Now, she sat with her magic book open, both hoping and despairing to find what she was looking for.

She paused on a page outlining magical seeing, gaze caught on a particular paragraph. It depicted the delving of one into another’s mind. It warned of the dangers, “… as faring abroad without direction or knowledge. Experiencing the quintessence of another mayhap stress the psyche into splintering. Thee should not bear instincts, opinions, or perspectives not thy own.” Merlyn gulped. Mental splintering sounded awful.

But she read onwards of a short descript to aid a connection. Oils, rituals, incantations and herbs; however, she doubted she would have time for such ceremony. She almost gave into disappointment before remembering mention of a few potions that aided in thought dexterity and projection in another chapter. She flicked to the appropriate page and read the ingredients of each concoction, contemplating the wisdom of her idea.

The scrape of a boot outside Gaius’ chamber door startled Merlyn back to reality and she quickly hid the magic book, opening another beside her. Lancelot staggered inside, skin grimy and body exhausted but features alight with happiness. Merlyn rested her chin on her hand and listened as he shared his day – aka, fawning over the prince. She hid her smile as he waxed poetic, admiration worn like love on his face, and let his happiness wash away the grimness of her thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

TBC...
I wanted to delve a little more into the lore behind the griffin, why it was doing what it was doing, where it came from, and what the creatures are usually like – since griffins are believed to be mythical, why would one suddenly appear out of the blue and attack?
But more on that later!
Hope you enjoyed the unicorn's appearance and Merlyn's exploration of her magical abilities!
The next day, the griffin attacked.

It soared over the roofs of the lower town, terrorising citizens before swooping into the royal courtyard where Arthur and his knights had gathered. It landed in the square and faced off against the men, knocking them aside and seeming intent on the prince. Its wings flared threateningly and Arthur shoved his spear into the joint by the shoulder, where the skin should have been thin. Instead, the spear broke and Arthur was knocked back. Oddly enough, however, the beast retreated when the prince slashed at it with a flaming torch, disappearing over the forest canopy.

Merlyn was confused. They had no defences and the griffin would have known that, given how little it cared for their strikes. Why did it not press its advantage?

“Are griffins afraid of flame?” she asked Gaius as they headed to the council chambers.

The old man shook his head. “Not according to any tales I’ve read,” he said.

“Then the beast is toying with us,” she decided. “That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“It would not surprise me. The sorcerer behind this would find great amusement in drawing out our suffering.”

Determination settled, ironclad, in her chest. “They have only given us more time to defeat them,” she retorted and Gaius shot her an appraising glance.

The council meeting was less than satisfactory. The King was utterly blinded by his prejudices and refused to believe magic could only be defeated by magic. If Merlyn were not there, Uther Pendragon would have just sentenced his son to death with his order to strike. But she was there, thank the Gods. And she was going to show whoever was behind this that Camelot was defended, come hell or high water.

Or she would, if the prat of a prince would let her join the hunt.

“No, Merlyn,” he said, hand against her shoulder to stop her from leaving Gaius’ chambers. His frame in the doorway worked effectively also. “This is a venture for neither woman nor servant. You must remain here, where it is safe.”

“Without me, you are venturing to your death!” she argued. “You need everyone who is willing to stand with you tonight. I am both willing and able.”

The look in his eyes was of frustration. “You do not know how to handle a sword, Merlyn,” he snapped. “I cannot do my duty if I am busy looking out for you. You will stay here and that’s an order!”

Merlyn snarled and shoved his arm off her but didn’t try to leave. She turned her back and paced a few steps away before swinging to face him. “Take Lancelot with you, at least. Every able warrior does not only include knights. He is skilled and loyal unto death – which you are sure to be facing. Let him show his worth.”
“I already intended such,” he said, watching her. “He is gearing up a guard horse alongside any others willing.”

“Good,” she said, meeting his gaze for a long, quiet moment. She bit her lip then threw caution to the wind, launching at him and wrapping him in a hug. “Be safe,” she whispered into his chainmail. “Stay alive.”

His own arms circled her. “I plan to,” he murmured into her hair.

“Don’t plan to,” she admonished lightly. “Plans never work out well. Just imagine how boring the afterlife will be without me and you should feel properly motivated to stay alive.”

He snorted and she grinned, pleased to have lightened the mood a little. She drew back, peering up at him. “You will win,” she said. “Believe that you will win.”

Arthur nodded and his eyes flickered to her mouth before he withdrew completely, hand resting on the hilt of his sword. She bit her lip and pressed her hands to her belly.

“Until I return,” he said, nodding to her before turning and descending the stairs. Merlyn watched until he was out of sight then closed the door and dashed up to her room.

She opened her cupboard and stared at her cloaks before choosing the vibrant, Camelot-red one she’d bought only recently. Summer was drawing to a close and she’d indulged a little for the coming months, though she hadn’t yet had opportunity to wear it.

She pulled it off its hanger and wrapped it around her shoulders, clasping the buckle at her neck. She pulled up the hood and checked how it fell over her face on the back of a tarnished plate. With a charm to darken the shadows, she felt secure her identity would remain anonymous.

She took it off to change into more appropriate wear; a plain tunic and breeches with gloves over her hands, tying back her hair with a leather thong. Once done, she left her room and moved to Gaius’ herb stores, collecting and grinding, what she hoped, was the appropriate blend, experimenting as she was. She blessed it with a whispered word then gathered it into a pouch before the door was thrown open and Gwen charged inside.

“Merlyn! Lancelot’s riding out with Arthur to kill the griffin!”

Merlyn caught the distressed maid in her arms and said apologetically, “I know. Arthur told me.”

“But he’s not a knight!” she cried. “He’ll get himself killed.”

“Have faith, Gwen,” she said. “No one is dying tonight. Both Arthur and Lancelot are skilled swordsmen and the men by their sides are loyal and capable.”

The dark-skinned woman finally drew back enough to see Merlyn's outfit. Her mouth dropped in horror. “You’re going also?”

The younger girl dipped her head. “I have an idea and I need to tell Arthur before he finds the griffin. Don’t worry; I’m not going to charge in weapons swinging. As the prince so helpfully pointed out, I’m utterly incompetent with a blade.”

“Then you must hurry,” replied the maid. “They’ve already left the courtyard.”

Merlyn tied the pouch to her belt and headed for the door. Gwen called before she left, “Be careful, Merlyn!”
The blue-eyed girl smiled. “Aren’t I always?” she jested before darting down the stairs.

Gwen squeezed her hands together anxiously, murmuring to the empty room, “No... never.”

Merlyn had only just passed the city gates when several riderless horses galloped out of the trees and past her. Sunstrider danced nervously, ears straining to catch the threat but she nudged him on. “It’s okay, boy,” she said, patting his neck. “I’ll only take you as far as I need. You won’t have to battle the griffin today.”

She heard the fighting long before she grew near. The company hadn’t even travelled off the north thoroughfare through the forest before the griffin had attacked. A couple more riderless steeds darted past and the clashes and grunts of combat rose. The screech of the griffin sent Sunstrider sideways and she drew him to a halt before dismounting. She tied his reins and pressed for him to return to the castle with her magic. She had not yet learned a colour-changing enchantment so her steed’s striking coat would be instantly recognised; no need for her disguise to be so easily betrayed.

Sunstrider whuffed in her face before trotting away and Merlyn wasted no time donning the cloak, casting the obscurity charm on her face, and dashing to ground zero.

She stumbled to a halt behind a tree and gazed out at the chaos. Most of the knights were down, unconscious or dead, she knew not, but Arthur, Lancelot, Sir Leon and two others remained standing. Their formation was scattered and their tactics desperate. The griffin took advantage and swatted the two unnamed knights into trunks like they were no more than flies. They didn’t get back up.

It turned its yellow gaze on the prince but Lancelot and Sir Leon drove at it from opposing flanks. Sir Leon’s cloak was caught in its beak and it had him off balance enough for the beast to smack him with a wing. He rolled to a stop near her position and she couldn’t stop herself from moving out to check his condition.

His head was bleeding and cheek bruised but his breathing was steady and heartbeat fast but regular. She breathed a sigh of relief before a human shout of anger grabbed her attention. Arthur was parrying the swipes of the griffin with his shield but slowly being pushed backwards while Lancelot clambered to his feet from where he must have been knocked down. He shook his head and reset his blade but before he could reengage, the griffin launched its whole body at Arthur and snapped his shield with its beak.

The prince fell on his back and threw up his sword defensively but it shattered in the griffin’s maw. The creature clamped Arthur’s torso in its mouth and both he and Merlyn let out shouts as he was lifted like a ragdoll. The black-haired girl threw up her hand and a ball of flame burst from her palm towards the animal, scorching its rump with a sizzle and drawing a scream of agony.

It threw Arthur as it spun to face her, its back leg folding under the pain. Nevertheless, it lifted its wings threateningly and dropped its head, making it appear larger than it was. Like it needed to be more intimidating, she thought sarcastically.

She saw Lancelot behind it, frozen in surprise at her appearance but, thankfully, his attention diverted to the injured prince and he hurried to his side with concern. Merlyn hoped he was alive.

The griffin hissed at her and she fumbled to untie the pouch of herbs from her waist. It clacked its beak then launched into a charge, wings flaring. She raised her free hand automatically as the
pouch fell into her other palm.

When it was within a few metres, she moved and threw the herb dust in its face then spun aside as it skidded off-centre, not wanting to be taken out. It shrieked and sneezed, shaking its head as it drew to a staggered halt but she gave it no time to retaliate, jumping at it and slapping a palm to its forehead. She whispered the mind-delving incantation while pushing her magic into the creature, hoping she had done it correctly.

Whether or not she had could be debated, but she felt her eyes heat with the golden glow and the world start warping around her. It stretched wide and high and wobbled like the surface of a pond before her vision magnified like she was wearing narrow bifocals; the centre focused with intense distinction while her peripherals edged back into regular vision.

She blinked and the world was cast in vibrant shades of all the colours she knew and many she did not; fluorescent and shadowed and sparking like lightning.

Another blink and she was seeing herself – though ‘seeing’ wasn’t quite the word for it. Directly in the griffin’s eyeline, she appeared amplified and frighteningly detailed. The microscopic scales of her skin, the minute flecks in her burning golden eyes, the very layering of the heat in her body pulsing in time with her heartbeat – a heartbeat that she could hear as clear as day.

She sucked in a surprised breath and there was a hard tug on her navel, dragging her deeper into the mind of the beast. She lost sight of the outside world and tumbled down, down past a dizzying miasma of images and sound, of colour and emotion. Thoughts that should have made no sense but she understood anyway barraged her mind as she fell and the assault of foreign magic hit her like an arrow, straight to her heart.

Abruptly, the feeling of motion halted and she was left with the vertigo of unused momentum. She staggered forward on legs that should not exist in the incorporeal world she was inhabiting and brought a hand to her chest to feel her erratic heartbeat, though that couldn’t be real either.

Suddenly, she was aware of another's presence, like sensing a stranger’s eyes on her back, and glanced up to see Cara. No, not Cara – Nimueh.

She wore a dark, wine-coloured dress, tattered and old while her brunette hair tumbled past her shoulders, contradicting her attire with its glossy, tended style.

“Emrys…” she hissed and Merlyn frowned in confusion, not knowing the word.

She said to the sorceress, “You need to leave this beast in peace. You’ve done enough damage here.”

“Only when the Pendragons are dead will I have done enough,” she retorted. “Why do you stand in my way, young one? What has Camelot’s royalty done for you to earn your allegiance?”

“They didn’t have to do anything,” snapped Merlyn, glaring as the woman strutted closer. “I protect them because it is the right thing to do. Death and destruction causes nothing but chaos and pain. How can you believe that what you’re doing is a good thing?”

Nimueh circled her, eyeing her up like she was a fascinating specimen. Merlyn followed her with her eyes, not trusting her for a second. The older woman said, “We all must make sacrifices for the future of our land. Mine is to mar my soul with death. What is yours, little girl?”

“What do you mean?” demanded Merlyn. “Nothing you are doing now is of any benefit to Camelot's future – to any of the kingdoms’ futures.”
Nimueh met her glare, her exotic blue eyes bright with the fervour of her belief. “Uther Pendragon needs to die. Only then will we find union. Only then will magic be welcomed back to Albion.”

Merlyn's thoughts tripped. Albion. This sorceress knew about Albion. “So you have heard the prophecy?” she asked. “Of the Once and Future King?”

Nimueh threw her head back and laughed. “Heard of it?” she exclaimed. “I am a High Priestess of the Old Religion! I have studied the prophecy since before the Purge. I have waited twenty years to feel its inception and now, finally, I can help it advance.”

“This is not the way Albion should be created,” argued Merlyn. “It is through peace and acceptance, friendship and understanding that will bring the kingdoms together. What kind of realm would Albion be if it is built on murder, lies and deceit?”

“What kind of realm would it be that it allows criminals to go unpunished?” scorned Nimueh. “The Pendragons are guilty of genocide. Uther continues to murder my people despite their peaceful customs, all because he refused to listen to my warnings twenty years ago.”

Despite herself, Merlyn’s curiosity peaked. Was she about to find out the catalyst of the Purge? “What warnings?” she asked.

Nimueh’s scowl morphed into a cold smirk and she said, “You will find out eventually. The King you protect lives in a deluded world. He remains unable to acknowledge his mistakes so lives, instead, by punishing the innocent. You protect a tyrant, Emrys. What does that make you?”

“I protect the Prince,” she growled. “And through him, the King. I am not the villain here; you are. You say you aim to hurt the King, yet you cause desolation wherever you go. All those people who died in that plague; what of their innocence? This griffin, who did nothing more than be a target in your plans, why is its suffering less important than yours? What kind of person are you to harm that which we should protect?”

Nimueh snarled at her. “I am the one with the knowledge you need to become the witch you are destined to be. We need not be enemies, you and I. We are too valuable to each other.”

“Your value is in death!” cried Merlyn. “I will never join with you!”

“We are both creatures of the Old Religion,” she said, tone superior. “We are kin.”

“I share nothing with you!” exclaimed Merlyn, disgusted. “You are no kin of mine!”

Nimueh sighed, looking put upon. “You will change your mind soon enough,” she said. “I am one of the last with knowledge of the Old Order. You cannot reach your full potential without me.”

“Get out and leave this griffin in peace,” she commanded. “You’ll not kill Arthur today.”

“He was not my target and death was not my intent,” the woman said, smiling mysteriously. “Good luck. The griffin’s mind is ravaged with grief and madness. Escaping this place will be a test of endurance, so let us see if you are as great as the legends say.”

With that, her image flickered out of existence and the capsule of blackness they’d been communicating within dissolved. Beyond, the vastness of the griffin’s mind appeared as sparks of energy dancing along invisible veins, bursting white-hot in her eyes and blasting heavy in her ears. It pulsed into her very consciousness and into her heart, disrupting the natural beat of the organ.

Her illusory body vanished, leaving her reeling and dizzy from the abrupt loss of corporeality.
Instantly, she felt the vacuum of the ether suck at her formlessness, pulling her apart in an attempt to fill the space, to become one with the electric lightshow of the griffin’s mind. Thoughts and memories wisped through her mental barriers like air through old shutters and she tried desperately to pull herself back together, even as her ethereal form denied containment. It felt as if parts of herself were evaporating into the chaos like smoke on the wind. Her very essence being stripped away and vanished into the vast endlessness of the griffin’s psyche.

The lightshow was its consciousness, cords of electricity darting from nucleus to nucleus as it processed the outside world, and Merlyn was helpless to guard herself against it, the not-a-void sucking at her strength like a black hole. It gorged on her magic – the only thing keeping her spirit bound together – and she felt the strain directly in her heart, like the pulses of energy that darted along the streams of thought were passing right through the organ, disrupting its tempo and causing it to seize. And she was helpless, too ignorant to know how to defend herself.

Formless and intangible, she wondered if this was her end. Disappearing into the griffin’s subconscious, as trapped as the Minotaur in Daedalus’ labyrinth. Lost, alone, with no sense of self.

She staggered as her strength depleted and wondered miserably what would become of Arthur when she was gone. Nimueh was still a threat – one that would be unchallenged with her gone. The Pendragons would fall. Albion would lay in ruin. Arthur would die.

No.

No. Arthur would not die. She would not fail him.

Her thoughts snap together like an overstretched wire and she barely had a moment to gather her wits before another hook behind her navel wrenched her backwards. She flew through the griffin’s consciousness, the bedlam of noise and images blurring into an incomprehensible mess as she passed.

She blinked and was thrown from its mind, feeling an instant of utter nothingness before she slammed into her own head. She staggered and dropped to her knees, gasping for air as her heart thumped frantically. Her brain pounded with pressure as the sensation of a compressed mind weighed her head towards the ground.

She had barely an instant to regain herself before the beast before her reared up with a screech. She raised her arms but was saved from being slashed by Lancelot coming at it from the side. He hacked at its flared wing with a sword and unsteadied it enough for it to turn its attention to him.

It snapped at his torso but his weapon saved him, shattering against its face but knocking its head aside. He dived away and picked up a spear, the griffin screeching and flailing wildly as it followed. Merlyn clambered to her feet and held out her palm, letting a blast of wind knock it off balance. It whirled on her, beak open in rage and she commanded, “Stop!”

It hesitated, wings flapping in agitation. “You’re free now; go home.”

It screeched and reared, clawing the air, and Merlyn was confused. Why was it not leaving?

“Go!” she ordered, throwing some magic behind her demand. “Leave and never return!”

It seemed to be the last straw for the beast. It screamed at her and charged, wild and careless, and she was forced to roll behind a tree to avoid it. She gaped as it pounced onto another tree in its path, using the trunk to break then launching towards another, slamming its entire body into the broad trunk.
The tree groaned and cracked under the onslaught and the griffin hissed and cawed as it injured itself in its frenzy. It didn’t stop, tumbling in the dirt as it ricocheted off the trunk only to scramble upright to throw itself into more trees, screaming at the sky.

It bounced back onto the path with the downed knights and fell on one without care. The crack of the man’s leg was heard clearly and he groaned into semiconsciousness from the pain. It snapped Merlyn out of her shock and she swiped out an arm, knocking the scrabbling beast off him with a second explosion of air. Unfortunately, she sent it closer to Lancelot and the solitary warrior lifted his spear bravely, even as he skipped backwards, away from the flapping wings. The griffin screeched and cried as it regained its feet only to slam sideways into a nearby tree in a deliberate attempt to hurt itself. It did the same with the sapling on its other side but the younger plant bowed and sent it rolling right over the top.

Belatedly, Merlyn realised what was happening. The beast had been freed from Nimueh’s control and left to feel the despair over losing its mate. And the bedlam of grief had consumed it.

The dragon had warned her on it, Gaius had hinted at it, but she had refused to listen, unable to accept that such a phrase as dead-man-walking could be relevant beyond an execution sentence. She’d always believe that if there was life, there was hope.

But she knew what had to be done, what had been decided the moment Nimueh entered its life, and she was now forced to recognise.

The griffin launched at Lancelot and the brown-haired warrior somersaulted under its legs, missing its claws by a hairsbreadth. He raised his spear once more and, as he thrust it towards the creature’s ribs, Merlyn incanted, “Bregdan anweald gafeluec!”

Blue flames burst over the tip of the spear and it connected with the underside of the griffin’s wing, burying itself deep into flesh.

The griffin lurched backwards, rearing with a scream of pain before it shuddered and fell to the side. It’s right wing crumpled under it body and its legs pawed the ground, twitching with the last throes of death.

Merlyn neared its head and saw its yellow eyes glazing over, though they flicked towards her when she was within sight. It clacked its beak once, softly, then stilled, living no longer.

She dropped to her knees and rested a gloved hand on its feathered neck. “I’m sorry,” she whispered hoarsely. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.” She dipped her head and wished she knew any magical phrases. A creature born of magic should be released with magic’s blessing.

A noise behind her startled her from her thoughts and she peered over her shoulder to see Prince Arthur staggering to his feet under the aid of Lancelot. He appeared freshly woken and disorientated, glancing at his fallen comrades before his gaze landed on the fallen griffin and her. Instantly, he was on guard.

“What are you?” he demanded, hand fumbling for the missing weapon in his scabbard. She realised she still had her hood up, thank all the gods. “What are you doing here?”

“I am,” said Lancelot but Merlyn didn’t wait to see what he said. She scrambled to her feet and dashed into the trees, letting adrenalin guide her flight.

There was a shout from behind her but she felt secure enough that she would not be caught. They were in no state to follow. She circled widely so she was heading back towards the city; if all went
well, she could hide her cloak then return to provide early aid to the fallen soldiers. Arthur and his men would be none the wiser to her double identity.

Once Arthur and Lancelot had checked on their comrades’ health, – some stirring under touch – the prince drew the traveller aside to hear the entire tale. Once done, the blonde knight traced his lips with a finger as a frown marred his face.

“No one can know of it,” he decided. “The King will deny any goodwill from a sorcerer. He’ll order a manhunt and our success this day will be marred. The people of Camelot should not be burdened by suspicion while they recover.”

Lancelot dipped his head and said, “I do think they were helping. They tried to keep the beast away from the men and distracted it from me when I was at a disadvantage. And I could not have defeated it without their aid.”

“Let’s not tell my father that part,” said Arthur. “Today, you are a hero on your own, defending our land single-handedly and winning.” He clapped him on the back. “You will be greatly rewarded.”

Lancelot looked down. “I don’t feel right taking the glory for a deed I did not do.”

Arthur squeezed his shoulder. “You may not have uttered a few magic words but you did stand alone against insurmountable odds and strike true when the need was greatest. That is the mark of a true warrior, of a true knight of Camelot.”

The brown-haired man stared at the prince with wide eyes, hardly daring to believe. Arthur said nothing more, only patted him one last time before leaving to tend to Sir Fergus with his broken leg, his own movements stiff and his bruised gut cradled.

Merlyn was exhausted. She had headed back to the knights when a loud horn had blown through the forest, echoing up to the city in a plea for aid. As she approached, she realised, stupidly, that she had no medical equipment on her and thus, would be of little use when she arrived ahead of Gaius but she pushed on nonetheless.

She arrived to find most of the knights awake and upright, tending to those who were not. Sadly, two of their comrades had died and were positioned honourably by the path with their weapons. Arthur had caught sight of her, alone, unequipped and ahead of schedule, and proceeded to scold her for ignoring his orders and of having nothing on her to help.

She took his berating silently as she set about tending to Sir Fergus, having him bite the leather of his belt as she reset the tibia bone in his leg, strapping it temporarily to a sturdy length of stick. Thankfully, the knight passed out from the pain and, as she moved off to tend to one of the lesser wounded, Gaius and a set of guards appeared.

Nevertheless, it was deep into the night before Merlyn found her bed, having finally been removed by Gaius when she found herself stupidly trying to wrap an uninjured man’s arm. She fell onto her sheets without bothering to change and fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Her rest was dreamless and she didn’t wake until Gaius stepped into her room late the next morning. She moaned pathetically.

“The prince has requested your presence,” he said, tapping her booted foot with his hand. “He is in
his chambers. Come on, up you get, my dear.”

She nearly whimpered as she dragged herself from her blankets and didn’t bother changing as she staggered past her mentor and down the steps. If the prince wished to see her immediately, then he could deal with her grubbiness.

She rubbed her eyes as she tottered along the corridors and only missed several servants and guards because they dodged out of her way, used to her clumsiness. She reached Arthur’s chambers with a yawn and proceeded to fall into the room on her hands and knees, the door giving way too quickly for her to check herself.

“Oh,” she muttered and climbed to her feet, finding Arthur staring at her in amusement from where he waited in his gambeson. She frowned. “There shouldn’t be training today,” she said. “You were injured.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know,” he said. “But it is only bruising and I have need of my armour.”

“But I haven’t even cleaned it yet,” she said dumbly.

“I don’t have need of it for ceremonial purposes – though, if all goes well, then you will need to clean it before tonight. I need it for the testing of a recruit into knighthood.”

“Oh?” she said, coming closer to pick up his chainmail, already lying on the table with the rest of his armour. “I didn’t think there were any ready.”

The prince had a pleased smile pulling at his lips. “I think you’ll agree with me that this man has proven his worth,” he said vaguely then waved at her to hurry up. She was too tired to question him so suited him silently, burying yawns in her arm.

As they headed out the door, Arthur tossed her an apple, which she fumbled with before catching. She peered at him questioningly. “So you don’t fall asleep by the fields,” he said with a smirk. She huffed and smiled, taking a large bite of the juicy fruit as she followed.

When she saw Arthur’s opponent, the apple dropped from her hands in surprise. “Lancelot?” she gasped.

The brown-haired warrior grinned at her sheepishly as Gwen fussed over his vambrace. “Hello Merlyn,” he said.

“Hello?” she parroted incredulously, coming closer. “Why did you not tell me you were recruited? How did you manage to talk the King into it?”

Lancelot shrugged. “The King asked me what I desired as reward for defeating the griffin and I said that my one dream is to become a knight of Camelot. He granted me the chance to combat his son. It was too late to find you once it had been decided; Gaius explained that you had already retired.”

“I’m proud of you,” she said, grabbing his arm in excitement. “No one deserves it more.”

He smiled but looked down, his thoughts obviously elsewhere. Merlyn stepped back, wishing him luck then returned to Arthur’s side, smiling at Gwen as she left.

All the able knights were there, their bodies creating a makeshift arena. When they were both ready, Arthur nodded to the timekeeper. The bout began.
Merlyn was re-donning Arthur in his freshly cleaned chainmail in preparations for the knighting and revelry that evening. The prince was still and silent, allowing her to work.

“Thank you,” she said to him, glancing at his face as she picked up his ceremonial tunic.

Arthur raised an eyebrow and she added, “For giving Lancelot a chance. It means the world to him.”

“Lancelot proved himself worthy,” he replied dismissively. “And my father gave him a chance. I had nothing to do with it.”

“No,” refuted Merlyn with a proud smile. “You took him at face value, even knowing he wasn’t of noble birth, and appreciated his skills for what they were. I can’t think of another highborn who would do such a thing for a commoner.”

Arthur looked decidedly uncomfortable with her praise and said, “Well, I’ve found much of our noble stock to be lacking the necessary aptitude and fortitude for true knighthood. Perhaps the new blood will remind them to pick up their game.”

“We can only hope,” joked Merlyn, slipping the tunic over his head and adjusting the coif over the fabric.

She reached for his belt and was wrapping it around his waist when he said, “You are free of your servant duties tonight. You are to be present as Gaius’ guest instead, as thanks for your medical assistance yesterday.”

She fumbled with the belt and fell, face-first, into his torso. She blushed brightly as she pulled away, choking out an apology, and scowled at the humorous snort he let loose.

“What do you mean; I’m to be present as Gaius’ guest? I don’t understand.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “It’s not hard. Everyone part of the events last night is to be rewarded. This is your reward. You can now drink and make an absolute fool of yourself with my permission.”

Merlyn stared in stunned pleasure. “I’ve never tasted alcohol before, my mother always worried about what I would do when inebriated.”

Arthur smirked. “With good reason,” he jested. “You have enough trouble with your balance when you are utterly sober.”

Merlyn shoved him for his comment but didn’t dispute his claim. It was true, after all.

Once Arthur was set and she had been dismissed, Merlyn hurried to her chambers and grabbed the two lovely dresses she had yet to wear before rushing to Morgana’s chambers. She grinned, both sheepish and excited when Gwen opened the door.

“I am free of my servant duties tonight,” she explained. “But I have no idea about readying myself for a ceremony on this scale. If it’s not too much trouble – I mean, if you’re not busy – and if Morgana is fine with it, of course –”

“Come inside, Merlyn,” said the highborn, stepping out from behind her changing screen. “Of
course we’ll help you ready. I would be insulted if you hadn’t come.”

Relieved, Merlyn obeyed and proceeded to an hour of beauty tutelage and care. She enjoyed it more than she should have, gossiping with the girls and ganging up with Morgana to gush over Lancelot’s infatuation with Gwen. The poor maid blushed ruby under their fawning but couldn’t deny their claims on his appearance. The new noble was very pretty indeed.

Merlyn was seriously self-conscious as she was led by Morgana to the banquet. The older woman had linked their arms so Merlyn couldn’t fall in behind and Gwen had a sympathetically amused smile on her face when the younger girl glanced back.

“Shoulders back, darling. Chin up. That dress was made to impress and you look fabulous,” said Morgana, squeezing Merlyn’s hand.

“I don’t think I should be wearing this,” she murmured, bunching some of the blue fabric in her fist. “It’s much too lavish. And surely the King will dislike me borrowing your necklace and hair clips.”

“Stop worrying,” Morgana replied, knocking her fingers loose from crinkling the fabric. “Tonight, you are not a servant, you are my friend. And as such, I can bestow you with what I see fit.”

Merlyn had no time to reply as they reached the double doors to the Hall of Ceremonies and the guards bowed as they pushed them open. The festivities had already begun; Lancelot having been knighted in the Throne Room not twenty minutes ago. Now the fun part of the evening began.

Merlyn stuck by Morgana’s side as the highborn mingled with some of the other noblewomen, watching the dancing instead of listening to their small talk. Most of the nobles were fine with ignoring her and she sighed as boredom took hold.

A servant passed with a flagon of mead and she quickly stole an empty cup from the table to fill. The servant obeyed her request with a small smile and she thanked him before taking a sip. It was sweet and rich, like honey, with a slight burn down her throat as she swallowed. She smacked her lips thoughtfully and decided she liked it.

She took another mouthful and stared back out at the dancers before a knight she did not know approached.

“Would you do me the honour of accepting a dance, My Lady?” he asked, bowing slightly with his hand outstretched.

She blinked in surprise and stuttered. “Oh – I-I’m no lady, good sir. Only Merlyn. My name is Merlyn.”

The auburn warrior remained smiling, straightening up. “Then would you care to dance, Miss Merlyn? My name is Sir Edgar. I see you watching the dance floor with longing in your eyes and hate to see such ache on so fair features.”

She blushed at his words and placed her hand in his. “Who am I to deny one who speaks so charmingly?” she replied and let him lead her out into the throng. “Though…” she eyed the other partners. “I do not know all the steps to this dance. It is simplified in my home village.”

“Then I will enjoy teaching you,” he smiled and twirled her beneath his arm in harmony with the other dancers.
Merlyn was taking a break at the edge of the room, flushed and hot as she drank the chilled mead to cool down. She was pleasantly buzzed and dizzy, content to simply watch a while.

Lancelot slid along the wall to her side, watching the room with his own goblet in hand. “I have yet to thank you for all you’ve done for me,” he said, moving his gaze to her.

She leant her head back against the wall and smiled up at him. “No thanks is needed,” she said. “You saved my life and you are a good person. What else could I do but help you achieve your dreams?”

He ducked his head, eyes on the liquid in his cup. “I should also thank you for saving my life last night,” he added, peering up at her from under his lashes. “I would not have been able to slay the beast had you not been there.”


“Calm,” he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. She flinched before she could check herself and her eyes darted towards the other guests. “I’m sorry I frightened you.” His face was contrite. “I only – I simply wished to let you know that I appreciate the risk you took to aid us and that your secret is safe with me.”

“But that’s – how?”

“I recognised your voice,” he revealed. “The rest of your disguise was excellent but I knew who you were the instant you spoke. Also,” he pressed his hand to his abdomen. “I suspected something when I awoke with a scar where once there had been none and memories of bleeding from that very spot not a day before.”

“You – you’re not… you don’t believe magic is evil?” she asked awkwardly, gaze flicking to the other patrons in fear of being overheard.

“How can it be when you are the one to wield it?” he stated simply and she stared at him in surprise. He smiled gently. “I’ve not been here a week and I’ve heard several tales of the prince’s maidservant, her unending kindness and sharp wit, both enough to keep the prince in line. And that’s only what I’ve listened to. What I’ve seen amounts to so much more. Selflessness, compassion, bravery –”

“Stop,” exclaimed Merlyn, cheeks heating furiously as she avoided his gaze. “I get it.”

“This celebration should be in your honour more than it should be in mine,” he added. “I’m hardly worthy of my title.”

“You are,” she argued seeing the self-doubt on his face. “You did not become a knight by defeating the griffin; you became a knight by passing the final test. The only advantage you gained from my involvement is that of equal opportunity.”

“Still,” he said. “They believe me capable of something I am not.”

“That’s not true,” she denied. “You dealt the fatal blow; no matter that the spear was touched by sorcery, it would not have worked had you not struck true.”

“Prince Arthur said something similar,” he remarked then added after a moment, “The griffin…
you said it was free after you touched its head. What did you mean?”

Merlyn traced a finger around the rim of her goblet, mind conjuring her last image of the ill-fated creature, the emptiness in its orange eyes. “The griffin wasn’t acting of its own accord,” she revealed. “There is a sorcerer, Nimueh, who harbours a deep hatred for the Pendragons, particularly King Uther. She has been periodically assaulting Camelot to try to overthrow the crown. It is she who set the griffin on its path. You see, they are not aggressive creatures on their own. In fact, they dislike being in the presence of mortals at all, avoiding civilisation instinctively. I don’t know why or how but she hunted down a mated pair and killed one of them to drive the other mad. She harnessed that madness and directed it towards Camelot, which is why it seemed to have a particular focus on Arthur. She was whispering to it, directing its rage upon him.”

She shook her head sadly, looking into the dark liquid inside her cup. “I delved into the beast’s mind and found her there, waiting for me. The way she spoke… she was not even disappointed that her plan was thwarted. I – I think she was testing me, which…” she met Lancelot's furrowed gaze. “She let the griffin free and I thought it was over but… I was warned that griffin’s mate for life and cannot cope with losing a half of themselves. You saw how violent it became. There was nothing else I could do.”

“You did the best you could,” he said, brown eyes earnest. “There was nothing more you could have done.”

“It has a baby,” she revealed, watching his mouth open in surprise. “While I was in its consciousness, I was assaulted with images and memories and thoughts. And I saw a young griffin there; its offspring. It’s still alive, awaiting the return of its parents, and I orphaned it.”

“You had no choice,” said Lancelot firmly, gripping her shoulder. “You said the griffin was lost to madness. You showed it mercy by helping me destroy it.”

Merlyn gaze tracked the room and landed on Arthur, who was glancing in her direction with a sour look on his face. He dismissed her when they caught each other’s eyes and she was faintly confused. What was his problem?

Putting it out of her mind, she divulged to her friend, “I plan to go to the northern plains and find it.”

Lancelot gaped at her. “You what?” he exclaimed.

“It is old enough to hunt simple game and fly short distances but it will be lonely. I fear Nimueh may try to take advantage of that. Possibly direct a second attack on us or use it to some other nefarious end. I must go there before her and see it cared for properly.”

“And how do you intend to do that?” he asked, bewildered. “Do you know the daily care of young, magical beasts? Do you intend to bring it back to Camelot? What if it reacts violently?”

“I am confident I can deal with it should it become aggressive. As for bringing it back to Camelot…”

“Do you intend to leave?”

“No,” she shook her head, eyes back on Arthur, who was now laughing with a couple of knights. “No. I cannot leave forever. But I just – I don’t want… Nimueh already took so much away from it; without thought or care. I would not see it abandoned to its fate due to the actions of a sorceress. I have a duty to correct her wrongs.”
“The duty is hers to bear, not yours. You have no blame for her actions.”

“I believe she sent the griffin to Camelot to test me more than to strike against the city. If I were not a threat to her plans, she would not have hurt those beasts – and I know I’m not to blame,” she added firmly when Lancelot opened his mouth in defense. “I know that. But it does not withdraw the fact that I am involved, by choice or no, and I must react as I believe best. This is what I believe is best.”

The brown-haired knight sighed in resignation, peering at her in fond exasperation. “You can’t save everyone, Merlyn,” he murmured. “Though I know you always give it your best shot.”

She smiled weakly at his praise and took a gulp of her drink. She saw his eyes drift to where Morgana and Gwen were chatting by a pillar.

She nudged him. “You should ask her to dance.”

The brown-haired knight scoffed. “I know not how,” he admitted, dropping his gaze.

She blinked. “Then you should learn how. Come,” she said decisively, taking his cup from his hand and placing both it and her own on the table. “This one is simple enough. I’ll teach you then you can woo Gwen.” She took his hand and dragged his reluctant form into the fray.

To put it mildly, Lancelot was terrible. By the time the song was over, Merlyn was wriggling her toes in discomfit and grateful to be off the dance floor. Lancelot was apologetic as he followed her to Morgana and Gwen and she palmed him off to them with a wish of good luck.

She made her way to Arthur’s side, where he sat nibbling on some fruit and listening to Sir Leon and plopped down beside him. The curly-haired knight paused in his speech and both men turned to look at her. She halted in the motion of reaching around Arthur to nab some grapes and stared at them, wide-eyed. “… I should leave, shouldn’t I?” she asked. “You were having a private conversation. Bother! I’m –”

“Nay,” interrupted Sir Leon. “I’m simply unused to you in such regal attire. You look lovely.”

“Thank you, Sir Leon. Morgana was generous with her help.” She sat up and touched the jewelled clip keeping half of her carefully curled hair contained.

“Lancelot certainly seemed to appreciate it,” said Arthur, something accusatory in his tone.

Merlyn frowned at him and tilted her head in confusion while, unseen to them both, Sir Leon backed away.

“He didn’t compliment me on my appearance,” she said, cautious. “He was thanking me for my help these past few days.”

“I’m sure he was, while flirting and pretending to stumble during your dance.”

Merlyn gaped at him. “I – are you… are you…” she shook her head. The idea was absurd. Jealousy? Arthur? “In case you’ve forgotten, Lancelot was a commoner not five hours ago – and a wanderer besides. I doubt learning to dance was high on his priority list.” She looked towards the pillar where her friends had last been but the throng of people was too thick to see through. “It shouldn’t be too hard to teach him. It’s not so different to the footwork of swordplay after all.”

Arthur snorted into his mug, lowering it to scoff, “It is nothing of the same! Swordplay is light and interpretive, judgements and dodges and attacks. Dancing is… dancing is stiff and formal, planned
and predictable. They are nothing alike.”

Merlyn rolled her eyes. “Not in the literal sense they’re not,” she said. “But in both you need nimble feet, smooth motions and the ability to interpret your partner’s movements. Tell me you have felt similarities.”

Arthur stared at her. “Not honestly, no,” he said and Merlyn sighed in defeat. A jaunty song started playing and cheers went up from the crowd. Merlyn recognised it as one that played at the annual village gatherings in Ealdor.

Without fanfare, she stood up and stole his drink, setting it aside. He spluttered but she grabbed his hand and pulled on it in an attempt to get him on his feet. “What are you doing?” he demanded, refusing to move.

“You have clearly been deprived of decent choreography,” she said. “I plan to rectify that.”

Arthur laughed, tugging her back towards him with little effort. “No, no,” he said. “I don’t dance unless I absolutely have to. And tonight, I do not have to.”

“Yes you do,” argued Merlyn, renewing her heaves on his arm. “Just one dance, so you can see what you’ve been missing. I promise it won’t disappoint.”

Arthur sighed dramatically but let her yank him upright, dragging his feet until she punched him lightly in his ribs. He cradled the area and put on a mock expression of pain but she ignored him until they were on the edge of the dance floor. She turned to him and smiled cheekily.

“Do you know this tune?” she asked.

“Do you?” he retorted. “After all, you are but a mere commoner.”

Merlyn scoffed. “In case it has slipped your notice, I happen to thoroughly enjoy dancing. I know this song from home.” She picked up one of his hands and pressed her palm against his. “Are you ready?” she asked, glancing at the wall of twirling bodies to her right.

“I was born ready,” he replied cockily and she let out a loud, “Ha!” before dragging him into the fast-moving throng.

She almost lost him in the immediate chaos but he clamped his fingers around her own and they were soon swept up in the routine. The alcohol firing through her veins and the mass of colour and movement around her sent her mind spinning pleasantly. She clapped and stomped and twirled around Arthur as he did the same with her, his face the only clear object in her vision.

With a grin of absolute abandon, she broke from the traditional twist and whirled under his arm, doing the three claps behind him then grabbing his hand to spin back to the front. He shook his head with a smile but stepped out a little as well, pushing her back two steps before he grabbed her waist alongside the others and lifted her into a turn.

It became a game of strategy. A challenge to gain the advantage over the other. Merlyn squealed when she miss-stepped and the prince used the opportunity to spin her out then draw her back in, dipping her backwards just as the tune ended.

The other dancers clapped and laughed in pleasure then started a gentle waltz as a much softer harmony began. Merlyn and Arthur stared at each other, breathing heavy and heart thrumming from the exhilaration. He pulled her out of the dip and she staggered against his chest, alcohol and adrenalin making her dizzy.
She laughed breathlessly. “Did you enjoy?” she asked, the bright expression on his royal features answering for him.

He raised the hand still holding her own and brought his other to her waist. They stepped out into a slow three-step as he answered, “It wasn’t horrible.”

Merlyn snorted at his downplay. “You loved it,” she said. “Don’t bother denying it.”

He smiled and stared at her. “Like I said: it wasn’t horrible.”

She shook her head and grinned at him, eyes locking warmly. His truly were very beautiful. Shaped like almonds and bracketed by long, dark blonde lashes, accentuating the rich, clear cornflower-blue of his iris. He broke their stare to glance down to her lips and she instinctively licked them. She realised they had stopped dancing.

He blinked and appeared startled with himself and she took the opportunity to step away, feeling confused and disturbed. “I – I’m going to find Gwen,” she said. “You – I thank you for the dance.”

She curtseyed and then vanished between the couples, leaving Arthur to blink stupidly and wonder why the hell he had just contemplated kissing his maidservant.

Merlyn groaned awake the next morning with her mouth feeling like fur and her head pounding like a drum. As such, it took her several minutes to realise she was cuddled up to another person.

She jerked back and forced her aching eyes open to see the Lady Morgana asleep beside her. She let out a sigh of relief as she remembered staggering back to the highborn’s chambers with the aid of her friends.

Mystery solved, the black-haired girl flopped back down and buried her face in the hollow of her friend’s shoulder, closing her eyes against the world.

She was on the edge of sleep when the chamber door opened and Gwen backed into the room with a tray full of aromatic breakfast foods. She placed them on the table and said, much too cheerily, “Good morning, My Lady, Merlyn.”

Morgana stirred but the black-haired girl wrapped an arm around her middle and held her tight, moaning in protest. Gwen laughed and Morgana blearily said, “Merlyn?” moving the arm she was lying on to touch the girl’s hair.

“’s too early,” Merlyn mumbled, keeping her eyes closed.

“The tenth bell has rung,” argued Gwen with a smile in her voice. “Surely you do not want to waste the day in bed?”

“Tha’s ‘xactly what I wan’ do,” she said then moaned pitifully as Morgana removed her arm and slid up the bed to lean against the headboard.

“Good morning, Gwen,” said the highborn, yawning and stretching.

“Apparently not for some,” the maid replied with a giggle and Merlyn harrumphed as she rolled onto her back, giving up on finding more rest.

“Ooh, my head,” she whimpered, bringing her hands up to cover her eyes. “It pounds like a drum.”
“It would,” said Morgana with a laugh, though she touched Merlyn's head in sympathy. “You were very inebriated last night. And quite chatty.” She put on a falsetto voice. “Arthur's an amazing dancer. Gwen and Lancelot are meant to be. Are baby griffins cubs or chicks?”

Both women laughed and Merlyn grumbled into her hands.

“Here,” said Gwen, coming closer. Merlyn peeked between her fingers and saw the maid holding out a small vial of some awful looking tonic. “I figured you would need something to get you through the day so I stopped by Gaius’ on the way in. He said, ‘don’t smell or sip, just swallow the whole lot in one go – and drink lots of water through the day’.”

Merlyn struggled upright then took the concoction from her hand. “Thanks,” she murmured then did as instructed, throwing it back. It was thick and oily and she dry-heaved at the flavour. “God, that’s awful!” she gasped, shuddering. “I’m never drinking again.”

She was ushered out of bed and given a weak tea to sip alongside a piece of toasted bread. Morgana changed into her daywear with Gwen's aid then joined her for a meal while Gwen tidied up. Merlyn peered down at her borrowed nightdress and was just realising she would have to redress in her evening gown to reach Gaius’ when the dark-skinned maid handed her a bundle of purple cloth. She exclaimed in happy relief and grinned up at Gwen who was wearing a fond, motherly expression. Thank the gods for Gwen.

Chapter End Notes

TBC…
I’m really sorry if the scene in the griffin’s mind was difficult to follow. I struggled to write it, trying to encompass her confusion and perceptions while explaining to you all what was happening. I’ll probably go back and flesh it out when I can think of how but until then, just understand that Merlyn lacks any mental barriers so when Nimueh left – who was protecting them while they talked – Merlyn's consciousness tried to fill the infinite expanse of the griffin’s mind, like gas spreading out to fill space when released from a container. What saved her was focusing on something with the entirety of her being. Her instinctive magic did the rest.
And the griffin having a baby was something that came out of the blue while I was writing. It just felt right to put it in there, and it is the first deviation from Canon facts that I’ve done (everything else has been in reaction to Merlyn's gender and experiences). I hope nobody was disappointed. The griffin will become a part of the story further along, just so’s you knows.
Also, since I’m ahead in my writing I already have a name for the griffin, but I’m not completely satisfied with it. It feels kind of contrived. I scoped out J.K’s Harry Potter list for Hippogriff names but none of them fit quite right, so if any of you have any suggestions you wanna throw out, I’m all ears.
Hope you enjoyed!
A Remedy To Cure All Ills

Chapter Summary

Merlyn thinks she's found a kindred spirit in Edwin Muirden. Gaius knows that is not true.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Merlyn had all the gear she thought she would need to travel to the northern plains packed into her satchel. Now all she needed to do was inform Arthur that she was leaving for a little while – to visit her mother, of course, not track down the magical spawn of the beast that ravaged Camelot's towns.

She grabbed a vial of Morgana's sleeping draught to drop off along the way, as her friend was suffering from a new bout of nightmares. Merlyn had suggested a dream journal but the noblewoman had declared that the things she saw were too terrible to write down.

She was climbing the stairs to the royal wing when a guard came racing past, clearly on a mission as he bounded down the stairs. She frowned at his back and paused for a moment but he hadn’t been shouting of intruders so she figured it was safe to continue on her path. She shook it off as unimportant until she reached the hall holding Morgana's chambers and found the door open with urgent voices inside.

She hurried into the entrance and found Gwen and the King by Morgana's bed. The woman herself was unmoving beneath the sheets, even as the King shook her shoulder to wake her.

“What’s going on?” she asked Gwen quietly, moving to her side.

The worried maid turned to her with tears in her eyes. “I don’t know,” she whispered, hands tangling together fretfully. “I came in to prepare her for the day and she refused to wake. She’s pale and her flesh is cold; she’s still like death but weak breath still enters her lungs.”

Merlyn moved to examine her but Gaius rushed into the room behind a guard. She backed off and said to Gwen, “I must tell Arthur. He will want to know.”

Two days passed.

Gaius was being hounded by the King and Merlyn had abandoned her duties to Arthur to aid him. The Court Physician was certain that Morgana had swelling of the brain but he could think of no reason or remedy that he hadn’t already tried.

“I’m sure it’s an infection,” he muttered as he swirled a concoction in a vial. “There’s nothing else it could be.”

“Do you think…” Merlyn trailed off. “Maybe I could… help.”
“If you’re suggesting magic, have you forgotten what happened with Gwen’s father?” he shot her a look from the corner of his eye. “This is not a magical illness; it must be cured by conventional means. We keep trying. See if you can find me some fresh rosemary.”

“There must be something more I can do,” she nearly begged, hating her uselessness.

“And yarrow,” he added, drawing a glare from his ward.

That night, Merlyn paced Arthur’s chambers while the prince slouched in his chair, head in hand. She was furiously scrubbing his boots as she moved, muttering to herself and itching to visit her comatose friend.

“Merlyn,” said Arthur.

“Yes?” she asked, pausing in her movements.

“You’re making me anxious.” Indeed, his teeth were clenched.

“Sorry,” she said, coming to his side and leaning against the table. “Gaius will work it out, you’ll see. She’ll be fine. She’s going to be absolutely –”

Arthur placed a hand over hers, forcing her fingers to relax from where they were white around the boot brush. She let out a shaky breath and he said, “If anyone can work it out, it will be Gaius. Worrying does nothing but make us ill, so tone it down.”

She snorted softly and looked down, squeezing his finger with her thumb. “Unfortunately, emotions are something nigh impossible to control.”

She wasn’t looking so didn’t see his eyes on her lips, nor him swallow thickly; only that he gently removed his hand before standing and moving to the hearth.

Without his touch, her hand felt cold but she buried the feeling and went back to scrubbing, refusing to allow her mind to wander. Morgana would be fine, even if Merlyn had to sneak in and cast some magic herself.

The next day, she was disturbed from cleaning out Arthur’s fireplace by the prince himself ordering her to settle a new arrival into the visitor’s wing. The black-haired girl was confused until the blonde knight mentioned he had a possible cure then felt insulted on Gaius’ behalf.

“Any cure this man has, Gaius will have already tried.”

Arthur spun to her and said, “Morgana has hours left. If she is not cured soon, she will die. I’m willing to try anything to save her, even the treatments of a possible charlatan.”

Merlyn couldn’t argue with that so left to find The Rising Sun to meet and collect this Edwin’s belongings.

Morgana was cured but Merlyn wasn’t entirely pleased.

Edwin descended the staircase to the noblewoman’s chambers and said to the waiting royalty,
“Great news, Your Majesty. You will be glad to hear it is not an inflammation of the brain.”

“What is it then?” demanded the King.

“It is a cerebral haemorrhage.”

“Haemorrhage?” said Gaius. “I don’t think so.”

“I found this trace of blood in her ear,” Edwin argued, displaying the spots of red on the white linen. Uther swore in horror and the stranger added; “The severity depends upon the site and volume of the bleed. If not treated, it can lead to a coma and, eventually, death.”

The King turned to Gaius. “How could you have missed this?” he asked and the Court Physician shook his head.

“I saw no blood,” he said.

“Please,” said Edwin. “Just thank the fates that you did not administer more rosemary to stimulate the circulation. Can you imagine what that might have done?”

King Uther looked to Gaius for an explanation but Merlyn scowled at Edwin, angry that he was embarrassing her mentor so publicly. Gaius said, slightly contrite, “It may have increased the bleed.”

The King looked betrayed and demanded, “Is there a cure?”

Edwin said, a mite smugly, “See for yourself.”

And so the King’s ward was well again, but Gwen was suspicious and so was her mentor. Merlyn was reserving judgement, her displeasure simply for the fact that she loved Gaius and hated to see him humiliated.

That afternoon, Merlyn knocked on Edwin's guest chambers to see if he wanted a meal delivered for supper but no one answered her call. Giving in to curiosity, she entered and gazed at the alchemy sets and scientific contraptions, touching and fiddling as she probably should not. She saw a simple, wooden box amongst the equipment and opened it curiously. Inside, a pile of dead beetles resided. Confused, she shut the lid and read the inscription on top.

“Berbay odothay arisan yeldo.”

She felt a small flicker of her magic activating and reopened the box to see the bugs now moving.

“Very good,” someone said and Merlyn jumped, spinning and knocking over a jar of powder in her haste. Edwin stood by the entrance, though he approached as she stared. Silently she held out the box.

“Swefn,” he hissed and the bugs stilled once more. Merlyn stared as he calmly put the box down.

“You have magic,” he said.

“I-it wasn’t me – I didn’t do anything,” she denied, instinct overruling common sense.

The man was unperturbed. “Then how else did you bring them to life? Only magic can do such a thing,” he pointed out. “These little angels are how I cured Lady Morgana. They repaired the damage to her brain. They saved her life. Magic can be a force for good.”
Merlyn nodded her head. “I know,” she agreed, a faint thrill of excitement at finding another good magic user alighting under her skin.

“Then why do you fear it?” he asked, staring into her eyes.

“I-I don’t fear it. Not any longer, but the King banned such gifts. It’s not permitted.”

“Should I have let Lady Morgana die?” he asked.

“No, of course not!” she exclaimed. “If – if there was no other way, I was ready to use my powers but Gaius thought the risk too great if there was another way.”

“People like us,” Edwin said, flat blue eyes glowing with fervour. “We have a gift. Do you not think it should be used to make this a better world?”

“Definitely,” she agreed, her own eyes ablaze upon finding a like mind. “It should be used selflessly and kindly, for the betterment of everyone. That’s what I have been doing in this city. So many of our people are stuck on revenge or greed; they’re failing to see what I’m trying to build. You see it, don’t you? You’re doing the same with your physician’s work. Creating peace and wellbeing, no matter who they be or whence they came. Having compassion for everyone, magic and mundane alike.”

Edwin smiled and she beamed back. “I can teach you,” he said and waved his arm at the forgotten, spilled powder. “Feormian dærst rénian.” The fine particles swirled upwards as if in a wind then sucked back into the jar.

Merlyn smirked and said with a flick of her fingers, “Raédan ásce géatan.” The jar lifted and poured the powder into an empty bowl. She enjoyed the pleased expression on his scarred face.

“You use this to help people?” he asked.

“Gaius doesn’t like me to,” she admitted, glancing down.

“A gift like yours should be nurtured, practiced, enjoyed. You need someone to help you, to encourage you.”

“Gaius fears my discovery,” she defended. “He looks out for my best interests and makes sure I don’t become too impulsive. He’s a good man, a good teacher.”

Edwin looked as if he’d tasted something sour. He swallowed hard before meeting her gaze with determined eyes. “Imagine what we could achieve if we shared our knowledge,” he said.

She smiled awkwardly, a little unnerved by his expression. “I should be getting back,” she said, waving vaguely to the door.

“Of course,” he said, voice calm. “But you must promise to keep our secret safe.” He put his finger to his lips and she nodded.

“Of course,” she said. As if she’d do anything else.

“People like you and I… we must look after each other.”

Merlyn returned home late that night, having paid a visit to Morgana after tending to Arthur. The noblewoman was pleased to see her, though still tired so she helped Gwen prep the chambers for
the night before bidding her goodnight.

She walked with Gwen towards the front doors of the castle silently but could sense the other maid’s unease. “You still do not trust Edwin,” she observed.

Gwen glanced at her before looking down. “I do not like that he refused anyone to be present as he cured Morgana. I was by her side the entire time she was ill; there was no blood in her ear, I’m sure of it. I do not like the way he is usurping Gaius’ position.”

Merlyn looked down also, watching her feet on the steps. “I agree to not liking the way he accused Gaius of mistreating Morgana, as if he was incompetent, but I don’t know if he is usurping his position. Edwin has particular skills and it appears like he simply wants to help. I, personally, would enjoy having him nearby for a little longer, if only to learn some of his methods. And Gaius does need an apprentice.”

“As you say,” said her friend neutrally.

Merlyn peered over at her unhappy features and linked their arms. “Perhaps we should keep a closer eye on him to ease our minds. I trust your opinions, Gwen, and if you think something is amiss, then I will be watchful.”

“Thank you Merlyn,” she said, meeting her eyes. “You’re a good friend.”

“But not as good as Sir Lancelot,” said Merlyn slyly. Gwen blushed darkly and the younger girl grinned. “I saw you two together when Morgana was ill. He was very supportive of your emotional needs.”

“Oh hush, Merlyn!” hissed the maid, touching her hot cheek. “He gave me a hug when I was fetching some water; that is all.”

“It shows he cares. I do hope, once he has settled and this fiasco is over, that you will spend time together.”

“Why do you care so much?” said Gwen defensively. “He’s a knight now. His time is full with living his dream. And I am busy with My Lady.”

Merlyn stared at her earnestly. “I have never seen a man look at woman like Lancelot looks at you, Gwen. I only want you to be happy.”

“I am happy, Merlyn,” she said, squeezing her arm as they trotted down the front steps of the castle into the courtyard. “I do not need a man to complete my life.”

“Of course not!” exclaimed Merlyn, affronted that she would think that. “But a partner in life is not too much to ask, is it? I know you long for children eventually and, from what I’ve heard, a man is necessary for that.”

Gwen gaped at her and gave her a shove. “Merlyn!” she cried, unable to stop the astonished grin from splitting her face. “You are incorrigible!”

“Well,” said the girl with a toothy grin. “I do try.”

They parted ways at the courtyard bridge and Merlyn headed for the physician’s chambers, climbing the stairs and stepping into a room still lit by multiple candles. The black-haired girl blinked in surprise at finding Gaius at the table, pouring over a tome.
“Should you not be in bed by now?” she asked him, noting the stress on his craggy features.
“You’ll not do anyone any good wearing yourself out.”

“I’ll sleep soon,” he promised, not even lifting his head. “But I have questions that need answers.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, noting his tone. “But don’t beat yourself up, mistakes happen. I do them all the time. You’re not infallible, Gaius.”

“When it comes to the health of the royal household, I must be,” he said, ending the discussion.

“Alright,” she whispered and retreated to her bedroom, unhappy that she knew not how to ease his mind.

Nonetheless, exhaustion assured that she fell into a deep sleep that night, only waking at the first hints of dawn. When she trotted down the stairs from her room in breeches and tunic, she found her mentor still at the table; only he was done reading and, instead, had his fingers in a steeple against his mouth, an unhappy frown on his face.

“Are you well, Gaius?” she asked in concern. “You’ve been up all night.”

“I’m well, my girl,” he said, blinking out of his funk to give her a weak smile. “I only contemplate memories I’ve long tried to bury.”

“I’ll make you some tea,” she said collecting the pail that hung under the eaves for rainwater. “And you should try to rest for a couple of hours. A sleepless night is never good, and you are no longer a spring chicken. I don’t want you to worry yourself into an early grave.”

Once she had set the pot of water over the newly fed fire, she turned to find Gaius smiling at her in amusement. “What?” she demanded.

“You remind me of your mother more and more every day. She, too, would hassle me about my health, even when she was a child and I an adult. Her compassion knew no bounds.”

“It still doesn’t,” said Merlyn, moving to the cupboards to find the blend she wanted. “When… when the villagers turned their backs after the earthquake, she never blamed them. Even when I was angry and resentful, she told me that they were afraid and that fear needs to be soothed before understanding can take its place. She didn’t even flinch when they accused her of being seduced by a demon, and that I was its spawn.” Merlyn shook her head, hands trembling slightly at the memories. “She is both fearless and compassionate and I hope, one day, I can be half as great as her.”

“That day may come sooner than you think,” said Gaius and she turned to see his eyes glowing with pride. She ducked her head, a touched smile tugging at her lips, and moved to take the heated water from the hearth.

She poured a cup and inhaled the fruity aroma before setting it before her mentor. “I must leave to gather some herbs for Edwin and take Sunstrider for a ride. You’ll be okay, won’t you?”

“Oh course,” said the old man and Merlyn bestowed his brow with a gentle kiss before hurrying out the door.

It was midday and Merlyn was tidying Arthur's chambers when the prince entered. The blonde knight was unusually cautious as he called for Merlyn's attention, though she was oblivious, at
first.

“Will you be wanting your lunch now?” she asked with a smile, straightening the last corner of his bedclothes.

“No, Merlyn,” he said, his tone grave enough to catch her attention. “I came to relieve you of your services for the rest of the day.”

She frowned, disbelieving. “Why would you do that?” she asked. “Have I done something wrong?”

“Nay,” he said, not meeting her eyes as he wandered towards the empty fireplace. “This morning my father, Morgana and I were in a conference with Edwin… regarding Gaius’ work.”

“… And?” Merlyn said slowly, confused but not liking the suspicion growing at the back of her mind.

“And,” said Arthur, resting a clenched hand on the hearth’s mantle. “We discovered that Gaius’ work has been slowly degrading over the past few years. He is a loyal and steadfast servant but there have been errors that seem to be increasing in regularity. We acknowledge that it is not Gaius’ fault, but his age…”

Merlyn was shaking her head slowly. “What nonsense!” she said. “You’re wrong. Gaius’ work is exemplary and nothing has changed. I would have noticed. Nothing he has taught me has been incorrect and none of his prescriptions have failed. I demand you show me these supposed errors!”

“I’m sorry, Merlyn,” said Arthur, face pained as he watched her. “The decision has been made. Gaius has already been informed.”

“What?” she exclaimed. “This is – this is outrageous! Edwin is obviously lying. How can you shunt Gaius aside the instant he makes a single mistake? He’s been loyal for over twenty years! I can’t – this is just –” Merlyn buried her fingers in her hair, utterly unable to believe it. What, in the name of the gods, was Edwin doing? She thought they had an understanding. She thought he would be an apprentice, not – not usurp Gaius’ position.

“Oh, blast and botheration!” she growled and dashed from the room without a by-your-leave to the prince. Gwen was right. Edwin was up to no good. How dare he do that to her mentor? They were going to have words.

She crashed into Gaius’ chambers to find the old man gathering clothes and kit. “Gaius!” she cried. “They can’t do this to you. You tried to save Morgana.”

“Uther’s not to blame,” he replied, rather more sedately than the situation warranted and not looking up to meet her gaze.

“I will speak with Edwin,” she pushed. “He’s clearly sabotaged your reputation. I know your work is perfect, I see it every day. And yet they dare accuse you of senility!”

“No,” ordered Gaius, tone suddenly hard. He glared at her. “You mustn’t do anything.”

“I can’t stand by and do nothing!”

“The King is right. It’s time I stepped down.” he turned away and pushed the clothes on the table into a satchel. A horrible realisation erupted in Merlyn's mind.

“What are you doing?” she asked.
“I cannot stay where there is no longer a use for me,” he replied, rolling up a blanket and tying it to the top of the bag.

“You’re not leaving.”

“I believe it’s for the best.”

“Then I will come with you,” she said.

“Merlyn,” he said, pausing once more to meet her shining blue eyes. “You are like a daughter to me. I never expected such a blessing so late in life.”

“And you are more than a father to me,” she said, pressing her clenched hands together.

“Then, as a father, I must tell you, you must remain here. Camelot is where you belong.”

Merlyn shook her head. “But you belong here too.”

“Not anymore,” he refuted and her heart broke a little. “Merlyn, you must promise me you will use caution with your gifts.”

“My gifts mean nothing without you to guide me. There is so much I have yet to learn; I need you to teach me.”

The old man shook his head, looking away. “I’m afraid I am leaving here tonight, Merlyn, and there is nothing you can do or say that will persuade me otherwise.”

Merlyn lip trembled and she backed away. “I will not let this happen,” she vowed and ran from the room.

Merlyn failed to corner Edwin that afternoon. The two-faced vagrant remained at the King’s side like a leech and Merlyn soon gave up to return home, only to find Gaius gone. She rushed down the thoroughfare to the gates and found the old man leading a grey mule from the guard stables.

“You cannot go!” she cried, jumping into his path. “We need to fix this.”

“The King will not change his mind and neither will I,” said the old man sternly. “Now let me leave with my dignity. Please.”

Merlyn faltered. “At least – at least take Sunstrider. He will protect you better than any guard dog on the road.”

“He lets no one but you on his back. I do not have the ability to heal from broken bones and bruises quickly.”

“I-I’ve been experimenting a little,” she admitted sheepishly. “He listens when I ask through magic. He will obey your every command.”

“I cannot,” said Gaius. “He is yours and I am not returning.”

“I know,” she said. “I know. Please. Just let me do this one thing.”

The old man pursed his lips but eventually dipped his head in consent. It took only a short while before her stallion was tacked and weighed down with supplies. She led him from the stall and
towards where Gaius waited at the doors, having returned the grey mule to the guardhouse. Sunstrider’s ears twitched as he registered the new stranger but allowed himself to be stopped before him.

Merlyn took Gaius’ hand and held it to Sunstrider's muzzle, pressing her magic into the steed with her other palm. Her eyes heated for a flash and the stallion’s followed a second later, shining gold. The palomino beast sighed in displeasure but lowered his head in submission.

“Thank you,” she murmured, scratching behind his ear. She turned to Gaius. “He’s yours now. He’ll guard you against any threats. Take care of him.” Hot tears pricked her eyes. “Take care of yourself.”

Gaius nodded and, after a lingering embrace, he led Sunstrider away.

When he was out of sight, Merlyn turned her eyes back to the citadel spires she could see. She would corner the slimy beggar and demand answers as soon as he stopped cowering behind the King.

The next day, things happened quickly.

King Uther was discovered plagued by the same illness as Morgana had been. Gaius returned from the forest and Edwin revealed himself to be just one more bitter sorcerer in a long line of hate-driven people.

“I can rule the kingdom now! And with you at my side, we can be all-powerful!” he exclaimed over the roar of flames closing in on Merlyn’s mentor.

“Release him!” she commanded.

“He is a weakness you do not need, Merlyn. He is a traitor and a coward!”

Gaius let out an involuntary yelp as the flames leapt at his robes and, with a feral growl, Merlyn slashed out her hand. The flames blinked out of existence as if they’d never been and Gaius slumped to the ground in relief. Edwin gaped at her in astonishment.

“I am so sick of all these greedy, small-minded fanatics!” she shouted at the sky, then pointed at Edwin. “I thought you were different! I thought you had the same vision as I, but you’re just as wretched as the others! All of you abuse the very essence of what magic is supposed to be! It’s enlightenment and learning. Selflessness and harmony. It’s supposed to bring balance and understanding of the deeper world. Why can no one see this but me?” she threw up her hands.

Edwin blinked himself out of his shock and jabbed a finger at Gaius. “This man stood by while countless of our brethren were executed,” he accused. “He used to be one of us, but he turned his back and grovelled at the feet of the tyrant to save his own skin. Neither he nor Uther Pendragon deserve to live for their crimes.”

“And you think murdering them now will bring justice?” snarled Merlyn. “It will do nothing but fuel the hatred that chokes this land. It will bring nothing but more death and destruction. You are blinded by your rage. You refuse to see another path because it will not sate your thirst for blood. But I will not allow you to harm the people I care for, nor what I am working towards.”

Edwin curled his lip and raised his hands. She did the same and he snapped out, “Then you will die first.”
He roared out a spell that sent an axe soaring through the air towards her. Gaius let out a cry of alarm but Merlyn stopped it before it hit her. There was a brief magical struggle as Edwin tried to overpower her but she’d had enough. A shove of her hands against the air and Edwin's magic crumpled beneath her own. The axe propelled back to its caster and imbedded deeply in his chest.

Edwin let out a single, startled breath before he collapsed to the ground, threat no longer.

Quickly, Merlyn turned to the box of beetles and swept it into her arms.

“What are you doing?” asked Gaius, having struggled to his feet in the aftermath.

“The King is ill,” she explained shortly. “The same thing as Morgana. Edwin said he used these to cure her so maybe we can too.”

She showed him the unmoving bugs and he said, “Elanthia beetles.”

“They’re magical?” she queried and he nodded, grave.

“Yes. They can be enchanted to enter the brain and feed on it until they devour the victim’s very soul. We must go to him.”

That evening, Merlyn and Gaius sat in tense silence as they ate dinner. Merlyn was still fuming over Edwin's betrayal but was also neck deep in despair. She wasn’t in the mood for small talk. Or, really, any talk at all.

“I wish to thank you for saving my life today,” said Gaius, scraping his spoon against his bowl.

“I was only repaying you saving mine,” she replied curtly without looking up. “That is why you left without a fight, correct? Because Edwin threatened to expose me.”

Gaius dipped his head. “Yes,” he said quietly.

Merlyn sloshed the soup in her bowl some more, belly a tight ball of knots that killed her appetite.

“What you said today…” the old man began but Merlyn cut him off.

“I killed a man today,” she said, glaring at her mentor from under her lashes. “And it wasn’t a mistake. I murdered a fellow sorcerer to save a tyrant king. And the only remorse I feel right now, is of how awful his childhood must have been to make him this way.”

Gaius looked down. “It is true he had a horrible experience when he was a boy. His parents, Gregor and Jaden Muirden, practiced dark magic and were captured by Uther during the Purge. He tried to save them from the flames and was thusly burnt. I treated him before sending him off with some fleeing sorcerers, knowing Uther would suspect him of treachery his entire life were he to stay. I did not think… I had hoped he would find peace elsewhere, but it seemed he chose the path of evil instead.”

“He watched his parents be burned at the pyre; he felt their pain when he tried to save them. With a past like that, I don’t know that I would be any different than he. How could I have condemned his actions without knowing his pain?”

“You cannot save everyone, Merlyn,” said Gaius, staring at her intently. “You cannot control the decisions of others. You can only respond to their actions in the moment and hope that they choose
the path to morality. Anything else, you must guard against with your full strength.”

“But this destiny I have… this – this journey to unite the kingdoms… I only know of it because I was told. Those people driven by revenge only know hatred because they cannot see that there is another way. My path has only just begun and it will be years before the rewards are reaped – if I do not fail first. I don’t – I don’t know how to let people know that a new age is coming. That they can let go of their grief because things will change for the better.”

“Merlyn,” said Gaius, his tone drawing her attention. “That is when one’s decisions matter most. When all hope is thought lost and the night is absolute, one can choose to either light a candle or embrace the darkness. That is when the true heart of a person is revealed; in hardship.”

Merlyn let out an aggrieved sigh and rested her head in her hands. “I tire of standing alone against my kin. I just… I want to know there are others out there who share my dreams, an equal land without murder or deceit staining its fruition.”

Gaius said nothing but only because he swallowed back his words. Quietly, both of them finished their meal then retired for the night. Another day, another duty.

Chapter End Notes

So this one. This one was short because the actions and plot of the story didn’t change. However, Merlyn's alternate mentality shines strongly here. Because of her past – her fear of her magic then subsequent embrace when given a purpose – has matured her, I guess is the word, beyond what Canon!Merlin was at this point. C!Merlin always used his magic and never felt he had to fear it, though he had been conditioned to hide it.

He hasn’t yet felt jaded by the laws and the darkness that seemed to pervade the sorcerers who suffered due to Uther. Here, my Merlyn has experienced the negative side of magic, overcome her fear, and has been given purpose for it. And because she overcame her fear by latching onto her ‘destiny’, she is much more anxious to create this fabled land of unity and peace. She wants to be accepted and feel safe in a way she hasn’t felt since the incident in Ealdor.

So being faced with one who could have been the epitome of what she is trying to do and yet used his status to harm instead, cut her deeply.

On another note: last chapter, I was contemplating Arthur's age and inadvertently answered my own questions. In Canon, Morgana is elder, and in the Third Season, Episode Five, she turns twenty-three. For any of the timeframe to be valid, Arthur is going to have to be seventeen turning eighteen in Season One. It actually makes sense when you think on the history of the characters. Uther illegitimately conceived Morgana with Vivienne but, of course, wouldn’t have known until she was properly pregnant, giving a six month or so leeway (since I doubt Vivienne would have travelled to Camelot to tell Uther that their tryst resulted in a pregnancy).

With the realisation that he has a child on the way, yet still faced with having no heir, he would have eventually realised that the issue lay with Ygraine and her unfortunate barrenness. And then, seeing – or hearing – of Morgana's birth and faced with no legacy of his own, I feel would drive him to seek alternate measure to ‘fix’ his wife, hence the Cup of Life. So the timeframe fits in regards to Arthur's age compared to Morgana's – give or take a year.

And to ease my own sanity, I’m going to ignore the whole “war on magic for twenty years” thing that started after Ygraine’s death. I’m just going to have it that the people
summed it up to a decade, and that, perhaps, Uther’s mistrust of magic was happening before the Purge since a person doesn’t go from zero to a hundred without a preconceived idea.
There, problem solved.
Anywho, thanks for reading! Reviews are love!
P.S: many thanks to those who reviewed, favourited and followed; you’re all great!
Creatures of Avalon

Chapter Summary

The Sidhe laugh on the sidelines while Sophia and Aulfric try to kill the Once and Future King

Chapter Notes

I apologise for most of this chapter. Reading back through has shown me how passive it feels, though I was proud of it at the time. The beginning is quite weak and I was almost going to rewrite it but I didn't want to be caught up in the past and lose traction with where I am presently. So, er, enjoy I guess.

She awoke the next morning with the previous day’s events still weighing heavily on her mind, but determined to push forward with her plans. Her bag remained packed by her door, awaiting her venture to the Northern Plains in search for the young griffin. All she needed was the permission of her master.

She delivered his breakfast on time and found him already awake and dressed, staring out the window contemplatively. As he sat down to feed, she steeled her resolve. Their conversation went a little like this:

“Arthur, I was wondering if I could possibly –”

“I’m trying to eat my breakfast in peace, Merlyn. That includes you not talking.”

“Yes, but I only want to ask –”

“Questions are prohibited when I don’t want to talk. Right now, they’re prohibited.”

“It’s more of a request than a –”

“Then even more reason to silence yourself. I’ve decided we’re going on a hunt today. Anything more requires too much thinking and defeats the purpose of my plan. And by we, I mean you and I.”

“What!”

And so out in the forest she was, several rabbits tied to her belt and an armful of awkward, heavy equipment in her arms. Because of the spontaneous decision, only Merlyn and Prince Prat were hunting instead of his usual entourage of guards, and the black-haired girl liked it not one bit.

She lost sight of Arthur in the scrub ahead hurried through the trees to catch up while also trying to remain quiet as he’d requested. Trying being the operative word.
She stumbled through a tangle of young, supple branches and only caught sight of Arthur when he was beneath her. She tripped into his squatting bulk and the arrow he’d been targeting went flying off into the underbrush. She heard the sudden rustle as the creature he’d been aiming at dashed away. She cringed shamefacedly.

He turned to her angrily. “You really are a total buffoon, aren’t you, Merlyn?” he exclaimed.

“I didn’t see you until too late,” she defended. “You are the one who stopped to hide yourself right in my path.”

“We’re supposed to be hunting! It requires speed, stealth and an agile mind.” He flicked her on the forehead and she glared, shoving his hand away.

“So you’re able to get by on two out of three, then?” she cut back.

His retort was disrupted by a woman’s terrified scream.

“What was that?” Merlyn asked nervously.

“Quiet,” said the prince, his posture alert.

Distantly, a man cried, “Please! Don’t!”

The woman cried again: “Help!”

Arthur grabbed his sword from Merlyn’s arms and they rushed off into the undergrowth, stealth abandoned.

Merlyn wasn’t jealous. She was simply… wary of this downright beautiful blonde woman who had immediately captured Arthur's attention.

Okay, so she was a little jealous. But it was a healthy respect of one luckier than herself and not malicious or petty… she hoped.

“Make sure you put her in a decent room,” said Arthur.

“The one next door is empty,” she pointed out nonchalantly.

“The one next door is fine. Excellent in fact.” She smiled at his bluster and he glared at her. “Shut up, Merlyn,” he said.

“I didn’t say anything!” she defended, throwing her hands up innocently.

“You didn’t have to,” he said and slumped against his bedpost despondently. “I want to make it clear that my intentions towards Sophia are completely honourable. Put her in the room on the other side of the castle. It’s warmer… more comfortable.”

“Of course,” she said, then added cautiously, “She’s… very beautiful.”

“Yes, she is,” said Arthur, staring into space with a dreamy look on his face.

“And… if your intentions are honourable…”

“Oh, they are,” assured the prince. “Most definitely.”
“Then what's the problem with her staying next door?” she asked.

He perked up. “There isn't one. You’ve convinced me. Put her in the room next to mine.”

Merlyn hid her smirk by turning away to tend to the room next door. First, Gwen was finding a potential courtship with Lancelot and now Arthur had the first stages of puppy love. Even if she found the prince attractive and had the first stirrings of a silly crush, Merlyn was happy he might find something deeper. Sophia Tír-Mòr was noble born, after all. They could marry with his father’s blessing.

The rest of that day was spent establishing the visitors into their chambers. Merlyn tended to Sophia at Arthur's request, finding the woman soft-spoken and reserved – personalities she had never experienced from a noble before. She helped the woman bathe and brushed out her long, golden hair, quite enjoying tending to a woman for once.

After Sophia was settled for the night, Merlyn skipped over to Arthur's chambers and entered without knocking, big grin on her face. The prince dropped the empty silver plate he had in his hand and turned to her, feigning nonchalance. She frowned suspiciously.

“Were you… looking at yourself in the plate’s reflection?” she asked.

“Don’t be absurd,” he scoffed, pink cheeks betraying his denial. She giggled and clapped a hand to her mouth.

“You look fine,” she said. “Very handsome. I’m sure Sophia will appreciate it tomorrow.”

“Why are you here, Merlyn?” he grumbled. “You’re supposed to be caring for our guest.”

“She’s in bed right now, sire. The journey and bandits has tired her out. I only came to ask if there was anything you needed before I headed home.”

“No,” he said, waving her away. “You’re dismissed.”

She dipped her head. “Have a good night, Arthur.”

“I’m taking Sophia out for a ride today,” said Arthur as she dressed him for the day. “You know, show her around.”

She frowned at him. “Where do I come into this?”

“Well,” he said. “I’m supposed to be on patrol with the guard of my father this morning, so I need you to cover for me.”

“What – and lie to the King?” she sputtered. “No. No way! No. He’ll see right through me. He’ll – he’ll have me in the stocks quicker than you can say rotten tomatoes.”

“Merlyn,” he said beseechingly and she sighed, knowing that she would fold to his wishes. “I need you to do this for me.”

“I’m a terrible liar,” she warned. “I start sweating, my-my vision blurs, my… my brain stops working right.”
“Well, no change there then,” he cracked and she pouted at him. “Look, I promised Sophia I’d take her out and if I don’t turn up, it’ll blow my chances.”

She looked down. “You like her then?”

“Yeah,” he said, like it was obvious – which it was. “What’s not to like? I want to spend some more time with her, but I need to get my father off my back. I can’t order you to lie to the King, but… you’d be a friend for life if you did.”

Merlyn rubbed her forehead, feeling like today was not going to be a good day. “Go on then,” she said, waving him off before she changed her mind. “You don’t want to keep her waiting.”

He grabbed her hand, grin insatiable. “Thank you, Merlyn. I won’t forget it.”

“Get,” she said, her own lips tugging upward at his enthusiasm. Definitely puppy love.

Merlyn went about her day on tenterhooks, dreading the moment the King called her in to question Arthur’s absence. Just as Gwen was approaching her from across the courtyard, worried expression on her face, a guard called her name.

“Merlyn,” he said. It was Henry, one of the sentries she’d tended after the Valiant incident. “The King demands your presence.”

She scrunched her nose and closed her eyes, heart thumping in her ears. She still had no idea what she was going to say and just the thought of having the King’s anger aimed her way scattered her composure.

She shot Gwen an apologetic smile and fell into step beside the guard, heading towards the Throne Room.

“So what did you do this time?” asked Henry with a sympathetic smile. “His Majesty looks quite irritated.”

“Well,” began Merlyn. “I wouldn’t say it was something I did – though, I suppose it wasn’t anybody else’s fault either. A simple misunderstanding, I guess, though the situation is a little confusing –”

“Oh dear,” he interrupted, to her relief. “Sounds like you’re going to have a fun time before the King.”

Merlyn dropped her head with a groan. “I have a feeling I know where I’m to end up,” she muttered.

Merlyn’s back ached and her head pounded by the time she was released from the stocks. The day was long past its prime when she staggered up the path from the lower town. She smelled awful and people shot her pitying glances as they avoided getting too close. She plodded up the staircase to the physician’s chambers and slunk inside stiffly, heading straight for her bedroom to gather clean clothes.

“Have you been playing with your food again?” joked Gaius dryly as she passed, hands busy preparing dinner.
“The King put me in the stocks,” she said, disappearing through her door and grabbing another dress then returning to the main room.

Gaius stared at her with a raised eyebrow. “What did you do this time?”

“Nothing,” she said, and felt mildly insulted as his sceptical expression, “Honestly, it wasn’t my fault.” She gathered up a towel, washcloth and her hygiene sack as she explained sullenly, “Arthur wanted to get out of going on patrol with his father and the guard so I covered for him and took the blame.”

“And Arthur was prepared to let you do this?” he asked, confused.

She sighed. “It was his idea,” she muttered.

“And what made him neglect his duties? It must have been something terribly important.”

Merlyn smiled wryly. “Sophia,” she said, moving towards the door.

“She girl from the forest?” he exclaimed, alarm lighting his features.

She nodded, not understanding his concern. “He wanted to take her out for the day. He’s besotted.”

“But they’ve only just met.”

She shrugged. “I know. I guess it must be a love at first sight thing. Anyway,” she held up her items; “I’m going to bathe. I smell like the compost heap for the pigs.”

Gaius nodded and she left, heading directly for the royal bathhouse. She would have to soak her dress to get the stink out and she still had to tend to Sophia when they returned.

Sophia sent her away after she delivered the evening meal, not even wanting her to prepare a bath. Confused, she backed out of the room and shut the door, standing still for a moment before heading to Arthur’s chambers just up the hall. When she arrived, the door was ajar and she heard voices inside. Unwilling to interrupt, she hesitated.

“Come on,” Arthur was saying cockily. “It wouldn’t be the first time now would it?”

“Arthur!” exclaimed Morgana. “I’m trying to protect you! She isn’t what she seems.”


Morgana hesitated. “I just have a feeling. It’s difficult to describe. I had a dream. A nightmare.”

Arthur laughed, ignoring the solemnity in the noblewoman’s tone. “You really are very sweet, Morgana.”

“You!” the prince chortled. “Your feelings; bad dreams. You don’t have to make this stuff up. You can tell me the truth. It’s obvious you like me.”

“Less and less by the second,” the woman growled.

“All right,” condescended Arthur. “Whatever you say.”
“You’re intolerable!” she exclaimed. “Just hope I’m wrong about her.”

She stormed towards the door and Merlyn wasn’t quick enough to hide before she appeared. The noblewoman stopped short at the sight of the younger girl but forwent anger in favour of urgency, grasping her hand and hissing, “Do not let Arthur and Sophia be alone together. Something bad is going to happen. You must believe me.”

Merlyn nodded, unable to do much else in the face of her intensity. “I do,” she said. “I’ll try my best.”

“Thank you,” sighed Morgana, though the tension in her brow remained. She gave a distracted nod and swept away.

Merlyn stood there, looking after her and experiencing the first inklings of apprehension.

Something in Morgana's eyes warned of her certainty and, despite Merlyn’s romanticism, she was more inclined to trust Morgana than an infatuated Arthur. The prince could be kind of oblivious.

The next morning, after working Sunstrider in the round yard, she collected Arthur's armour and headed to his room, intending to bring his breakfast in next. What she found, instead, was Arthur already dressed in a neat outfit, tightening the belt on his hips.

“You’re dressed!” she said in surprise.

“But – you’re supposed to be wearing these. Your father is bestowing a knighthood on one of your men this morning.”

“I’m giving it a miss,” he said uncaringly, checking his appearance on the back of a silver plate.

“Won’t the King mind?” she said and Arthur glanced in her direction.

“Not if you, er… cover for me again. By the way, thanks for yesterday. I heard you ended up in the stocks. Bad luck.”

“Bad – bad luck! They were throwing potatoes at me! It’s only supposed to be rotten fruit! I have tender spots on my head!”

“I’m not sure there are any hard-and-fast rules but, if it’s any consolation, I think it was worth it.”

She huffed but curiosity pushed her to ask, “So it went well?”

“Great,” said the prince, eyes faraway. “Fantastic. She’s incredible.”

“Are you… I didn’t think you were so romantic,” she said. “I mean, I knew you wanted to marry for love but –” she whistled lowly. “Should we be ringing the church bells?”

Merlyn's gut swooped when Arthur didn’t immediately deny it. His face was contemplative and that, in itself, sent alarms ringing. The prince would never think of marriage after only knowing a woman two days. He was spontaneous on a lot of things but regarding love, she knew he was very careful – which was why he hadn’t yet married despite his father peddling noblewomen his way.

“I’m, er, I think you should go to the knighting ceremony,” she said. “Show your support to your men and all that.”
The prince turned to her, expression betrayed. “So you’re not going to cover for me then?”

“I-I-I would but – but I don’t think your father would take my word for it this time,” she explained, scrabbling for ideas. “You only need stay for the twenty minutes in the Throne Room and then I will escort you and Sophia on your venture. You – you can take her on a picnic. They’re always pleasant later in the morning anyway.”

“But I promised Sophia a stroll through the woods,” said Arthur, a whiny edge to his voice.

Merlyn rolled her eyes. “I’m sure she’d enjoy a picnic at the end of that stroll. I’ll… I’ll even show you one of the glades I visit. It’s very beautiful, with some scented flowers and a small stream along its edge.”

Arthur’s blue eyes narrowed in thought and his lips pursed. “You say it’s beautiful?”

“Very,” she confirmed. “And you could, perhaps, use the chance to give her a flower or two. She’d like that, I think.”

“Very well,” he said decisively. “You tell me where this glade is and I’ll go to the knighting ceremony.”

“Oh – no,” she denied. “I-it’s too hard to explain, I’ll have to show you – a-and I’m sure you don’t want to sully Sophia’s reputation by not having an escort. I mean… if you really don’t want me there, I can call for her father… I’m sure he’d love to accompany you and his only daughter on your romantic walk.”

“No!” said Arthur, azure eyes wide with alarm. “No. You’re right, your presence would be helpful. I mean, I need someone to carry all the picnic gear, after all.”

Merlyn forced herself to smile. She had a feeling today was going to be just as horrible as the previous one.

Sophia was highly displeased with Merlyn's presence, showing more personality than the whole time the black-haired girl had attended her. And Merlyn didn’t like what she saw.

“Why’s she here?” Sophia asked Arthur, pretty features scrunched in distaste. “I wanted us to be alone.”

Merlyn involuntarily grimaced at the insinuation those words brought. Sophia had only known the prince two days! What a harlot!

“She wanders the forest nearly every morning,” soothed Arthur, touching the foreign woman’s hand. “She knows the best places for a picnic. I promise, you won’t even notice she’s there.”

Forced to concede, Sophia did with little grace, openly glaring at Merlyn before flouncing away. Arthur also glowered at her, but with pointedness. “You are a ghost, understood. I don’t want to hear you speak unless you’re spoken to.”

With an unhappy frown, she nodded and Arthur turned away in satisfaction. As they walked towards the lower town, the black-haired girl glanced back at the castle only to find Morgana watching them with worry. Merlyn nodded to her, a promise to heed her warnings, and after a moment, the highborn nodded back, understanding.
Merlyn was utterly disgusted. Weighed down with picnic gear, she made frequent pauses to catch her breath but it hardly mattered since the Prat and the Harlot strolled along as slow as a tortoise. Sophia frequently giggled, clutching at the prince’s arm like a barnacle while Arthur had eyes only for her, whispering into her ear and touching her lovely, yellow hair. Merlyn would have found it sweet on anyone else but on them, it was sickening. This was not the Arthur she knew – this was some lovesick fool.

“We’re here!” she called loudly, interrupting their whispers. She dropped her things uncaringly onto the grass and sighed in relief as she rolled her shoulders.

Arthur finally detached himself from Sophia and moved closer to look around. It wasn’t one of Merlyn’s more coveted areas – though she wouldn’t tell him that – but it was nice enough. Several trees had been felled an age ago, leaving a small clearing with spotted sunlight allowing grass to grow. A couple of metres away, a tiny stream trickled and forget-me-nots dotted its banks.

“Not bad,” said the prince. “Though with all your frolicking in the forests, I expected something a little grander.”

Merlyn scowled at him and said through gritted teeth, “the more fantastic ones can be reached by horse but our Lady Sophia doesn’t like them. Therefore, you can deal with what you’re given.”

“Don’t speak to me like that,” snapped Arthur and she dropped her head, biting her lip to contain her retort. If Sophia wasn’t there…

“Shall I set up, milord? Or do you want to impress your companion with your picnicking skills?”

“I’m sure you can handle it,” he said, turning away dismissively. “After all, you are the servant.”

Merlyn gritted her teeth harder and set about removing several sticks and rocks from the area before laying out the thick blanket on the grass. She didn’t bother spelling the ground dry; let their bums grow damp, she thought nastily.

She retreated to one of the trees while they ate, settling between the protruding roots and carving crude designs into a stick with her herb knife. She kept an eye on the couple but they were back to being nauseatingly flirtatious with each other. She thought some very mean things about them before she frowned at herself. Was she being petty because of jealousy? Was she jealous?

She cocked her head and peered at them, watching Arthur feed Sophia a grape. Her belly clenched with a hot, acidic sensation. Yup, she was jealous. But… Sophia glanced her way before murmuring something to the prince. He snorted then shot her a look also, obviously laughing at her. This wasn’t how she expected Arthur to act when he was wooing someone. He was being unnecessarily cruel and actually enjoying when Sophia did the same.

He had been an arrogant toerag when she first met him, but it was an act of bravado with his fellows: the big man with a big head. He had never been malicious and, thankfully, maturity had mellowed his act. However, this was… calculated and callous. Aiming to actually hurt.

“Merlyn,” called Arthur, disturbing the girl from her thoughts. She blinked and looked at where he still reclined. “We’ve finished our meal. You can gather it up and return to the castle. Your service is no longer required.”

She stared at him. “Uh… no,” she said. “I’m your escort. I’m supposed to remain with you.”
“We aren’t invalids, Merlyn,” he said, sitting up and glaring at her over his shoulder. Beside him, Sophia also glared. “We don’t need you spying on us.”

She frowned at him, perplexed. “It’s not spying if you know I’m here.”

Arthur’s expression was one of true frustration and he stood up, marching to her. He grabbed her arm and yanked her upright, ignoring her yelp of protest. “Why are you disobeying me like this?” he hissed, keeping his voice low. “I thought you wanted me with Sophia, but now you’re acting like-like some jealous harpy.”

She gaped at him and yanked her arm free. “You agreed to my presence because you didn’t want Sophia’s reputation to be ruined! Why are you changing your mind now?” an unbidden thought rose in her mind and she grabbed his wrist, choking out, “Are you going to have relations with her?”

“Of course not!” he growled, shoving her hand away. “I would never dishonour her in such a way.”

“Then why do you want me gone? I’m just as much her escort as your helper. An unmarried woman shouldn’t be alone with an eligible man, particularly one of noble birth.”

“She doesn’t want you here,” he snapped. “She says you annoy her, and frankly, you annoy me. So leave us in peace!”

She jerked back at his tone; hurt hitting her right in the heart. But she didn’t let it break her resolve, lifting her chin and setting her jaw. “You said that you would listen if I brought any suspicions forth, no matter how outrageous they may sound,” she said. “This is one such occasion. Please,” she implored. “Let me stay.”

He gritted his teeth and glanced back at Sophia. The blonde stared at him expectantly but he sighed heavily, turning to Merlyn once more. “Fine,” he bit out. “Stay. But remain out of my sight and only speak if you wish to spend another day in the stocks.”

He spun away and returned to his companion. She asked him something quietly and he replied shortly. Sophia gaped in anger and scowled at Merlyn furiously. The black-haired girl could have sworn her eyes flickered red but it was gone a moment later and she couldn’t be sure it wasn’t a trick of the light. Nevertheless, she was very careful to ghost through the trees at their right as they headed back to the castle. She’d had enough rotten fruit thrown at her for the week, thank you, and she didn’t want to test their patience.

Merlyn was forced to leave their side to return the scraps and dirty dishes to the kitchens but she moved as quickly as she could. She dropped the empty picnic basket in the cupboard and dashed back up the stairs with a tray of tea and biscuits. However, when she arrived in the hall, hairs rose all over her skin and her steps quietened instinctively. She snuck up to the door and heard Sophia murmuring. She leant closer to decipher the words.

“… Jamea mortharisher. Tuck von phrixur…”

Merlyn gasped. Sophia was using magic!

Without hesitation, she shoved the door open, the tray of tea and biscuits tumbling from her grasp and shattering on the ground. “Stop!” she cried. “Don’t harm him!”

Sophia jumped away from the prince, her red eyes returning to normal within a blink. Arthur’s, too, glowed unnaturally before returning to their bright cornflower blue. Merlyn held up a hand in warning as she demanded, “What are you doing to him?”
“What are you talking about?” asked Sophia, voice soft and frightened. “Arthur, your servant is mad.”

“Stop pretending,” snapped Merlyn. “I heard you incanting a spell. What sorcery was that? What have you done to Arthur?” indeed, the prince appeared confused and hazy, not reacting timely to their conversation. “Arthur?” she called more gently. “Are you alright?”

She tried to draw close but Sophia cringed behind him. “Don’t let her hurt me, Arthur,” she cried. Instantly, his hand went to the sword still attached to his belt. “Leave her alone, Merlyn,” he growled; “Or I’ll have you in the stocks.”

She stopped. “She’s a sorcerer, Arthur! She’s befuddled you or-or slowed your thoughts. She’s not what she seems.”

The blonde prince paused, staring at her. She put up her hands, placating. “You must trust me. I’m your loyal servant, Arthur. I would never harm or lie to you. She’s bewitched you with magic.”

“Don’t listen to her, Arthur,” crooned Sophia. “She’s jealous and spiteful. She would see me burn on the pyre so she can have you for herself.”

Merlyn snarled at her. “Arthur can choose his own love; he needs no help from me – except to save him from deceitful enchantresses! Wait until the King hears of your trickery. He hates sorcery more than anyone, and you’ve dared harm his son. You’ll be boiled in a vat of oil!”

“Merlyn?” muttered Arthur, still staring at her in confusion.

She stepped forward and grabbed his arm. “Come with me,” she murmured, keeping his focus on her. “Trust me, Arthur.” She moved her hand down to tangle her fingers with his, ready to tow him along.

Her distraction, however, allowed Sophia to send out a pulse of magic and Merlyn was sent soaring backwards. Arthur gave a fearful shout as she skidded over the table and tumbled to the floor, rolling into the tall dresser with a solid thump. She coughed for breath as she was winded but forced her bruised body to move. She pushed herself up on shaky arms and glared at the sorceress. The blonde woman was smirking, one hand stroking Arthur's hair. The man himself was unmoving, eyes glazed with a red haze.

“We’re in love, Arthur and I,” she said. “And we’ll not be ripped apart by the schemes of a jealous servant. Goodbye Merlyn.” Before the black-haired girl could raise her hands, Sophia slashed her staff at the dresser. With a deep groan, it fell forward.

Merlyn had barely a second to cover her head before the heavy piece of furniture slammed atop her with the force of a sledgehammer. She was unconscious before her face hit the floor.

“…rlyn… Merlyn…”

Everything ached. Each movement felt like someone was stabbing her back. Her head pounded furiously, the worst migraine she ever remembered having.

“… Merlyn…”

She tried to respond but drawing breath robbed her words and drew a cry of pain instead.

“G… Gw –”

“I’m here. Shh. Just rest and you’ll wake up feeling better.”

Her hold on consciousness fled.

Sometime later, memory came back to her in a flash. She shot upright with a gasp, only to double over with a cry. She slipped sideways but was saved from greeting the floor by gentle hands circling her body.

“Easy,” a male said, replacing her on the bed and bracing her against his chest. She curled into foetal position to try to escape the pain. Lancelot said, “Breathe, Merlyn.”

She sucked in obediently but faltered as her back screamed in protest. She jerked instinctively and whimpered when it only worsened the agony. Calloused hands brushed back her hair and Lancelot murmured above her, “I’m sorry. I know it hurts but you must breathe, Merlyn. Breathe.”

She shook her head against his torso, panting shallowly. “Here,” he said and she forced her eyes to open a crack to see a vial of some sort of concoction held before her. Lancelot touched the back of her head and she obediently opened her mouth for him to tip it forth. She tasted the familiar, bitter blend of the common pain relief tonic. Simply recognising it and knowing that her suffering was soon to be dulled had her feeling better.

“Arthur –” she choked out, eyes clenched together once more. “He’s in trouble.”

“Why do you think that?” asked Lancelot, arms tightening attentively around her shoulders.

“Sophia – she’s a sorceress. She’s bewitched Arthur somehow. She’s very powerful. I didn’t – I didn’t realise until she attacked me. I underestimated her.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” said her friend, brushing a hand over her knotted hair, careful not to touch the large egg swelling at her crown. “Do you know how she bewitched the prince?” he asked. “Was it a spell? Potion? Er… ritual?”

“Some… some sort of spell,” murmured Merlyn, eyes closed and feeling tired as the throbbing of her body slowly eased. “Both her and his eyes went red. But I don’t think… I don’t think she completed enchanting him then. Arthur appeared confused and still listened to reason. I don’t know… about now. How long was I out?”

“Several hours,” said Lancelot. “At first… at first Gaius feared the damage would kill you. When Arthur said that his heavy dresser fell on you… Gaius said that head injuries are nearly impossible to predict and you could be bleeding into your brain. That you’ve awakened means you aren’t, and for that, I’m grateful. You would be greatly missed, my friend.”

“As I would miss you in the afterlife,” replied Merlyn with a weak smile he couldn’t see.

Silence fell for a few minutes, Merlyn fighting to stay awake. Then Lancelot asked tentatively, “What can we do about Prince Arthur? Tell the King?”

“I’m not… I know not yet,” she said, forcing her tired eyes open. “I believe the spell will be broken with Sophia's death but I do not want to coldly murder her. But she is too powerful to be held by the King’s chains. Only a Magical Cuff would restrain her but I know not how to create them.”
“Such cuffs exist?” asked Lancelot with surprise. “Why does the King not possess them?”

Merlyn pushed herself up off her friend’s chest, body shaky but obedient to her commands. She squinted at him. “Magic is required to create them. Runes are inscribed in the metal and some sort of ritual is performed, though I know not more. The book I possess does not go into detail, only stating that it traps the sorcerer’s magic and, in some cases, their spirit. Such an idea unnerves me enough not to explore it.”

He dipped his head in agreement and Merlyn shifted her legs to climb out of bed. He lunged forward in alarm. “What are you doing?” he demanded. “Gaius said you are not to leave the bed until the swelling has gone down.”

She looked at him askance. “Arthur is in danger – whether he is about to sell his soul to a she-demon or die by her hand, I know not. I cannot lie in bed while he stands vulnerable to her whims.”


“Oh,” she said dumbly. “Well… I don’t really have one at this point. I need to check her out a little more before I know what to do. I know little about her father, Aulfric. He hasn’t done much but remain in his room, and shows little care for his daughter wandering the woods with a man – which is peculiar, is it not? That a nobleman cares not for the virtue of his daughter.”

“Indeed,” said Lancelot with a frown. “For many suitors, a woman’s virtue is one of the selling points of marriage eligibility.”

“So I’m not mad,” she sighed, pushing herself to her feet and wobbling in her hunched state. The brown-haired knight steadied her with a worried frown but she ignored it, gesturing to the floor on the other side of the bed. “My – my magic book is hidden under a loose floorboard. Would you – could you –?”

He nodded and moved around the bed, letting her guide him until his fingers found purchase on the correct slat. He peered inside interestedly and pulled out the cloth-covered tome. “Good hiding spot,” he said. “No one would think to look beneath the floor.”

He re-joined her and, together, they shuffled down the steps to the main chamber. The knight set her down at the table with the book and went to the window to collect the pail under the eaves. He paused in the act of unhitching it and stared at something in the dark.

“What is it?” Merlyn asked, standing up slowly and making her careful way to his side.

He helped her step up onto the crate below the window and pointed towards the lower town. Merlyn squinted through the gloom and distance, about to ask what he was pointing to when she saw it. Or rather, him. Aulfric.

He had his cloak obscuring his body and was spiriting through the shadows towards the gates but the peculiar staff in his hands gave him away.

Immediately, Merlyn turned from the window and clambered off the crate. She staggered and yipped as she jarred her body, almost falling before Lancelot steadied her. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“You must check on the status of the Prince,” she said, ignoring his question. “Make sure that Aulfric and Sophia haven’t coerced him to leave. I need to follow him to see where he’s going.”
Her brown-haired friend grabbed her arm, stopping her from moving away. “You can barely stand, how do you intend to keep up with him through a forest?”

“I’m… I’ll take my steed,” she said.

“Not hunched over like an old crone, you’ll not. You won’t be able to get on his back. Let me go in your stead. I can follow him much more quietly than a horse and I’ll report back to you what I see.”

Merlyn shook her head. “Aulfric could have magic also. You’ll have no defense if he catches you; it’s much too dangerous.”

“Then, if you must go at all, we will go together,” Lancelot decided firmly.

“But –” Merlyn cut herself off. “Fine! We haven’t the time to argue.” She shuffled towards the door with her teeth gritted but Lancelot gave a frustrated huff and stepped in front of her.

She stopped and demanded, “What are you doing?”

“We’ll never catch him at that speed,” he turned away so his back was to her and squatted. “Climb onto my back.”

“You want to piggyback me?” she asked.

Lancelot rolled his eyes. “If you wish to catch up to Aulfric then I suggest you concede this indignity.”

Merlyn snorted but awkwardly stepped closer. Lancelot hooked his arms behind her legs. She said, “Are you sure you’ll not tire? We know not how far – eep!” Lancelot stood with her in his arms and she latched onto him in surprise.

He chuckled deeply and hitched her higher. “I’ll have no trouble carrying your weight,” he said. “You are lighter than my chainmail. Have you been skipping meals?”

“No,” retorted Merlyn, a little insulted. “Are you calling me a bag of bones?”

“I would never be so rude,” he replied. “But…”

“Urgh! Definitely rude,” she muttered then kicked his sides gently. “Move on, my uncouth steed. Our journey begins.”

He laughed lightly but obeyed and they trotted down the stairs to catch up to Aulfric. The guards halted them at the main gate but Lancelot ignored their perplexed expressions and asked the head guard if anyone else had recently left the city.

“Nay,” he said with a faint northern accent. “You’re the first since the sun set, sir.”

“Nothing strange at all occurred?”

“Well… there was a moment where we all felt a little dizzy but it passed quickly and no one’s worse for wear.” The man changed the pike from one hand to the other. “We’ve been vigilant in our duties, Sir Lancelot.”

“Of that, I have no doubt, captain,” he said. “Your work has been exemplary. Merlyn and I will be back before the sun rises. Keep a lookout, for I have no desire to be arrowed tonight.”
“Er – yes, sir,” he said and snapped to attention, highly confused but unwilling to question one of higher rank. He and his fellows watched with bewildered faces as Lancelot marched away, Merlyn still perched like a child on his back. Favian, her closest guard friend, shook his head from the parapet. She waved at him.

Once they had disappeared into the forest path, Lancelot slowed. “So… any idea which way to go?” he asked.

“Give me a minute,” she said and closed her eyes. “Onhwirfedness seon, drýlác gerihtrece mín stíg.”

Her eyes flashed with heat and she opened them to find the world slightly warped. Energy had coloured the world into a miasma of effervescent trails like glittering slime left by snails and slugs. The plants and unseen animals pulsed with different rhythms, blues and greens and browns and yellows; an orange-coated hare darted through the underbrush, leaving a faint glowing trail, as if the colour was leaking from the creature’s body. The whole thing was almost overwhelming to her senses.

She must have made a disconcerted noise because Lancelot said, “What is it?”

“Oh, just –” she blinked a few times and her brain adjusted. She reached out a hand to the nearest tree and felt the slow thrum of evergreen life under her hand, deep and harmonised with the earth. “Just magic, is all.”

Lancelot snorted quietly and Merlyn pointed over his shoulder. “That way,” she said, seeing a sky-blue luminescent trail layered over the true path through the forest and somehow knowing it would lead to their quarry. Her knight friend didn’t argue and moved forward quickly, trusting her to guide him true. Just like a real steed.

They squatted in the shadows of the trees as Aulfric summoned an audience with someone unknown. Merlyn stared in awe as a blue glow grew over the lake’s surface and a hazy city became visible. She felt the magic pulsing through the air, vibrating through her very body. Several small sparks of light zoomed from the city and flew in the sky above Aulfric’s head but she was disrupted from her awe when Lancelot let out a gasp of pain.

Her head shot towards him and found his gaze locked on the ghostly city while his skin paled before her eyes. “Lancelot!” she hissed urgently, nudging him. He didn’t respond, stare unmoving, breath stilled.

She looked back at Aulfric but it wasn’t his doing. He didn’t know they were there.

“Lancelot, look at me!” she demanded, trying to grab his head but failing to turn it. “Stop looking at the city!”

She covered his eyes and the reaction was instant, he sucked in a ragged breath and collapsed against her. She grunted under his weight but guided his head to her lap, stroking his hair worriedly. “Are you well? Are you hurt? What happened?” her other hand hovered over his torso but she could find no ailment to treat.

“I – I don’t know,” he panted, voice hoarse. “I s-saw the city and it was as if it beckoned the very soul from my body, stealing my breath and squeezing my heart.” He shuddered. “I was unable to break away. Thank you,” he breathed, staring up at her. “You saved my life. Again.”
She shook her head. “You would not be here, were it not for me so there is no debt.” She looked back at the lake and found one of the blotches of light was hovering before Aulfric. She used her magic to slow time and saw it was not merely a spark but, in fact, a little humanoid creature. It was light blue and had very large, pointed ears, like a bat. Merlyn touched her own big ears and, for once, was grateful for their size. She would be humiliated with ones as large as theirs.

The sharp-toothed being was saying, “…punishment for killing another Sidhe is a mortal body and a mortal life. You will never be able to return to Avalon.”

“The crime was mine, not my daughter’s,” said Aulfric pleadingly.

“The gates of Avalon remain closed to your daughter… unless the soul of a mortal prince be offered up to them.” the thing grinned wickedly and Merlyn's wonder turned to horror. What a sadistic little creature.

However, Aulfric seemed pleased. “Thank you,” he said. “An immortal life for my daughter is all that I desire, so I promise you the soul of the greatest prince of all: Arthur Pendragon!”

The blue being had a peculiar grin on its face, not quite smug, not quite knowing. It said nothing, only bowed before it and its brethren vanished back into the ethereal city, which quickly faded from view. Once alone, Aulfric began laughing manically and Merlyn touched Lancelot's shoulder pressingly.

“The city is gone now,” she whispered. “Did you hear what was said?”

“Bits and pieces,” he murmured, rubbing an ear. “My heartbeat was pounding too loudly. Arthur is to be sacrificed for Sophia?”

Merlyn nodded, hunching down instinctively when Aulfric turned back towards the city, still chortling to himself and oblivious to his audience. “They aren’t human,” she breathed once she was sure the old man was gone. “The life of Arthur is payment for Sophia to return to Avalon – that city, I think. We must return to Gaius.”

Together, they winced and groaned their way to their feet before turning back towards the castle. Worriedly, Merlyn touched Lancelot's brow but he grasped her hand with a reassuring smile.

“I’m improving with every breath,” he said. “I am weary but no longer on death’s door. You need not fret.”

She forced a smile in return but kept a close eye on him as they ambled gingerly through the forest. She was still uncertain to what had transpired and feared a reoccurrence.

She felt both more relieved and more confused when Gaius explained upon their return: “Avalon. What you saw at the lake. It is the land of eternal youth. Mortals are only supposed to glimpse it at the moment before death.”

“It almost killed Lancelot,” she said, glancing at the knight beside her. His pointed look told her he was still okay. “But I was perfectly fine,” she added, mystified.

Gaius' eyebrow rose. “Extraordinary,” he murmured. “Lancelot is a mortal; he’s lucky to have survived.”

“And I?”

“You, Merlyn,” said the old man on a sigh. “Are something completely unique. As a creature of
magic, you may not appear as a mortal to Avalon’s defences, granting you immunity.” He paused for a moment then asked, “What did it look like?”

“How does it matter?” she said. “They’re going to sacrifice Arthur and we don’t even know who ‘they’ are yet.”

“We do now,” corrected Gaius, moving to his desk. Merlyn and Lancelot followed. “I found writing like this on the top of Aulfric’s staff. It’s Ogham, an ancient script. Abad ocus bithe. Duthectad bithlane. ‘To hold life and death in your hands.’” He met their eyes and explained, “From the writing on his staff and what you saw at the lake, I’m afraid I’m now certain: we’re dealing with the Sidhe.”

“That does not sound like a good thing,” she said, reading his expression.

“They’re master of enchantment.”

“How can I stop them?” she asked urgently. “I don’t think they can be reasoned with.”

“You are lucky to survive the encounter you had,” he said. “I would greatly argue against confronting them directly again. They are an ancient race that sees mortals as little more than a passing flicker. They are extremely dangerous.”

“I’ll be careful,” she assured him. “But I cannot let them kill Arthur.” She shook her head, confusion pinching her features. “Why is Sophia entrancing him this way? They’ve had ample opportunity to sacrifice him.”

Lancelot piped up tentatively, “Perhaps the ritual must be done at the gates of Avalon.”

“And some sacrifices require a willing heart,” added Gaius. “If Arthur is beguiled enough not to notice her attack you with magic, Merlyn, then perhaps he is enchanted enough to welcome death by her hand.”

Merlyn clenched her fists. “I’ll not let that happen,” she growled. “She’s stripped him of his dignity and wits. I’ll not let her steal his life also.”

She marched over to the table where her magic book remained open and flopped into a seat to scour its pages. There had to be something to defeat the Sidhe. Those arrogant blue insects would not take Arthur from her.

“I’ll visit the prince in the morning,” said Lancelot. “And remain by his side while you figure out a plan of action.” She shot him a look and he assured with a dip of his head, “I have complete faith in your abilities, Merlyn. You’ll find a way.”

She grumbled under her breath and turned back to her book. Lancelot bid them goodnight and headed for the door. She called, “Be careful, Lancelot. When I say Arthur has lost his wits, I mean he is almost under Sophia’s complete control. Don’t test his or her patience and if they want you to leave, obey. Please; I don’t think Arthur would forgive himself if anything happened to you while under that enchantress’s influence.”

“I’ll watch myself,” he said. “Just be sure you do the same. He’ll already despise himself for allowing you to be hurt. I have no wish to see him further anguished.”

Merlyn didn’t even realise she’d fallen asleep until she was jolted awake by Lancelot slamming
open the physician’s door and rushing inside. She snorted upright but her aching back protested and she slipped sideways, falling to the floor in a hunched heap.

“Ow,” she mumbled, hissing as she pushed her arms beneath her.

Arms slid under hers and scooped her up with ease. “You’re hopeless, Merlyn,” Lancelot said with affectionate exasperation.

“Yet you still call me friend,” she quipped with a strained breath as her back whined in pain. “Why did you charge in here so madly?”

He dusted her shoulders then shifted his position to meet her eyes. He said gravely, “The prince has gone to petition the King for Sophia's hand in marriage.”

“What!” she exclaimed. “This is not good. This is very not good.”

“I believe it was Sophia's suggestion,” he added. “Though, to what end, I cannot be certain.”

“Why would she request that if she’s going to kill him anyway?” she agreed. She looked around for her mentor. “Where’s Gaius?”

“I believe he’s doing his usual rounds as Court Physician,” he said.

“What time is it?” Merlyn asked, askance. She peered at the window to see sunlight shining in at a steep angle.

“Late morning,” the knight said and the black-haired girl blinked in astonishment.

“Why would Gaius leave me to sleep?” she muttered, annoyed. She rubbed a hand over her face and glanced at her friend apologetically. “I’ve found nothing on how to defeat the Sidhe. There’s hardly any lore on them except that they’re a highly reserved race that view humans as beneath them.”

“Was there mention about their staffs? They refuse to be parted with them for any length of time.”

“Actually, no,” said Merlyn thoughtfully, head tilted. “And it said nothing about Sidhe being banished as humans. Perhaps they concentrate their magic through them. Crystals are used to stabilise, and runes to focus. Maybe if we relieved them of the staffs, it would weaken them enough for me to… to stop them.”

“Perhaps I could draw close enough to slay them with steel,” said Lancelot. “Death is not an unusual companion to me and you should not be forced into actions you are not comfortable with.”

“No,” she denied. “They could kill you with a flick of their hand before you were anywhere near them. It has to be me. It’ll be okay. It’s not premeditated if its self-defence.”

Lancelot dipped his head in agreement and Merlyn was about to return to studying the magic book when her belly growled like a hungry beast. She put a hand to it and blushed. “I guess I haven’t eaten in a while,” she realised.

Her friend shook his head and put an arm around her back, guiding her to the door. “Then you should eat before you continue pushing yourself. How’s your head today?”

Word reached them of Uther's reaction to Arthur's request-turned-demand to marry Sophia, and
Merlyn knew, she knew, that this was Sophia's plan all along. With that blonde harlot whispering in his ear, Arthur was sure to do something reckless – like elope. She had to steal the Sidhe staffs.

Lancelot told Merlyn he was returning to Arthur's side but she worried that something bad would happen. “Whatever they have planned is reaching its climax. You have no protection if they decide to hurt you.”

“Sophia will not let you remain by the prince’s side, Merlyn,” he replied, guessing her thoughts. “You are a threat.”

“They don’t know I have magic,” she said. “They don’t know that I’m a threat.”

“It is not your magic I’m talking about,” Lancelot elaborated with a soft smile. “You have a strong bond with Prince Arthur; strong enough to upset Sophia's hold over his emotions. She will ensure you are unable to harm her plans, one way or the other.”

Merlyn chewed on her lip and finally conceded. “Fine. But I will still accompany you to his chambers. I’ll hide nearby and keep watch. If Sophia tries to use magic, I’ll stop her.”

Lancelot’s face displayed his unhappiness but he relented to her stubbornness. Together, they ventured to the Royal Wing.

The brown-haired knight knocked on the door to Arthur's bedchambers but the prince didn’t respond, even as they heard him moving around inside. Hesitantly, Lancelot opened the door and entered, Merlyn out of sight against the wall. Once he disappeared from her sight, she hurried a little further down the hall to another, smaller door. With a whispered word to unlock it, Merlyn slipped inside and shut it again.

Before her was the servant’s quarters; a small, unadorned, windowless room with only enough space for a narrow bed and small chest of drawers. Perpendicular to her position, the door into Arthur's main chambers stood, also locked.

Another quiet spell and the lock released, allowing Merlyn to crack it open and peer through to hear Lancelot speaking with Arthur. From her location, she couldn’t see them very well, buried into the far corner as the door was but noise travelled clearly. She looked out at Arthur's luxurious four-poster bed and listened as her knight friend tried to sympathise with the prince.

“Perhaps if you were to slow your courting, sire, give the King a little time to realise his heir has fallen in love…”

“My father will never see reason,” grumbled Arthur, sounding as if he was moving around. There were the faint clinks of chainmail and Merlyn frowned. Why was he wearing chainmail?

“You have only known the Lady Sophia a short while. It could be that the King is simply –”

She heard someone else enter and realised it was Sophia when she said in that false, quiet tone of hers; “Arthur, I wish to speak with you alone.”

Instantly, the prince said to Lancelot, “Leave us.”

He hesitated. “Honour demands I stay while –”

“Leave!”

A longer pause. “Of course, sire,” said Lancelot and there was soon a click as the main door was
“I told you people would try to keep us apart,” crooned Sophia.

“I know,” replied Arthur, tone softening. “I won’t let that happen.”

“We can elope together. Get away from this place, these people.”

“People…” murmured the prince, sounding unsure.

“Start fresh, somewhere where no one will judge us for our love. But we need to leave soon: tonight.”

“So we can be together. ‘Til death do us part.”

“‘Til death do us part,” she parroted and Merlyn thought it awfully ironic. Then Sophia incanted, “Túce hwón frec’úre, artur.”

“I don’t think so,” snarled Merlyn and leapt from the side room. “Stop your schemes, enchantress!”

Sophia jumped in surprise but Arthur remained gazing at the blonde woman dazedly. She recovered quickly and smirked at the black-haired girl. “You cannot stop me,” she said smugly. “I hold power beyond your wildest dreams.”

Merlyn's gaze flickered involuntarily to her staff and the woman’s smile grew at her awareness. Merlyn said, “I know what you plan for Arthur. I followed your father last night and I know you mean to sacrifice him to buy your way back to Avalon.” She shook her head in disgust while Sophia blinked in surprise. “You have no right to Arthur's life. He is to be King of Camelot and I will not let you change his future.”

“You have no choice,” remarked Sophia, looking her up and down. “Who are you but a mere peasant, one who has no voice and no power? You are weak. And in my way.” She lifted her staff but the main chamber door burst open and Lancelot appeared, his weapon drawn. Arthur flinched at the noise.

“Lay down your staff, sorceress,” ordered Lancelot. “And release Prince Arthur from your bewitchments.”

Sophia snarled at him and her eyes glowed red but a blast of magic hit the knight from behind before she could act. Merlyn shouted in alarm as Lancelot fell forward limply, revealing Aulfric framed in the entrance. Merlyn saw Lancelot's chest still rise and fall and relief made her weak. He was only unconscious, not dead.

Arthur frowned at the downed knight. “Lancelot?” he mumbled, taking a step forward. Sophia intercepted him, face upturned towards his own. Merlyn crept closer, eyes on the staff in Sophia's grip.

“Leave him,” she lilted. “He tried to tear us apart. He doesn’t wish you well, Arthur. Not like I do. Please, we need to leave before the King tries to sentence me to death again.”

“I’ll never let that happen,” insisted Arthur, cupping her cheek. “I’ll protect you with my life.”

“Then protect me far away from here,” she plead, leaning into his touch.

“No!” shouted Merlyn, taking a furious step forward. “Arthur, listen to me! She wishes to sacrifice
you to the Sidhe. If you go with her, you will die!”

Arthur frowned at her. “But we’re in love,” he said.

She shook her head with an apologetic expression. “What you feel isn’t love; its obsession created by a pretty face, and built upon with enchantments and lies.”

His features twisted into anger. “Who are you to tell me how I feel?” he demanded.

“I’m your friend,” she said, inching nearer. He scoffed.

“No, Merlyn,” he denied. “You’re my servant.”

She pushed down the hurt and reminded herself that it wasn’t Arthur speaking. “Remember your promise to me, Arthur. You said you would listen to my suspicions without bias. I need you to hold yourself to your oath; Sophia is not what she seems. Think about what she’s making you do; abandon your kingdom and people, leave your father without an heir. You would never do that! And particularly not for some harlot you met days ago!”

Arthur swallowed heavily, staring at her and Sophia glared. Behind them both stood Aulfric, staff ready to strike. Merlyn glanced at Sophia's, held loosely as she pressed into the prince.

The blonde woman stroked his face, drawing his eyes back to her. “Arthur,” she murmured, leaning up so her nose brushed his. “Come away with me.”

Merlyn lunged forward and managed to plant her fingers around Sophia's staff but the other woman managed to keep a hold of it when she pulled. With a shriek, she fell into Merlyn and sent them both tumbling to the ground. The black-haired girl landed with an, “Oomph!” but didn’t let the shock loosen her grip. A brief struggle ensued.

A blast of energy shot out of the crystal atop the staff like an arrow and Arthur's nightstand exploded as it was struck. Everyone ducked and in the fleeting distraction, Merlyn was grabbed from behind and torn away from the blonde woman. She gave an angry shout and kicked out her legs but the person squeezed her ruthlessly until she shuddered with a winded whimper, her tender back protesting.

Arthur snarled in her ear, “How dare you assault Sophia! I should have you flogged.” He threw Merlyn away and she landed awkwardly on her shoulder as she rolled.

She cried out as her aches flared with pain and shuddered, body too stunned to move. Slowly, the initial wave gave way to renewed throbbing and she coughed breathlessly as she curled on her side.

She took a breath and forced herself to focus, peering up to see Aulfric with his staff pointed at her. A jolt of fear ignited the magic in her veins and made her skin itch with static.

“You have irritated us enough,” the old man growled. “Time to die. Na mben sis!”

Merlyn squeaked and threw up her hands. Her magic pulsed forth in an invisible wave and the opposing energies collided with a startling explosion. Merlyn was thrown back, as were all the objects in the room, including Aulfric, Sophia and Arthur. The last thing Merlyn saw was the startled expression on the old man’s face.

Chapter End Notes
So that’s that. Also – I am so, so happy right now. I’ve been stuck on this stupid part of a chapter I’m writing for SIX WHOLE WEEKS! And I’m finally through it! Hooray! I had to get everything perfectly right because the tiny little details mentioned in it has repercussions that changes things later, but it just wasn’t coming out right! I had rewritten the whole chapter about six times and was ready to scrape my eyeballs from their sockets BUT I started posting this story pretty much as I reached that chapter and all the reviews I received seriously helped me push through the fiddly re-re-re-re-rewrites. So THANK YOU to those who reviewed, favourited and followed since the beginning, each one was a port in the storm I was weathering. One other thing; I have a few names for the griffin but I’m not too sure which to pick. There’s Kadriyah, which means Destiny in Arabic; Asteria, which is the Greek goddess of night oracles and falling stars; and my original – Nightfire. If anyone has a preference, I’d love to hear it… Cheerio.
“...rlyn. Merlyn, wake up. Merlyn!”

She let out a pained grunt when she tried to move and she felt someone press a hand to her shoulder to keep her still. “Do not move,” another voice commanded; Gaius. He said, not to her, “Go to the King and tell him of our guest’s duplicity. Merlyn is in no state to fight tonight.”

“But I am merely...”

“You are a Knight of Camelot by his very decree. You have just as much right as any other nobleman to call for audience. Now, please, tell him that Arthur has been enchanted by powerful beings disguised as mortals and has been spirited from the city. Go!”

Lancelot’s heavy tread quickly faded and Merlyn whimpered as she tried to move again. “Stay still, my girl. Your spine is too inflamed to determine if there has been any critical damage. Now, open your eyes, I need to check how severe your concussion is.”

She did so but immediately slammed them shut again. Everything was blurred and too bright, piercing straight into her brain with a razor-sharp intensity. She gasped and Gaius pressed a vial against her mouth.

“Drink,” he said and she obediently pursed her lips, only to grimace and turn her face away when the flavour hit her tongue.

“Yuck,” she rasped but he was insistent.

“It’s a pain tonic, Merlyn, not sweet tea.” She held her breath to gulp it down and shuddered as the texture coated her throat.

“Tell me if you can feel this,” the old man ordered and set about testing her for paralysis and numbness.

When the tonic began to take effect, Merlyn let out a relieved sigh at being able to think again and Gaius urged her eyes open once more. Light still stabbed at her skull but less potently, allowing the old man to check her pupils and vision.

“Definitely concussed,” he said disapprovingly, his craggy face unfocused above hers. “I warned you not to confront them again. You’re lucky you didn’t die!”

Guarding the Gates

Chapter Summary

Things happen

Chapter Notes

Real life is getting in the way so my posts will slow down for a little while. Enjoy.
Memories trickled back to the forefront of her brain and she sucked in an alarmed breath at realising the cause for her situation. She forced herself into a seated position before Gaius could stop her and groaned at the protests of her back and head. A high-pitched ringing deafened her hearing and she put a trembling hand to her temple.

“Arthur?” she hissed. “Sophia, Aulfric?”

“Gone,” he said. “Morgana saw them vanish and came to me. I searched for you and found Lancelot just waking by the door and you completely unresponsive. I feared the worst, Merlyn… my heart cannot take this stress every week. I thought you didn’t want me to find an early grave.”

“It’s not every week,” grumbled Merlyn drowsily. “And don’t say that. Most of the time, it can’t be helped.”

Though she had closed her eyes again while rubbing her head, she just knew Gaius had raised his eyebrow at her. It was a particular kind of silence. She finally blurted, “I’m sorry, alright. I don’t mean to, it just, kind of happens.”

“I know all too well, Merlyn,” he said. “Now we must get you to my chambers so you can rest somewhere more comfortable than the floor. Uther will soon send out a brigade to find Arthur and the Sidhe.”

“But it doesn’t matter if they find them, Gaius,” she said, peering up at where he was growing a little less fuzzy to her eyes. “They are powerful. Those knights will be going to a slaughter.”

“You are too injured to make it to the lake, Merlyn. You’ll pass out trying to mount your steed.”

At that moment, Lancelot returned, panting, and informed them of the King scouring the city for the trio. Merlyn turned to stare pointedly at her mentor. “Lancelot can aid me. We have doubled before and he knows where we must go. Perhaps we can beat the knights and stop this before they come to harm.”

Lancelot glanced between the two, unwilling to enter the feud. Eventually, Gaius relented with an aggravated sigh. He dug through his medical bag and withdrew two different brews. “This one will stimulate adrenalin to give you energy, but be cautious for after it wears off, you will crash, hard. This one is a slightly stronger pain tonic, but I warn you now, you will not know if you are severely injured until it is too late, so please, I beg of you, be careful.”

Merlyn nodded seriously and took the vials from him. The pain one, she downed immediately, but the other she left for when she was closer to Arthur. No need to drop from exhaustion during the middle of a fight.

Lancelot said nothing as he helped her up and they hobbled out the door. Merlyn knew he was displeased with putting her in harm’s way once again but he guided her honestly.

When he moved to the knight’s stables, Merlyn objected. “Sunstrider is the strongest and has the most stamina. He’ll be able to carry us both more quickly than any of the others.”

She took the lead, the pain tonic beginning to take hold, and moved to the royal stalls. Sunstrider nickered a greeting and she stroked his face, pressing her need for them to double into his thoughts. He shook his head and nipped the air near Lancelot in displeasure before giving in with a groan. “Thank you,” she whispered and led him from the stall.

Lancelot boosted Merlyn onto his bare back before using a fence to vault on behind. Sunstrider made his protests known with little pigroots as they headed out of the city. He settled when Merlyn
nudged him into a canter, enjoying letting his legs stretch more than disturbing his riders. The setting sun cast long shadows through the trees as they dashed along the path.

She slowed him once they neared the lake, throwing back the adrenalin tonic. They could hear the sound of Aulfric incanting and Merlyn quickly scrabbled off her steed, landing awkwardly on the ground before she dashed off through the trees.

“Merlyn!” hissed Lancelot only to give a short cry when Sunstrider tucked his head between his knees and gave one big buck. The brown-haired knight went soaring over the horse’s head and clattered to the ground heavily, winding himself. The stallion gave a satisfied snort then dipped his head to nibble some shoots of grass growing between the forest debris. Lancelot groaned pathetically from where he was sprawled.

Merlyn skidded to a halt at the last tree before the clearing and stared out as Arthur and Sophia stood waist-high in the lake while Aulfric chanted on the shore. “… Dondiay. Dobior colt oghum. Anvin. Flatau. Dondiay. Dobior colt oghum, Artur Pendragon…”

Arthur fell backwards into the water just as a troop of knights clattered on scene and Merlyn gave a frustrated growl.

“Stop!” Sir Leon called. “Cease your actions in the name of the King!”

Aulfric roared and slashed his staff, knocking horses over and sending knights flying. At least one man was trampled beneath flailing hooves and the black-haired girl moaned in remorse. Her eyes settled on Sophia's discarded staff and, with a hissed word, it soared into her hands. Most of the knights reformed their ranks and charged at the offensive sorcerer. From the water, Sophia held up her hand and cast several spells, knocking the knights down one by one.

Her eyes searched for her staff but Merlyn gave a feral snarl as she aimed it at Aulfric just as Sir Leon slashed his sword towards the man’s neck. “Swelt goldbeorth!”

Sir Leon’s weapon connected with the old sorcerer’s staff and Aulfric exploded an instant later with a sharp cry. Sir Leon appeared startled and Sophia screamed from the lake.

“Father! No, father!” she threw out both hands and the few remaining warriors were knocked forcefully into the trees.

Merlyn turned her new weapon onto the scheming enchantress and growled, “Og kelis!”

A blast of wind and Sophia exploded also, leaving the area silent and eerie. Merlyn dropped the staff and shoved off her jacket, running for the lake. None of the knights were rising quickly enough, and some were not rising at all.

“Arthur!” she cried as she dived into its chilly depths, gasping as the shock of the temperature stole her breath.

The water was surprisingly clear – though burning her eyes with ice – and the rays of fading sunlight pierced its surface with ribbons of light. She spotted Arthur quickly, resting peacefully at the bed of the lake and wasted no time hooking her hands under his arms then springing off the silty ground towards the surface.

She emerged with a gasp but quickly sunk again under the weight of the prince’s stupid chainmail. She tried to keep his head up and paddle but her own dipped beneath the water with her efforts. She flailed, swallowing liquid, and tried to rise but they both descended like stones.
Before she could panic, she felt someone grab a fistful of her shirt and haul her to the surface. She choked and sputtered as she breached the water but automatically pulled Arthur's limp head to rest on her shoulder. The water was in her eyes, stopping her from seeing her saviour but she was dragged steadily into the shallows where another pair of hands relieved her of the prince. She wiped at her eyes as her saviour moved his hands from the back of her shirt to hook under her arms and glanced up to see Lancelot’s face. He was dragging her ashore.

As the buoyancy of the water disappeared, she hunched over to burp up the water she’d swallowed, gravity making the liquid heavy in her gut. Lancelot braced her easily, rubbing her back as he soothed, “Easy, Merlyn.”

Once she could breathe clearly, she rubbed her face and squinted at her friend. He smiled at her tightly as he looped one of her arms around his shoulders and hauled her the rest of the way from the water. She staggered in her soggy dress and Lancelot guided her to where the prince lay prone on the shore, surrounded by several of his knights.

She let herself fall to her knees beside him and quickly checked him over. He wasn’t breathing.

“Come on, you clotpole,” she growled, pushing on his unmoving chest. “Breathe.” She forced all her weight on her hands and felt a little give but not enough. Desperately, she tilted his head up and plugged his nose, sucking a breath before pushing it into Arthur's mouth.

The knights exclaimed in confusion and outrage as she effectively kissed the semi-dead prince before them but she worried not, for Arthur's body spasmed beneath her hands.

She pulled away just as he vomited a stream of water and quickly turned him on his side so it could drain. She met the astonished gaze of Sir Leon and explained sheepishly, “It’s an experimental treatment. It’s, er… it’s been banned in the eastern lands because they believe the breath holds your soul and giving it to another is demonic. I-I hope the King doesn’t think the same.”

The curly-haired knight peered down at where Arthur was unconscious but his breath steadying. “He will be grateful his son is returned to him alive. You have done the kingdom as great service tonight, Merlyn.” He shook his head and mumbled in awe, “The Kiss of Life…”

Merlyn started flagging halfway back to the castle, her aches and pains throbbing worse and worse with every beat of her heart while exhaustion began to suck her under even though she was astride her steed. She was almost too tired to shiver in her wet clothes.

Her head drooped and she would have slipped sideways to a very uncomfortable fall if Lancelot hadn’t wrapped an arm around her from behind and braced her against him.

“Is she well?” asked Sir Leon concernedly from his own steed, though Merlyn couldn’t summon the energy to reassure him. Not even to open her eyes.

Lancelot answered, “She is feeling the consequences of the past few days. She was attacked alongside myself when we discovered the Tír-Mòr’s treachery, for the second time in two days.” she felt a light hand rest on her brow. “She persuaded Gaius to feed her some concoctions that would numb her pain and tiredness until Arthur was found. She is much too stubborn for her own good.”

Merlyn wanted to argue, to defend herself, but their words garbled in her ears and the world fuzzed into nothingness.
Arthur awoke the next morning with a slight headache, confusion and his father by his side. The latter explained the past few days and memories trickled back into place, hazy with the fog of bewitchment. He sat up in alarm when he recalled Merlyn's incidences but the King assured him of her wellbeing, being treated in the Court Physician’s chambers. Arthur was dissatisfied with his simple answers but forced himself to leave it be until his father exited to deal with the fallout.

“You have an extraordinarily loyal servant,” he mused before he left. “She went to great lengths at great personal risk to ensure your safety – and it isn’t for the first time.”

“Merlyn is selfless and courageous,” Arthur replied, a little bemused. “And she serves this kingdom well.”

“Hmm,” he said, tapping the doorframe before leaving. The blonde knight frowned at where he had been before pushing himself from his bed – the only piece of furniture in the devastated room left mostly undamaged. He was distracted from his slow escape, however, when Lancelot stepped inside the open doorway, looking as noble and proud as any knight.

Arthur winced as more memories cropped up; “I remember Sophia's father knocking you out,” he said in lieu of an apology.

“I am well, sire,” the brown-haired knight said with a small bow. “I came to inform you of the evening’s events.”

“No need,” he said, straightening up and trying to appear dignified despite his body’s aches. “My father already updated me.”

Lancelot dipped his head. “With all due respect to the King, My Lord, he does not know the full story.”

“Oh,” queried the prince, cautious.

The knight’s rich chocolate eyes locked onto his own sky-blue ones and said candidly, “You were saved by the actions of a sorcerer, sire.”


Lancelot lowered his gaze once more. “They did not identify themselves. However… they wore the same red cloak as the one who aided in the defeat of the griffin. I believe them to be one in the same, My Lord.”

“This makes no sense,” said Arthur, shaking his head. “Why would a sorcerer help me, then or now? What have they to gain from it?” he ran a frustrated hand through his hair.

“Perhaps…” Lancelot trailed off then said. “Never mind, sire. I wish not to talk out of turn.”

“Speak,” the prince commanded and the brown-haired knight clenched his gloved fists in trepidation.

“I thought, perhaps… the sorcerer is trying to show you that not all magic is evil.” at Arthur's dark expression, Lancelot backtracked. “It was merely a thought, My Lord; a fanciful explanation.”

“I warn you not to utter such ideas while in the King’s presence,” warned the prince. “Sympathisers of sorcery are treated with the same prejudice as the magicians themselves,
regardless of status."

“Of course, sire,” said Lancelot, bowing low. “Forgive my impertinence.”

Arthur waved his contrition away. “I value the discussions of a trusted comrade,” he said. “You shared with me your thoughts and now I will share with you my truth: sorcery and magic are corruptive, right down to one’s very soul. Whether a man has good intentions when studying the dark art or not, he will always end up the same – greedy, selfish and hateful. Magic opens pathways that should not be explored by mortals and to traverse them brings only wickedness. Which is why my father is so strict with his judgements. Sorcery creeps through the shadows and only fire can burn it away.”

“I understand, sire,” the new knight said. “I’ll not suggest it again.”

The prince nodded. “See that you don’t.” he scratched at his stubbly face and stared out the window before asking, faux nonchalantly, “Truly, how is Merlyn? I remember…” he shook his head and looked down at his feet. “I remember standing by while she pled for me to trust her; remaining motionless as she was harmed right before me.”

“She… has not yet woken from the ordeal last night,” revealed Lancelot carefully. “Gaius says that it is a result of the tonics she drank rather than any life-threatening affliction.”

“Tonic?” queried Arthur with a frown.

Lancelot swallowed, knowing the prince would not like it. “She was determined to join the hunt for you, sire. She would not take no for an answer, so Gaius gave her a potion to numb her aches and another to boost her energy. It was what allowed her to dive into the lake after you, My Lord, when all the knights had been knocked down by Sophia. Had she not acted so quickly, I know not if you would be here now.”

“And why is she laid up now because of them?” he demanded. “What effects did they have?”

“Nothing long lasting, I assure you, sire. Only… the Court Physician will be able to explain better than I.”

“Then let us go,” the prince said and marched passed Lancelot and out the door. The brown-haired knight stared after him for a moment before shaking his head and following after.

Merlyn, apparently, had mild swelling of the brain due to exacerbating her concussion and exhaustion from the energy booster she’d downed to chase after him. Arthur sat down in the stool beside the patient bed Gwen vacated for him and shook his head at his senseless maidservant.

“You are a complete idiot,” he muttered and, spotting some fever sweat upon her brow, squeezed out a cloth in the bowl of water nearby to dab it over her face.

Behind them, Gaius and Gwen shared a surprised glance but said nothing. The handmaiden bid him a quiet farewell and left with Lancelot, who was watching the proceedings from the doorway. Gaius watched the brown-haired knight rest his hand upon Gwen's back as she passed and shook his head in bemusement. His blue eyes tracked back to the prince tending his maidservant.

Perhaps there was something in the water causing a different kind of enchantment.

He shook his head at his fanciful thoughts and quietly left the prince to care for his ward while he
attended to his duties. After all, if he couldn’t trust Arthur Pendragon to act with decorum around his niece then he could trust no one with her at all.

Merlyn awoke shortly that evening before falling into a true healing sleep. She stirred the next morning with a headache but not much else, which Gaius attributed to her magic. Once he was satisfied with her recovery, the old man set about thoroughly berating her, pacing as he ranted about her recklessness, impulsiveness, impetus and a host of other similar words. She let him go silently, eyes glazing over as she waited for him to calm. Then something he mentioned struck an odd memory.

“Wait – what? Morgana came to you with suspicions due to a dream?”

Gaius’ temper was halted and he drew a heavy breath that stretched into a worried sigh. “What do you know about seers?”

Merlyn's eyes narrowed in suspicion and she struggled to sit up in the bed. “Not much,” she said slowly. “They're supposed to be able to see the future – like prophets.”

“It’s said to be an innate ability. Those who have it are born that way. Some aren’t even aware that what they see is the future. It comes to them in their dreams.” Gaius neared and lowered himself slowly onto the stool beside the infirmary bed.

“Morgana's dreams… surely you don’t think…”

The old man sighed, rubbing his brow. “I don’t think it. I fear it. I’ve been watching Morgana since she was very young. And, though I tried to persuade myself otherwise, I realised that some of the things she said she’d dreamt came to pass. I’ve kept it secret from Uther, of course. The gift of prophecy is too close to the work of magic.”

“Do you…” Merlyn leant closer to Gaius, even though they were alone. “Do you think she could have magic also?”

Her mentor looked down at his hands. “It is unclear. I’ve read that many who are seers also possess magic but it never states if it is learned or instinctive like your own. I can only hope, for her sake, that she does not.”

“Would it be so bad?” asked the black-haired girl; a little hurt. “I could help her with control and teach her what I’ve learned.”

“No, Merlyn,” ordered Gaius sternly. “To wish for such a thing is to wish for her to live in fear. If Uther ever found out, things would never be the same again.”

“But I do it every day,” she argued. “I have nightmares of Uther sentencing me to death, of the pyre, of Arthur standing by while I burn. But I manage because I have embraced who I am. I live in fear but I do not regret. I am magic and I will die magic, any way it comes to me. Living in fear of the unknown is worse than any knowledge.”

“And you would decide for Morgana, would you? Strip her of any choice by forcing your ideals upon her? Your hubris astounds me, Merlyn.”

“No!” she defended, stunned by his attack. “I didn’t mean it like that – I would never – I’m not like that! Morgana should… she should know. She should know her potential. But I would never influence her like that.”
Gaius dropped his head, craggy face pinched with an expression she couldn’t decipher. “I know you wouldn’t knowingly, Merlyn, but these times are dangerous, and risking both yourself and the ward of the King will only bring ruin.”

“But what of her premonitions?” questioned Merlyn weakly. “She helped save Arthur's life. Is that not reason enough to tell her the truth? She and I could work together to protect him. We could save more lives with her early warnings.”

“Meddling in future events without true context can lead to horrible consequences, Merlyn. Neither you nor she are wise enough to navigate such murky waters. Now banish these ideas from you head. Morgana must never find out the truth. For everyone's sake.”

The next morning, Gwen was carrying more flowers to her Lady’s bedchambers and told Merlyn with a sad smile that Morgana was still suffering night terrors despite Gaius’ nightly tonics. Merlyn watched the curly-haired maid trot up the stairs to the Royal Wing and felt horribly guilty for giving into her mentor’s demands.

But, with a grit of her teeth, she turned away and went to fetch Arthur's morning meal, and, finally, request a leave of absence to go search out the young griffin. Blast all these incidences ruining her plans. No one had better harm the prince while she was gone or there would be hell to pay.

Arthur and Merlyn were awkward around each other that morning, having not spoken since that final incident with Sophia in that very room. Thankfully, it had been refurbished and all traces of the magical explosion removed. She hadn’t thought about it until she arrived but she realised there was a very real chance he remembered her using sorcery. Admittedly, the magic had been invisible until it touched the offensive spell but the incident brought questions forth; questions she hoped the prince would not think to ask.

“Merlyn,” said Arthur suddenly and she jumped in surprise from where she was straightening his bedcovers. She stared at him and he stared back, playing with his food instead of eating it. She gulped. Rarely did Arthur not enjoy his breakfast and always it was because of something grave. Uh oh! She thought. He knew.

“I just wanted to say… that I’m sorry for the way I acted while influenced by Sophia. I know I wasn’t myself but I should have known something was wrong. I should have fought it more; done something.”

Merlyn blinked in surprise. “You’re… sorry? You’re not – you don’t…” she shook her head and sighed in relief. Then she said happily, “You were fighting her enchantment. Several times you broke free enough to listen to me. The only reason she kept you subdued was because she was present and could re-ensnare you immediately. She was a creature of deception and disguise, Arthur, there was nothing more you could have done.”

“Magic appears to always be getting the better of me,” muttered Arthur, stabbing the sausage on his plate. “I have no defences and no awareness of it. How can I battle something that ghosts through shadows and distorts my own thoughts without notice?”

Merlyn ducked her head and finished fluffing a pillow. “I know not, sire,” she merely said, though her mind was churning with similar questions. Could a mortal man learn to defend against magic? was there a way to learn?
Silence fell between them until Arthur finished his meal and sat back to ruminate. Merlyn bit her lip and neared him, sensing the opportunity.

“Arthur,” she said, twisting her fingers together as she tried to form her words. “I was wondering – I mean, I would like to request –” she licked her lips, cursing her verbal trips. “I want to visit my mother,” she blurted. “I-I-I mean, I would like to request leave so that I can visit my mother. In Ealdor.”

The prince blinked at her, surprised, before a frown drew his brows together. “If this is because of the violence you have suffered these past days…”

“No,” exclaimed Merlyn, rushing to assure him. “No, nothing like that. I’d been hoping to talk to you for a week now, only things kept getting in the way. It’s just… it was always my mother and I together, and now I’m here, she is alone. I-I understand that it is a late request and it will remove me from your service for maybe two weeks but I just – I want –”

“Merlyn,” said Arthur and she stopped talking. “Of course you can visit your mother. You saved my life at great risk to your own – and not for the first time – take as long as you need. You will still be employed when you return.”

The black-haired girl smiled in relief and gratitude. “Thank you, Arthur. I shan’t be more than two weeks. I’ll be here for your birthday, I promise. Just don’t go and get yourself killed before then.”

The prince scoffed. “I think I should be warning you of the same,” he jested. “It seems you’re the one who keeps throwing herself into danger. I, at least, know how to wield a weapon.”

“I… have strategies,” she defended weakly.

“Running headlong into peril is not a strategy, Merlyn. It’s stupidity.”

She gaped in affront. “It is not I who runs into problems without a plan, Arthur. Speak to me when you have saved my life as much as I have saved yours.” She stuck her nose in the air haughtily and the prince snorted, shaking his head fondly.

“I believe that day may come sooner than you think with your recent track record,” he said with a wry smile.

“We shall see,” she replied cockily then swept towards the door.

“Oh – there’s to be a celebration tonight,” he called, forcing her to stop her haughty retreat. “You’re to be in attendance as a guest. I’m sure Morgana will enjoy dolling you again if you ask.”

She looked over her shoulder, frown on her face. “A celebration? Whatever for?”

He raised an eyebrow. “We conquered an enemy of Camelot. Is that not cause for celebration?”

“Well – yes,” she admitted. “But why am I needed. And as a guest? That’s a little weird.”

“Merlyn,” drawled Arthur, leaning back in his chair in exasperation. “Stop asking questions and just be glad you don’t have to be there to refill my cup. Honestly.”

“Alright, fine,” she said, glaring. “But this is out of the ordinary and you know it.”

He rolled his eyes and waved her off so she stuck out her tongue and left. It seemed she was to start her quest tomorrow on a shortage of sleep. Not the best way to start an adventure, but also not the
The party was in full swing when Morgana and Merlyn swept in with Gwen, fashionably late like the highborn preferred. Merlyn edged off to the side with the maid while Morgana moved straight through the middle to greet the King, a smug smile revealing her pleasure at having the crowd’s attention. The black-haired girl couldn’t understand how she thrived under such scrutiny but couldn’t begrudge her the power she wielded at that moment. Even Arthur’s blue gaze was intent on tracking the flow of Morgana’s deep blue skirt and smooth, exposed back.

Merlyn’s own back felt the breeze keenly, bare as it was with her costume. Morgana had not allowed her to wear the other dress the highborn had gifted her – the more promiscuous one with the tight corset – and instead pulled one from her own wardrobe. Merlyn’s body had been developing without her notice. She was still slender but her hips had widened and her small breasts had budded a bit more. Her body wasn’t as womanly as Morgana’s or Gwen’s but it was further along than Merlyn had realised, busy as she was with more important things.

Thankfully, her borrowed dress was still conservative; high across her chest and clasping behind her neck with full sleeves encasing her arms. It washed over her breasts loosely before the stitching gathered beneath them to run smooth over her belly, keeping the fabric close to her skin so the low cut exposing her back to the world didn’t also display her front if she leant forward. Goodness knew how humiliating that would be. It brushed her slippers but wasn’t long enough to trip her, which Merlyn was eternally grateful for. The colour was a beautiful soft lavender that Gwen said contrasted her creamy skin wonderfully and brought out the pale pigments in her rich blue eyes. She was glad the maid was confident in Merlyn’s appearance because dressed up like this always made her aware of every one of her flaws.

She touched her neck where a beautiful silver choker covered her scar, the delicate metal woven to looked like lace against her skin before coming into a spiral that cradled a polished pearl in the hollow of her throat. It was understated in its opulence but clearly the jewellery of a princess – not that Morgana seemed to really care about social structure all that much.

Merlyn picked up a goblet of water just as the King stood up in his chair, creating a hush through the crowd. His voice rang clearly through the hall as he spoke, slowly walking around the royal table to the edge of the dais. “This week, we were faced with a familiar evil disguised in a new form. Sophia and Aulfric Tír-Mòr, come to seek the aid of Camelot, were not of the noble birth they claimed.” There were a few gasps from the highborns who had not yet been informed and a murmur of astonishment. The King continued. “They bewitched my son with their sorcery, coerced him from his home in the dark of night and tried to sacrifice him for their nefarious deeds. But Camelot’s strength won out and their evil lives no more. A toast,” he raised his goblet. “To a successful purge of the evil in our midst.”

“Hear, hear,” someone called and the crowd followed suit, taking a sip. Gwen appeared by her side, dark features split by her white smile. Merlyn wondered what had her so happy.

“Now,” continued the King, “The acts of the mighty should be celebrated but it should not overshadow the acts of the small. The measure of loyalty is not weighed by the status of the person, but by the importance of the deed and the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the wellbeing of another. Arthur’s servant has shown time and again the strength of her devotion, even in the face of adversity. And I, as King, cannot belittle such fidelity. Merlyn of Ealdor, come.”

Merlyn stared, frozen in shock, eyes wide and breath caught, as many faces turned to her. Surely she heard wrong. She was a servant – the King didn’t even know her name.
But he did. And he’d called her forth. And she wasn’t moving.

Gwen gave her a shove and the momentum started her walk on stiff legs towards the King. The crowds parted before her and sealed behind, giving her no hope of fading into shadow. She looked at the King but his regal features were too frightening to bear. Her gaze slid across to Arthur, who was watching her impassively, though a smug grin pulled at the corners of his mouth. She narrowed her eyes. He knew. He knew this was to happen and he left her to be caught unawares. That – that – clotpole! He was so going to pay for this.

She halted before the King, his body rising above her own as he stood on the dais and she remained on the communal floor. She didn’t know what to do with her hands, the limbs feeling like big awkward weights on her sides, so she clasped them in front and tried to appear stately.

“Your Majesty,” she said to the King, fumbling through a curtsey. “My Lord,” she aimed at Arthur, trying to contain her resentment until later. His amusement told her she hadn’t quite succeeded.

The King said, “You have shown bravery beyond measure this past week and in the months since you were assigned your position as Arthur’s servant. Time and again you have risked life and limb to ensure my son’s safety. I feel this must be rewarded.”

“Oh –” she stuttered. “There’s no –”

“From this day forth, you will be named a Friend of Camelot. From today to the day you die, you will always be welcome within our borders.” He turned to Arthur who had produced a small red pillow holding silver medallion with the crest of Pendragon. He picked up the pendant and lifted the necklace over her head, forcing her to tuck her chin so he could bestow it upon her. It came to rest just above her breasts, two inches in diameter and weighed with intricacy. The crowd erupted into applause while Merlyn stared at the King, stunned as a mullet. Arthur moved down the steps to her side and turned her so she faced the clapping nobles. His hand rested warmly on her back and she was jolted from her shock by the warm sensation of skin on skin.

She sucked in a deep breath and muttered to Arthur, “Why didn’t you tell me this was happening, you dunce?”

He smiled at the crowd and murmured back, “The look on your face was priceless. I’ve never seen you look so stumped.”

She caught Lancelot’s eye in the crowd, standing by Gwen, both with wide, proud smiles. Gaius stood on the other side, beside a pillar, wiping away a tear. She turned to Arthur and his hand slipped from her body. “I’m going to get you back for this,” she said. “Just you wait.” She curtseyed him then turned to the King to do the same.

“I look forward to it,” Arthur replied cockily as she melted back into the throng. She shot him a glare. He had no idea of the thoughts brewing in her head. If he did, he would know to be cautious of the next few meals she served. Game on, buddy.

“So, what does being a Friend of Camelot actually mean?” Merlyn asked Gaius later that night. The old man was heading for bed and Merlyn was eager to do the same, but questions were rolling at the forefront of her mind.

“A Friend of Camelot has the right to bring forth concerns to the court. And you cannot be
banished, even by the King, unless you have broken the law. If someone harms you, it is taken as an assault on Camelot.” He shot her a stern glare, eyebrow raised. “However, that does not give you leave to throw yourself into danger. You are not a noble and you are not supported on the same level.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, tilting her head at him.

“If you are attacked by a powerful ally or – god forbid – kidnapped by another kingdom, you are not assured the payment of ransom or war.”

Merlyn scoffed. “I know that!” she said. “Though why anyone would kidnap me is anyone’s guess.”

“You’d be surprised,” Gaius muttered darkly and she didn’t press him to elaborate, not really wanting to know the motivations of the shadow community.
Before she headed to the north in her search for the griffin, Merlyn had decided to actually visit her mother. Just an overnight stay to check on her and see Will – who she guiltily realised she hadn’t thought about much at all since she’d been gone.

She arrived at Ealdor around midday the second day but was cautious in her approach, unsure of her welcome by the villagers since she’d caused an earthquake before she left.

No evidence of the incident remained. All the half-crumbled houses that had neighboured her mother’s old home had been repaired and the ruins at the epicentre had been cleared and put to other uses. A pen now stood where the hut once had and several goats were tethered inside, munching on the growing grass. Merlyn felt a wrench in her gut at the sight but pushed on, turning towards Will’s home.

She led Sunstrider up an alley to avoid the markets on the main thoroughfare and kept her eyes lowered to avoid the few people that were in the nearby houses. She wondered if they recognised her. She wondered if she had changed that much. She felt like she had but that could be all in her head. She felt like a stranger in a stranger’s land; unwelcome, ill fitting, ostracised. She almost snorted at the irony. Not much had truly changed then.

The familiar small abode of Gisla, Will’s mother, came into sight quickly and Merlyn eagerly picked up her pace. Sunstrider followed obediently, ears flicking alertly, and she drew him up in the shade along the side of the building, tying him to the small pen holding the single sheep inside. The golden stallion leant forward to sniff the woollen creature then lifted his top lip as he took in the unfamiliar lanolin scent. She giggled at his antics and left him with a pat, confident that he was content for now.

She rounded the side of the house and stopped at the front door, taking a deep, fortifying breath. She raised her hand to knock and was thoroughly startled when a woman’s voice said from behind her, “Merlyn?”

The girl jumped and spun around to see her mother standing on the path with a basket of herbs in her grasp. She was staring at her daughter, shocked.

Merlyn felt her face split into a wide smile as happiness swelled in her breast. “Hello mama,” she said a mite sheepishly.

The woman dropped her basket and launched at her. “Merlyn!” she cried happily, enfolding her in a tight hug before leaning away and cupping her cheeks. “My beautiful girl. I’m so happy to see you.”
“And I you,” replied Merlyn, clinging to Hunith's shoulders. “I missed you mama.”

Her mother drew her back into a hug and Merlyn buried her face in her neck, breathing in the scent of herbs, soapwort and sanctuary. Right then, the sixteen-year-old was home.

It was late afternoon by the time Will returned from the fields, dirty, sweaty and tired. Merlyn barely gave him enough time to get in the door before she was there with an uncontainable grin.

“Hello,” she said and his head jerked up in astonishment.

“Merlyn,” he breathed, blue eyes huge.

“In the flesh,” she said, her arms out wide. He took that as his cue to throw himself at her, clutching her to him and rocking them in his exuberance.

“You’ve returned,” he said against her hair. “You’ve finally come back.”

Guilt besieged her as she realised he believed she was there for good. “Will,” she murmured into his chest. “I’m not staying. I’m sorry, but this is only a visit.”

He pulled back, staring down at her questioningly. “What do you mean?”

“Well…” she laughed a little to herself. “I’m actually on a quest,” she admitted.

His frown deepened in confusion and she elaborated; “Camelot was attacked by a sorceress through means of a griffin. I was forced to slay the beast but in its mind, I saw it had a, er, a cub I guess you would call it. I’m tracking it down and making sure Nimueh will have no chance to use this one as she used its sire.”

“And will you return here once your journey is done?” asked Will. “I’ve missed you. Not a day went passed where I did not think of you.”

He brushed back some of her hair tenderly and Merlyn felt awful. She could hardly say the same. Perhaps it was because of the craziness of Camelot; there wasn’t much time for introspection or reminiscing, after all.

She shook her head at herself. She was making excuses and being unfair to Will.

She ducked her head. “Perhaps a short walk before dinner?” she asked and something in her tone must have clued Will in to her solemnity.

He nodded. “Mother!” he called over her shoulder. “Merlyn and I are going to collect some firewood. We’ll be back shortly.”

“Of course, dear,” replied Gisla from the minute kitchen. “Take your time.”

The pair trudged from the house and towards the forest, not speaking until they were away from the village.

“So how was Camelot?” asked Will, kicking a stick from his path.

“It’s wonderful. So full of life and energy,” she shared, feeling a smile pull at her lips as she reminisced. “Even at night, when everyone is resting, I look out my window and see the firelight twinkling like stars all throughout the lower town. And I’ve learned so much. Not just about –
about magic, but on knights and medicine and daily life in a castle. There’s just… so much to see all the time.”

“So you’ve started using your magic again?” her friend asked, peering at her.

Merlyn looked down. “Not at first I didn’t,” she admitted. “I tried so hard to be good but…” she shook her head and met his gaze with a wry smile. “It seems I have a destiny to unite the kingdoms of Albion with my gifts.”

Will stared at her, unsure if she was jesting. “What?” he asked with a small laugh.

She laughed too. “I met a dragon in Camelot’s dungeons,” she explained, enjoying the incredulity on Will’s face. “He is magnificent; golden and wise, but also a little… condescending, I suppose. He is the one who told me that I was given my powers for a reason. That I would help Arthur Pendragon unite the lands and bring magic back.”

Will scoffed. “Are you sure the overgrown lizard isn’t senile?” he asked. “How are you supposed to help some arrogant prince with anything? You’re a peasant. No jumped up aristocrat is going to listen to a commoner, no matter their skills.”

“Prince Arthur is different,” said Merlyn, careful of Will’s prejudices. “He’s a little arrogant but he does care for his people. He tries to be fair and just.”

Will raised an eyebrow at her, askance, and she realised she hadn’t told him she was his maidservant. She did so and the boy stopped short in surprise.

“You’re his personal servant?” he asked, something judgemental in his tone.

“Yes,” she admitted, frowning at him.

“You – a woman – are serving a man, one who has nearly the highest authority in the kingdom.”

“… Yes,” she repeated, even more confused.

“Has he ever – is he… he hasn’t… he hasn’t taken advantage, has he?” he asked.

“In what way?” she asked, tilting her head. “I mean, he makes me do chores that I know aren’t usual for a personal servant – like cleaning his stables for one, though Tyr is a good sort and helps me out when he can. I’m just glad he’s never forced me to tend to his chamber pot.” She shuddered. “Heavens if I’d be able to look at him the same after a trauma such as that.”

“Eww, Merlyn,” grumbled Will and she scrunched her nose apologetically. He sighed and shook his head fondly. “You haven’t changed at all,” he said. “You’re still utterly oblivious to certain things.”

“Hey!” she cried, a little insulted. He simply ruffled her hair, to which she shoved him. He shoved her back lightly and she tangled in her dress, tumbling gracelessly to the ground on her rear. He laughed as she glared up at him through her messy hair so she lunged for his legs to bring him down. He jumped out of reach and dashed away when she clambered to her feet to give chase, laughing light-heartedly as he went.

This is good, Merlyn thought as she let the earthy scent of Ealdor permeate her senses and the wind brush against her face as she raced after him. This is peace.
The pair was walking back when Will touched upon heavy subjects again.

“So… what does this destiny mean for us?” he asked, feigned casually with his arms full of branches.

Merlyn watched the path before her, her own arms laden with kindling. Goodness, this was hard. “I-I think… I think I am staying in Camelot. So – so I don’t want you to wait for me. It’s not fair… to either of us, but especially for you. You should have someone who can give you what you need.”

Will stopped. “You give me what I need, Merlyn. And no one else could compare. You are what I want, and if that means I have to move to Camelot to be with you then that’s what I will do.”

She gaped at him. “And leave your mother and my own unprotected? Leave your job so your mother cannot feed herself? No, Will, we cannot be that selfish.”

“Why are you not fighting for us?” he demanded. “You say a dragon told you of your destiny, and suddenly you are too important for us peasants? Too superior to care for me?”

“That is not it at all!” she exclaimed, hurt at his attack. “I’d never think myself more important than anyone else! And I still care for you – I will always care for you –”

“You simply love me no longer,” cut in Will.

“I-I…” she didn’t know what to say. When she was with him, she felt the swells of affection that she’d assumed was love. But while in Camelot, she had hardly thought of him in more than a part of the encompassing longing for home. That wasn’t what a partner should do. She should desire to be with him for the simple fact that he was the main attention of her heart. But she didn’t. And that wasn’t fair to him.

Will took her silence as an answer and looked away, features pinched in hurt and sullenness. “I see,” he said gravelly and strode off without another word.

She let him go, unwilling to torment him with her presence any longer. She needed to sort herself out before she could explain her emotions to him. She just hoped he forgave her.

Never had she wanted to be one of those manipulative wenches; the ones who strung a man along before leaving him high and dry. But she feared that was exactly what she’d just become.

She dropped her armload and buried her face in her hands with a groan. Why could she never do anything easily? Why did she always hurt those around her?

Merlyn was ready to leave late the next morning. She’d returned to the house a little while after Will to her mother’s questioning looks and guilt settling heavy in her gut. She’d done nothing more than cuddle up to Hunith for the night and enjoyed the ministrations tended to her. The next day, she lingered over breakfast, hurt but understanding Will’s silence before he left for the fields. When he disappeared over the small knoll, Merlyn forced herself from the house and readied Sunstrider for the coming journey, not wanting to linger since she knew not how long it would take to gain the griffin’s trust and set up protections. She had to be back in Camelot’s capitol in time for Arthur’s coming-of-age ceremony.

She untied her steed and stood by the door as her mother pressed more wrapped bread into her hands. “You said yourself you know not how long you will be in the north,” she said in the face of
Merlyn's protests. “You will use more energy to keep warm in the chillier climate. Oh – I have a spare woollen cloak –”

“Mama,” the black-haired girl said sternly, putting her foot down. “Winter is harsh here. You will need the cloak more than I soon and I’ll not be guilty of leaving you unprepared.”

“I only worry, my love,” she said stepping closer and cupping Merlyn's cheeks. “It is my duty as your mother.”

“You don’t need to any longer. I’m stronger now; I have more knowledge.”

“Yes,” agreed her mother, identical blue eyes shining with emotion. “You are older and wiser. You have grown into a beautiful, strong woman and I am proud of you.”

Unexpected tears pricked Merlyn's eyes and she sniffled, hugging her mother. The older woman whispered into her hair, “Be safe, my heart.”

“I will be,” she replied and steeled herself, stepping back. “You are still happy here?” she asked.

Hunith bowed her head. “I’m still happy here,” she said.

Merlyn dipped her own head in acknowledgement. “I’ll visit the next time I am able,” she promised then swung into Sunstrider's saddle. “Farewell mama.”

“Farewell, my baby,” she replied as Merlyn rode away.

Before she entered the forest, the black-haired girl looked towards the rise hiding the fields from view. Will was too hurt to say goodbye but she couldn’t begrudge him his distance. She had just broken his heart.

Merlyn huddled into her headscarf as she traversed the wilds of the Northern Plains. It was late summer in the south, autumn starting to add a bite to the air but it felt like midwinter in the icy northern country. To her great relief, however, the griffin’s cave was at the southern end of the northern plains, at the foot of a mountain range to the east. Her magical sight had guided her true and she settled for the final night a league away to work out a strategy to approach the young, shy beast without being attacked or frightening it off.

She fell asleep with the fire blazing strong, several enchantments warding her camp and Sunstrider resting alertly nearby.

She awoke flailing and disorientated as Sunstrider squealed in fright and her wards gonged an alarm in her head. Overhead, a large shadow flew over her camp, only noticed by the reflection of the flames off its shiny feathers. Immediately, Merlyn jumped to her feet and raised her hands defensively. It seemed she would not need a game plan. The griffin had come to her.

It swooped low several metres away and she was blasted with a gust of icy air as it slowed to land. Her stallion kicked up his heels as he darted passed Merlyn and away from the threat but he didn’t continue to bolt, which surprised her. He skidded to a halt at the edge of the firelight and lingered there, jumpy and shivering. He called to her a few times, high and reedy, but all her attention was on the liquid black shape stepping into the firelight in front of her.

The griffin stopped and cocked its head at her, blinking one large golden eye cautiously. Merlyn carefully lowered her hand since the beast didn’t look primed to attack. Its dark wings were folded
neatly against its body and its head was high and tilted curiously. It chattered its beak gently but Merlyn didn’t know enough about birds or griffins to decipher its meaning. It didn’t appear to be a challenge.

“Hello,” she murmured then jumped as Sunstrider snorted loudly behind her, protesting its presence. She took a calming breath and held out her hand disarmingly, palm skyward. “Aren’t you a beautiful creature.”

Indeed, it was. It was hard to tell in the darkness but she thought its coat appeared as dark as a moonless night sky, feathers reflecting the light like faceted glass while its hide absorbed the luminosity like a void. Its eyes were a rich, honey-gold and sparked with youth and vitality. Of what she could discern, it stood at about twelve hands; still growing. It chattered at her again and, daringly, she inched closer. It twitched its head but didn’t shy, staring at her expectantly.

“I’m not going to harm you,” she murmured, knowing it couldn’t understand her words but letting it learn her cadence. “I only came because I was forced to slay your last remaining parent. And I didn’t want to leave you at the mercy of one who might try to bind your will as well. You deserve better than that.”

She crept ever closer and when she was within an arm’s length of it, the griffin stretched its neck and cocked its head further, contemplating her palm before it dipped its head and nipped her skin.

She yelped and jumped back, causing the griffin to startle and Sunstrider to charge over, ears flat in hostility. The griffin flared its wings defensively and Sunstrider shied, kicking out his heels in agitation. He snorted and pranced at her back but didn’t flee, warming Merlyn’s heart with his show of loyalty.

Nevertheless, she placed a hand on his trembling neck and washed him over with soothing magic. “Steady, boy,” she murmured. “He’s not aggressive yet. Let your fear ease.”

Sunstrider did stop but his tail remained high and he let out a single, deafening snort to show his opinion on the matter. Merlyn chuckled softly but let him go, turning back to the twitchy griffin. Its wings were tucked once more but held from his body in preparation against another scare. Merlyn glanced at the small cut on her hand and frowned back at the beast. It hadn’t appeared malicious as it hurt her, merely curious. In fact – she thought back to the rush of memories she’d caught from the older griffin – she was the first human the young creature had ever seen.

The griffin chattered its beak again, head turned to gaze at her with one glowing eye. She was starting to think the chattering was a form of reassurance or nervousness, though it was impossible to read without connecting with the creature.

Merlyn blinked. Should she? She didn’t have a poultice prepared and she was afraid to attempt anything like she’d done with the other griffin – the sensation of being pulled apart was one that lingered in her nightmares – but perhaps… perhaps something softer. Let it read her intentions and emotions while she did the same in return – just as she did with Sunstrider.

With a fortifying breath, Merlyn let her magic roll over her skin and spark off her fingertips. The griffin’s front claws flexed into the dirt as it stared at her hands and she held one out invitingly, hoping it would catch the hint. Griffins weren’t written as the most intelligent of magical creatures.

Thankfully, its curiosity drove it forward and it dipped its head to touch her fingers with its beak. A blue static spark lit between them and they both flinched but Merlyn sensed a brief flicker of emotions not her own: curiosity, innocence, loneliness.
Gently, she moved her palm to stroke over its beak, feeling the warm, smooth texture of it, unlike anything she’d felt before. Her fingers brushed the small, silky feathers bracketing its maw and another static light burst between them. The emotions were stronger now, the loneliness an ever-present weight on its mind, though it seemed relieved to be near her, as if she wasn’t a mortal to be avoided and, instead, a magical creature like itself. It was a bewildering sensation and caused Merlyn to question just what exactly she was to bring about such reactions. Was her father a demon like her childhood peers accused? Did that make her not human, allowing her to be differentiated from her people?

Merlyn shook her head. Not the time, nor the place. And certainly not the right mindset to be giving a young beast. She shoved the dark speculations to the back of her mind and concentrated on broadcasting her virtuous motives and innocent curiosity of the beast.

Again, the griffin chattered its beak but she caught the drift of the instinct behind it and realised it was a display of its submissiveness. Like when a foal smacked its teeth together on meeting a strange horse, it was telling them that it meant no harm and to please not harm it back.

It was actually rather endearing and gave Merlyn the confidence to slide her fingers up its feathery face. It sighed in contentment and leant into her touch, bringing a smile to her lips. She was amazed at the silky texture of the plumage, so much softer than any of the pheasant game she’d carried in the past. More like baby fluff than feathers.

They spent a long time simply getting to know each other, Merlyn marvelling at its easy trust in her and the beast enjoying her attentions, closing its honey eyes when she scratched a sweet spot. Behind her, Sunstrider let his displeasure known in whickers and snorts, stomping his feet and flicking his tail.

Tiredness eventually crept into her limbs and she reluctantly drew back from the griffin, yawning into her arm and blinking sleepily. The birds had not yet awakened in their roosts but Merlyn was sure it was very early in the morning. Unsure of what else to do, Merlyn backed away and turned to the dying fire. With a whispered word, the flames heightened again and a wave of warmth washed over her skin. She sighed in contentment and moved back to her sleeping pallet, glancing at the griffin over her shoulder before settling back down.

Behind her, she heard Sunstrider creeping nearer and with a last head tilt, the griffin melted back into the darkness. She was sure it remained nearby but was hiding from the light of the flames and she felt confident that it would bring her no harm. Her stallion must have felt similar for, though he was alert and tense, he was no longer frazzled and flighty. He nosed her head and shoulders before satisfying himself with her health and taking to nibbling on some grass as his ears swivelled attentively.

She smiled at his antics and gratefully closed her eyes. She had some decisions to make but such things were better done when one was mentally functional. For now, she would sleep.

When the morning sun had warmed the air as much as it was going to, Merlyn reluctantly left her bed and packed everything back onto Sunstrider. The griffin had retreated to its cave with the morning light so Merlyn used her magical sense to track it to its home, her stallion following reluctantly.

As she drew closer, she could feel the thrum of magic in the earth, deep and old. This place had been a sanctuary to magical creatures for generations. It saddened her that Nimueh had desecrated the haven so callously but she vowed she would not be able to again.
She followed the tendrils of energy back towards an outcropping of rocks, looking like a simple
cluster of ancient boulders until she sensed a hollow between two stones resting against each other.
She neared it but didn’t enter, as from its depths, the griffin peered at her.

“Hello,” she murmured and the creature chattered its beak, looking a little more skittish now she
was invading its home. “I’m not here to harm you. I’m here to make sure nothing wicked can
trespass again. Easy; you’re okay.”

Cautiously, the griffin stepped into the sunlight and Merlyn found it was even more beautiful with
the sun glancing off its glossy coat. “You are stunning,” she said and held out her hand. The griffin
stepped near and Sunstrider reluctantly retreated, heavy breaths letting her know of his displeasure.

Sparks lit between them at first contact again but she pressed into the beast of her intention to ward
its home, asking permission to imprint its haven with her magic. It cocked its head, not truly
understanding but not objecting either. Merlyn took it as permission, unable to explain it any better
until the creature witnessed it itself – or should she say, herself, because it appeared the griffin was
female.

Merlyn drew back with reluctance. “Alright,” she said bracingly. “Let’s get to protecting your
home.”

She moved past the griffin and touched either side of the obscure entrance, fingers moving over
both boulders. In her book, it had mentioned that doorways and places of transition were best for
warding. Natural divisions between one area and another reinforced the partitioning that warding
produced, as if nature itself had created ley lines to be exploited.

It was hard work and draining. Merlyn had to take several breaks throughout the day so she
wouldn’t exhaust herself into a stupor. By the time the sun was touching the western trees, she was
sweaty, fatigued, and headachy but victorious. The cave, its underground paths and a little of the
surrounding clearing was warded against malicious attacks. And if the magic was breached, she
was alerted, which meant she could return and act in defense. It was a gratifying sensation,
knowing she had created a true haven for magical creatures seeking shelter, for she could feel in
the pulse of the earth that the griffin wasn’t the only creature to visit the cave. She knew not the
signatures of most of them, but she definitely recognised the touch of a unicorn. And not just any
unicorn, but hers.

She camped outside the griffin’s cave that night with plans to leave in the morning. The black
beauty stood in the doorway of its shelter and dozed, seeming to want company more than it
wanted comfort. On her other side, stood Sunstrider, also dozing where he stood, his coat
gleaming gold in the firelight. Merlyn tucked herself deeper into her blanket, covering her chilled
nose, and closed her eyes to sleep. Beneath her, the earth thrummed deeply, like a heartbeat, and
her own magic pulsed peacefully in time; she slept soundly until dawn.

Sunstrider was tacked up, Merlyn’s things were loaded down, but Merlyn herself was hesitant. She
brushed her hand over the griffin’s silky plumage and felt its keen loneliness like a spear to her
heart. Griffin’s might not be the most intelligent of creatures but this one knew she was leaving,
and it longed to join her.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, scratching its sweet spot as she impressed the danger of that idea.
“Where I’m going, you cannot follow. You would be slain and my quest would be for nothing.”

The creature chattered its beak softly and a short purr escape its mouth, but she could sense that it
was not a purr of pleasure. It was whining; a child about to be abandoned again.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered again, pulling away and moving to Sunstrider’s side. She mounted swiftly and nudged her steed towards the south, glancing back once to see the shy beast watching her with one burning golden eye. She looked away as guilt churned in her belly. It was for the best. A griffin would be slain immediately if it followed her home. Camelot held no safety for magical things.

Not yet.

That first night, Merlyn camped under a large tree well off the main track. She had set temporary wards and bedded down for the night beside the warmth of a small fire. She fell asleep quickly as Sunstrider grazed nearby but was awoken disorientated mere hours later as her steed let out a frightened squeal and the ward alarm gonged loudly in her head.

She scrambled to her feet, hand up defensively, but found, to her astonishment, the black griffin ghosting between the trees at the edge of the firelight. Her golden eyes gleamed as she peered at Merlyn timidly. The black-haired girl sighed and dropped her arm, rubbing her eyes tiredly.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she told her. “You’re supposed to be in your cave, safe from people.”

It chattered its beak, halting halfway behind a young tree, as if acknowledging her displeasure but gently defying her demands.

“Come here,” she said on a sigh, holding out her hand reassuringly. “I’m not angry. You only want company and I can’t be mad at that.”

Just like the first time, the griffin was tentative in approaching, her black coat swallowing the glow of the fire, but she didn’t nip her this time, understanding that it caused pain to one with softer flesh. The griffin accepted her touch readily, closing her eyes in bliss and Merlyn’s heart melted right then and there.

“You’re going to need a name,” she told her. “And I’m going to have to work out a place for you to live. I’m afraid I know of no untouched goldmines around Camelot.”

The beast appeared unconcerned with her trivial matters and Merlyn smothered a yawn in her shoulder. “I’m tired,” she told her. “So I’m going back to sleep. We can work out the details tomorrow but it’s going to have to be on the move. Arthur’s birthday is nearing and I’m running a tight schedule just to make it back before he grows suspicious, alright?” There was no answer – not that she had expected one – and she withheld another yawn as she moved away from the creatures, sinking down in her bedding. The griffin left her be, wandering off to explore her surroundings.

When she was gone, Sunstrider tiptoed over, snuffling her hair to ensure her wellbeing. Merlyn lifted a hand to scratch his nose.

“I’m fine, mister,” she said, amused at his antics. “If she was going to hurt me, she would have done so by now. And it seems like you two might need to learn to get along, if she stays. What do you think of that?”

Sunstrider gave a well-timed snort and Merlyn laughed softly. “Thought so,” she mumbled, closing her eyes.
The journey back to Camelot was measured in bouts of amusement and anxiety. The young griffin was very curious of the world, venturing away from them as the moon dominated the sky but stuck close when the sun was high. It seemed to be an instinctual fear of being seen that had it skittish during the day. It made sense, since the beast was coal black and very obvious in the green and brown environment of the forests – or so she had thought.

The first time she past another traveller, she panicked, believing the griffin would be recognised but a quick glance back showed only her and her steed, the black body of the griffin having completely vanished from sight. A half an hour later, she was back by Sunstrider’s flank, causing the stallion a high amount of discomfit but otherwise no fanfare. Merlyn realised that she must be able to sense the people coming and disappear before she could be seen; another instinctive trait of the shy, magical beasts. It made sense, since griffins had been believed to be mythical not long ago. Possessing a natural awareness and aversion to mortal men would keep them from discovery with so few to be found. A useful technique, and one that put Merlyn’s anxiety to ease. The griffin vanished like a ghost long before travellers appeared and reappeared when they passed like she had been there all along.

The amusement came when the young beast was faced with new types of birds or ground creatures – the warmer climate allowing for different species to thrive – and she darted off to investigate. She often startled herself in the new terrain and shot back to Sunstrider’s side until she regained the confidence to venture again, chattering and clicking her beak as she processed new things. It was endearing and Merlyn couldn’t help but grow to love the beast.

When they reached the main thoroughfare heading to Camelot’s citadel, Merlyn branched off onto a lesser used path that circumvented the city altogether, spearing through the Darkling Woods and heading towards the distant White Mountains. Over the past few days, Merlyn had tossed locations back and forth in search of a suitable oasis and the only one she could think of was Avalon Lake. The mystical area was rich with magic, though it was sharper to her senses than the cave where the griffin had previously lived. Energy tingled over one’s flesh like a crisp breeze instead of thrumming through the bones with languidness. But, Merlyn believed it would comfort the griffin to be so close to a magical sanctuary, as she herself was comforted by them. She also knew that mortals had a natural aversion to the area because, she guessed, the magic of the Sidhe felt so unearthly. If she set up similar warding to that of the cave, then the griffin would be doubly protected and might be able to find peace on its banks – and she’d be able to visit.

They arrived at the lake as the sun was edging behind the canopy and Merlyn wasted no time in setting up camp, searching out kindling and eating the last of her rations. She did not want to go foraging so she would have to find a good shelter for the griffin, set up her protections and, hopefully, impress upon the young beast before noon tomorrow that it couldn’t follow her to Camelot. If she wanted to make it back to Camelot before dark and not risk being skewered by an arrow, that was.

She fell into her blankets with stubborn determination and forced herself to settle into a restful sleep. The brush of magic over her body helped and so did the comforting presence of Sunstrider chewing grass nearby. The griffin was too quiet to be heard but Merlyn wasn’t worried; the creature was designed to be in the wild, after all.

The next morning had Merlyn up with the sun. She packed her bedding and brushed away her makeshift fireplace before searching for the elusive griffin.

“Nightfire!” she called then scrunched her nose in distaste. “Asteria?” she asked aloud but it sounded very delicate on her tongue; nothing like the curious but shy griffin.
She caught sight of the unnamed beast gliding over the lake like she hadn’t a care in the world, dipping her front claws into the water as she flew. Merlyn called out with her magic to summon her and the griffin veered from her path immediately, speeding towards her with the swiftness of an arrow. She flared her wings as she neared the shore to slow her speed and Sunstrider let out a nervous snort, dancing back near the trees. Merlyn was buffeted with a blast of wind and squinted against the dirt but the griffin landed quickly and her wings tucked smoothly.

“Hello, girl,” she said, reaching out a hand. “Kadriyah?” They touched and the blue static arc zapped them both. “No. Not Kadriyah. Did you find any good spots in your exploration, missy?”

Merlyn pressed her intention to settle the griffin by the lake but the creature quirked her head and clicked her tongue so Merlyn impressed upon her the danger of nearing Camelot’s citadel, of the pain she would suffer and the death that would follow; of being hunted like prey. The beast chattered nervously and her wings lifted instinctively from her body so Merlyn felt that she had been sufficiently warned. She felt bad for scaring her but if the King learned of another griffin living within his borders, he would stop at nothing to hunt it down, and Merlyn didn’t want that anxiety on her consciousness.

She looked towards the heart of the lake where a small island held a tall spire, too far away to make out the details. She wondered if that would make a good hideaway for the beast but knew not how to reach it. She eyed the griffin’s wings and the feathered expanse of her back. The beast was still young; a little leggy, at most, thirteen hands, while her parents had easily reached eighteen. She might not be developed enough to carry extra weight – like a steed’s bones needed to settle before a saddle could be added. But Merlyn could ask.

The answer was confusion and the black-haired girl figured she couldn’t blame the griffin for the reaction. She clearly wasn’t a beast of burden and did not understand the concept beyond carrying a rabbit or fox home for dinner. She eyed the griffin’s clawed front feet and decided it was not something she wanted to experience. She liked her insides to remain on her inside thank you.

Instead, she enquired through mental imagery if there was a place where she would choose to rest, a roost or nest, and a responding vision revealed a low overhang of ancient tree roots that had been woven together by time. The griffin had already explored the area and found the spot to her liking, though it lacked the deep pulse of Old Magic that she had come to expect. But Merlyn hoped to rectify that as much as she could, even if her magic was fresh atop the land and not deep in its bowels. But first, wards.

She neared the trees bracketing the shore and engraved some runes into the bark, the division between forest and bank giving a clear guide for her border. She was grateful that she didn’t need to go to the same measures she had with the cave, for the lake possessed a natural barrier that she was only strengthening, touching upon the ancient power of the Sidhe and weaving it into her wards, which would hopefully give it a longer life.

The sun was high when she was done and sweat dotted her temples despite the cool air off the water. Her belly growled but it would have to wait until she returned to Camelot, as with the bath she was longing to have. She almost moaned at the idea. The north was cold but she had been wearing layers and moving around, which had caused her to feel muggy. She had bathed in a river when she had moved further south but as a woman alone, it had been a great risk that she hadn’t dared to attempt more than once. She longed for the aroma of lily-of-the-valley and not the stench of stale body odour.

She tacked up Sunstrider, who reluctantly pulled his head from the sweet grass that grew along the bank and accepted the bit in his mouth. The griffin nudged her back as she tightened the girth and
she let out a small, “oomph!” as she knocked into her steed’s side. Sunstrider laid his ears back at the black griffin, his sourness at the girth diminishing his tolerance of the magical creature. She patted his neck in apology and moved away to farewell the beast.

“You have to stay here,” she told it, fingers burying in the silky feathers on her face. “I have to return to Camelot. But I will visit you often and you can learn your new home. Perhaps you will meet other magical creatures; I know the unicorn wanders through these trees as well.” The griffin closed her golden eyes, enjoying Merlyn's attentions but she pressed on it, once more, of the griffin’s incapability to visit Camelot. “You will be hunted like prey. Killed without mercy. You will have no peace, no home, no company. You must stay away, understand?”

The beast’s wings lifted in agitation and she chattered nervously, mind absorbing the negative association with the image of the white city. When Merlyn was satisfied she understood the danger, she backed up and released her hold. The griffin settled but watched with sad eyes as Merlyn mounted Sunstrider and turned him towards the very city she had to avoid.

“I will be back within a couple of days,” she told her, knowing she didn’t understand but feeling better saying the words aloud. “You’ll not be alone forever, I promise, Skylark.”

Merlyn greeted the gate guards heartedly, her relief at returning making her joyous. She asked after the absent Favian, who was a good friend, and was told that his wife had birthed a son two night’s prior, healthy and strong. Merlyn was overjoyed, even as she was a little saddened to have missed it, and vowed to pay him a visit the first chance she had.

She slogged up to the royal stables and settled Sunstrider into his stall, wrapping his legs in poultices, though he had yet to have swelling. He’d had a hard fortnight’s journey and he deserved the best care for his dependability. She gave him a nice bran mash alongside his usual bag of hay and left him to rest for the day. She’d check on him tonight to remove the poultices.

She was heading towards Gaius’ chambers to let the old man know she’d returned when a faint brush of something in her mind had her turning towards the drawbridge separating the upper and lower town. There, she saw the heavy, double doors closing before a young figure in a foreign green cloak. She thought it odd that the gates would close when it wasn’t yet late and there was no threat to be had, but her attention was focused more on the short figure, though she knew not why. Then he turned and she saw it was a boy. A boy clasping his arm like it pained him and a terrified expression on his youthful face. She approached quickly and his stunning, sky-blue eyes locked intently on her own.

“Hello there,” she said softly, crouching down to his height as he withdrew slightly from her presence. “Are you lost?”

He stared at her, gaze flicking from one eye to the next, like he was trying to work her out. He said nothing.

“Are you hurt?” she asked, glancing towards his arm cradled beneath his travelling cloak. “May I see?”

He flinched back from her outstretched hand so she stopped. “I’m not going to harm you,” she promised. “But I need to see if you’re injured. My name’s Merlyn, I’m somewhat of a novice healer. I can ease your pain.”
There was a commotion on the parapets and the boy suddenly grabbed her hand. *They’re going to hurt me,* he cried into her mind. *They’re going to kill my uncle and me!*

She gaped at him. “You – how –”

*Please, Emrys,* he begged. *Don’t let them find me!*

She heard the thundering of guards rushing down the parapet staircase and knew it would be but a moment for them to pour out the doorway beside the gate arch.

“Come,” she decided, tugging him towards the back of the market stalls serving the upper town. He followed for a few steps before he folded in on himself, in too much pain to move. She heaved him up into her arms and kept going, thankful that she knew most of the backstreets in the area. Behind her, the shouts and orders of the guards could be heard as they spilled onto the street but a glance back showed her well covered by stalls and people. She heard the captain order them to fan out, which meant she hadn’t been seen, but she continued to hurry, for the eyes of the commoners might aim them true instead.

She reached the courtyard but jerked back as she saw the vibrant red of knight’s capes pouring from the castle. She rolled back into the shadow of the alley and took a deep breath. She needed to know before she risked everything for the boy. She lowered him to the ground and crouched down, taking his shoulders in her grip.

“Why are they after you?” she demanded. “Why are you and your uncle in this city?”

*Please,* he said but she shook her head.

“Answer me,” she ordered. “You are a sorcerer, so more than likely, your uncle is also a sorcerer. How were you discovered? What did your uncle do to draw attention?”

*We only came for supplies,* he said, upset. *We were raided in the forests. We didn’t want to come to Camelot but there was nowhere else to go. Please, we mean no harm.*

“How do the guards know what you are?” she pressed.

He grabbed his cloak, gaze pleading. *Our clothes,* he whispered mentally. *It is too cold to leave our cloaks behind but it is the wear of the druids. Uncle had to take the risk.*

Immediately, she softened, unhappy for her own hesitance but glad she could trust him. The memory of Edwin Muirden and his betrayal was scorched into her brain.

“Here,” she said, unclasping his cloak and letting it fall from his shoulders. He curled in on himself, his bloodied arm cradled against his chest, so she unhooked her own travelling cloak and wrapped it around him, eyeing his torn sleeve. She couldn’t see the wound but the fabric was torn neatly, like a slice rather than a tear. Like a blade rather than a bramble thorn. It made her feel sick, thinking of one of the guards slashing at an unarmed boy, druid or not. She hoped it hadn’t been one she was friends with.

There was a shout and two guards sprinted past, hands on the hilts of their swords so Merlyn rolled up the boy’s green cloak and took his hand.

“I need you to be strong for a short while,” she said, glancing out and clenching her teeth at the two guards stationed, as always, by the entrance to Gaius’ chambers. She’d hoped they would have moved away in the frenzy but it appeared they were there to stay. “We are going to walk calmly towards that entrance there,” she pointed to the servant’s entrance to the left of the grand stairs into
the castle. “We aren’t going to act frightened or nervous or hurt; we are to act as if we belong, alright? Like with unfriendly dogs, they only chase you if you run away.”

He stared up at her, blue eyes wide with fear so she forced a small, tight smile, knowing it was inadequate but having nothing else to give. If only she knew a disillusionment or transportation spell they’d be out of danger in a heartbeat, but her book didn’t cover that aspect of magic save to say it existed.

“On three, okay? We walk as if we belong. One, two, three.” She stepped onto the cobblestones and tugged the boy alongside. He kept close to her side, nearly tripping her several times but they passed without alarm until they were near the arch of the doorway and a squad of guards spilled into the courtyard. The boy jumped in fright and a shout was heard behind them.

“Oi, you! Halt!”

The boy whimpered and Merlyn gave up all pretence, bounding into the castle and up the staircase with her hand clasped tight around his own. He panted heavily, dragging behind, and sagged in exhaustion when she skidded to a halt on the next landing. There was a corridor ahead and another flight of stairs to their left but she could hear guards approaching from the corridor so she urged him up the next staircase, her hand around his the only thing that stopped him from meeting the steps with his face.

His eyes were rolling as he staggered onto the next level and his legs were visibly trembling. She wouldn’t be able to carry him fast enough to evade the patrols and she felt despair rising. She’d certainly be caught and the boy would die, innocent and young.

Her frantic gaze landed on a door halfway down the hall and recognised them as Morgana’s chambers. The woman was the kindest person she knew; she wouldn’t turn away a child because of his heritage. But she was also the King’s ward and under heavy scrutiny; if she was caught…

Merlyn shuddered. Nobility that betrayed their king were often boiled in oil. An extremely slow and agonising death; one she’d been told was horrific to watch.

A man’s voice echoed up that staircase, “Search every room on that floor!” and boots thundered nearer.

Merlyn hooked her hands under the boy’s arms and dragged him to Morgana’s door, not bothering with courtesy as she turned the handle and staggered inside. She turned once the boy’s feet were inside and closed the door swiftly, Morgana exclaiming in surprise; “Merlyn!”

She looked over, panting and shaking with adrenalin. The highborn and Gwen were standing by a table, a glass of wine in the Lady’s hand.

“Morgana,” she gasped. “They want to execute the boy.”

Fists pounded on the door and Merlyn retreated with the druid in her arms as the guard captain said, “My Lady?”

“He has done nothing wrong,” she pleaded quietly and the highborn snapped out of her shock.

“Back there,” she said, pointing to the sun chair behind the curtains. Merlyn let out a breath of relief and dragged the boy back, pulling the curtains to hide their presence.

The boy was completely unconscious now and she smoothed her hand over his hot forehead while Morgana spoke with the guards. “You’re going to be okay,” she whispered to him as Morgana closed the door once more, the men retreating. “I’ll find a way to get you out. I promise.”
The announcement rang out with swiftness. A druid was to be executed in an hour. The sun was edging towards the western wall and Merlyn knew not what to do. She watched from Morgana’s window as the platform was raised and the chopping block placed primly in its middle. The executioner sat on it as he sharpened his axe, his mask keeping his identity secure. Behind her, Morgana patted the boy’s brow with a damp cloth, cleaning the stale sweat from his skin. Against his pale flesh, a small Celtic tattoo lived starkly on his chest but Merlyn lacked the knowledge to name it. She hadn’t even known there was a magical culture before today – which was silly in hindsight. Were they peaceful? Safe? Where did they live? What did they do? What did they know?

A hunger lived in her heart. A yearning to learn about her magic and their culture – but she feared to hope for others like herself, for what if they were vengeful? Being hunted like prey and oppressed like eastern slaves did not breed contentment. What if they were a community bent on actualising the King’s death? Would she have to fight them? Destroy them? She pressed her hands to her belly in anxiety before she spun away from the window and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Morgana asked, worried green eyes locked on her. On the sun chair, the boy watched without expression. She stared at him as she replied.

“I seek answers and… possibly hope. I’ll return soon.” She marched out the door before Morgana could speak again but light, familiar footsteps followed her quickly. She stopped at the top of the staircase and Gwen appeared, winding her hands together nervously.

“You’re going to see the uncle, aren’t you?” she stated more than asked. Merlyn’s answer was all over her face. Gwen looked terrified. “Be careful, won’t you? If the King suspects you of consorting with sorcerers, he’ll execute you in a moment.”

“I’ll be okay, Gwen,” she reassured, stepping closer and laying a hand on the maid’s hands, stilling them. “And so will you. If anything happens or we’re caught, I’ll make sure you aren’t blamed. You’ve already suffered through lies and assumptions; you’ll not face that again.”

“Oh, Merlyn,” she said. “I’m not worried only for me. I know you. You head to do something reckless. Just—please, promise me you will be careful. I don’t know what any of us will do if you were sentenced to death.”

Merlyn saw the very real fear shining in her friend’s chocolate eyes and felt bad for causing it. She squeezed Gwen’s hands. “I’ll be careful,” she promised.

She trotted down the dungeon staircase with a tray of simple broth.

“Food for the prisoner,” she said to the guards at the bottom, cards laid out on the table they had claimed. One stood up, frowning.

“No food for sorcerers,” he said and she frowned back, hiding the shaking of her hands under the tray.

“His last meal,” she pushed. “Surely that’s allowed.”

The man looked slightly chastened and gestured her onwards. She nodded to him in thanks and continued, crinkling her nose at the musty, rat-ridden stench that permeated the very walls of the dungeon. She found her target slumped in the third cell around the corner, chained arm and leg and
looking miserable. He straightened up when she appeared and she cast a glance in the direction of the guards before pushing the bowl between the bars.

“Food for you,” she said, hearing as the sentries started up their card game once more. She crouched and met the man’s awed gaze. “My name’s Merlyn,” she whispered. “Your nephew is safe.”

Immediately, he sagged against the wall, blinking back tears as he peered skyward. “Thank you, Emrys” he husked out. “I feared… I could feel that he lived but he had been wounded…”

“I’m treating it,” she said. “There’s a mild infection that I’m hoping my tincture will soothe but… he’s frightened.”

“I was foolish,” the man said, shaking his head tiredly. “I thought – if we moved swiftly – there would be no time to be caught. But I forgot to account for betrayal.”

Merlyn took a breath, knowing she had little time. “Druids,” she said and his eyes darted to her own. “Are you a peaceful people?”

He frowned. “We seek enlightenment and unity.”

“But do you want King Uther gone? Do you want him dead?” she pressed, glancing towards the corner where the guards were still playing. They would notice her lingering soon.

The man’s frown had deepened and he leant forward, confused. “Druids do not desire harm to those around them. Do we wish the King of Camelot changed? Yes, but we do not wish him dead and we do not plan to kill him. We only long to be accepted.”

The anxiousness that had been squeezing her tight released like a knot come loose. She let out a great sigh and felt a tendril of excitement blossom in her belly. Peaceful magic users; a whole culture of nonviolent sorcerers seeking only to better their knowledge. It was everything Merlyn had wished for and feared would never exist.

Her hands clenched around the cell bars and she took a deep breath to steady herself. “Thank you,” she said. “For being honest.” She looked at him, a smile on her face. “I do not know your name, nor that of the boy. He only speaks to me in his mind and only with fear.”

“My name is Cerdan, My Lady,” he said, staring at her like she was truly some highborn. “And my nephew’s name is Mordred.”

“Mordred,” she repeated softly, mulling the Celtic name over in her mind. “What does it mean?”

Cerdan hesitated, dropping his gaze and she thought it a strange reaction. “It means ‘uncertain’,” he shared, sounding like he was revealing a secret. She cocked her head but didn’t push; there were far more important things to be dealt with and she was running out of time.

She stood up. “We’ll see each other soon,” she said. “You should eat. I know it looks bland and tastes the same but you’ll need your strength.”

Cerdan shook his head, alarm on his face. “Don’t risk yourself for me,” he said. “You are too important.”

She frowned at him. “I’m no more or less important than any other person. I’m only a servant.”

He frowned back at her, incredulous. “You are Emrys,” he said like it meant something. “You are
the light of our future.”

“Emrys?” she parroted in confusion. “My name is Merlyn.”

“Oi!” called the guard finally and Merlyn jumped. “What are you doing down here so long?” he rounded the corner, hand on the hilt of his sword, expression distrustful.

She stepped away from the bars, trying to look nonthreatening. “He was struggling to reach the bowl,” she explained as he reached her side to peer into the cell, making sure she hadn’t sabotaged anything. “He’s attached to the far wall and my arm isn’t long enough to push it near.”

The guard saw the predicament and unsheathed his sword. “We cannot enter the cells of sorcerers until execution by order of the King,” he explained, expression a little apologetic when he caught her eyeing the weapon warily. He stuck the sword through the bars and used its length to push the bowl closer to Cerdan. When it was within arm’s reach, he removed his blade and slid it back into its scabbard. Cerdan watched the guard in surprise but Merlyn smiled at him.

“Thank you,” she said, glancing back at the druid before leaving the dungeon. She had half an hour to think of a way to save him.

The courtyard was full but the chatter was low. None of them enjoyed these spectacles but it was by law that any not with urgent tasks were to be present – to view the King’s resolve against magic. Merlyn thought it made people jumpy instead, afraid that they would be the next victims of his hate.

“People of Camelot!” the King pronounced. “The man before you is guilty of using enchantments and magic. Under our law, the sentence for this crime is death. We’re still searching for his accomplice. Anyone found harbouring the boy is guilty of conspiracy and will be executed as a traitor.” He turned his pale eyes on the druid. “Let this serve as a warning to your people.”

Cerdan stood proud atop the execution platform, glaring up at the King. “You have let your fear of magic turn to hate,” he stated. “I pity you.”

The King glowered while Arthur had his arms crossed, looking like he would prefer to be anywhere else but there. The King nodded to the executioner and Cerdan was shoved to his knees, head resting on the chopping block. There was a collective intake of air from the crowd as the axe was raised but Merlyn watched no longer.

Her eyes flashed gold and the swing of the cleaver slowed to a crawl, as did the entire courtyard. Merlyn left her hideaway in the shadow of a doorway and weaved between frozen bodies towards the platform. Her face was hidden beneath the crimson cloak and her face magically obscured. She’d also deepened her timbre, remembering Lancelot’s admission of her recognisable voice.

She tried to jump onto the platform but tripped as her toes stubbed the edge and fell forward onto her hands and knees. She clambered to her feet but stepped on her long cloak, and was grateful that no one could see her as she stumbled again. With a huff, she straightened herself and grabbed Cerdan’s collar, pulling him back just as the axe fell where his neck had once been.

Time resumed and there was a shocked outcry. The executioner spun, pulling his axe from the wood but Merlyn raised her hand and incanted, “Ætgár ic i áidlé blóstm!”

In his hands, the axe erupted into a cluster of flowers and he dropped it with a yell, scrambling backwards. To help him along, Merlyn cast, “Fleoge!” and he was sent flying backwards into the
crowd. She hoped whoever he landed on wasn’t hurt.

She spun to face the King on his terrace and found the guards at his flank, weapons drawn, though there were not yet arrows, thankfully. “Guards!” he shouted, gesturing to the men that bordered the courtyard during such gatherings. “Seize him!”

“Don’t bother, O’ King,” she said, mocking him with a bow. “We’ll be out of your reach soon. I only came to save an innocent man from your cruelty.” She turned to her left and held out her hand. “Chistian!” she hissed, causing the guards to hit an invisible barrier when they tried to climb the executioner platform. She turned back to him and saw Arthur at his side gesture to a few men at the back of the assembly. Probably sending them up high to shoot her down.

“No man who uses sorcery is innocent in my kingdom,” announced the King and Merlyn bared her teeth, though it went unseen under her hood.

“That is clear, My Lord. The blood dripping from your hands stains everything you touch.” She glanced to her right, seeing two guards appearing on the parapet with a long bow. With a whispered word, she sliced through Cerdan’s restraints, allowing him to rise. “Ask yourself this; if compassion and mercy makes you weak, then why does love make us strong? Chistian!” she snapped and the arrow aiming for her heart snapped on her shield. “Let’s go,” she murmured to the druid, grabbing his hand. She called up to the King, “I’ll leave you to your thoughts, shall I?”

“Stop them!” the King shouted, eyes wild. “Stop them!”

Merlyn concentrated and felt the world slow around her once more. The fleeing townsfolk slowed to a crawl; the approaching guards hovered mid-step; the King’s arm hovered in the air, gesturing for the archer to fire again. She tugged on Cerdan’s hand and was relieved to find that her hold on him saved him from the same entrapment as the rest of the courtyard.

“Wha…” he gasped, speechless.

“I’m unable to hold it for long,” she said. “We must go.” Obediently, he staggered after her as she ran, pushing through the messy crowd with less finesse than before. Her hand in his grew sweaty.

“The power you wield,” he murmured, awed. “You are truly the light of our future.”

“I’m only a girl,” she panted, feeling the strain of holding time captive, and pulled him towards the entrance she used to reach Gaius’ chambers. They would not make it past the upper town before time resumed and all her effort would be for naught. “Doing what she can to make this world kinder.”

They passed the motionless guards by the arch entrance and raced up the staircase to the corridor that passed the stairwell to their hideaway. She strained her magic until they were upon the second set of stairs then it snapped from her control and time resumed. She tripped from the backlash and Cerdan reached out to help her back to her feet, continuing their scramble up the steps.

“Are you well?” he asked breathlessly just as a faint shout went up from the courtyard. She saw the realisation flash in the druid’s eyes; they no longer had the advantage.

She continued up, Cerdan following faithfully, and she shoved open the door to the physician’s chambers, stopping herself from falling by holding onto the frame. The druid rushed past and she shut the door quickly, turning and ushering him up to her room.

“You’re going to have to hide in here for now,” she said, feeling shaky and sweaty as she unclasped her cloak and balled up the vibrant fabric. “My mentor lives here also but he does not enter my
room. We will have to hope that the King believes we have fled the citadel and will not conduct searches of the castle.” She squatted down on the other side of her bed and pried off her little cubby hole, shoving the cloak inside. “When it is safe, I will take you to your nephew and you will both leave here. Please,” she implored, looking him in the eye. “If we make out of this alive, do not come back. The King will kill you on sight.”

“You have my word, My Lady,” he vowed, bowing his head.

She shook her own. “I’m no lady. Call me Merlyn – or Emrys, if you have to. Now, I must leave.” She stopped and pointed at him sternly. “Don’t come out under any circumstances. If I need you, I will come here, understood? If you want me, do that –” she wiggled her fingers beside her head, “– mind talk thing.”

Cerdan dipped his head again, “Telepathy,” he explained. “And of course, Emrys.” She rolled her eyes as she left her room. He was acting like her word was gospel and she his messiah. The prediction of her destiny had clearly tolled far but she felt it was unwarranted. She was just a girl who wanted what everyone sought: peace and harmony. Albion might be her end goal but it didn’t negate the journey. Peace at the expense of compassion was not a true peace – King Uther had shown her that. If she could teach that to Arthur, then she felt her duty would be fulfilled. That was no more and no less than anyone would do if they were able.

She ducked back into the shadows of an alcove as a collection of guards trotted past then continued on to Morgana’s chambers, wishing she had time for a bath. She had over a week’s worth of grime on her body from her travels; horse hair, dirt and sweat. Her hair was beyond greasy and her clothes stiff from filth – and she was sure she smelled as badly as she appeared.

She sighed, brushing off her vanity, and knocked on Morgana’s door. “It’s Merlyn,” she identified so they didn’t panic.

Gwen opened the door, her features strained and stressed. Merlyn smiled at her reassuringly as she stepped into the room and joined Morgana by the sun chair, the noblewoman stroking Mordred’s hair as he slept.

“How is he?” she asked and Morgana looked up with a pleased expression.

“He’s recovering,” she said quietly. “Did you…” she glanced to the closed window. “Did you see the execution?”

“I did,” said Merlyn, joining her and sitting on the sun chair. Mordred opened his striking eyes and stared at her. “That was some rescue.”

Gwen made a noise from where she hovered by the table and the black-haired girl looked over, though the maid didn’t meet her eyes as she tidied the table. Morgana said hesitantly, “Did you… I mean,” she swallowed and Merlyn’s heartbeat thrummed in her ears. Surely they didn’t know. How could they possibly –

“We thought you must have contacted someone,” Gwen said, stopping her menial clean-up to stare, almost accusingly, at her. “You disappear on some secret errand and then a sorcerer shows up to save the druid’s life? Merlyn, please don’t take us for fools.”

The black-haired girl gulped, glancing at Morgana to see her waiting expectantly. Mordred also watched her but his gaze was knowing – and… challenging?

She ducked her head. “I know the sorcerer,” she admitted carefully. “Once they heard of Cerdan’s
– that’s the druid’s name – capture, they refused to leave him at the King’s mercy. But,” she added, biting her lip and knowing they were going to be angry. “They didn’t make it out of the castle. Cerdan’s hiding in my room.”

“What!” exclaimed Gwen, aghast. “If he’s caught you’ll be executed immediately! You said you wouldn’t do anything foolish!”

“I couldn’t just let him die!” she argued, hands clenched with the force of her belief. “I was told that druids are a peaceful people. They only want to live in peace.”

“What’s the boy’s name?” Morgana interrupted, uncaring of their quarrel as she gazed at the boy. Merlyn softened.

“His name is Mordred,” she shared.

“Mordred,” the highborn hummed thoughtfully and the boy looked up to stare into her eyes. Merlyn felt like she was intruding on a private moment and stood up to give them space. She went to Gwen’s side where the maid tidied the mantle, dusting the spotless ornaments with a rag.

“I’m sorry,” she said, saddened that her friend was upset.

“No, Merlyn, no,” Gwen said softly, putting down her rage and grabbing her hand instead. “You have nothing to be sorry for. There is nothing wrong in trying to help those that need it. I only fear that your compassion will be your downfall one day; that the wrong person will take advantage or you’ll be caught trying to save someone the King doesn’t want saved.” Her rich, dark eyes were brimming with fear. “I meant what I said earlier; that none of us would know what to do without you. You’ve been here only a short while and you’ve already stolen our hearts.”

Merlyn ducked her head to hide a blush. “I thank you for your words,” she said, smiling up at Gwen. “I don’t know what I would do if I lost any of you. You’ve become my family.”

They hugged and Merlyn inhaled Gwen’s earthy, lavender scent, burying her face in the woman’s shoulder. Gwen smoothed a hand over Merlyn’s head but the younger girl drew back. “Don’t touch me too much,” she cautioned. “I’ve yet to have time for a bath after my journey.”

“Well,” the maid murmured. “I wasn’t going to say anything...”

“Oi!” Merlyn cried, shoving her back and causing her to laugh. She held a pout, though she wasn’t truly hurt. She knew she stunk. “I’ll leave in a moment.”

They both looked over at Morgana and Mordred, who had closed his eyes once more. Gwen asked quietly, “What are we going to do with them?” Merlyn knew she was referring to the uncle and son, not Morgana’s attachment to Mordred, though that was an issue to be resolved also.

Merlyn hummed. “We’ll have to get them out of the city. I hope that Cerdan’s disappearance will having the King believing that they’ve left and lift the restrictions, but...”

“What if he orders another search of the castle?” Gwen pressed. “What will you do then?”

“There’s another place I can take him,” Merlyn admitted, thinking of the dragon cave. “But I don’t want to unless I must. It’s difficult to reach and difficult to leave.”

“Then pray we won’t need to,” she agreed, watching Morgana with keen eyes.
Merlyn spent as long as she dared in her bathtub; the rest of the royal staff having come and gone by the time she crawled out. One perk of the castle washroom over the town bathhouse was that the hot water was less of a commodity. In the communal bathhouse, they were allotted an amount and had to enjoy it until it cooled. In the castle bathhouse, one could refill many times as long as they replenished the fire pots and marked them as heating.

By the time Merlyn began dressing, she was pruny like an old maid and ready for sleep, but her belly growled a warning that food would come first.

She ducked down to the kitchens for a bite as Gaius didn’t know she had returned and so wouldn’t have a meal ready. She winced a little at that, knowing she also had to present herself to the prince. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be in too foul a mood after losing a sorcerer from right under his nose; the King was sure to be on the warpath.

With that in mind, she farewelled the scullery maids, glad she hadn’t faced the Head Cook and her temper, and dashed up the staircases to the Royal Wing. Arthur should be inside finishing up some last-minute reports before bed if his father hadn’t summoned him for a shared meal. She knocked a jaunty tune on the door; *shave and a haircut*, and heard from within, a sharp, “Enter.”

She did so with a beaming smile on her face, peering around the door to see the prince at his writing desk as suspected. Her smile immediately dropped as she took in his drawn features.

“Sire!” she said and his eyes jerked up to meet her own. “You haven’t been taking care of yourself.”

His eyebrows rose. “Hello to you too,” he said as she properly entered and closed the door.

She put her hands on her hips. “Don’t try to play coy, we both know you’re terrible at it. What has you looking like you’ve been ill all week?”

Arthur replaced his quill and leant back to stretch as well as he could in his high-backed chair. “Two sorcerers escaped from right in front of us,” he explained. “My father is not taking it well.”

She decidedly did *not* ogle his chest as his loosely-laced tunic stretched across his front. “Were they attacking?” she asked cautiously, wanting to hear his thoughts on the matter but wary of accidentally drawing suspicion. She was a terrible liar when faced with questions.

“That’s the thing,” Arthur said, leaning forward with a contemplative frown. “We caught a druid and he was to be executed but when he was on the chopping block this-this,” he held up a hand trying to form an image that his words could not. “Person,” he finally settled on. “This magician appeared from nowhere, turned the executioner’s axe into a posy, insulted the King and disappeared with the druid.”

She cocked her head at him, tentatively sinking onto the edge of the desk and happy that he didn’t shoo her off. He was definitely distracted. “What’s so odd about that?” she questioned. “One magic user saving another. Perhaps they were friends – or family.”

“Yes,” he agreed, looking up at her earnestly. “But he didn’t attack the King at all. He had ample opportunity, and the magic to achieve it clearly, but instead, he grabbed the druid, told the King that compassion wasn’t a weakness and left. No one was seriously harmed and no one died. I don’t understand.”

Merlyn bit her lip, uncertain if her words would be welcome. His cornflower-blue eyes were awaiting her opinions, staring at her intently enough that she felt a flush on her cheeks. She looked
away. “Perhaps their words of wisdom were more than mere words,” she shared cautiously. “If they were truly believed in a compassionate nature then why would they harm needlessly? It would go against everything they stood for.”

“Yes,” he agreed, pushing out of his chair in agitation, pacing in front of her. “But a sorcerer? By their very nature, they are dark and greedy. No matter their altruistic ideals, they always end up the same.”

Merlyn twisted her hands together, unable to look at Arthur as he spouted his beliefs. It always hurt to hear his condemnations of her kind.

“Perhaps rest would help settle your thoughts,” she suggested. “You’re tired and tiredness is never helpful in clear-headedness.”

“Not yet,” Arthur denied, moving to sit beside her on the table and cross his arms, causing her to peer at him oddly. He was sitting quite close, barely a space between their clothing. “I wish to hear of your travels. Did you have trouble on the road? How was – Ealdor?”

She blinked at him, a little baffled. “You… wish to hear about Ealdor?” she asked, a little uncertain to his motives. He’d never shown interest in her home village before. “It’s, er, a small village. Everyone knows everyone, as settlers rarely come our way and it is difficult for families to move with so little currency. Most of our land is farms for Cenred’s taxes.”

“What of your mother?” he pressed. “Is she well?”

Merlyn smiled, seeing her mother’s healthy figure in her mind’s eye. “She’s well,” she told him. “Better than I had hoped. I’d feared that she would be lonely but we’d moved into a friend’s house before I left the first time and I think the company has helped her greatly. She glows in a way she hasn’t for a long time.” she tried not to remember the whispers and taunts that had followed Merlyn and stressed her mother since she was little. The loneliness of caring for a bastard daughter that many thought was demon-spawn had been hard. It simultaneously warmed her heart and made her sad to know her absence had given her mother the opportunity to mend long-fractured friendships.

“That’s good,” he said, seeming uncertain of how to carry small talk. She grinned at his incompetence and offered him a lifeline.

“How has life been without me here?” she asked, glancing around the spotless chambers. “Has Morris been keeping you in check?”

Arthur snorted. “I’m a prince, Merlyn,” he drawled. “I don’t need a minder.”

This time, Merlyn snorted. “Please,” she scoffed, nudging his arm. “Incapable of dressing yourself on any given day, throwing tantrums when you don’t have your meal on time, going out of your way to make sure all my attention is where you want it – am I describing you or a toddler?”

He nudged her back, a little harder than she’d expected, and she fell off her perch with a squawk, foot landing on the hem of her dress and causing her to tip gracelessly to the floor. Arthur roared with laughter as she rubbed her pained behind so she grabbed the closest thing – a boot – and chucked it at him. He let out an, “oomph,” as it hit his head and glared at her before swooping down to pick it back up. Merlyn scrambled to her feet and dodged behind his dining table, ducking as the boot whistled passed her head. She grabbed a vine of grapes from the bowl and propelled them, one by one, at his advancing form, laughing as he tried to catch them in his mouth.

This was good, she thought to herself. This was home.
Chapter End Notes

So sorry for my long absence. My computer is actually in for repairs right now so I haven’t had access to my story but I’ve finally managed to get onto a laptop and edit this chapter for you all. I don’t have an ETA for my computer so I’m unsure when the next update will be but thank you all for hanging in there! Hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Summary

Cerdan meets Kilgarrah and defends Mordred.
Merlyn runs around like a crazy head and Arthur feels betrayed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gaius was asleep by the time Merlyn returned to her chambers. The prince had been summoned to see his father but waved off her offers to accompany him. “Go to bed, Merlyn. You’ve been away for nearly two weeks and need the rest; I can’t have you falling asleep tomorrow when I’m busy searching the city.”

“Do you think they still hide here?” she asked.

Arthur shrugged, belting his sword to his waist once more. “What I think is irrelevant; my father believes the druid would not leave without his accomplice. He’ll probably have me searching all night.”

“Invading homes in the dark,” she commented. “That’ll scare people.”

He sighed, rubbing his eyes and looking stressed. “My father will see it as flushing out the sorcerers, no doubt.”

She felt bad for him but didn’t know how to soothe his agitation. His issues were of his father’s making, and unfixable by a mere servant. With a quiet farewell, he soon left and she tidied up the mess of their horseplay before ducking down to the kitchens for food and returning to the physician’s chambers. She crept past her sleeping mentor, deciding that her arrival would be a nice surprise for him in the morning, and slipped into her room with a whispered, “It’s Merlyn; it’s safe.” Before casting a muffling charm on the door.

From under her bed rolled the druid, covered in dust bunnies. “Oops,” she said, wincing at the dirt in his hair. “I guess I should sweep my floor once in a while.”

“It’s fine,” he said, peeling cobwebs from his face. “I don’t think the guards would be able to find me under there.”

Merlyn snorted then covered her mouth in shock. “Did you jest?” she asked. “I think you just jested.”

Cerdan smiled, a little sheepishly, but Merlyn waved off his impending apology. “No, no, I think it’s great. Humour is good.”

“I’m glad you approve,” he said. “I’ve been working on it for all the hours I was under there.”

She pointed at him. “You’re good,” she said.

"I do try," he said.
Merlyn picked up the pillow from the bed and gave it to Cerdan. "It’s too risky for you to take the bed but I won’t have you sleeping on the bare floor like a beggar. Take this also," she peeled one of her blankets from her bed to give to him but he shook his head, refusing.

"I shan’t strip you of your bedding," he said. "I am used to hard ground and my cloak is thick enough to keep me warm on chilly nights."

She glared at him. "You are my guest, no matter the circumstances that brought you here. That means it is my duty to care for you as well as I am able. Take the blanket and pillow and make your bed; I will be unable to sleep if you are not cared for." He hesitated then took the blanket and she grinned. "Now that’s sorted; I have some food here. I’m afraid it’s little more than some bread and meat but it will fill your belly."

"That is more than enough," he said, taking the proffered sandwich with wide eyes. "You are too kind."

"Nonsense," she dismissed, folding down the blanket on her bed before reaching for the nightdress folded where her pillow had previously been. She realised that she hadn’t exactly thought her plan through; she was going to sleep in the same room as a strange man in, what was essentially, her undergarments. Her face felt hot just thinking of it. "Um, I’m just going to change…" she edged out the door, Cerdan making a concerted effort not to notice. He’d clearly already realised the awkwardness of the situation and was trying not to make it worse.

She tiptoed down the steps to the main chamber and ducked to the right where the fireplace had settled into hot embers, bathing the room in a warm, red glow. Gaius, on the other side of the steps, snored contentedly.

She changed swiftly, shivering in the cool air on her shadowed side, and laced her collar to her neck. She was exhausted but she was unsure if she would find sleep while near a man. Now that it was on her mind, it felt all sorts of inappropriate. But there was no alternative. Hopefully, on the morrow, they would be able to get the druids from the city and back on their way; already several ideas were taking shape at the back of her mind.

She returned to her room and found Cerdan already lying in his selected spot by the wall, his back to her. She felt inordinately relieved at skipping an awkward goodnight and quickly settled into her bed, blowing out the candle on her bedside table. The quiet sounds of night birds drifted in through the shuttered window and it made a comfortable backdrop to Cerdan’s slow breaths, the controlled rhythm lulling her into a stupor that, eventually, drifted into sleep.

The next morning, Gaius gave her an exuberant hug, startling her with the affection, before he abruptly pulled away and asked sternly, "When did you return?"

She smiled sheepishly and lied. "As the sun set. I bathed then was with Arthur until late; you were already asleep and I didn’t want to disturb you. You’re not mad, are you?"

He stared at her suspiciously then said, a mite challengingly, "If you were with Arthur then you heard all about the excitement with the druid and the sorcerer."

She cocked an eyebrow, glad she had prepared for his questions. Still, sweat prickled on the back of her neck. "If you’re talking about the hooded sorcerer who saved the druid’s life then yes, I did. He’s probably been up much of the night searching for him."
He narrowed his eyes, waiting for her to give herself away but she held firm, forcing herself to blink occasionally and not look like a startled deer. Finally, he released her, huffing as he turned away. “Be glad you weren’t here,” he stated. “No doubt you would have been incapable of keeping yourself uninvolved.”

She gulped, glad that his back was to her as she wiped her clammy hands on the skirt of her dress. “So, um, what do you know about druids?” she asked, trying not to flinch as his head turned to her sharply. “I mean, I heard that they’re peaceful. Why does the King want them dead so much?”

“Uther trusts no one with any show of magical ability. Though the druids claim to be peaceful, he believes they conspire to overthrow him.”

“And do you?” she pressed. “Do you believe they desire his downfall?”

Gaius glanced at her from the corner of his eye before returning to mashing herbs into a paste with his pestle. “After the Purge, there were some who splintered from the main faction, believing that their seclusion allowed fear to breed among men. They turned from the path of enlightenment and sought to restore the balance of our land.” He hesitated then added, “But they did not turn only from the lifestyle, they also forsook one of the fundamental beliefs of druidism, which is that all life is sacred and love is stronger than hate.”

Merlyn glanced towards her room before forcing herself to look away. “What became of them?” she asked nervously.

“Many died pursuing their goal, others realised the error of their ways. Some, with patience and knowledge, faded into society to await opportunity.” He glanced at her. “Please don’t get caught up in this, Merlyn, otherwise it will be your head on the chopping block.”

“No, of course not,” she mumbled, staring at the green paste he was concocting as her thoughts reeled. “I don’t even know where they are.”

He shot her a look, something in her tone setting off alarms, but visibly decided against remarking on it. “You’d better get Arthur’s breakfast,” he said instead. “I doubt he’ll be in a tolerant mood; he’s been ordered to search the castle next.” He shook his head, grumbling to himself. “This is going to slow my rounds; I just know it.”

Merlyn swallowed thickly, alarm zapping through her veins. That meant her room would be searched – Morgana’s chambers as well. Stiffly, she farewelled Gaius, walking out the door and closing it calmly before sprinting off to the highborn’s rooms. They had to move Mordred before the patrols came or Morgana would be in grave peril. She shuddered at the punishments the King might deal out against such a personal betrayal.

“Morgana,” she called, knocking quickly on her door. “It’s Merlyn.”

The door opened a crack and she slipped inside. She turned to the older woman as soon as it was shut and hissed worriedly, “They’re going to search the castle. Mordred must be moved.”

Morgana shook her head. “He can’t be moved,” she said. “He’s very pale and hasn’t awoken since last night. I fear he lost a lot of blood.”

“Oh,” said Merlyn, moving swiftly to the boy, who was indeed pale and sickly. She crouched down and pressed the back of her hand to his forehead; it was cool. She lifted his lip and peered at his gums. “He’s gone into shock,” she announced, feeling angry at herself for not predicting it. “I didn’t even think about it when I treated his arm.” She unwrapped the limb and was grateful to see
the wound sealing without swelling or overt redness. No infection. “I’ll have to grab a potion from Gaius’ stock. You’re right, he definitely should not be moved in this state. But Morgana,” she looked up at the worried woman. “If Arthur comes to your room… you’ll have nowhere to hide him.”

“I’ll think of something,” she vowed, ducking down to tuck the blanket around Mordred’s bare torso. “I’ll not give him up to be slaughtered.”

Reluctantly, Merlyn conceded, unable to think of an immediate solution. She rewrapped his arm in fresh linen then stood with her soiled bundle. “I must try to move Cerdan and show myself to Arthur but I’ll return as quickly as I am able. Do not feed or water him and keep him warm as you have been.” She hesitated, unwilling to leave the highborn to the mercy of soldiers. “I’m sorry for putting you in this situation,” she said. “If I could have gone elsewhere…”

“I’m glad you came to me,” Morgana assured, taking Merlyn’s hand in hers. “I would have you trust me, regardless of prejudice laws that would have innocent people executed.”

“The King believes that magic makes him guilty.”

“Uther is wrong.”

Merlyn stared at her, hardly daring to hope. “You believe that?” she asked.

Morgana met her gaze, her sea-green irises swirling with a trickle of self-revelation. “What if magic isn't something you choose? What if it chooses you?”

Merlyn opened her mouth but found herself speechless. Confession rose up like bile in her throat but she swallowed it back down with conviction. Now was not the time; they had no time.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” the highborn asked and Merlyn blinked, looking away.

“Nothing,” she said, taking a calming breath and feeling her heart thump loudly in her chest. “I must go; Arthur will be annoyed as it is.”

“Of course,” said Morgana. “Be safe.”

“You also,” she returned, glancing towards the unconscious Mordred.

A glimpse into Arthur's chambers showed the bed untouched and the hearth cold; the prince clearly hadn’t returned after seeing his father. She wondered if he had eaten anything and winced at the image of how irritable he would be if he hadn’t. A missed meal did not a happy prince make.

She tidied up the room, tied back the heavy curtains to let in some natural light and picked some fruit from the bowl to feed Cerdan while she tried to sneak him into the bowels of the castle.

Merlyn quickly shoved the druid into the shadows of an alcove as a couple of guards marched passed. They were nearly there, only one more staircase and the distraction of the sentries that always guarded the entrance. But the stairs were the worst. There was nowhere to hide while descending them and the threat of discovery was high as patrols had picked up threefold while the search was progressing. That also meant that the guards below were more than likely awake and aware.
She peered over the balustrade cautiously and found one at his post, pike in hand as he systematically scanned the area. He didn’t appear worried but he was far too alert for her liking. She couldn’t knock him out because that would set off alarms when he awoke. She couldn’t bind him for the same reason and he wasn’t sleepy enough to doze, nor was he drinking or playing a game. She squinted into the archway beyond his frame and her eyes flashed with heat as her vision distorted to see through the gloom. With a whispered word, a barrel on the other side of the wall toppled onto its side and the guard jerked upright with his pike at the ready.

“Who’s there!” he called. “Show yourself!”

No one answered him and with quiet footsteps he approached, lunging around the corner to see nothing. While he was occupied, Merlyn and Cerdan rushed past on light feet, ducking down the roughly carved tunnel leading to the dragon’s cave.

The air grew colder and sharper in her lungs as they descended in the dark before warming again as proximity to the dragon’s lair heated the air around them. The obscuring black eased up into a gloomy grey when they reached the iron gate to the platform, letting them both see their feet as they neared the edge.

“Dragon!” she called into the shadows and Cerdan looked at her with alarm. She ignored him for the moment. “Dragon! Hello?”

There was a deafening roar that sent her heart rate spiking and she spun on shaky legs to see the dragon latched onto the wall like a cat stalking its prey. He pushed off quickly and flew to the large, jutting formation before their rocky platform.

“Do you have to do that?” she demanded, putting a hand to her racing heart. “You scared the life out of me.”

The dragon ignored any introductions, golden eyes glaring at Cerdan. “You are not welcome here,” he growled and the druid backed up fearfully. Merlyn stepped in front of him to block his view, mouth open in astonishment.

“He’s a friend,” she said. “He has nowhere else to hide.”

“He is no friend of yours,” the dragon denied. “He harbours the druid boy.”

“Mordred?” Merlyn asked. “How do you know that he’s here?”

“Like you, I hear him speak,” he said, raising his head to meet Cerdan’s gaze again.

“Then why do you hate him? He has magic. He’s just like me.”

“You and the boy are as different as day and night,” the dragon boomed.

Cerdan spoke up in a wavering voice, “He still has a choice.”

The dragon snapped his teeth and both Merlyn and Cerdan jumped. “What is written has been written long before any of us walked this earth. You think yourself so mighty as to change destiny?”

“He’s just a boy,” Cerdan croaked but gamely faced the dragon’s glare. “He doesn’t know what his future holds but his very name gives him power over his destiny.”

The dragon leant in, hot breath stealing the sweat from their skin and drying their eyes. He said
ominously, “It takes great strength and sacrifice to deny one’s fate. Pray you be right, for Albion’s sake.” He moved away and said to Merlyn, “You should not protect this boy, young witch. If he lives, you cannot fulfil your purpose.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, feeling like she was chapters behind her two companions. “My destiny is to protect Arthur. What does he have to do with that?”

“It is written,” said Cerdan quietly, not meeting her questioning eyes. “That my nephew is to slay the Once and Future King.” He met her gaze pleadingly as he added, “But his very name is a denouncement of his future. It means uncertainty, for uncertain is the path of one’s destiny and paths can always be remade. Please,” he begged. “Do not judge him for actions not yet passed.”

“Of course not,” she said, shaking her head at the very thought. “He’s only a boy and he’s innocent.” She turned back to the dragon, whose reptilian features were obviously displeased. “You said yourself that it takes great strength and sacrifice to change one’s destiny. That means it can be done.” She pressed her hands together imploringly. “If I allowed him to be hurt when I could help him because of something he may never do, how am I any better than the King who condemns us? The sorcerers who attack us? Please, Dragon, don’t ask this of me.”

The ancient beast looked away, nostrils flared in distaste. “You play a dangerous game, Merlyn. The future is indomitable and cryptic; pray that your decision doesn’t write destruction for us all.”

“Thank you,” she breathed and started backing away, having spent too long down there already. “I must go; please let him stay,” she requested before turning to the druid. “Your nephew will be protected; you will both leave this place alive.”

Cerdan’s face was pinched with worry. “Is Mordred well?” he asked. “I can barely sense him.” He lifted his hand to his ear, as if to explain his words.

Merlyn bit her lip. “He’s in shock,” she said apologetically. “I forgot to account for the blood loss and emotional trauma. It’s not serious yet, and I’m heading to treat him now, but he wouldn’t be suffering if I had acted properly. I’m sorry.”

“I am alive because of you,” the druid said. “My nephew is protected because of you; how can I demand more when you have already done so much?”

She dipped her head in thanks of his word. “I’ll return when I am able – oh,” she removed a fist sized pouch from her belt. “Here is some food to tide you over.”

He bowed his head as he took the offering and Merlyn farewelled them swiftly, heading back up the tunnel. She had already wasted so much time. What if Arthur had already searched Morgana’s chambers? What if Mordred’s shock had worsened? She didn’t have the right medicine to excite his heart or reregulate it if arrhythmia took hold. She dodged past the nervous guard and raced up the staircase, the pouch holding Mordred’s remedy slapping against her thigh.

She ran into Arthur’s patrol when she reached Morgana’s floor, swinging around the top balustrade of the stair only to yelp as two guards raised their weapons in surprise. In her haste to stop, her left knee buckled and she fell gracelessly to the floor, landing awkwardly to save the vial at her hip.

“Well,” said Arthur, stepping out of an empty room he’d been exploring to peer down at her. “At least I know where you are now.”

She grinned up at him. “Sire!” she cried happily. “Great to see you! I was wondering where you had wandered off to. I noticed you didn’t go to bed last night.” She pushed herself up on her elbows
as the guards retreated to their posts, leaving her to the prince. “Have you eaten today? I know you don’t handle missed meals very well. You should stop, have a bite. I can fetch a meal from the kitchens; I doubt the search will suffer if you take a break.”

“Merlyn,” the prince drawled, reaching down to pick her up like she weighed nothing, dusting off her spotless dress like a father tending to an errant child. “I know the intricacies of important tasks confound you but the point of searching the castle all in one go is because it gives our quarry no time to move himself before we trap him.”

“You are definitely hungry,” she said, nodding. “You have your grumpy tone going.” She wiggled a finger in front of his nose and he knocked it aside with a long-suffering sigh. “I’ll just go grab something from Morgana’s fruit bowl to keep you until I can scrounge up a meal.” She went to walk past but his hand darted out to stay her path. She peered down at the arm across her chest then up to the prince and he hastily removed it, clearing his throat.

“Er, I’m searching the room first. You can fetch me something from the kitchens while I deal with Morgana.”

“Oh – er, I would – I wouldn’t do that,” she said, cutting in front of him when he moved towards the woman’s chambers. “Um, Morgana’s not feeling well. She, er, she probably won’t like you disturbing her – and why would the druid be in there? That’s just silly.”

Arthur stared at her suspiciously. “Merlyn,” he said slowly. “What are you hiding?”

“Hiding?” she asked with a scoff, feeling flushed and woozy as her heart raced in her chest. “I’m not hiding anything. What makes you think I’m hiding something?”

Now he appeared alarmed. “Merlyn,” he said, shaking his head. “You didn’t…?”

She stared at him with wide eyes, realising that he was onto her. “Um…” she said stupidly.

He pushed past her and marched to Morgana's bedroom door, shoving it open unceremoniously. Morgana leapt up from where she had been tending to Mordred and gaped at him. “Have you forgotten how to knock?” she demanded, pulling the curtain across the sun lounge. Merlyn slid in behind the furious prince as the guards took up their posts on the doorway, oblivious to the discovery inside.

Arthur stared at Morgana, speechless for a long moment. Abruptly, he spun back to the door and said to the guards, “Give me a moment,” before shutting the door.

He stayed with his back to them, fist clenched around the door handle before turning slowly. Merlyn retreated to Morgana's side, feeling safer away from the prince.

“Have you gone utterly mad?” Arthur demanded in a sharp hiss, keeping his voice down as he moved from the doorway. His eyes locked onto the boy hidden behind the curtains. “You’ve been hiding him in here all this time?”

Morgana lifted her chin. “I’ll not have an innocent boy executed.”

“You’re betraying the King.”

“The King is wrong!”

Arthur gaped at her and she said more gently, “I know you think it also, Arthur. Mordred’s done nothing wrong; he doesn’t deserve Uther’s judgement.”
“I’ll have to report you,” he said, sounding pained. “I cannot betray my father.”

“I can’t believe you’d let an innocent child die!” she accused.

“There’s nothing I can do; the King has already made up his mind.”

“Please,” Morgana begged, stepping closer. Merlyn ducked her head, feeling as if she was intruding on a moment between the two. “Uther doesn’t need to know. If we can remove him from this city, then you can say that you never found him. You are a better man than your father, Arthur. Don’t become like him.”

The blonde prince clenched his teeth, dropping his gaze before flicking up to Merlyn. She awaited his condemnation. “What part did you play in all this?” he demanded. “You, who has not been here two days.”

“I, er,” she cleared her throat as her voice caught. “I found him,” she admitted. “I was returning from my journey and I saw him standing alone in the upper town markets. He was hurt and afraid. He-he told me that he was being hunted and they were going to kill him.” She swallowed. “I helped him evade the guards but we were being surrounded. The only safe place was Morgana’s chambers – I knew she would not turn him away.” She looked away. “He’s been here ever since.”

“And the sorcerer who saved the druid? Who is he?”

Merlyn rubbed her arms, feeling a little ill. “A friend,” she whispered.

“You –” he spun away, pacing towards the table and the vase of flowers atop it. He rubbed a hand over his head as his other leant against the weathered wood. “You consort with sorcerers, conceal druids from me; what else are you hiding, Merlyn? What else are you keeping secret?”

“Leave her alone,” ordered Morgana, stepping towards the prince angrily. Merlyn hunched in on herself, mind screaming all the things she was keeping quiet. “She’s only done what any truly good person would do. She courageous and selfless. What are you, Arthur Pendragon? Are you your own man, or a puppet of your father’s?”

“Don’t speak to me of loyalty when you have none!” he snarled, glaring.

She bared her teeth. “My loyalty is to the good of the people! My laws are not dictated to me by a man whose hate chokes our kingdom. Use your eyes, Arthur; Uther does not breed peace, he breeds oppression.”

“You speak of rebellion,” Arthur said, voice tightly controlled. “Would you dethrone my father?”

Morgana stared at him, silent for a long moment. Merlyn’s heart thumped loudly in her ears and she held her breath as her friend drew herself up.

“I do not want Camelot,” she finally said. “I want peace.”

The prince looked Merlyn’s way, features aggrieved. “And you,” he said. “You feel the same?”

She ducked her head, fear stealing her voice. How could she answer that? Of course she wanted magic to not be outlawed, and the only way to do that was to not have Uther on the throne, but did that mean she wanted him overthrown? No. He was King but he was also Arthur's father. She could not hurt him like that.

“Of course not,” she muttered hoarsely.
“Will you help us remove Mordred from Camelot?” Morgana asked the prince.

Arthur was silent for a long while and Merlyn looked up to see him staring at her. She tried to convey through her expression how sorry she was for deceiving him but his face was impassive. He glanced away, taking a breath.

“I will help you,” he said. “But do not think I forgive you.” He shot her a glare before turning to Morgana. “You show no guilt for your actions, nor the treasonous words against your King.” He moved towards the door. “I will return once I have completed my search. Have him ready before nightfall.”

Merlyn visited Cerdan to update him and the druid sagged with relief. “With the Once and Future King guarding him, he will not be harmed. Thank you, Emrys.”

“You will have to stay down here a day or so longer,” she said apologetically. “Until the gates reopen and the eyes of the guards ease their intensity. Arthur has sent a raven to be met in the Forest of Ascetir with Mordred.”

“They will come. Like I, they know the importance of the boy to the future of Albion. It would not do to have him fall into the wrong hands. Iseldir is the leader of our guild.”

She left him with a satchel filled with food and returned to Morgana’s chambers with a meal upon a tray. Mordred had recovered quickly after some quiet, warmth and a blood stimulate tonic and she knew he would be hungry. And it would be good to send him off with a full stomach.

Arthur and Morgana were planning the escape when she slunk into the room and she avoided both of their eyes, focusing, instead, on tending to Mordred. She readied a bath while he ate, not knowing when he would have access to one again with his nomadic lifestyle and not wanting him to miss the experience. She left him splashing happily in the wooden tub while she returned to clean the vestiges of his meal. She found Arthur staring into the fireplace while Morgana prepared a travel bag for the boy. She went to Morgana’s side as the least intimidating presence.

“Has it been decided?” she asked quietly, glancing back at Arthur before meeting the highborn’s gaze. “Is there a way out?”

“There is,” Morgana said, voice tight with emotion. “There’s a tunnel in the burial vaults that leads out beyond the city walls. There’s a grate covering the exit; I’m to meet them there with Hengroen.”

“It should be me,” she argued. “It’s much too dangerous for both of you to disappear; it might make the King suspicious.”

Morgana shook her head. “Arthur is taking him the rest of the way; I’ll not be gone long.” Merlyn opened her mouth to argue but the older woman silenced her with a pleading, “Let me do this, Merlyn. I wish… I wish to say goodbye.”

With the devastation wrought on Morgana’s beautiful features, the black-haired girl could do little more than concede. She took the noblewoman’s hand in her own. “You’ll see him again,” she said. “Destiny would not have brought us all together now if not for a greater purpose. He’ll return one day and, perhaps then, stay.”

“I believe you’re right,” agreed Morgana, staring forward vacantly. “He will return, but for good or ill is yet to be decided.” She blinked several times and shook her head, appearing dazed. “This day
has grown long and the night will be even longer. My mind is ready for rest.”

There was a loud splash and Morgana moved towards the bathing chamber. Merlyn let her go, thoughts still whirling with the other woman’s prophetic words. To be decided. Mordred’s destiny and Arthur’s fate. To be decided.

Merlyn was fretful as she lingered in Arthur’s chambers that night. She tidied, dusted, swept, fluffed his pillows and straightened his writing desk. When tiredness dragged down her limbs, she retreated to the cushioned chair by the banked fire and curled up, though her mind still burst with imaginings. The warning bell had not sounded but that did not mean something had not happened. Perhaps bandits struck in the night. What if Hengroen spooked and threw them? Maybe they were lost.

Merlyn jerked awake under the hand that touched her shoulder, looking up to see Arthur had returned. She jumped up, overbalanced and almost fell into the burning coals before the prince pulled her away.

“You’re a menace to yourself,” he grumbled, tugging her to his table and sitting her in his usual spot. She perched on the edge of the chair awkwardly, feeling like she was preparing for an interrogation when he remained standing. He plucked a few grapes from the centre bowl and she realised that he had already changed into a loose shirt and trousers, his feet bare. A glance beyond him showed his day clothes and weapon’s belt in a pile on the floor by the change screen.

“I owe you an apology,” he said, drawing her eyes back to him in astonishment. “I’ve not been fair.”

“No,” she argued automatically, a little confused on his train of thought. “You did –”

“Merlyn,” he interrupted with a stern glare. “Let me speak.”

She mimed zipping her mouth shut and he shook his head with a faint smile, turning away as he rolled a grape between his fingers.

“I realised that you had little choice but to help the boy,” he stated. “Whatever else you may be Merlyn, Morgana was right in calling you courageous and selfless. You said yourself that you approached him because he was alone and scared; you had no way of knowing that he was a fugitive. Even after…” he shook his head with a resigned smile. “You have little regard for your own life but hold each and every one around you to the utmost importance – even when it would be smarter not to. I cannot condemn you for being who you are, Merlyn, when that is why I value you.”

She ducked her head, cheeks burning fiercely. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I feared you would… I do not hate the King. I do not want to dethrone him – for what would I do with such authority? I only… I only wish he didn’t see evil when there is no evil to be had.” She twisted her fingers in her lap. “I… I know magic is outlawed and he believes it to be dark, but for a boy who has no concept of darkness other than the shade of night? How can the King order a life to be ended when it has yet to be lived?”

She looked up at Arthur and found him staring into the hearth, still rolling the grape between the pads of his fingers. His face was drawn, purple smudges under his eyes. He was slumped against the edge of the table and his blinks were slow. Exhaustion weighed him down like anchors.
She stood up. “Come on, sire,” she said gently, plucking the berry from his hand and leading him by hand to the bed. She removed the two long pillows and threw them in the direction of his sun lounge before folding down his covers. “I haven’t placed the hot stone at the foot of the bed yet so the sheets are cold but I’ll remedy that in a moment. Come on, in you hop.” He obediently slid onto the mattress, predictably shivering at the cool temperature but settled without a word. She pulled up his covers and tucked them around him; he said nothing, eyes half-closed. She pressed a hand to his forehead.

“What’re you doing?” he mumbled sleepily.

“Well,” she said. “You’re being so cooperative that I have to wonder if you’ve fallen ill from all this stress. You don’t feel like you have a temperature.”

“Ha, ha,” he grumbled, glaring at her faintly and she was unable to stop herself from smoothing his fringe off his forehead, grinning affectionately. When she realised what she was doing, she pulled away and cleared her throat, quickly moving to the fireplace where the flat, smooth hot stone sat warmly in its bearer. She scooped it up with tongs and slid it under the fur pelt at the bottom of the bed to warm his feet without burning. He sighed happily, eyes closed, so she retreated to collect his clothes for the laundry.

“Stay,” he mumbled as she headed for the door and she turned, not sure if he was dreaming or not. A sliver of his blue irises were visible under his blonde lashes, reflecting the light from the burning coals.

“Stay,” he repeated. “’s too late to go back. You’ll be caught and sent to the dungeon.”

Oh, she realised. There was a curfew because of the search. She let out an aggrieved sigh and dumped his clothes by the door to be dealt with in the morning before heading towards the cushioned chair. Arthur let out a huff.

“Servant bed,” he grumbled, rolling onto his side so his back was to her. “There’s a room for you.”

“But it’s full of dust and cobwebs,” she said. “I don’t clean it.”

“It’s been cleaned,” he mumbled, face mashed into a pillow. “Use it, Merlyn. Go to sleep.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, sire,” she said and moved to the opposite wall where the door was tucked away in the corner. She opened it and lifted her candle, shivering at the cool air that hit her, the room having been sealed off from the heat that rolled out of the fireplace. With a longing glance back at the soft chair by the fire, she moved into the room and pushed the door most of the way shut. For propriety, she should have shut it tight, but she wanted the warm air to seep into her chamber; it wouldn’t do that with a closed door. Not like she was going to change or anything anyway, she had no other attire.

With a yawn, she pulled the covers back and let out a surprised grunt at finding them thick and heavy, very much unlike the regular servant bedding. Quickly, she shucked her shoes and slid beneath them, pulling the covers up to her head. She blew out the candle and the blackness became absolute, no window to cast a light. She buried her nose into the warmth of the blankets and let out a contented hum, falling asleep quickly.

Chapter End Notes
Did ya like? Cerdan’s not dead so I wonder how that will influence Mordred’s future… Hmm… ;)
Reviews are love!
Chapter Summary

Arthur's birthday and coronation turns from a celebration into a fight for survival.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Merlyn let out a laugh as Skylark chased after a startled rabbit, prancing and flapping her wings in excitement, and inadvertently slowing herself down. The rabbit disappeared into the shrubbery of the trees and the griffin skidded to a halt, skipping back to Merlyn as if for praise. Obediently, she scratched her sweet spot, saying, “You’ll never make friends with the wildlife if you scare them all off like that. What did that poor rabbit do to you?”

Skylark let out a deep purr and smacked her tongue defiantly against her beak so Merlyn pushed her away playfully, sending her into another canter along the lake. Sunstrider let out a displeased snort and Merlyn retreated to his side, giving him a scratch as well.

“She’s just excited, boy,” she said. “She isn’t able to see me as often as you can.”

He nibbled her hair before dropping his head to graze and the black-haired girl turned her head to see the sun rising in the east. She let out a sigh. “I’ll have to head back soon. It’s Arthur’s eighteenth birthday today; his coronation. I want to surprise him with breakfast and a duty-free day. I think he’ll like that after last week.” And the fiasco with the druids.

Cerdan had shed his cloak, trimmed his hair and joined a caravan leaving the city, walking out the front gates with no issue two days after Mordred had escaped. By the end of the week, the King had been forced to abandon his vigilance when Othanden, a prosperous town by the Channel of Portsmeere was besieged by Saxons. They were driven off but not before they pilfered many valuables and damaged the town centre. The King had been hungry to hunt them down but Arthur’s birthday was nigh, so he gave the order for repairs and returned to Camelot’s city without retribution. Robbed of two proceedings, the King was not pleasant, and his son bore the brunt of it, driven into the ground with his father’s demands.

But Merlyn had pulled some strings – or more, strung herself up in them instead of Arthur – and he now had a full day to do as he wished before the crowning that night. She was eager to see his relief when she told him of his freedom.

And relief she did see, but instead of coaxing him out on a ride to show him some glades she’d been wanting to share, he said; “Excellent! I’ve been meaning to go on a hunt. Notify Lancelot, Gareth and Ector to ready their mounts. We’ll head to the western forest and see what we can find.”

She did so, a little despondent at his dismissal of her idea, though chatting with Lancelot cheered her up a bit. He was settling into his role perfectly, though he admitted that there were some knights who were a little frosty with him for undermining the Code of Camelot. Merlyn assured him that they were only jealous his good character and superior skills meant more to the prince than from which bloodline he hailed.
She returned to Arthur to ready him for the day and found him already dressed, strapping his belt to his hips. That was when she learned she wasn’t actually invited to join them.

“You should be thrilled,” the blonde knight said as he attached his scabbard to his belt. “A whole day to yourself. You can join Morgana and braid each other’s hair or something.”

She glared at him. “Why are you refusing my presence?” she asked, a little hurt despite herself. “I’m not some fanciful maiden who faints at the sight of blood.”

“Thank the graces for that,” he muttered, moving to the door and pulling on his riding boots. He caught her glare and sighed loudly. “It’d be inappropriate for you to be in the company of so many unrelated men,” he revealed. “I don’t see what the big deal is. I’ve been on hunts without you before.”

“Not since I arrived,” she said. “I’ve always accompanied you. How is you and I being alone together any different to there being a party of men?”

He shot her a droll look. “Have you ever heard the term ‘lady of pleasure’?” he asked.

“You mean…” she gasped, catching on. “What? You’re calling me a –”

“No,” he interrupted loudly. “But I realised that I’ve been treating you as I would treat a manservant and it risks your reputation.”

“What’s brought this on?” she demanded, putting her hands on her hips. “You never care about social propriety. If you did, I’d live in the stocks.”

He sighed, straightening up. “My father,” he began and Merlyn knew she would not like what he had to say. Nothing good ever came from him uttering those words. “Has mentioned that I should being thinking about my future, now that I am of age.”

She cocked her head at him. “Okay…” she said slowly.

He took a breath. “He told me to start thinking about finding a wife.”

It felt like the air had been punched from her chest. “A wife?” she repeated dumbly. “But the King has years left and you are still young.”

“That is the way of nobility,” he said, not meeting her eyes. “I am the sole heir so I must do what I can to ensure our line continues.”

“Do you want children?” she asked, curiosity spiking. “If you did not need them, would you still want them?”

“Of course,” he said, as if confused by the distinction. “I’ve always wanted children. Several of them, so they aren’t lonely.”

Her heart melted. That right there revealed just how much he suffered as an only child of royal blood; probably more than he realised.

“I want children also,” she admitted with a smile, gaze distant as she imagined. “I know not how many, for the number constantly changes but there is always more than one. Siblings… so they can protect each other.”

He was watching her with an inscrutable expression and she felt suddenly self-conscious. “What?”
she asked.

He shook his head, turning to the door. “I’ll return before sunset; be sure to have a bath and meal ready. Oh, and muck out my stalls while I’m gone – and clean my rooms,” he ran a finger over the wood skirting beside the door and rubbed it against his thumb. “It’s getting a bit dusty.”

Merlyn jabbed a finger to the door. “Leave,” she commanded and he raised a playful eyebrow.

“You know I’m the prince right –”

“Just go!” she laughed and pushed him out the door, shutting it in his face when he turned for another retort.

“I’ll get you back for that, Merlyn,” he sang before she heard his footsteps marching away.

She shook her head fondly and turned back to the room. Arthur’s breakfast sat demolished on the table. His clothes were strewn on the floor. His bed was unmade and pillows thrown all over the floor. She shook her head; forget little ones, Arthur was enough of a child on his own.

Merlyn didn’t spend the day with Morgana, braiding each other’s hair. The highborn was resting, suffering from disturbed nights once more. Gwen looked tired as she told the black-haired girl and Merlyn plucked a small, yellow blossom from her own hair, tucking it into her friend’s.

“Remember to take care of yourself also,” she said. “You’ll turn out no better if you don’t rest too. I’ll see if I can find an alternate remedy to those tonics; sometimes different medicines work better on different people.”

“The Lady Morgana would be forever grateful, and truthfully, so would I. It never grows easier to watch her suffer.”

Gwen returned to Morgana’s chambers and Merlyn went to clean out the royal stalls, greeting Tyr as he tended to one of Uther’s steeds. The issue with Morgana’s powers was dire. It deprived the woman of her rest, besieged her with images she had no hope of understanding and left her miserable and confused. Gaius’ words still rang strongly in her ears and Merlyn was still fearful of accidentally stripping Morgana of her right to choose magic or not, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t soothe the intensity of the divinations. If she could find a tonic or even a spell that would take the edge off her emotional upheaval, then Morgana would not be so disturbed as to lose her rest.

Merlyn believed that the premonitions were there for a reason – for why else would destiny torment the compassionate woman – so didn’t want to risk blinding her completely. But she also worried about causing more issues. The gift of prophecy was so obscure that Merlyn’s book covered the chapter on dreamwalkers, fortune tellers and seers in a mere two pages. She needed more information.

But it was not to be that day – or for several days after.

Arthur was crowned. A black knight drove his horse through the far window, the stained glass shattering on the steed’s armoured head. The knight threw down a gauntlet. Knight Owain picked it up. Mortal combat was declared for the following morn.

“Have you ever seen this Black Knight before?” Merlyn asked Gaius once they returned to their chambers, Arthur’s celebration having been postponed.
Gaius didn’t look up from where he mixed a concoction together. “I don’t believe so,” he said.

“You didn’t recognise his crest?” she pressed, watching him closely, though his impassive face was long-since mastered.

“Crest?” he asked and she knew he knew something by his nonchalant tone. If Gaius was truly ignorant, he would be intensely focused on solving this mystery, not creating a burn paste. Poker face be damned; there were other ways of outing a person.

“What house is it?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I didn’t see it that clearly.”

He evaded a few more questions before snapping, “Merlyn, your faith in my all-seeing knowledge is both touching and wholly misplaced. Maybe if you’ve finished your work, you could go to bed and leave me to finish mine.”

She conceded defeat. “Okay,” she sighed. “I’m going.” She walked up her steps then hesitated as her thoughts turned to the combat on the morrow. “Gaius?” she queried.

He sighed heavily, looking skyward. “Merlyn,” he said, resigned.

“Do you think Knight Owain can beat him?”

The old man looked over, his craggy features no longer holding their impassiveness so well. She saw his worry; his dread.

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

Knight Owain died. The Black Knight – who Merlyn knew had been dealt a mortal blow – stopped before the royal booth and threw down his gauntlet. “Who will take up my challenge?”

Arthur was delayed from jumping the barrier and another knight, Sir Pellinor, grabbed it instead. “So be it,” the Black Knight said, helmed head turning to stare at the King before he marched away.

Merlyn said lowly to Gaius as the imposing warrior passed, “Should we tend his wounds? He took a hit?”

Gaius glanced at her. “Owain didn’t land a blow.”

The black-haired girl stared after the retreating knight, who stood tall and unhindered by injury. “No, I saw it. The sword definitely pierced him. He should be dead.”

“Perhaps,” sighed Gaius. “He already is.”

Merlyn stared at him, aghast. “Dead men don’t walk,” she stated, as if the physician didn’t yet know.

“Not on their own,” he agreed and a shiver went down her spine. “I must speak with the King,” he added and strode away without another word. Merlyn turned to watch as Arthur and his knights arranged Sir Owain’s body into a position of honour, sword upon his chest. His scarlet cloak was spread over his body as a shroud while guards moved forward with a stretcher, prepared with the knowledge that it would be used that day, one way or the other.
It was confirmed that the Black Knight was a wraith; Tristan de Bois to be more accurate, going by the hole in the man’s tomb.

“How do we stop it?” she asked.

“We cannot,” Gaius admitted. “Because it is not alive, no mortal weapon can kill it.”

Merlyn shook her head, unwilling to believe that. “Surely there must be something.”

“Nothing can stop it until it has achieved what it came for.”

“And what’s that?” she asked, already suspicious of the answer.

“Revenge,” the old man confirmed and Merlyn shook her head.

“Always,” she muttered. “It’s always revenge. What does that mean for Sir Pellinor?”

Gaius looked down at the book on the table, open to the page on wraith’s. “I’m afraid it doesn’t look good.”

“I cannot accept this,” she said. “Sir Pellinor is a good man, a noble warrior. He doesn’t deserve this senseless death.” She turned away, pacing. “We’ve dealt with something similar before, with the griffin. You said, ‘magic can defeat magic’.”

“A mythical beast is not the same thing as a wraith, Merlyn. A wraith is created when one utters a vow of vengeance upon death and a powerful sorcerer calls upon that oath. The creature is sustained through dark magic and ill intent. A simple incantation will not defeat it.”

“But there has to be a way!” she snapped. “You talk like it has happened before. Have you seen this in the past? What happened?”

“I have not,” Gaius admitted reluctantly. “I have only read of such deeds.” He closed his book and set it aside, sinking onto the bench seat.

“Then you might be wrong,” she declared, ignoring his affronted glare. “What did you read in these chronicles?”

Gaius sighed, his aged features sagged with tiredness. “Geoffrey of Monmouth knows the tales better than I,” he said, resigned. “He will be able to tell you more.”

“Thank you,” she said, darting close to drop a kiss on his brow before breezing out the door. She had until the next sunrise to figure out how to kill something already dead.

Geoffrey of Monmouth was still in the Hall of Records when Merlyn burst through the door and she startled him so badly, he almost fell from his seat.

“Merlyn!” he gasped, clutching his chest. “Have some composure, please!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” she cried, moving closer but unsure how to comfort him. “I didn’t think – I thought, perhaps, you had left.”

“If I had,” said the Court Genealogist, pushing himself to his feet. “Then the Hall would be locked
and you would have run into the door.”

She ducked her head at his reproachful tone. “I apologise,” she said, a bit more contained. “Only – I have need of your knowledge. Gaius believes the Black Knight is a wraith.”

“Then we are in grave peril,” Geoffrey said solemnly.

“Which is why I’m here. I need to find a weapon that will kill something that’s already dead.”

“Well,” he said, thinking. “I’ve read of such things in the ancient chronicles.”

She leant forward, hope rising. “What did they say?”

“Several fables,” he shared slowly. “Speak of ancient swords.”

“That can kill the dead?”

“The swords the fables speak of could destroy anything, alive or dead.”

This was exactly what she needed. “Can you show me one of these fables?” she asked.

“Well, let me think,” he said, moving to the shelves and perusing them. “Yes. Hmm…”

She tried not to be impatient but it was pressing between her shoulder blades like a hand urging her forward. Finally, he pulled a large tome off the shelf and placed it on the small, cluttered table beside it. He flipped through several chapters and finally landed on one with a large illustration on the right page. It was of a dragon with a golden sword floating before its open maw.

“This is the Chronicle of Beltain,” he explained, scanning the paragraphs with his finger. “Now then… ah, here we are. ‘Sir Marhaus looked upon the great sword, begotten in the dragon’s breath and found it passing good’.”

Merlyn jolted. “What was that?” she demanded and Geoffrey recited the passage once more. “Dragon’s breath…” she murmured, mind whirling. She straightened. “Thank you, Geoffrey. You have aided me greatly.”

She took off, leaving the genealogist bemused and resigned. “Always in a rush,” he murmured to himself.

Merlyn rushed to Morgana’s room but Gwen had already returned home for the night. The highborn was dressed for sleep but it was clear she hadn’t yet sought her bed. Her features were pinched with stress as she spoke.

Merlyn took her hand. “I have a plan to stop the Black Knight,” she assured her. “Fret not; Sir Pellinor will not die if I have my way.”

“Thank you, Merlyn,” the older woman said, taking a deep breath. “That man is… not normal. I fear what he seeks is not merely to challenge the knights.”

“It never is,” the black-haired girl agreed. “He will be stopped, I promise you.”

“I believe you,” Morgana said. “I only fear for the lives lost beforehand.”

Merlyn agreed, which was why she raced down to Tom’s, despite the dark sky and knocked on his
door. Gwen answered, a frown on her face that disappeared when she saw Merlyn.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, keeping her voice low. Her father was, more than likely, asleep inside.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” she apologised. “But I’ve come to ask a favour.”

“Yes?” her features were concerned.

“I’ve – I’ve come to ask for a sword. The strongest sword that your father has ever made.”

“Whatever for?” the maid asked, opening her door to grant Merlyn access.

“To stop the Knight,” she whispered.

Gwen nodded in acceptance then held her finger to her lip, moving towards where Tom was, indeed, sound asleep in the far corner. Merlyn hung back as the maid squatted and reached under the bedframe, quietly extracting a long shape swathed in red cloth. They retreated to the curtained division at the back of the house and Gwen placed the package reverently on her mattress.

“My father’s been saving this,” she shared, unwrapping the cloth. “He’s always said it was the best sword he’s ever made.

Merlyn gazed upon the shiny metal, reaching out to pick it up. She knew little about weapons, only that the pointy end faced away from the wielder, but even her novice eyes knew that this was a fine sword. “It’s perfect,” she murmured, running a finger along the centre of the blade. It was balanced exceptionally well.

“He’ll kill me if he finds I’ve taken it,” Gwen said, eyes on the sword. Merlyn replaced it upon the cloth and took up her friend’s hand.

“He’ll understand,” she said. “You did it to save a life.”

“I hope your plan works,” the maid murmured.

Merlyn rewrapped the sword but didn’t speak, though in her mind, she muttered, so do I.

She ventured down to the bowels of the castle and stood before the dragon. He was less than helpful with her request. “The dead do not return without reason,” he said. “Who has he come for?”

Merlyn swallowed. “The King.”

The golden beast raised his head dismissively. “Then let him take his vengeance and the wraith will die without my aid.”

“But it is not the King who is fighting,” she argued. “Sir Pellinor has taken up the challenge. He will die without this sword!”

“Sir Pellinor’s life is of little consequence to me. Perhaps Uther will take it as a sign to stop cowering behind his men.”

“You’re condemning a good man to death!” she shouted, outraged.

“The knights accepted their mortality the moment they pledged themselves to the kingdom. Their fate is not my concern.”
“But Arthur’s is,” she argued. “And through his, mine!” she stared at his indifference and an ugly suspicion arose in her mind. “You are caged down here, imprisoned without the sky I know you long for. Alone and angry… you must be eager for revenge.” The dragon was startled at her insight, releasing hot air through his nostrils. That alone told her that her guess had been correct. And it made her sick with anger. Of course – of course! Why hadn’t she seen before?

She snorted sardonically, throwing up her hands. “It’s always revenge,” she spat. “For what else would you do down here but plot against those who you believe did you wrong – and not care about stepping on anyone else as you go?”

The dragon leant down, teeth bared. “It is not a belief that I was done wrong,” he growled. “Uther betrayed the trust of a friend when he chained me down here. He betrayed not only me but himself and everyone around him! It is not a belief that he did me wrong. It is knowledge!”

He reared back, wings flaring and Merlyn realised her stupidity in angering the only one who could help her. “Wait!” she cried, flinging herself towards the edge. “Wait! I’m sorry! Please don’t leave!”

He stopped, breath heavily with emotion and guilt settled into her gut. She was being horribly unfair. She’d let her hurt at being used fuel the cruelty of her words. “I’m sorry,” she repeated more quietly. “I cannot know how you’ve suffered, of the destruction you’ve seen or the friends you’ve lost. I am only a village girl, trying to live up to this expectation you have of me. You want me to be this saviour for the future, this creator of Albion, but I, myself, am only learning how to make my own decisions. I do not have wisdom or authority; all I can use is my wits and my heart and hope the mistakes I make will not be catastrophic. You tell me to stand back and allow Sir Pellinor to die. To allow the King to be struck down. But how can I when everything in my being screams at me to do something?”

The dragon looked calmer, though his head was high above her own when usually he bowed down to speak to her as equals. He said, “You are young and still naïve but sacrifices are inevitable. You cannot save everyone, Merlyn.”

“I know,” she said, holding out her hands. “I know… but I cannot sit back and allow people to die. Because… because if I do, how does that make me any better than the people who kill? I must believe that I was gifted with this purpose by more than a fluke of destiny. I must believe that it was because the decisions I will make – that I have made – will lead us to unity. If I cannot believe that then I can’t trust in anything I do and everything that I’m striving towards will fall to ruin. Please tell me I’m not wrong.”

The dragon drew in a long, deep breath, letting it out in a loud whoosh of resignation. He tilted his head as he peered down at her. “A weapon forged with my assistance will have great power.”

“I know,” she said but he shook his head sharply.

“You do not know,” he said solemnly. “You can only guess. You have not seen what I have seen. If you had, perhaps you would not ask this of me.”

Trepidation slowed her breath. “What do you mean?” she asked warily.

“In the wrong hands,” the dragon said. “This sword could do great evil. It must be wielded by Arthur and him alone.”

“But –” she was quailed by his great golden eye narrowing. “I understand.”
“You must do more than understand,” he said tersely. “You must promise.”

She stared up into his grave face and held his gaze unwaveringly. “I promise,” she vowed.

Merlyn entered Arthur’s chambers and found the prince sleeping restlessly on his bed. The fire had burned low and the curtains were still hooked back, allowing the cold night outside to press through the windows and chill the room. She placed the wrapped sword on the table and moved over to draw the curtains before throwing some more logs on the fire and stoking the flames back to life. Once done, she grabbed Arthur’s winter robe and the sword, and walked to the bed, relighting the candle on his bedside table before waking him.

He startled under her touch and jerked upright, hand searching for the blade she knew lived under his pillow.

“It’s me!” she said, moving back and holding up her hands. “It’s Merlyn.”

Arthur squinted up at her in the new light created from the candle. “Merlyn?” he said groggily before flopping back onto his pillows and rubbing his eyes. “What’re you doing here?”

Despite the impropriety, Merlyn dumped the sword and robe onto the sheets and crawled on after them. Arthur wrenched his legs up when he felt her weight on them. “Wha –”

“Budge up,” she said and he moved up to sit against his headboard in incredulity. “I have a gift for you,” she added, tucking her legs under her after kicking off her shoes and dragged the cloth-covered weapon into her lap. She laid her hand on it gently as she met his wide eyes. “But I need you to promise that you will fight in place of Knight Pellinor.”

“Urgh! Merlyn!” he grumbled drawing his hands over his face in irritation. “I cannot take Pellinor’s place; it’s against the Knight’s Code. He picked up the gauntlet therefore he must fight.”

She leaned forward. “But the Knight’s Code only applies to living knights, right? The Black Knight isn’t alive. That means the rules no longer matter.”

“What?” Arthur asked. “Don’t be absurd, Merlyn? Of course the knight is alive.”

“He’s not,” she insisted. “After Sir Owain’s death, Gaius and I went down to the catacombs. Tristan de Bois’ tomb was broken and there was no body inside. That knight outside wears Tristan’s crest,” she pointed to the window. “No other person wore the same crest but he.”

“So another had taken it up,” dismissed Arthur. “It may be illegal but it is not enough to break our laws.”

“The law states in mortal combat, the knights must battle until one is dealt a mortal blow. Arthur,” she grabbed his feet, still hidden under the blankets. They twitched beneath her palms. “Sir Owain struck a mortal blow. The blade went into the Black Knight’s gut, only it didn’t kill him because he’s not alive!”

“What are you saying, Merlyn? That my mother’s brother has returned from the dead and is now taking my knights down one by one?”

“I’m saying that your mother’s brother has been conjured from the dead by a sorcerer to seek revenge on your father. I’m saying that Sir Pellinor has no chance to defeat him tomorrow but you can if you use this blade. I’m saying that you must trust me. Please.”
Arthur sighed, looking away. He shivered a little as his exposed arms cooled in the air so she picked up his robe and threw it at him. He grunted but put it on. “Show me this sword,” he requested.

She unwrapped it and gifted it to him flat across her palms. Immediately, interest sparked in his eyes and he leant forward, plucking it from her hands. He turned it over, inspecting it with a gaze more knowledgeable than her own.

“This is a fine blade,” he murmured. He held it outstretched like he was reaching for something then drew it back in. “It has almost perfect balance. Where did you get it?”

“Erm, Tom. Tom the Blacksmith. Gwen’s father.”

“I didn’t know he forged swords this well.” Arthur slid from the bed, gripping the weapon with both hands and lifting into a swing pose, blade beside his shoulder. She smiled as he tested it like a child playing with a new toy.

“He worked on that one diligently. Said it was the best sword he’s ever made. He was keeping it for a special circumstance.”

He worked it over a little more before he lowered the sword to his side and sighed. “To usurp Pellinor's position would a declaration of doubt,” he stated. “It would tell the knights that I don’t trust in his ability to complete his task and he would lose all respect among them.”

“But to allow him to fight, you condemn him to death. Which is better?” she asked. She climbed off his bed and moved to the window, edging aside the heavy curtain to look at where the Black Knight stood sentry, unmoving and unhurt; a dark stain on the otherwise moonlit grass. “Look at him, Arthur. He doesn’t sleep; he doesn’t eat. He is not mortal.”

She felt Arthur come up behind her and he reached out to move the curtain further back. He, too, stared at the Black Knight for a moment. An idea popped into Merlyn’s head and she spun around to face him. He was closer than expected but she was too focused on her idea to blush at the skin exposed by the deep V of the loosely tied robe.

“If the public learn that he is a wraith, would Pellinor keep his honour?”

Arthur peered down at her, blue eyes silver in the darkness. “It would, but if it is not revealed quickly, assumptions would be made.”

“What if… what if Pellinor fought the creature but we told him to takes its helm off. Tristan has been in his tomb for twenty years. If he’s not bone, he has to be horrific. The whole arena would see that he’s not mortal and you could step in without anyone losing their honour or reputation or whatever it is you knights hold to such esteem.”

“That… is actually not a bad idea, though it all depends on Pellinor dishelming the Black Knight.”

“He is one of the more skilled knights in your collection. Do you think he can do it?”

Arthur moved away and Merlyn felt a momentary loss. He ran his fingers over his lips in thought. “He could do it,” he said. “But what if the Black Knight’s helm doesn’t detach? As you said, he’s been encased for twenty years; what if his headpiece has fused?”

“Well,” she replied, not having thought of that. “I guess we’ll have to cross that bridge when we get to it.”
Arthur shot her a look but she didn’t see him coming up with any alternatives. He lifted the sword in his hand again. “Why is it so important that I fight the Black Knight? I am no more special than anyone else.”

“Oh, er,” she fumbled for an answer. “Um, I think, I think it has something to do with your, er, bloodline. You’re related to him so you have the, er, power to kill him for good.”

“Hmm,” he said, still eyeing the blade. “The blood of my mother.”

Merlyn bit her lip. “Well, you’re not – you’re not really killing him,” she said. “He’s already dead. Just, um, think of it as putting him to rest.” She winced at the terrible pun and added, “I mean, he’s not truly back. He’s a wraith driven by revenge. That doesn’t make a person so that thing out there isn’t really your uncle.”

“What are these inscriptions here?” he asked, lifting the weapon so the blade shone in the firelight. “On the front and back.”

“Um,” she stepped closer and peered at the words. It was the Old Tongue but she couldn’t tell him that, nor could she tell him she could read it. “I-I don’t know,” she said lamely. “I didn’t think to ask.”

“Right,” he said and walked to the table to lay down his weapon. “Well, it’s late and I, apparently, have a fight in the morning.” He gestured towards the servant’s chamber. “You can sleep in there. We will need to be up early in order to meet with Pellinor before his bout. He will need to be informed of our plans.”

“Yes, sire,” she said and the thought of sleep had her yawning. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Merlyn,” he said and she turned away as he shed his gown, moving to the room. She hissed as she hit the wall of icy air and wondered if she should start leaving the door open, if only so the heat could permeate the narrow space. She shed her shoes and dived under the covers, leaving the door wide open in hopes of feeling the fire’s breeze.

With a workable plan in motion and hope brightening the horizon, Merlyn fell asleep quickly and deeply.

The battle was fierce. The Black Knight was ruthless and unceasing but Knight Pellinor was skilled and informed. They skirmished for a little while before Pellinor managed to catch the edge of the Black Knight’s helm with his sword. He wrenched it up and spun away from a slash, bringing his shield up to bear as Tristan’s desiccated features were put on display, his helmet falling to the dirt below. The crowd erupted, several women screamed, men shouted in horror; one or two nobles fainted.

“Demon!” Pellinor shouted. “You are no knight!”

Arthur moved onto the dirt of the arena, in full regalia with his burnished sword held on guard beside his raised shield. “No!” the King cried, rising from his seat. “Arthur!”

The prince ignored him and Merlyn watched as the Black Knight turned to face the new threat. Sir Pellinor, as per instructed, edged around the enemy and dropped back into flank position.

“The Knight’s Code does not apply for creatures of magic!” the prince decreed. “I challenge you, Wraith,” he spat the word like it was dirty.
“So be it,” Tristan intoned.

Merlyn was tidying Arthur’s chambers when the prince returned after meeting with his father. The black-haired girl expected him to be sullen and frustrated, as he usually was after facing the King. Instead, his features were thoughtful, his attention far away.

“Would you like some tea, sire?” she asked to draw him back. He blinked, as if only just realising she was there, and glanced up.

He nodded his head and moved to the table, flopping into his wooden chair and resting an elbow on the scarred wood. Merlyn unhooked the kettle from the fire and poured the hot water into a pot filled with his favourite tea leaves. She’d thought he might need it to calm down, but now she was curious as to what had him so preoccupied.

“Copper for your thoughts?” she asked as she set the tray on the table, removing a teacup and filling it with steaming brew. She breathed deep the rich, earthy scent.

“My father… said that I mean more to him than Camelot.” He watched his fingers trace meaningless patterns on the tabletop. “I always thought… I always thought that I was a disappointment to him, but he said that I was his son and he would not wish for another.”

Merlyn felt warmth bloom in her heart for the misguided king. He was a bit of a tyrant and refused to listen once his mind was made up, but he loved his son and it was about time he told him.

“That is great news,” she said. “And he should be proud. You are a great man, Arthur, and you will be a good king, with or without your father’s approval.”

“Thank you, Merlyn,” he said. He took a sip of tea but yelped as he burnt his tongue. He jerked the cup away but dropped it in his surprise and the scalding liquid spilled all over his lap. “AHH!” he screamed, leaping up to try to escape the burn.

“Oh no!” shouted Merlyn, looking for anything that would help. A pitcher of water stood at the other end so she leapt for it, spinning and throwing the cooler liquid at his front. He stopped, staring at her as water dripped from his shirt and trousers, some having splashed up to hit his face. He blinked in disbelief. Merlyn snorted in laughter and covered her mouth to try to contain it.

“Merlyn,” he growled slowly, holding his arms from his wet body like a displeased cat. She backed away slowly, not liking the look in his eye. She held up her hands.

“In no way was any of this my fault,” she said. “I only made the tea, I didn’t force you to drink it while it was still hot.”

“Merlyn,” he growled but this time with more intent.

“No,” she said, pointing at him. “You did this to yourself.”

He leapt at her and she shrieked as she dodged, darting around the table to avoid the bear hug she just knew he was going to give her. She grabbed some grapes in order to provide a counter-attack and tried to think of an escape plan.

“You’ll never catch me!” she declared as she ran.
I hope the conversation between Kilgarrah and Merlyn was believable. I tried to
smooth its rough edges as I read through again but it still feels a little jumpy and
unintelligible… but this whole chapter kind of feels… discordant. *shrugs*
On another note, I’m from the east coast of Australia and can I just say, you guys are
lucky you got this at all. If anyone watches international news (or is from Australia)
then you heard about Cyclone Debbie hitting Down Under (now it’s hit New Zealand
– be safe guys!). But just. Wow. Worst storm in my memory and I’ve lived here my
whole life! I’m lucky I lived on a hill but my valley town is gone. I have friends who
are homeless with no insurance claim because they’re in ‘flood zone’; others who have
lost whole herds of cattle despite putting them at the highest point in the region. Places
that are only just now being accessed because the roads are gone… just… wow.
But nah, global warming doesn’t exist guys. It’s a myth. Increased severity in weather
events is just a bad set of years. Nothing to worry about.
Sorry – I might be a little bitter right now.
…
Reviews are love!
“What do you mean, I’m not coming with you?” Merlyn demanded of Arthur as he marched through the castle.

“It means exactly what I said,” he retorted, not even gracing her with a glance as she hurried to keep up with his rapid pace.

“But you aren’t allowed to go alone!” she said, almost tripping on his heels as they descended a staircase. “Your father ordered that when you returned from the last hunt injured.”

“Father is always overly dramatic,” he dismissed, rolling his eyes.

She gaped at him. “You needed stitches in your arm! You’re lucky infection didn’t set in with how long it took you make it back to the city.”

“Well, now I know better,” he said, leading them into the courtyard. The day was sunny and bright, the white stones hurting her eyes with the glare of reflected light. “And I’ll not be alone,” he added. “Lancelot is going with me.”

“What – but –” she blustered. “What if you need a healer like you have the past two times? Bandits have been testing Camelot’s boundaries for weeks now. Two knights may not be enough if there is a large group.”

He slowed and shot her a glance. “And you think having you along will make all the difference between winning a battle and losing one, do you?”

Yes! She screamed in her mind but she couldn’t say it aloud. To Arthur, she was a lowly servant who couldn’t even wield a sword. Or a mace. Or a pike. But she could handle a shield fine!

“That’s what I thought,” he said smugly at her silence before he marched away, leaving her behind. She fumed at his retreating back. This was the fourth time he had gone on a hunting trip since his birthday and the fourth time he had ordered her to stay like a trained dog. How was she supposed to protect him from harm when he shunted her aside the moment he headed into new territory?

A light hand touched her shoulder and she turned her head to see Lancelot wearing a sympathetic
Smile. “Leaving you behind again?” he asked.

She growled at him. “The stupid clotpole refuses to listen,” she whined. “What if there are bandits? Or Saxons? Or Vikings? Or-or evil sorcerers!”

“Calm yourself, my friend,” he said. “He’ll not be alone and I will protect him with my life.”

“I’ve no doubt of that,” she agreed, worry pinching her brow. “But I don’t want that either. Not only would Gwen bring you back from the dead to string you up, I’d miss your pretty, pretty smile.”

Said smile split his face and he shook his head fondly. “We will both try to stay out of trouble, alright? And it is only a short hunting trip. I think Arthur is growing a little suffocated.”

She threw up her hands. “I offered to take him to some of the glades I’ve found but he always has some sort of excuse. It’s his own fault that he’s not taking a break.”


He shook his head, patting her on the back. “I do not think it is the risk of boredom that has him turning you down, Merlyn.” He took a cleansing breath of the crisping air. “I must go. Arthur’s impatience is renowned.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” she grumbled and farewelled him. He marched with long strides towards the lower town and she turned back to the castle. Other than her usual tidying, Arthur hadn’t given her any chores, seemingly too eager to escape the city to pass it a thought. So she headed to Gaius’ instead. Perhaps he would indulge her with a lesson on the Old Tongue. Or –

She stopped. Or she could take Sunstrider out. And if she just happened to follow the same path as the prince and his knight, what a coincidence.

She peered towards the royal stables then turned back to the arch that would lead her up to Gaius’ chambers. Spy on Arthur? Or potentially clean out the leech tank? The answer was a no-brainer.

Sunstrider was full of beans as she moved him towards the city gates. He may have been feeding of Merlyn’s own thrill of rebelling but he was a handful as they moved through the markets. He didn’t strike out or bite but he did hop a few times on his haunches and his ears flattened in displeasure if anyone drew close – which, in a market, was a lot of people. He did snap at Favian when the gate guard drew close to chat but she checked him severely for it. Sunstrider knew the guard and usually had no issue so his problem was internal, and she wouldn’t stand for it if it might harm someone around her.

“Sorry,” she apologised when Sunstrider finally stood quietly but the guard waved it off easily.

“I’ve seen how he is with anyone else. That you have him listen to you at all is a miracle.”

“Well,” she said, patting his neck and leaking some calming thoughts into his mind. He snorted and shook off her attempts, which he was able when he was feeling particularly stubborn. “Some days are better than others.”

“I wish you luck,” he said and moved back.

Merlyn smiled at him. “If I find some rosehips, I’ll gift them to you for your wife. I hear she and the bub are doing well.”
“Very well,” he agreed. “You should visit again. Alys finds you charming.”

“And no doubt enjoys the way little Adrian quiets when I hold him,” she added with a laugh.

“You have the magic touch,” he joked and she forced her smile not to waver. If only he knew.

She let her senses change the moment she was concealed from the watch towers and followed the blazing gold path that indicated Arthur’s route. Sunstrider was eager to stretch his legs but Merlyn knew Arthur and Lancelot were on foot and she didn’t want to stumble upon them. Subtlety was key.

For an hour, she traipsed through the forest, hopping off Sunstrider to lead him when her path wound around trunks and through shrubs. She didn’t hear either knight but she knew her path was fresh by the brightness of the golden hue.

A rabbit darted underfoot, Sunstrider reared with a shriek and Merlyn froze as the cold metal of a sword point touched her throat. Her stallion jumped at the threat and the swordsman jerked away.

“Control your beast!” a familiar voice commanded and Arthur stepped around a tree to glare at her, sheathing his sword. Behind him crept Lancelot, looking very much like he would rather be anywhere else.

“He was only protecting me,” she defended, laying a hand on the horse’s neck and pouring reassurance into him. He snorted, ears laid flat but didn’t leap again. “He thought you were a bandit.”

“And if I was, you’d be dead,” the prince retorted. He glowered at her. “Have you been following me?”

“No!” she said, knowing as it came out of her mouth that it sounded false. “Maybe?”

“Merlyn!” he growled. “What did I tell you about following me?”

“Actually,” she pointed out. “You only said I’m not supposed to accompany you. You said nothing about following behind.”

He looked incensed. “It was implied!” he shouted. “You’ve only made this worse! What do you think people will believe when they see you trotting out ten minutes after us? It doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together and know you’re joining me.”

“What does it matter?” she shouted back. “I am your servant. It is my duty to be close at hand for anything you might need! I can’t do that if you sit me aside any time you leave the castle.”

“Are you thick?” he retorted. “You are a woman! Disappearing into forests with men does not breed a respectable reputation.”

“But I am not just a woman; I am your servant, and you are the prince. I need to be able to do my job or you may as well pick another servant – one who’s actually male!”

“Maybe I will!” he yelled.

“Fine!” she shouted. “You do that.”

“Alright then!”

“Alright!”
They stared at each other. In the background, Lancelot was staring at a tree like it was sharing its life story.

“I’ll see you back at the castle then, sire,” she mocked and spun around to mount her horse.

“Good,” he snapped back as she turned Sunstrider away. “And maybe you can clean my chambers while you’re there!” he shouted at her back.

She stuck up her rude finger and disappeared into the foliage. Arthur turned back to Lancelot and saw he was watching him knowingly.

“What?” he demanded defensively.

“Nothing, sire,” he replied.

“Good,” he said sharply and turned on his heel to find another place to hunt. Their yelling would have scared off any viable prey.

Behind him, Lancelot shook his head as he followed.

That afternoon, Merlyn was carrying a pail of water towards the physician’s chambers when, from out of the crowd of the lower town markets, her mother appeared, travelling pack in hand.

“Mama?” she called, stunned at this odd collision of worlds.

“Merlyn!” Hunith cried and ran to her for an embrace. Her clothes were more threadbare than before and she bore a black eye.

“What happened?” she gasped, cradling her mother’s cheek. “Who did this to you?”

A horrible thought occurred. “Did travellers come again?”

“No,” she rushed to assure, cupping Merlyn's neck. “No, nothing like that.” She ducked her head and Merlyn felt real fear rise in her throat. “Raiders,” she whispered. “Demanding harvest. They killed Carac.”

“Oh, mama.” She breathed, drawing her into a hug. Carac had been one of the only villagers who never turned away when Merlyn destroyed their home. He had offered them shelter, but he had always held a torch for Hunith and she hadn’t wanted to take advantage of his heart.

“Come,” she said, grabbing her mother's hand while the other picked up the pail. “Gaius will be able to ease the pain and reduce the swelling. We can discuss this more afterwards.”

“Merlyn,” the older woman murmured as she was tugged along. “I was hoping to seek the aid of the King’s men. Kanen has many followers. If they take our stores, we’ll starve before winter is through.”

“That will not happen,” Merlyn vowed. “The King may be horribly biased and stubborn but he cares for his people. He’ll not let you starve.”

The King refused to help. His reasoning was sound but that failed to soothe Merlyn's ire. Men, bullies, throwing their weight around, while others, with true power, failed to help. She joined
Arthur up on the battlements, where he went when he needed to think. She stared out at the bustling lower town and the forests beyond, mind further afield.

“I’m sorry,” he said, glancing at her before facing the lower town once more. “If it were up to me, we’d be on our way there now.”

And that right there eased her anger. Arthur was sincere; he was a true knight, an honest hero, which was why *he* was the Once and Future King and no one else.

“You tried,” she said, wanting to lessen the guilt he should not bear. “And thank you for getting an audience with the King.”

Arthur dipped his head. “I wish that Camelot was able to help people regardless of how far away they lived.”

Merlyn hugged herself, one hand drifting up to play with the medallion resting on her collar. “I’m going back to Ealdor,” she stated.

“Of course,” he replied.

“It’s been an honour serving you.”

He looked at her, finally seeing the anxiety she was failing to hide.

“You’ll be coming back,” he said like it was a done deal. She shook her head sadly.

“She’s my mother,” she whispered. “I must care for her above anyone else. You understand?”

“She could stay here,” he suggested, faux casually. “You are a Friend of Camelot. My father would make sure your mother had a safe home and a job here in the city.”

She ducked her head. It was a generous offer, better than she could have hoped. But, “That would not save the village,” she murmured, hating her decision the moment she made it but knowing she would never forgive herself for leaving the people to suffer. “I could not live with myself if they died when I could help. And my mother will not abandon them.”

“I understand,” he said. “It was a fanciful idea.”

She turned to him. “It was generous, and more than I deserve.” She sucked in a breath and tried to jest; “I guess you must truly search for another servant now,” she felt hollow as she said it. “One who can accompany you everywhere he needs.”

He stared at her, features solemn and she was momentarily lost in his blue gaze. They were so pure, like a clean, sparkling river, or the clear, ultramarine pigment in the lapis lazuli gem. His lips parted and her eyes dropped to the pink flesh. A libidinous thought shot through her brain; *I wonder what his mouth would taste like.*

She dropped her head, cheeks heating furiously, confused by her own emotions. Then, his arms drew her close and she gratefully wrapped her own around his torso, fingers digging into the shirt at his back like she feared he would pull away. She buried her head in his shoulder and inhaled his scent, trying to lock it to memory. It might very well be the last time she did so.

His head lowered and she could have sworn he pressed his nose to her hair, breathing in her scent as she was his, but he drew away before she could consider it too closely.
“Merlyn,” he said lowly, dropping his arms from her body. “Good luck.”

She dipped her head, moving away. “Thank you, sire,” she replied. “For everything.”

Gwen helped Merlyn prepare for her trip, leading her to her home and packing armour, swords and supplies into several saddlebags. The black-haired girl was grateful for the sentiments, but it was too much. “I’ll not be able to carry all that,” she said, eyeing the bags of chainmail.

The door opened behind her and Morgana appeared, dressed in breeches and a long grey tunic belted at her waist by a wide, sturdy leather belt. “You’ll not have to,” the highborn said. “We are coming with you.”

“What do you mean?” Merlyn asked, not liking where this was heading.

“You’re going to need all the help you can get,” Gwen said softly and she looked back to see her wearing a comforting smile. “I can mend armour and sharpen swords.”

“And I know how to fight,” added Morgana.

“But,” she shook her head, glancing between them. “You-you can’t. Your place is here. You – y-you –”

“If it was the other way around, you’d help us in a heartbeat. You already have. You saved my life,” said Gwen, moving around Merlyn's frozen frame to hand some bags to Morgana, who still stood by the door.

“You are our friend,” said the highborn. “You help everyone without ever asking for repayment; now it is our turn to help you.”

“But what about Lancelot?” she asked Gwen. “He wouldn’t like you putting yourself in danger.”

Gwen dark eyes flashed. “I am free to do as I wish. Lancelot and I are not courting; what he thinks matters little.”

Merlyn realised she had accidentally touched a nerve but she was surprised to hear that they were not courting. They’d been dancing around each other for weeks, flirting and taking walks. What was Lancelot doing?

“Sorry,” she murmured. “Only…” she looked down. “It’s dangerous. Not… not just because they have weapons. The chances of them defeating us is high; we are only farmers, smiths, weavers; not warriors. And… and men like that usually celebrate by causing more pain.” She met their eyes hesitantly. “Do you know what I mean?”

“It won’t come to that,” Morgana vowed, drawing close and grabbing Merlyn's hand. “We will think of some way to defeat them.”

Emotion clogged her throat and Gwen drew her into a warm embrace. Merlyn buried her face in the maid’s shoulder and took deep, controlled intakes of her lavender scent, allowing the calming aroma to soothe her frayed nerves. Her mother had reassured her that she had only been struck the once, the bandits much too intent on gathering stock to steal a woman, but Merlyn knew the danger was implied. People like Kanen knew only how to satisfy themselves and cause others pain. A way to do both was to rape. She could only assume that the bloodlust of battle would stir up those primal urges, as the accounts she’d read of Viking pillages insinuated.
And now, here were two friends leaving their safety to help her, regardless of such threats.

She pulled away from Gwen and straightened her tunic, similar to Morgana’s, if a little less fine. “You two are good friends,” she murmured, fairly embarrassed at her minor breakdown but glad that the tension riding in her shoulders had lessened.

“And don’t you forget it,” jested Morgana. Merlyn smiled affectionately.

“Never.”

Gaius fussed over her as she packed a spare set of clothes then gave her a rare hug before sending her on her way. She watched by the door as he pressed a bag of medical equipment into her mother’s arms and drew her into a long embrace. Merlyn felt a pang of sorrow that the two siblings lived so far apart. They had never been in each other’s immediate sphere of interaction, as by the time Hunith was born, Gaius had left to apprentice in the city, but they had always had a good relationship. It was a shame that Gaius’ advancing age and her mother’s inability to move closer (when Merlyn was young) had created such an obstacle.

Eventually, they parted and mother and daughter headed for the stables. Arthur had offered her mother a steed but Merlyn had turned him down. Like her before she came to Camelot, her mother had little experience with horses. Merlyn felt better having her double on Sunstrider; He was a solid beast and had the best stamina of all the horses in the city, he’d be able to carry them easily.

They left without fanfare, though Merlyn saw Arthur watching them depart from atop the balustrade. It was too far away to make out more than his outline but she raised her hand in a wave. After a moment, the prince waved back before he turned and walked away.

They moved through the forest in silence, the sunlight shining through the canopy in broken rays, landing upon the forest floor in dappled patterns. Sticks and leaves crunched under the horses’ hooves as the birds sung overhead. Far off in the underbrush, small critters and rodents scratched and scurried, easily heard in the cool, still air. If they hadn’t been traipsing willingly towards trouble, Merlyn might have enjoyed the ride with her friends.

As it was, they all felt the pressure of journey’s end and followed mutely, one after the other, along the main east road.

When the evening set in, they unanimously agreed the make camp, edging off the roadway to lessen the risk of discovery. Morgana tended to the horses while Hunith removed supplies for dinner and Gwen cleared spots and set out the bedrolls; Merlyn was off in the trees searching for kindling.

Talk was muted and the meal was bland but filling. Gwen and Morgana soon retreated to their bedrolls as the chill set in but Merlyn remained seated beside her mother.

“They shouldn’t be here,” the older woman murmured, glancing back at the sleeping pair. “Especially the Lady Morgana. Is she not the King’s ward?”

Merlyn huffed a quiet laugh. “Not that you’d know it. She is the only person I know who is not frightened of him.”

Hunith looked back at her, features solemn and Merlyn’s own mirth died a quick death. Her mother
said, “It will not make any difference to Kanen that they are women.”

“I know,” she replied, poking the fire with a stick to keep her hands busy. “But I failed to talk them out of coming.” She glanced at her mother and the purple bruise around her eye stood starkly in the yellow firelight. Anger bubbled in her gut and she finally understood the drive of revenge. “I want to make him pay for what he did to you.”

If anything, her mother grew more concerned. She touched Merlyn’s cheek, deep blue eyes shining with reflected flames. “Promise me you will be careful,” she murmured. “No one can find out about you.”

She smiled reassuringly, gripping the hand that cradled her face. “They won’t,” she said. “They never do.”

Her mother sighed and removed her hand. “Get some rest,” she requested as she stood, moving to her blanket. Merlyn lifted the burning stick and blew on the end, eyes glowing gold to make the embers spraying from the wood form the Pendragon crest. The beast gave a silent roar and flapped its wings but the breeze blew it apart before it could soar.

Merlyn’s senses expanded from her body as she rested, layered upon the earth like a trip string. The moment she felt horse hooves upon them, cantering with intent, she was jolted awake. She reached for the sword beneath her blanket and checked on the status of her fellows. They were all sound asleep and she contemplated waking one before deciding that their rest was more important. The travellers might only be passing by, not seeking a warm body or gold. They may not even see them, metres from the path and shadowed by underbrush as they were, but she needed to be sure.

She crept through the trees, weapon in hand as the horses stopped approaching. One flaw of her sensory awareness was that it only worked if she was in a meditative state. Now she was alert, she had no idea where the people or steeds might be.

A blade touched between her shoulder blades and she froze. “I’d ask you for money but I know you don’t have any,” said a distinctly familiar voice.

“Arthur!” she exclaimed spinning around and forgetting the weapon in her hand. The prince ducked and glared at her so she lowered the blade sheepishly before happiness took hold and she launched at him. He jerked back with her hug but didn’t push her away, of which she was glad. She didn’t think she would see him for a long time and here he was, dressed in armour that was digging into her shoulder. She stepped back, beaming at him. He rolled his eyes.

“Put the sword down, Merlyn. You look ridiculous.” He snatched the weapon from her hand and strode off towards camp. From behind her, she heard another set of footsteps and spun to see Lancelot leading Hengroen and his own chestnut steed, Bronzomarle.

“Lancelot!” she cried joyously and he smiled at her indulgently.

“I’m disheartened you did not inform me you were in trouble, Merlyn,” he said and she winced.

“Well, er,” she tried to think of what to say but all that came to mind was Gwen’s ire at the mere mention of his name. She knew the anger hid a deeper hurt and she was protective of her first female friend. “You,” she pointed at him before putting her hands on her hips. “Why are you leading on Gwen?”

“Guinevere?” he said, frown pinching his brow. “What do you mean?”
“Oh!” she sniped. “‘What do I mean’? You know very well what I mean! Why have you not offered her courtship? You’ve been showing her clear favour and she to you but you hold yourself back. Only men with ill intentions do not announce them to others.”

“Ill intentions?” he parroted, looking a little insulted. “I wish to marry Guinevere! I want to spend the rest of my life by her side. I long to see her belly swell with our children and watch them grow in our home. I have no ill intentions unless you count love amongst them!”

His words melted her self-righteousness and bewilderment took its place. “But if you have such desires why have you not acted upon them? She is hurt and confused.”

“I never meant…” he shook his head, looking down. “For my whole life since my village was slaughtered, I have been a nomad. I had no home. Now I am at Camelot, fulfilling my dreams. And I have found love… but I still do not have a home.” He peered up from under his dark lashes, embarrassed. “I have been searching for a place in the upper town, close to where her father lives and works, so that she may see him often. I… I would not shame her by proposing courtship with someone who has no dwelling.”

“Oh Lancelot,” she said and wrapped her arms around him in a hug. He couldn’t do the same, holding two horses’ reins as he was, but he dropped his chin atop her head.

She withdrew and smacked his chest. “Aye!” he cried.

“Fool!” she said. “Gwen knows you! She loves you. Making your courtship official will do little more than reassure her of your intentions. You need not have everything sorted before you approach her. Is that not what relationships are about; communication and understanding. What if you choose a house and Gwen hates it? She may stay there because she loves you but it would not make her happy an, in turn, make you unhappy. And, would it not be more special to choose together the place you are to be for the rest of your lives?”

Lancelot’s expression was gobsmacked. He clearly hadn’t thought of those possibilities. “You are right,” he murmured slowly. “I have failed to act appropriately as a potential suitor. Do you think she will forgive me?”

“She is hurt,” Merlyn admitted. “But if you grovel for long enough, I know she will forgive you. I hear flowers are a good place to start. Oh – and picnics. And dinner! A nice, home cooked meal wouldn’t go astray.”

“Alright, alright,” he laughed, nudging her to turn. “We’d better join Arthur at the camp or he may wake everyone to send them searching.”

Merlyn took Hengroen and together, they returned to camp. Morgana, Gwen and Hunith slept on obliviously as Arthur moved around them quietly, checking the perimeter and stoking the fire. When he saw them appear, he moved closer to hiss, “About time? what where you two doing out there? canoodling?”

Merlyn gaped and peered at Lancelot who bowed his head to the prince. “Apologies, My Lord,” he said.

“We weren’t canoodling!” she hissed, scowling at him. “Do you take me for a homewrecker, sire?”

He appeared a little contrite but she stuck up her nose and moved to settled Hengroen with Sunstrider. Her golden boy snapped at the bay stallion but she shoved his nose away and he settled
with a huff. Lancelot situated Bronzomarle on the other side of the guard horse that Gwen was borrowing and the affectionate chestnut shuffled up to snuggle with the strange gelding. Morgana's grey mare twitched an ear but gave them no more notice.

Merlyn and Lancelot returned to the fire and sat beside Arthur. The blonde prince poked the coals with the stick Merlyn had discarded earlier and she stared absent-mindedly at the embers spiralling into the black sky above. Soon enough, Lancelot bid them goodnight and unrolled his bedroll perpendicular to the snoozing women, propriety never far from his mind. They listened until his breathing evened into slumber before Arthur spoke.

“How much further is it?”

“Er, maybe a few hours,” she said, hooking a thumb over her shoulder.

“How many men does Kanen have?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted, reaching down to pick up a twig. “I think, from what my mother said, maybe as many as forty.”

She peeked at him from the corner of her eye and saw the worry edging onto his features. “You should get some rest,” he said, dropping his poker and rising to his feet. “It’s going to be a long day tomorrow.”

She reached out and grabbed his hand. He stopped her turned back to her, looking from their entwined limbs to her face. She tried not to blush, wanting him to see her earnestness.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “I know you didn’t have to come but I’m, I’m glad you have. I’m glad you’re here.”

He dropped his gaze to their hands and he squeezed her fingers before letting go. “Get some sleep,” he said softly before fetching his bedroll and stretching out on the opposite side of the fire to Lancelot.

Merlyn remained another half hour, absently tracing her hand before she began yawning and moved to curl up beside her mother once more. The older woman reached out an arm to draw Merlyn close and the black-haired girl buried her nose under her mother’s chin. Sleep found her swiftly.

Kanen was poised to strike down Matthew when they burst from the trees. Arthur gave a shout and the brute looked up to see them skidding to a halt before the dirt path. Arthur leapt from his steed, weapon swinging with Lancelot following promptly. Morgana gave a yell as she bounded into the fray alongside Gwen while Merlyn fell from Sunstrider and almost impaled herself on her own weapon.

“Merlyn!” her mother cried but she held up a hand as she scrambled to her feet.

“Fine! I’m fine!” she said, darting forward to meet the bandit twirling his sword.

She parried some hits before he pushed her against the door of a house, using his weight to bear her own sword down towards her face. She growled with the effort of keeping him at bay before Sunstrider gave a furious scream and the man was struck by his flailing hooves. She staggered at the loss of counterweight but her horse was there for her to fall against. She patted him in thanks and moved forward to find another threat but Kanen shouted from atop his mount “You’ll pay for
this with your lives! All of you!” and galloped away like the coward he was with his men chasing
behind.

She sagged back against Sunstrider but saw Will standing metres away, staring at her.

“Will,” she breathed, taking a hesitant step towards him. She was unsure if he would welcome her
or not, considering the devastation she’d left of his heart during her last visit.

But she didn’t have to worry, for a slow smile spread across his face and he said gently, “Merlyn.”

She leapt at him and they collided solidly, embracing tightly. “I thought you would hate me,” she
whispered, eyes clenched shut.

He buried his face in her hair and said softly, “Never.”

“Merlyn!” Arthur called sharply and she reluctantly pulled away, quickly wiping her eyes before
facing the prince. He said with a sour expression, “Gather the villagers together, I need to talk to
them.”

“Yeah, I’m just –”

“Now, Merlyn!” he turned away and she crinkled her nose at his back before facing Will. His
expression was annoyed and she shrugged.

“We can speak in a short while, alright. This is important.”

“Yeah,” he muttered, glaring at the prince over her shoulder. “Sure.”

Merlyn chased Will after he stormed from the village meeting, his anger and resentment at nobility
having reared its ugly head. She followed him as he entered his house but hung back as he took in
the devastation the bandits’ search had wrought. He moved forward slowly, righting an overturned
stool then moving towards the wooden frame that carried his late father’s armour.

“He knows what he is doing,” she said softly as her friend brushed off the aged tabard bearing the
crest of Essetir. “You have to trust him. When I first met Arthur, I was exactly like you; I thought
he was pompous and arrogant.”

“Well, nothing’s changed there then,” he scoffed, not bothering to turn around.

“But, in time, I came to respect him for what he stands for; what he does.”

Will glared at her over his shoulder. “Yeah, I know what he stands for: princes, kings, all men like
him.”

“Will,” she said quietly. “Don’t bring what happened to your father into this.”

He spun around, anger evident on his face. “I’m not! Why are you defending him so much? You’re
only his servant.”

“He’s also my friend,” she said.

Disbelief etched into his eyes. “Friends don’t lord it over each other,” he stated.

“He isn’t like that.”
“Really?” he mocked. “Well, let’s wait until the fighting begins and see who he sends in to die first. I guarantee you, it will not be him.”

“I trust Arthur with my life.”

“Is that so?” he stepped closer. “So he knows your secret, then?” he read the answer all over her face and laughed without mirth. “Face it, Merlyn, you live a lie. Just like you were here. You’re Arthur’s servant, nothing more. Otherwise you’d be honest with him.”

“You’re wrong,” she whispered, though the truth in his statement crept into her mind, feeding on all the doubts and fears buried in her heart.

Will was sad as he stared at her. “You know I’m not,” he said, just as quietly.

She turned and left, unable to handle his words.

Setting up bedding was a sad affair. There simply wasn’t enough room to house everyone in Gisla and Will’s home but Arthur and Lancelot refused to allow the women to dwell on their own. They finally split up, Merlyn, Hunith and Arthur taking Carac’s empty, one room hut. The fallen man had been in love with Hunith since he was young and had never wanted another. His hut was a sad reminder of his lonely life and Hunith hesitated on the doorstep.

“It’s okay, mama,” she said, wrapping her hands around the woman's arm. “If nothing else, he would be happy to finally get you in his home.”

“Merlyn!” Hunith hissed, scandalised. Behind them, Arthur snorted and Merlyn grinned at him from over her shoulder.

“Come on,” she said, leaving her mother and stepping inside to take in the small space, smelling must, old straw and stale sweat. It was night, and there was only one door and window but the moon was bright and cast everything in a silvery glow. The sink basin was against the far wall, beside the small, single window that held the rain pail and, beneath it, was the scarred work bench. A small round table sat against the right wall with a single wooden stool as its accompaniment while on the opposite side was a narrow, spindly bed. The headboard faced the back wall, pushed against a low set of drawers in the corner, while the foot was directed towards a miniscule, ashy fireplace. Overall, it was a seriously depressive dwelling and she felt a pang that the slain man didn’t know reciprocated love before he died.

Her mother stepped up beside her, suffering the same sadness if the downturned edge to her lips spoke true. Merlyn took her hand and led her over to the narrow bed. “Here,” she said, turning down the threadbare blanket. “You need your rest. You’ve been stressed for days.”

“Oh, no,” she refused, stepping back. “The prince should take it. He’s royalty.”

“The prince can handle one night on the floor, mama,” she said, tugging her closer and glaring at Arthur from behind her back. “Isn’t that right, sire?” she added sweetly, daring him to deny it.

He looked at the uneven, wooden flooring distastefully. “I’m sure it won’t kill me,” he said.

“Oh, no,” she refused, stepping back. “I couldn’t. The prince should take it. He’s royalty.”

“The prince can handle one night on the floor, mama,” she said, tugging her closer and glaring at Arthur from behind her back. “Isn’t that right, sire?” she added sweetly, daring him to deny it.

He looked at the uneven, wooden flooring distastefully. “I’m sure it won’t kill me,” he said.

“See,” she turned back to her mother, whose tired eyes were heavy with exhaustion. “Come on, mama. You’re dead on your feet.”

She finally conceded and allowed Merlyn to tuck her in. She helped unravel her mother’s hair wrap
then sat beside the bed and stroked the long strands soothingly until the older woman was asleep. As she did so, Arthur moved around, collecting the rest of the blankets from the drawers and laying them out on the floor. Merlyn contemplated simply laying her head down and falling asleep right there but Arthur touched her shoulder as her head started drifting towards her arms.

“Come on,” he said, nudging her to her feet. She did so grudgingly and he layered two blankets beside the bed before handing her a third. “Now sleep,” he ordered and Merlyn gave a half-hearted snort.

“How can’t order me around,” she murmured. “We’re not in Camelot.”

“But I’m still a prince,” he replied smugly. “And you are but a lowly peasant. Now, listen to your superiors, Merlyn, before you hurt your head trying to think.”

His words, though in jest, sent a sharp pain through her gut. Friends don’t lord it over each other, Will said.

“Goodnight, sire,” she mumbled, laying down in her spot on the floor and pulling the blanket half over her face. Her nose was chilled.

Arthur hesitated, clearly surprised with her quick dismissal, but soon lowered himself beside her, a clear three feet between their bodies and his head by her feet. His sword rested on his other side, within easy reach if someone entered unwantedly. He sighed as he stillled and the room was quiet for several minutes.

Then he shifted.

And rolled.

He curled.

He uncurled.

He flopped onto his back.

He sighed.

“Have you always slept on the floor?” he asked, breaking the silence. “I noticed only one bed at Gisla’s.”

“Yeah,” she hummed. “The bed I have in Camelot was luxury in comparison.”

“Must have been hard,” he said.

“Mmm,” she agreed. “It’s like rock.”

A soft huff left his nose. “I didn’t mean the ground. I meant – for you. It must have been difficult.”

She hummed, shaking her head though he couldn’t see. “Not really. I didn’t know any different. Life’s simple out here. You eat what you grow and everyone pitches in together. As long as you’ve got food on the table and a roof over your head, you’re happy.”

“Sounds…” he paused. “Nice.”

She snorted. “You’d hate it.”
“No doubt,” he agreed. “Why’d you leave home?”

She thought about which answer to give. Lie? Semi-truth? “Things just… changed.”

“How?” she tried to think of how to answer and startled when his foot slid over her cheek. “Come on,” he urged, toes wiggling as she shoved it away, making a noise of disgust. “Stop pretending to be interesting. Tell me.”

“There was an attack,” she blurted then swallowed, not having planned to share this story. But she couldn’t take it back now, and clearly something inside wanted him to know. “A couple of travellers came by in the night. Ealdor is far away from anywhere so visitors are rare. No one realised these two were there or else the women living alone would have been guarded.” She paused to take a calming breath but Arthur didn’t speak, though she could feel the weight of his attention.

“I don’t know my father,” she admitted. “My mother never married him and he was gone by the time I was born.” She laughed mirthlessly. “Which I guess you knew because I have no surname.” She shook her head, refusing to be side-tracked. She’d never shared this before and she didn’t want to lose her nerve now.

“They invaded our home in the dark and demanded we make them a meal…

“Please,” Hunith implored, trembling by the sink. “Merlyn is promised to the neighbour’s boy. Let me send her there for the night.”

Merlyn’s fists clenched, perched unwillingly on one of the men’s laps, and she spat defiantly, “I’ll not leave you to these vermin!”

The hand that snapped around her throat was quick and tight and the man’s seedy breath washed over her cheek as he hissed, “Control your tongue if you wish to keep it.”

Choking as she was, Merlyn wasn’t able to reply and panic took hold as black spot burst in her eyes. He squeezed for a moment longer then let her go, hand moving, instead, to her chest, pinching a small breast.

“Not much to touch,” he commented, hand roving down to her thigh and smacking it. “But I don’t like waiting. She stays.”

Hunith’s face crumpled momentarily and Merlyn caught a glimpse of the despair she was trying to contain. Her mother’s sky blue eyes met her rich azure gaze and the apology and plea was clear to see. Merlyn’s eyes burned but she refused to cry. They would not see her cry.

When the time came and the simple broth was consumed, – all the while Merlyn was forced to remain on him for his free hand to explore – Merlyn’s heart was pounding and her breath was erratic. As Hunith picked up their remains, the girl could see her hands trembling. Oh, gods.

The other man stood up as Hunith placed the wooden bowls on the bench and pressed close behind her but Merlyn was distracted as the bearded man on whose lap she sat tangled his fingers into her long hair and yanked her head back so he could kiss her throat. Merlyn couldn’t help herself; she struggled.

It was futile in the position she was in and her punishment was a sharp bite just under her ear, sharp enough that she yelped and was certain skin was broken. She was proven right when he pulled away only to roughly kiss her and she tasted coppery blood in her mouth.
As soon as she was free of his assault, she spat at him, grimacing in disgust. He stopped his ministrations as a glob of reddish saliva slid down his hairy cheek. She barely had time to register his features morph into one of fury before he grabbed the back of her head and slammed her face against the table.

Pain flashed and everything blacked out. The world spun and she couldn’t think.

“Merlyn!” a frantic feminine voice called and the black-haired girl wondered who was so worried and why. “Merlyn!”

She tried to say she was fine but her lips weren’t working and her tongue felt thick. She tried to move her arms – move her legs – move anything but she was numb all over. She didn’t feel her body be thrown, face-first, to the floor.

“Merlyn!” she screamed again and the black-haired girl finally took the panicked voice as her mother’s. Why was she so worried? What happened? Why couldn’t she feel anything?

She groaned as she tried to speak, bile sitting high in her throat. With more effort than should’ve been required, she opened bleary eyes to see everything spinning like someone had stuck her to the spokes of a wheel. She saw the blurry figure of her mother struggling against a larger, unfocused figure in an attempt to reach her. She stretched out her own hand, though the distance was much too great, and felt herself be picked up by the collar of her nightdress and dragged away.

Her stomach rolled in protest and she swallowed the saliva pooling in her mouth, too muddled to do more than flail her limbs in an attempt to break free. She was as limp as a ragdoll when she was eased down, surprisingly gently, upon the wool nest that served as her bed then large hands rolled her onto her back. The hem of her dress was tugged up to above her waist and she felt the drawstrings of her pantaloons be untied. Somewhere, she knew this was bad. Very, very bad.

She weakly flapped her hands at the pushy fingers but they were shoved away without effort and her pants pulled down and off with a few rough tugs. The cold air on parts of her body that shouldn’t have felt cold air, woke her a little and she struggled as her legs were pried apart. She felt scarily exposed and tried to clamp together but something pushed between her thighs. When she felt something pressing at her most private place, she screamed. She felt hot pain and she screamed louder. Louder and louder until the very ground trembled and the walls shook and she was spattered in something wet and chunky as the weight pressing on her fell to the side instead. She tasted blood in her gaping mouth but she just kept screaming, unable to stop, unable to draw breath.

Eventually, she passed out.

Someone tapped her cheek insistently and she heard her mother’s tremulous calls nearby. Her mama was upset. That wasn’t good.

With a herculean effort, Merlyn forced her lead-weighted eyelids to lift and squinted at the terrified, teary face of her mother. “Come, sweetheart. You must get up. You must flee. Quickly, Merlyn, quickly!”

She whimpered as Hunith pulled her into a sitting position, head feeling like a nut being twisted in a nutcracker, the meeting of her thighs burning as her weight settled on it. She hunched over to the side and vomited.

“We managed to escape,” she croaked to Arthur. “The earthquake caught them by surprise as much as it did us. Mama managed to knock away the man hurting her and saved me from mine but he
was so angry. He had a knife…”

“What is she?” he screamed, holding his hunting knife in a shaking fist. “What kind of demon is she?”

Behind her, the man who had tried to rape her was headless, his brain having swelled and exploded with the pressure of her scream. Merlyn knew not how but she was concussed and dazed and only cared to protect her mother.

Merlyn snarled like a feral animal and he lashed out in a panic, catching her across her throat with his blade. She fell.

“She killed him with a cooking pan and dragged me from the wreckage. She managed to stop the bleeding, and her knowledge as a healer saved me from infection. Gisla and Will took us in and mama has been living with them ever since.”

Arthur was silent for a long moment. “These men,” he said in a light tone, though it shook minutely with emotion. “They are dead?”

“Yes,” she answered quietly. “They’re dead.”

“Good,” he said darkly and, despite the sinister sentiment, Merlyn felt warmer. She rolled towards him and tucked her hands under her chin, eyes outlining the lump of his legs.

“I’m better now,” she assured. “I healed, in both mind and body, and am stronger for it.”

“I never doubted you wouldn’t be,” he said, turning towards her also and breathing in a deep sigh. “If there is one thing you are not, Merlyn, it is weak.”

She smiled into the darkness, tucking her chin towards her chest. “Thank you, Arthur,” she said softly, his name sounding intimate in the dark.

“We’ll start training the men tomorrow,” he said finally. “It’s going to be a long day. Goodnight, Merlyn.”

“Goodnight, Arthur.”

Merlyn struggled to meet Arthur eyes that morning, feeling as if her soul had been spilled in the night. In the harsh light of day, she felt vulnerable, exposed, as if she had scooped out her insides and bared the tender parts for his inspection. She focused on dressing him in his armour, gnawing on her lip as she shot glances over at her mother, feeling as if the older woman might judge her for revealing such an intimate story, despite her inability to actually know that Merlyn had shared it.

Finally, Arthur grabbed her hand as she fumbled with his vambrace and said quietly, “What you told me last night,” he said and her heart ratcheted in her chest, staring up at him with wide eyes. “I don’t see you as anything less than you were before. You are incredibly strong for what you survived; climbing back to your feet and beating down those who tried to hurt you. That’s the mark of a true warrior and I could ask no more of one I call friend.”

“Friend?” she repeated, feeling a little raw. “Is that what we are?”

He stared at her intently, gaze flicking from one eye to the other before dropping to her mouth. She sucked in a surprised – and yes, hopeful, she was hopeful – breath but the clatter of bowls brought
her back down to earth sharply. She stepped back quickly, dropping her head in embarrassment before turning to find her mother focused attentively on cleaning the bowls. Nevertheless, Merlyn knew she had seen everything and her face flushed red hot at the thought. She must think her only daughter had turned into a harlot.

Arthur cleared his throat from behind her and said, “I’m heading into the forest to collect wood. When you are ready, you can join the others.”

“Yes, sire,” she mumbled and he quickly left.

“Mama,” she said softly, contritely. “What you saw… We aren’t… I’m not –”

“Come here, my flower,” Hunith said, turning and holding out her arms. Merlyn fell into them gratefully, clutching her close and breathing in the herb and soapwort scent that had carried her through sixteen years. Her mother rocked them gently, rubbing her hands comfortingly over her back. “Love, true love, doesn’t care about social status or expectations. It is unbiased and intangible. It cannot be controlled or contained or forced. It simply is and always will be.” She took a deep breath and leant back, brushing a hand over Merlyn's hair to tuck errant strands behind her oversized ear. “I loved your father,” she admitted and Merlyn sucked in a surprised breath. Her mother never spoke of her father. In her later years, she’d thought… perhaps she’d been assaulted and that was why she kept silent in the face of Merlyn's questions.

“I loved him so fiercely but he was a powerful man. He could not stay in Ealdor with me and I could not go with him. Our love was forbidden but it did not stop me, for he held my heart. When he left, I was inconsolable, but I did not regret. Not for one moment.” She cupped Merlyn's cheek. “Love is very often painful, my heart. It is struggle and choices and compromise, but it is so wonderful. However brief your time, if he loves you, and you love him, do not run away. Embrace it. Because we live only once and a life without love is no life at all.”

Merlyn glanced around the small, ramshackle hut that Carac had lived in, alone, pining for a heart that was already taken, and she was scared.

“I’m only his servant,” she said and her mother let out a wet laugh.

“I saw the way he looked at you, my love. You are not only anything in his eyes.”

She blushed but her fear was real, Will’s words having dredged them to the surface. “But it doesn’t matter, mama,” she whispered, gripping the older woman’s sleeves. “He doesn’t know the real me. If he did,” her gaze dropped. “I’d probably be dead by now.”

“You don’t truly believe that, do you?” Hunith asked.

“He’s the son of Uther Pendragon,” she said. “He’s been trained to hate magic since before he could talk. He might not want to kill me, but I think he would, for Camelot.”

Hunith looked sorrowful and brought Merlyn's brow to her lips before pulling her into another embrace. “You must have faith, my child. One day, he will know you, and he will accept you as you are. Just keep being yourself and he will not have a choice.”

Merlyn headed towards a collection of trees with an axe when Will shouted at her to wait. He joined her, laughing at the tool in her hand and reminded her of nearly flattening Old Man Simmons with a tree felled by her magic.
“He never did like me,” she mused and he snorted as he lowered himself onto an old fallen trunk.
“Even less after that.”

She lowered herself to sit beside him, staring back at her childhood village.

“You’d be able to defeat Kanen on your own, wouldn’t you?” Will said, shooting her a glance as he rubbed his chilled fingers together.

Merlyn shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“So what’s stopping you?” he challenged. “So what if Arthur finds out?”

“You know why,” she said. “I have to be by his side to help him reach his destiny.”

“Right,” he said sardonically. “The destiny that a senile magical lizard told you about.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” she said, a little incensed.

“No,” he stood up. “I understand perfectly. You’re telling me that you would rather keep your magic a secret for Arthur’s sake then use it to protect your family and friends.”

She had nothing to defend herself with, because, when it came down to it, that was exactly what she was doing.

Will shook his head at her and marched away, turning after a few steps. “You’ve changed, Merlyn. Once it was, you’d do anything you could to help those in need. I guess we don’t matter anymore now you have your destiny.” He wiggled his fingers mockingly then walked off. Merlyn watched him go and pressed her hands to her face.

Was he right?

The next morning, Matthew was killed, slung like fresh game over the strange horse’s back. Dimia, his fiancé, was distraught as she crumpled over his body. Will was irate.

“You did this!” he shouted, shoving through the crowd to accuse Arthur. “Look what you’ve done! You’ve killed him!”

“It wasn’t his fault!” snapped Merlyn, angry that he would shift blame like that.

“If he hadn’t been strutting around, treating us like his own personal army, this would never have happened!”

Arthur features were stressed but he replied strongly, “These men are brave enough to fight for what they believe in, even if you aren’t!”

Will glared. “You’re sending them to their graves! You killed one man,” he jabbed a finger at Matthew’s corpse. “How many more need to die before you realise this a battle that can’t be won?” he turned to his grieving neighbours. “When Kanen comes, you haven’t got a chance. You’re going to be slaughtered.”

He spun away and Merlyn saw Arthur drop his gaze to Dimia, still weeping near his feet. The expression on his face was heartbreaking and Merlyn felt a swell of protective anger rise in her chest. Why was Will being so cruel? She met Gisla’s sad brown eyes in the crowd and the older
woman gestured with her head for Merlyn to follow her son. She did so with purposeful steps, cornering him in his house.

“Don't bother, Merlin. I'm not interested,” he said when he saw her. He moved around, gathering clothes and supplies.

“You should be,” she said. “Because tomorrow, Kanen attacks, and whether you like it or not, we'll have to fight.”

“Not if I'm not here,” he retorted.

“You would abandon your mother to these brutes?”

He spun on her. “Mother is coming with me,” he growled.

She shook her head. “I don’t think she will. This is her home, and she will defend it. Will,” she pleaded. “Join us! This isn’t about Arthur; this is about your friends. Are you really going to abandon them?”

“It is not I who is abandoning my friends, Merlyn!” he shouted. “You could end this! If you used your magic then no one else would have to die.”

“You know I cannot,” she whispered, hating the words as they left her mouth.

“Cannot, or will not,” he cut back then turned away in disgust. “I am not the one abandoning these people, Merlyn. You are.”

Merlyn left with Will’s words reverberating painfully through her soul. He was being selfish and fearful, but he was right about her. She could save everyone. She could stop Kanen before he spilled more blood or widowed another woman or razed another village.

But Arthur. She didn’t want to leave Arthur, and that made her just as selfish as Will. For what right did she have to put her own desires above another’s life? If she did that then she was no better than King Cenred, who lounged in his lavish castle with his mighty armed forces and left his kingdom to suffer.

She stood on the dirt path uncertainly for a moment before her feet turned her in the direction of their temporary dwelling. Arthur would want to think, regroup, and the best place for that was somewhere quiet.

She found him sharpening his sword outside the hovel, sitting on the remains of a trunk with a pensive expression on his face. She sat beside him, running her hands nervously over her trouser-covered thighs. Arthur stopped rasping his whetstone, rolling the finely-grained rock in his hand.

“William’s father was killed fighting for King Cenred,” she said. “And the King refused to provide financial aid. Will’s mother, Gisla, was forced to move away from the city with Will and her sick father because she couldn’t afford to stay without her husband. Will’s grandfather died not long after they settled here; he was eight.” She looked down before meeting Arthur’s eyes. “He doesn’t trust anyone of nobility.”

“Do you think the villagers believed him?” he asked.

“No,” she said and laughed a little in remembrance of all their childhood shenanigans. “He's always been a troublemaker. They’re used to ignoring him.”
Arthur looked away, obviously not feeling the same humour. “And if he’s right?” he asked and Merlyn realised he was losing faith.

“He isn’t,” she said, leaning closer to try to catch his gaze.

The blonde prince shook his head. “I’m treating these men like soldiers, and they’re not. You’ve seen them fight. They... they have no clue! You must tell them all to leave the village before Kanen returns.”

“No,” she snapped, angry at the resignation in his voice because it called to the fear in her heart. That they weren’t going to survive. “We are here to stay. We are going to fight, and we are going to win.”

He looked over at her, noble features solemn. “Merlyn, it cannot be done. The odds are too great.”

“It can!” she argued, turning to him in her fervour. “We’re going to make Kanen rue the day he ever came to this village. All you need to do is get the men ready for battle, and... and the rest will take care of itself.”

“How?” he asked, near pleading, and she ducked her head, sadness effusing her now she realised her choice was made.

“You just have to believe in them,” she murmured, kicking at the dirt with the toe of her shoe. “Because if you do not, they will sense it, and the battle will be lost before it has even begun.”

She felt the weight of his eyes on the crown of her head but she couldn’t meet them now she knew what must be done. She stood up, focusing on straightening her clothes as she said, “I will return soon.”

She walked away, steps heavy. Unknown to her, her mother watched from the doorway, gentle features mournful.

Merlyn found Will pacing out the back of his house, expression both fearful and angry. She assumed it was because he had tried to convince his mother to leave but sturdy old Gisla was not to be swayed so easily.

“Will,” she called softly and her friend stopped his muttering to glare at her.

“What do you want?” he asked sullenly and she glanced towards the house before facing him again.

“Walk with me?”

He understood immediately; there were unwanted listeners within his walls. Though she was going to reveal herself on the morrow, she would like peace for as long as possible.

He fell into step as she moved towards the trees near his house, a place where they often ventured to play as the branches there were low enough for them to reach and close enough to other foliage that they could move from tree to tree with a little dexterity.

The sun cast long shadows as it sunk towards the western canopy, throwing everything into an orange and gold lustre. They would need to return soon, Arthur probably wanted to speak with the villagers on their last night before battle.
As they breached the first spindly trees, Merlyn stopped and turned to her friend. “You were right, Will,” she said sadly. “I cannot sit back and let the village be harmed when I can stop it.”

He nodded his head. “That’s not a bad thing, Merlyn,” he said in the face of her unhappiness. “Having the power to protect the people you love should be respected, not feared. If your prince cannot see that then he is not worth your time, and he is clearly not the amazing future king he is supposed to be.”

Merlyn ducked her head. “Change takes time, Will. He’s the son of a man who would cut out his own heart if someone told him it was bewitched. Arthur cannot change his childhood beliefs in a day when shrouded with such prejudice.”

“That,” Will said, jabbing a finger at her. “That right there, excusing people for their hatred and stupidity. That is the Merlyn I know.”

She smiled, feeling the warm bubble of affection that she had once mistaken for love. He was good man, Will, and she hoped he would find a wife that complemented his character and understood how lucky she was.

“I want you there with me,” she said, meeting his eyes from under her lashes. “I… I want someone by my side when I face Arthur. After. I… don’t think I’ll be brave enough to stand on my own. Will you accept my apology and stand beside me as my friend?”

“Of course, Merlyn,” he said, taking her hand. “I’ll stand by your side proudly, as a true friend should.”

The morning dawned slowly, the sky hidden behind clouds that lifted under the warmth of the sun. Merlyn sat on the spindly bed as her mother fussed over the fireplace, brewing tea in place of making breakfast when Merlyn admitted that she wouldn’t be able to stomach a meal. Hunith’s hair was bound within her wrap and her dress as tattered and threadbare as it had been in Camelot. Her shawl was around her shoulders to ward off the chill and her feet covered by well-worn boots. She had no armour, no chainmail, no weapon or shield, and still, she was willing to step out and challenge the greed of armed brutes.

Arthur re-entered the hut, already wearing his chainmail and Merlyn stood, reaching for his pauldron. She walked to meet him as he placed his sheathed blade on the small round table and lifted the metal plates onto his guard shoulder. She strapped it around his collar then settled the couter onto his arm, buckling above and below the valley of his elbow. She reached for the vambraces but his hand landed on her own, stilling her movements.

“No,” he said. “Not today. Put on your own.”

Her hands trembled as she picked up her own vambrace and pushed it onto her forearm, cursing silently as her fingers kept fumbling as she tried to slide the leather through the buckle. Arthur soon knocked her hand away and did it for her.

“What happens out there today, please don’t think any differently of me.” Her voice trembled a
little, knowing how futile her request was. Of course he’d think differently of her; in his eyes, sorcerers were monsters and today, she was baring her face.

“I won’t,” he promised, ignorant to her thoughts. “It’s alright to be scared, Merlyn.”

She looked down, stepping back when she saw he had finished fastening the straps. “That’s not what I meant,” she said, moving away, eyes catching on her mother’s alarmed expression.

“What is it?” Arthur asked, clearly sensing there were words unsaid. “If you have something to tell me, now’s the time to say it.”

She peered back at him and saw the concern on his face. She opened her mouth but the words stuck in her throat.

Morgana stepped into the doorway, breaking their seclusion and Merlyn's opportunity. “Arthur,” she said. “They’ve crossed the river.”

Arthur nodded and followed her out, casting one last glance back before he disappeared. Hunith grabbed Merlyn's hand and let out a shaky breath. The black-haired girl cupped her mother’s face and kissed her brow before racing out the door. Will was approaching.

“Are you ready?” he asked as she fell into step with him.

She nodded. “As I will ever be,” she sighed.

She saw the prince moving down the line of villagers, clasping arms and patting them on the shoulder, reassuring them before they experienced battle for the first time. She ducked into an alley and moved around the house so she had a clear line of sight to the forest and a clear path to the village centre. She heard Arthur call for her when he realised she wasn’t nearby but she didn’t answer, though her heart begged to.

“Merlyn,” he hissed, clearly trying to keep his voice down. “Merlyn, where are you?”

He was interrupted as Kanen’s men burst from the trees, roaring and hollering with their weapons bared and horses galloping. It was intended to frighten them into a panic but with their positions secure, the farmers held steady. The horses thundered past the first houses and into the open space of the village centre. There they circled, beasts snorting with adrenalin and riders searching for targets.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” Kanen called and Merlyn edged around the mud-wall for a clear sightsline. Arthur's plan erupted as a hidden gate was abruptly wrenched upright, barricading the path for the few horses nearing. They reared in surprise and Kanen swung his steed around with a growl but the predicted wall of fire on their other side failed to appear, leaving much too much room for the bandits to spread.

“Something’s wrong,” Merlyn murmured and shifted from foot to foot. Attack now and give them a chance to fan out or help Morgana light the trench and trap them as per the plan?

She held out her hand and hissed, “Bærne!”

The straw in the trench ignited, rushing left and right as it gorged on the kindling and the horses milling close squealed in fright, startling their riders as they jumped away. Some lost their nerve at the organised defense and darted through the narrow pathway between two houses to escape. Kanen roared at their backs and Merlyn rushed out to incant, “Efnan gelac!” when the villagers rushed from their hiding places to attack.
The riders were pulled off their steeds like an invisible noose had hooked around their necks and the villagers wasted no time setting upon them with their weapons. Lancelot and Arthur, however, had stopped to stare her way, one with fear, the other with horror. Merlyn met Arthur's wide eyes apologetically but Will distracted her when he wrenched her back out of the way of the way of a riderless horse. He dragged her back into the alley, towards the back of the building where their discarded weapons waited and Merlyn shoved aside her grief as the sounds of combat grew louder. She’d have time to feel sorry for herself later; right now, there was a battle to be had.

Turned out, it wasn’t much of a fight. Most of the men had recognised the touch of magic and panicked. They were fleeing through the only paths available to them while the farmers and smiths gave chase. Only Kanen and a loyal handful continued to attack, bloodlust clearly overriding their sensibilities. Merlyn engaged with one and lost sight of Will until he landed his father’s blade in the bandit’s gut. The brute fell and Merlyn clasped Will’s shoulder in thanks, her friend grinning back. They turned to find more adversaries when someone roared, “Magician!” and an arrow pierced Will’s chest.

Merlyn screamed, falling with Will as he sagged towards the ground. A pulse of raw magic escaped her control like a shockwave and knocked everyone to the ground, but she didn’t care as she tried to stem the blood pouring from his chest. “No, no, no, no, no,” she cried, feeling the warmth of the life-liquid push between her fingers. The rich colour and sheer amount had her realising that the point had pierced his heart. An unfixable wound with her current skills.

Will coughed wetly and red dribbled from his mouth as the blood leaked into his lungs. “Merlyn,” he gasped, clutching at her sleeve as she cradled him. He shuddered in pain and she hushed him. “Save your breath,” she whispered, smoothing his hair. “You’re going to be fine. You’re going to be perfectly fine.”

Footsteps raced over and she blinked through teary eyes to see Arthur and Lancelot, the others coming quickly. The prince’s hand was tight around his sword and she couldn’t hold his mistrusting glare. Lancelot moved to drop down on Will’s other side but Arthur stayed his movement.

“Which of you cast that magic?” he demanded. “Which of you is the sorcerer?”

Will coughed again and Merlyn touched his cheek, tears spilling from her eyes. “It was me,” he gurgled, swallowing blood.

“Will, don’t,” she sobbed and her friend shook his head jerkily.

“Won’t be alive long… so can’t kill me,” he laughed wetly then started coughing. She turned him on his side and he vomited red. So much red. She smoothed back his hair as he curled up in a vain attempt to escape the agony, wishing she could do more. Do anything. “We had no chance,” he rasped to the prince. “Had to do something.”

“You’re a sorcerer,” Arthur stated, looking uncertain. His grip on his weapon had loosened.

“Yeah,” Will sighed and Merlyn bowed over his chest, weeping.

There was a pause then Will whispered, “Mama.”

Merlyn looked up and there stood Gisla, face draining of colour. “Will,” she breathed and her legs folded under her. She stared, comprehending for a moment before her hand reached towards the arrow. She stopped before her fingers touched the shaft and she shot Merlyn a hopeful glance. The
black-haired girl shook her head, unable to face the grief that crumpled the woman’s features.

“Mama,” Will choked, his breath cracking with liquid. But he would not drown. Merlyn had her fingers around his wrist and she could feel the irregular thrums of his damaged heart. It was going to fail soon.

“Mama… I’m scared,” he whispered.

“Shh,” Gisla crooned, stroking his cheek. “You’re going to see your father. He’s going to be so proud of you, my boy. So proud.”

“Mum…” his breath hitched and he tensed instinctively before his strength failed and he relaxed, breathing out.

He didn’t breathe back in.

.Guilt ate at Merlyn. She sat on the spindly bed, stripped bare as her mother cleaned her skin of blood with a cloth and pail of water. Her clothes had been taken, to be cleaned or burned, she knew not and cared less. Gisla was with Will, grieving in the privacy of her home. She didn’t know where her friends were; didn’t know if they were even still in the village. A pyre was to be built for Will, who was the only casualty of their battle, two hours before sunset and she was not leaving before then. Perhaps not after either.

Once she was as clean as she was going to get without a bath, Hunith dressed her in some of Carac’s old clothes, the dead man no longer needing them. They hung off her frame like she was a child playing dress up and her mother wrapped a shawl around her shoulders to preserve some modesty around her collar.

“This wasn’t your fault, my love,” said her mother, speaking for the first time since they entered the hut.

“Kanen shouted ‘magician’ when he shot the arrow,” she said, staring at the far wall so she didn’t have to meet her mother’s anguished face. “How is that not my fault?”

“You cannot blame yourself for the actions of others,” she insisted. “Kanen chose to loose that arrow; that makes Will’s death his debt to carry into the afterlife, not yours.”

Hearing her say the words, Will’s death, broke into her numbness and allowed the tide of emotion she’d been tiptoeing above rise up and swallow her. She gave a sob, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth. “Will’s dead, mama,” she cried. “He’s dead.”

“Shh,” Hunith soothed, drawing her into her arms. “Shh, my baby.”

“You knew he was a sorcerer, didn’t you?” asked Arthur, standing beside her as she watched her friend’s body burn. Gisla was with Hunith and several other mother’s, leaning on them as she cried. Merlyn couldn’t look over, the woman’s grief too raw. “That’s what you were going to tell me?”

“Yes,” she murmured tonelessly, hating the lie as it spilled from her mouth. “It was.”

“You know how dangerous magic is,” he said, obviously unable to keep the censure from his tone. “You shouldn’t’ve kept this from me, Merlyn.”
He turned away and she scoffed softly, still staring at the flames. He looked back. “What?” he asked.

She turned her head to stare at him. “Magic is dangerous,” she repeated. “So is a sword. So is power. So is an army.” She turned back to the pyre, dismissing him. “It is not simply what you wield. It is how you wield it.”

“Sire,” called Lancelot, drawing Arthur's attention from her. “We are nearly ready to depart.”

The prince looked back at her and she met his gaze, challengingly. He swallowed and asked, “Are you returning with us?”

She blinked. “Are you allowing me?” she replied.

He glanced towards the fire and said, “He was your friend and he did not live in Camelot. I cannot condemn you for keeping him hidden when he did not live by our laws.”

She ducked her head, unsure of what she was feeling right then. “I will talk with my mother,” she said and walked away.

“Of course you should return, Merlyn,” Hunith said, a confused frown on her face. “You belong in Camelot, at Arthur's side.”

She scoffed, hating how resentful she was being but unable to help it. Her mother touched under Merlyn's chin and lifted her face so their eyes met, blue to blue. “You have to go, Merlin. You belong at Arthur's side. I've seen how much he needs you. How much you need him. You're like two sides of the same coin.”

She rolled her eyes. “I've heard someone say that about us before.” She sighed, unable to refute her mother’s claim. If she wanted magic to be accepted once more, for the dragon to be free and all magical beings able to live in peace, she had to return. “If anything happens…”

“I know where to find you,” she said and touched Merlyn’s nose. “You should go. The night will soon be here.”

“I'm going to miss you,” she murmured.

“And I you,” Hunith replied.

Chapter End Notes

Hunith is amazeballs, just so you know. She’s who I modelled Merlyn from; her kindness, empathy, noncombative-unless-seriously-provoked attitude. There was so little of her in Canon but I always felt she was this warm presence behind the scenes; who Merlin would visit between activities and fall into her arms to be cuddled and healed. (You know, if the show was real).

Hope no one was traumatized by the blood and – the other thing. Just know, if you’ve ever been assaulted, it is not because you were weak or stupid. To survive something like that, to be humiliated in that way, and be able to get up and keep going, even with tears streaming down your face or cuts littering your body You Are STRONG. Don’t
ever let anybody make you think differently.
And seek help because your thoughts are your own worst enemy.
The Keeper of the Unicorns

Chapter Summary

Arthur makes a fatal mistake; let us see how he fixes it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The shouts and clashes of weapons were the thing that clued Merlyn into the danger. The day was overcast but the clouds sat high with little chance of rain. The air was cool and breezy, wind rustling the green and yellow leaves in a gentle, woody melody. Birds and insects hummed, chattered and twittered as mammals and reptiles whispered through the leaf-litter in search of a meal.

Merlyn had been content sitting under the leafy roof in her red cloak, resting her back against a giant weathered oak while she reached her meditative state and tracked Arthur's progress in his hunt. The blasted prince was still refusing her company on grounds of propriety and Merlyn was still ignoring his orders – though, hopefully, he wouldn't find out this time. As had been so thoroughly picked out by the irate blonde, Merlyn was not great at stealth. Her boots liked to seek every twig and crunchy leaf as she crept along. So now she was trying something new.

She still followed Arthur and his entourage into the forest but once encompassed under the same canopy, Merlyn found that she could situate herself among the older trees and use the Sidhe staff she had stolen from Sophia Tir-Mòr to connect to them. She was able to use the tree's deep roots as a conduit to spread her awareness through the woodland. Like piggybacking the energy currents already existing instead of exhausting herself trying to lay her own.

She found Arthur, glowing golden and bright, and almost overwhelming her ability to see Lancelot's warm, rich brown or Leon's deep, cobalt blue. They weren't as far as Merlyn had expected, though by the direction of Arthur's path, she was hopeful they were continuing away.

Then she heard the battle cries with her living ears and her awareness snapped back into her body with enough force to knock the wind from her lungs. She staggered to her feet, wheezing and hunched like an old crone, but still dashed off in the direction she'd sensed the prince – and subsequently heard the yells. She hadn't felt anyone else nearby, though Arthur's golden aura was like the sun in the way it devastated her senses too much to see the stars. She guessed familiarity with the knights must have given her enough to pick them up but not notice strangers.

She dashed madly though the scrub, spindly branches from undergrowth flicking against her hood though her spell keeping it from whipping off her head, then tripped over a fallen branch and almost took her head off with another. She steadied herself against a trunk and shook her head at her own actions. Arthur wasn't a damsel in distress, he was a warrior and could defend himself. She might not even be needed in the end.

So a little more sedately, she continued on her path.

She pushed through some foliage and burst out at the top of a slope where Arthur and his knights battled at the bottom. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw they had it well in hand only to
choke when an arrow pierced Lancelot's shoulder, knocking him back. He gave a cry and dropped to the ground, causing Arthur and Leon to close ranks around him, though they had no shields to fend off such weapons.

Thankfully, Merlyn was capable – and angry at the attack.

She found the perpetrator hiding behind a trunk to her left; he was aiming another arrow from his crossbow. She used magic to wrench him from his hiding spot before he could fire and sent him tumbling down the slope for the knights to deal with. Arthur and Leon attention was caught by the disturbance but Merlyn was too occupied with blasting a second Bowman down to worry about being spotted. The archer hit the tree behind him and slumped, unconscious, to the ground. The first one, having slid down the slope near the knights, clambered upright and saw her standing above with her arm outstretched.

"Witch!" he cried and tried to flee, which was silly, honestly. He knew what she was and the power she wielded, yet he still tried vainly to escape. Distantly, she had to muse at the irony that a bandit recognised what she was better than most men of repute - and seemingly higher intelligence.

She was a witch; not a sorceress. If he hadn't stuck an arrow in one of her friends she might have been tempted to let him escape. As it were...

She called forth some vines and bound him tightly. With the slant of the hill, he tipped backwards and landed heavily, unable to brace himself as he rolled further into the valley. Merlyn searched with her eyes for more threats but found them all unconscious or wounded so her gaze turned, instead, to Lancelot down below. She started to head down the slope but Arthur stepped forward to meet her approach, weapon raised threateningly.

"Halt, sorcerer!" he commanded and she stopped, rolling her eyes, though he would not be able to see below the hood.

"I am a witch, Arthur Pendragon. You would do well to learn the difference."

"You are a magician!" he accused. "I recognise you! You, who stole the druid man from the executioner's block."

"Are you criticising me for saving a man from the blindness of your father's bigotry? You, who knew of his innocence and pleaded with your father for mercy; mercy that he knows not how to give."

Arthur tensed at her knowledge and Merlyn realised she'd oversharped like a fool. "What do you know of my interactions with the King?" he demanded, flourishing his sword. "Do you spy on us? Have you plans to attack Camelot?"

"I just saved your life!" she exclaimed, unable to believe he would ask such a dumb question. "If I wanted Camelot ruined, would I not strike you down and leave your father to suffer your loss? Do not be foolish, Pendragon. Put aside the shutters your father has drawn over your eyes and see clearly!"

"You know nothing of me, my father, or our kingdom. Show your face, sorcerer," he deliberately ignored her earlier correction, like a true prat. "So that I may see who has broken our sacred laws."

She thumped her staff end on the ground in annoyance. "I'm afraid I cannot," she said. "And you would do well not to seek me when I leave. Your knight needs medical attention. I would help but," she raised her hands in supplication. "You will not let me." She stepped back. "Until we meet"
again, Prince Arthur." She bowed mockingly, unable to stop herself, and turned on her heel.

"Stop!" he shouted but she ignored him, like usual, knowing it would take him too long to clamber up the steep incline to then follow her trail.

"Arrogant men," she grumbled as she hurried through the trees, shedding her vibrant cloak and lifting the enchantments over her voice. With Lancelot injured as he was – the shot had been high, into the collar and not the lungs or heart, thankfully – the path back to the city would be long and painful. If she wanted to lessen the risk of further injury, or early infection, or internal bleeding, or all the other nasty stuff, she was going to need to send them some help in a form they would acknowledge. And the best option she could think of was to send their steeds, to ease the journey home. She could even add a pain tonic to Lancelot's saddle since he would know it was from her and trust it enough to drink – as long as Arthur didn't see and smash it first in suspicion.

She ran back to the city and straight up through the lower town to the stables, saddling Leon’s steed, Seagrane, and Lancelot's Bronzomarle in the empty knight’s stables, but left Hengroen bareback when she ghosted into the royal stalls to fetch him. Take that, you arrogant toerag, she thought smugly. Enjoy your ride with Hengroen’s whither in your crotch.

She led them down the alleys that skirted the main thoroughfare, thankful it wasn’t busy and no one batted an eye. She turned to the postern gate that led to the large paddocks beyond the wall and sent the single guard there scurrying away after a bundle of barrels that went mysteriously tumbling down the road.

She gave the beasts the path she wanted them to take then set them loose, watching with a grin as they ran off down the dirt track, kicking and snorting in excitement. Horses.

Promptly, there was a shout from further down the wall and she ducked back into the shadows of the entrance arch as the men ran across the balustrade to alert the gate guards. There was probably going to be a bit of a panic in letting the prince’s steed escape the castle – which meant there would be a guard contingent sent out to search and, hopefully, happen upon Arthur with the injured Lancelot. She pumped her fist quietly. She was a genius and she didn’t even know it!

“Who’s there?” the returned guard demanded, edging around the gate with his pike raised nervously.

Merlyn flinched in surprise and pressed herself into the little corner created by the stone arch of the gate protruding from the rest of the city wall. Don’t turn left, she pleaded silently, eyes on the guard’s back.

Don’t turn left, don’t turn left.

The guard glanced either side but he was in front of Merlyn and didn’t see her tucked behind. After a moment, he turned back and returned to his post – turning right and avoiding her little niche.

She breathed a sigh of relief and sagged against the white limestone. Now… how to get back into the city without being caught. Merlyn bit her lip. Hmm…

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Merlyn shuddered as she cleaned the leech tank, the stagnant scent of the water sticking in her nostrils and hitting the back of her throat like flavour. Gaius paced behind her, simultaneously returning his books to their places on the shelves and scolding her for her foray into the forest.

“Utterly foolish thing to do,” he grumbled for the third – or was it fourth? – time. “Imagine if you had been caught; what would you do with your destiny then?”
“I was in complete control the entire time,” she assured him, not feeling as if she has done anything wrong. “He was at the bottom of a hill and I at the top.”

“If anything had gone wrong you would be at their mercy…”

“Gaius,” she said on a sigh, stopping to turn to him. “This is the best idea I’ve had since—since – I don’t even know! My disguise is complete and he knows that I wield magic. This way I can show him that magic is a force for good without ousting myself and losing his trust. How else would he learn? He’s supposed to be the King of Albion and Albion is a land equal for everyone. How can he become that great, noble ruler if he isn’t faced with challenges to his bigoted ideals? This is a good thing, Gaius. Please, let me do this.”

The old man’s weathered features didn’t lessen in their worry but he did sigh with resignation. “I doubt I could stop you if I tried,” he muttered. “You are as stubborn as Uther when you believe you are right.”

“What?” she yelped, insulted. “I am nowhere near as stubborn as the King!”

Gaius shot her a look, eyebrow raised and she quailed slightly. “I, at least, can be reasoned with,” she said as a last defense.

“Clearly not,” he said, shaking his head and turning away. “You know how dangerous it is for you and you still flaunt it like it’s all a joke.”

“It is not a joke!” Merlyn snapped, angry he would say that. “I know very well that magic is not a joke! I learned that lesson in Ealdor and I relearn it every day I live in fear here! But I see beyond what you clearly cannot. I have faith that the rewards will outweigh the risks because Albion... that is a place I want to see with my own eyes. And it will not happen if I lumber in the shadows afraid of the light!”

She was breathing heavily by the end of her tirade and turned back to her task to disguise the burning in her eyes. Gaius was quiet behind her, probably surprised at her outburst. She was a little surprised too, but his depreciation of her motives bit at a trigger she didn’t realise she had.

“I’m sorry,” said Gaius and she glanced over in shock to see his apologetic expression. “I belittled your efforts and ignored your reasoning. I only fear that your impulsiveness will lead you to risking too much one day and being caught. Your death would be my death, Merlyn. I couldn’t see you burn.”

The black-haired girl wiped her slimy hands off on a rag and turned to the old man. “I understand, Gaius,” she said, and she did. She would hate to see he or Gwen or Morgana risking so much for a reward that may never come. “But you must respect my choices, even if they differ from your own. You are my guardian, but you are also my mentor. I still need your wisdom and your caution, but I need your acceptance as well.”

Gaius stared at her a moment before he stepped closer and brought his hands to her cheeks, raising himself up to kiss her brow. “Look at you,” he murmured, affection clear in his pale gaze. “When did you grow into a wise young woman?”

She ducked her head. “I only try to do what I know must be done.”

“And that is why you are so special, Merlyn,” he said. “You do not do what must be done, you do what is right and believe that is what should be done.”

She was wordless for a reply so she tucked her chin and set back to cleaning the leech tank, feeling
the heat in her cheeks. She did not think herself so special, but she could not deny it made her both
delighted and awkward to be praised so. Particularly by one she respected so much.

Gaius touched her shoulder as he returned to tidying his books, seeming to understand her silence,
and she bit her lip to stop a smile. There was little better than making him proud and she let herself
soak in the moment.

“Lancelot asked for my favour,” said Gwen abruptly.

Merlyn stopped brushing Sunstrider’s coat and turned to her friend. “Come again,” she requested,
hardly daring to believe her ears. It had been a couple of weeks since Ealdor and with the events
that happened, Merlyn figured Lancelot had brushed off what she said about Gwen.

But apparently… “Lancelot asked for my favour,” Gwen repeated, biting her lip to control her
smile. “I said yes.”

Merlyn squealed and dropped her brush, bounding at the maid and wrapping her in an exuberant
hug. “That’s amazing! About time!”

“I know,” agreed Gwen. “I was beginning to fear he had grown bored.”

“He’d have to be a stupid man for that to ever happen. Oh, I’m so happy for you!” she moved back
to grab her hands, bouncing up and down as excitement bubbled over. “Oh, oh! Did he gift you
with something? Let me see, let me see!”

Gwen laughed at her exuberance and obediently turned, displaying the lovely silver clasp
containing her lively curls. It twisted like three lily’s blooming, the middle the largest while the
other two bowed over to connect to the clasp that slid through the underside of her hair; small light
purple stones dotted the stamens. It was beautiful; worthy of a queen.

“Wow,” Merlyn breathed, reaching out but afraid to touch it. “It’s amazing.”

“It’s too much,” Gwen said, turning around once more. She looked embarrassed to be wearing such
a fine piece but brushed a hand over it reverently. “It must have cost a fortune.”

“Gwen,” she said, taking her hand. “If anyone deserves a fortune being spent on them, it’s you.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “It’s too much for someone like me.”

“Someone like you?” Merlyn asked crossly, dropping her hand. “And what is that exactly? A maid,
a servant, a commoner? Or a woman who is compassionate, selfless, and kind?”

Her friend looked down, fingers twisting together. “Gwen, come on,” the black-haired girl urged,
tone gentler. “Ignore what you believe you do and do not deserve. Think about what you have and
how he makes you feel. He loves you; you love him. That’s all that matters in the end.”

Gwen looked up sharply, eyes wide and Merlyn snorted, knowing exactly why. “Don’t try to deny
it, my friend,” she grinned. “Love shines from your very pores when he is around. He is no better,
fumbling and dopey when you smile. When you two marry, name your first child after me, will
you not.”

“Merlyn!” Gwen gasped, smacking her in the arm. The black-haired girl laughed, dancing out of
reach. Behind her, Sunstrider let out an unimpressed snort and Merlyn held up her hands.
“Alright, alright,” she said and the maid stopped her attack. “I need to finish my tasks but we must celebrate tonight. Does Morgana know yet?”

“No,” the other woman said, sounding a little sheepish. “You were the nearest and I couldn’t contain myself.”

“Well I’m honoured,” Merlyn said, putting a hand to her chest. “Perhaps ask if we can convene in Morgana’s chambers once I have finished serving Prince Prat. I’ll bring some mead, or wine if I can get my hands on it.”

“Or Lady Morgana could request some and not be rapped across the knuckles for thieving by the head cook.”

Merlyn paused. “Or that,” she agreed.

“What’s the problem, Merlyn?” Arthur asked loudly and the black-haired girl winced, holding a hand to her head. “Have a little headache?”

“Sire, please,” she whispered, squinting against the bright light in his chambers. “Speak quietly.”

“But why,” he began, just as loudly as he circled closer like a predator sensing weakness in prey. “You are not ill. You are not injured. Why oh why could you be feeling so low?”

“Lancelot proposed his intentions to Gwen yesterday,” Merlyn shared, knowing he already knew. “Morgana, Gwen and I celebrated the long overdue appeal.”

Arthur snorted, retreating to grab some grapes from the bowl. “A bit blunt when you’re in pain, aren’t you?” he commented, throwing one up and catching it in his mouth. She wished she was as talented as that; they always seemed to hit her teeth and bounce away.

“Well, luckily for you,” he continued when she said nothing, too drowsy to argue. “I’m heading out on a hunt today. Once you’ve tidied my room and cleaned my jousting armour, you have the whole day to recuperate. Perhaps you could go find Lancelot and imbibe some more with him. I’m sure he’s bored out of his mind, grounded as he is.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “The pain tonics he’s drinking have a negative affect with alcohol. He’d be dancing naked on the balustrade if we’re not careful.”

Arthur grimaced. “Better not. Unlike you commoners, we knights have a certain level of decorum to maintain.”

“Got it,” she said. “Can’t have him streaking through the upper town – oh! Wait, that wasn’t him. That was you.”

Arthur looked horrified. “Morgana!” he hissed. Merlyn laughed then held her head as it throbbed. “Us?” he asked, alarmed.

“Sure,” she replied, grinning at his dismay. “Gwen and I. Last night. But then we asked one of the older guards who patrol Morgana’s wing –” his horrified expression only grew, “– and he said it was the talk of the castle for weeks. He shared that his wife – who works in the weaving circle –
and her friends spent a long time comparing your body to the other two who joined you on your run.” He sputtered so she assured him, “It was almost unanimous that they thought you were the best looking; that ‘even in youth, you had the body of a man’.” He choked on his saliva and Merlyn laughed as he doubled over. She added because she couldn’t hold her tongue, “And since I’ve seen you now you’ve grown, I have to say they were probably right.”

“Merlyn!” he exclaimed and she giggled uncontrollably, even as it hurt her head.

“I’m sorry;” she gasped, snorting. “The gossip of last night seems to have stayed on my lips. I don’t mean to be so vulgar.”

They both took a moment to compose themselves, Merlyn moving to clean up Arthur’s demolished breakfast, nibbling on an abandoned bit of buttered bread. She hadn’t been able to share the breakfast Morgana had delivered to her quarters, just the smell of sausage and egg turning her stomach, but now she had drunk some water and tea, she was growing a little peckish.

Arthur donned his boots and soon left so Merlyn quickly tidied his chambers and returned his tray to the kitchens. She collected his armour and retreated to her room so she could clean it with magic while she researched something she’d been eyeing for a while: scrying.

With Arthur’s propriety binge dragging on for longer than she expected, Merlyn knew she wouldn’t be able to follow him on every single trip, particularly the ones where he left for days at a time. So she had looked to alternate means. Teleportation was still undefined other than stating it was possible so the next best thing was scrying. It would at least tell her if Arthur was in trouble, even if she couldn’t get to him immediately. All she had to do was learn how to scry.

Through study, she knew that wooden capsules, like bowls, were terrible for scrying as it tended to split images like tree branches. Crystals were well beyond her capability, as were natural pools and stone basins. Mirrors were difficult because they usually reflected back on the caster instead of the object of their question. Brass, on the other hand, was a stable material with good reflective qualities and, therefore, good for beginners. So, positioned on her bedside table, already filled with rainwater, was a deep brass bowl borrowed (stolen) from the royal kitchens.

She needed calm, quiet and dark. The first two were easy enough and the last as good as it was going to get with a blanket hung over the gapped shutters on the window. She moved into the centre of her bed and crossed her legs with the bowl cradled between her hands in her lap. She closed her eyes and reached for the meditative stupor, slowing her breaths and listening to her heartbeat. It was different to what she usually did, which was allow her awareness to slip from her body by listening to the sounds and sensations around her. This time, she needed to be insular, concentrate on relaxing each muscle in her body, from her jaw to her toes and banishing any thought but what she wanted to know.

Minutes passed before she felt she was in the true state to cast her spell, touching the surface of the water as she incanted, “Diegol cnytte, gewitte me yst áredeteth Artur.”

The water rippled for longer than was natural after she removed her finger and she felt a faint resistance to her request before an image arose from the bowl’s depths. It was Arthur stalking through a forest, gaze intent upon the ground as he tracked any sign of game. Pellinor and another, unfamiliar knight were faint glimmers in the peripheral. They were in no danger.

The image split and below was Arthur’s investigation of a cloven hoofprint, his confusion at the unfamiliar outline clear. After focusing on his features, she was pulled away through the trees along a path towards a clearing between two weathered rocks. There, in that clearing, stood her unicorn.
“Ooh,” she hummed, a smile breaking over her features. “Hello beautiful.”

The moon-bright beast turned in her direction as if it heard, though Merlyn was unsure if that was possible. She couldn’t see its liquid brown eyes as its long, grey forelock fell over its face and, despite knowing it would fracture the spell, she couldn’t help but reach out to touch the image of the creature.

Then there was an odd wet _thunk!_ and the unicorn reared, screaming in pain, before its hind legs gave out and it toppled to the side. An arrow protruded from its flank, silvery blood flowing free. Arthur stepped from the bushes, a victorious grin on his face.

Merlyn screamed.

The bowl shattered.

“You’re lucky the shards didn’t slice too deep,” Gaius said as he bandaged her hands. “Or you might have lost the use of your hands entirely.”

Merlyn didn’t speak, too stunned, mind still caught on the scene of the unicorn’s death; of its murder. By _Arthur_.

“What were you doing up there, Merlyn?” he asked for the third time. “What did you see?”

He clearly had enough wits to realise what a brass bowl filled with water meant but she couldn’t articulate her actions, the scene too horrible to share and the words sticking in her throat like sand.

A short trumpet blast outside the room announced the prince’s return but Merlyn turned away from the door, not wanting to see. Did they bring the whole carcass back or did they merely cut out the horn as a trophy and leave the rest to rot?

She peered down at her bandaged hands, wrapped so thickly that she could barely bend her fingers. Perhaps she would not have to gaze at the prince for a while; she was too injured to work after all.

Yes.

She liked that idea.

Word spread of Arthur’s deed and praise falling from every mouth for his skill as a hunter. Gaius glanced at her with a knowing, sorrowful expression and she grew angry at the people around her.

“How can Arthur take pleasure from killing such a creature?” she demanded, glaring at citizens as she marched through the corridors to the Physician’s Chambers.

“Arthur is a hunter,” Gaius said, keeping pace alongside and shutting the door gently behind her when she flung it wide to enter the room. “It’s in his blood.”

“It’s a waste of life. It was doing no harm,” her voice choked up, remembering the sensation of its magic touching her own. The purity, like the full moon shining upon the grass on a clear night; of the subtle strength, like the gravitational pull that controlled the waters of the earth, potent but gentle. “He didn’t even use it for meat.”

“The King would hold little regard for the flesh of a creature of magic. He would sooner starve
than allow it to be served.”

“Then he should not hunt them!” she hissed and stormed to her room. The bed was drenched in water but she didn’t want to return outside and hear the awed whispers of the townsfolk, nor the longing to see the horn carved from the unicorns forehead. She ripped the blanket off the shutters with her hands pressed together like a seal and slumped to the ground with it as her cushion.

She knew she was sulking, acting as a spoilt child, but she was deep enough into her melancholy not to care. She was alone in her room so what did it matter if she pouted?

Merlyn requested a guard to send her apologies to the prince when the worst of her temper was gone. She’d informed him of her injury and inability to work and had called Morris to replace her – after bribing him with a custard tart. Her anger was still sitting at a low simmer but she was less liable to snap at someone who didn’t deserve it. Whether Arthur deserved it or not was a matter she had yet to decide.

There was a knock on Gaius chamber door and Merlyn moved closer since Gaius was doing his castle rounds. “Enter,” she called instead of struggling to open the door with her bandaged hands.

Arthur entered. Merlyn blinked in surprise.

“Sire,” she said. “Did you not receive my message?”

“I did,” he admitted, eyes on her hands. “You failed to specify the nature of the wound you suffered.”

“Oh,” she lifted her hands, unsure why it mattered. “Cut my hands. They’ll be fine in a day or so. I’ll be back to work soon enough.”

“Good,” he said, though he drew closer and took her hands in his own. She didn’t know what he was searching for as they were thoroughly covered. “This is excessive for a cut or two, is it not?”

“Um, I shattered a bowl. Gaius thought it better to cover all the cuts to prevent infection.”

Arthur raised an eyebrow at her, still cradling her hands within his own. “And how did you manage that?” he asked dryly.

She smiled sheepishly. “I’m especially gifted.”

He huffed and let her go, stepping back as if he realised the ‘impropriety’ of his proximity. They stared at each other for a moment before Merlyn remembered why she had hurt her hands in the first place and she had to turn away. She moved, instead, to the vials on Gaius’ worktable.

“So I hear congratulations are in order,” she said, unable to help the slightly scathing undertone.

“Success is one word for it,” she muttered, touching the cork of a tonic.

“If you have something to say, Merlyn, don’t hold back,” he said. She glanced back and his arms were folded in front challengingly. She met his irritation with her own.

“I don’t think you should have killed it,” she said, folding her own arms before wincing as it hurt her hands and dropped them again.
“Oh, really?” he said. “And why is that?”

“It was doing no harm; they are creatures of peace,” she turned away again before he could read the devastation on her face. “What purpose did you serve by killing it?”

“We were hunting,” he said like she was stupid. “That's what you do.”

“I’ve never seen you hunt to spill blood,” she snapped. “You always hunt to provide food. You’ve never left the beast to rot like it wasn’t worth it’s flesh.”

“And what would you have me do?” he challenged. “Would you have me bring it home as a pet?”

“As if you could contain a creature like that,” she scoffed.

Arthur's reply was terse. “A ‘creature like that’ is exactly why I feel no guilt. It is a beast of magic; only happiness can come from its demise.”

At that moment a guard pounded on the door and the prince turned to acknowledge him. Merlyn was grateful for it gave her time to choke back her insults and calm the urge to shake Arthur until he saw with clear eyes.

“My Lord, the King requests your service as a matter of urgency.”

Arthur sighed, nodded and the guard retreated. He pointed to Merlyn. “We’re not done.”

He left. Merlyn stuck her tongue out at his back. Prat.

The crops died overnight. Livestock grew sick. Gaius struggled to find a scientific cause but refused to inform the King of his suspicions (that they’d been cursed) because of their ruler’s habit of diving off the deep end in regards to such threats. Stores were rationed. Looting took hold as people panicked. A curfew was put in place.

The water turned to sand. And, no matter what spell Merlyn threw at it, it remained unchanged.

She had a theory on the cause because of the distinctiveness of the magic. Nimueh’s touch was recognisable by its dark intent but this was… neutral. When she traced the sand with her magic, trying to find a way to breach the solidity of its shape, she hit a firm barrier. It wasn’t a protective casing or a runic ward, a shell to contain an enchantment, it was something older and purer, something that held her at bay through the very nature of its existence.

It was the air before a lightning storm, metallic and sharp on the tongue. The antithesis to all other ancient magics Merlyn had encountered, which usually thrummed in the earth like the pulse of a heartbeat. Even the static tingle of Avalon Lake was different, sparking against the skin in tribute to the mystical creatures that had been present for eons. But that magic came from life; this… came from something else.

“Merlyn,” called Arthur, halting her march across the empty, night-time courtyard. He moved away from the arch he had sent the patrolling guards through and approached casually. “You do realise there's a curfew?”

“Yes,” she said. “I need to speak with you. I believe I know what is causing this.”

That caught his attention. “Pray tell,” he said with his arms folded.
“I believe… the unicorn’s death may be to blame.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, eyebrows raised disbelievingly. “How can a slain beast cause our crops to die? Our water to dry?”

“I’m, I’m not sure,” she admitted. “But the timing is suspicious and –”

Arthur’s attention was caught by something behind her and he gestured her to quiet briskly. She followed his gaze and saw the shadow of a figure cast on a tunnel wall leading into the depths of the castle. They chased the flicker of the invader’s torch into the bowels of the castle, losing him down the iron stairway to the burial vaults. Arthur gave her a series of hand gestures that meant nothing to her. She went to follow as he moved to the right but he stopped, frustrated.

“That means you go the other way and cut him off!” he hissed.

“Perhaps you should teach me your hand speech before expecting me to understand!” she whispered back.

They split up, circled the path, met once more, saw a flicker of a torch down another corridor, hunted it, lost him, and felt like they were being laughed at.

“Where is he?” Arthur demanded.

She shrugged. “I saw no one.”

“He was right here! Don’t tell me you let him past you.”

She glared at him. “No one passed me, Arthur.”

“Are you looking for me?” a soft voice asked, drawing their attention. Not two metres away, having snuck up without their knowledge, was an old man clothed in an oddly-styled grey robe, a threadbare shawl protecting him from the cool night. In his hands was a strange travellers staff, the top forking into an irregular prong. His garb and calm stature told Merlyn that he was not a normal trespasser.

“I am Anhora,” he introduced himself. “Keeper of the Unicorns.”

“Camelot is under curfew,” Arthur said. “What is your business here?”

Anhora looked grave. “I have come to deliver a message,” he said solemnly.

“And who is this message for?” the prince asked.

“It is for you, Arthur Pendragon.”

Arthur’s suspicion ratcheted, as Merlyn’s own had done from the moment she saw the old man. “Is it you who’s responsible for killing our crops, turning our water into sand?” demanded the prince.

“You alone are responsible for the misfortune that has befallen Camelot,” Anhora said and Merlyn knew that her worries were confirmed. The unicorn. It all came back to the unicorn.

As they spoke, Merlyn reached out with her magic and tried to gauge Anhora's presence but it was like hitting a stone wall. The old man’s eyes flickered to her and she had the sudden fear that she was about to be ousted. Arthur’s attention saved her from whatever he might have done.

“Undo the curse or face execution!”
The old man shook his head sadly. “Only you can do that,” he revealed. “You will be tested.”

Arthur's anger was blinding him to hearing Anhora’s words, just like his father before him. He tried to arrest him only to fall through the air as the old man disappeared right before their eyes.

“Until you have proven yourself, and made amends for killing the unicorn,” his voice echoed and they turned to see him atop the iron staircase, well out of their reach. “The curse will not be lifted. If you fail any of these tests, Camelot will be damned for all eternity.”

He vanished but Arthur raced up the stairwell anyway. Merlyn followed a little more sedately, knowing intellectually that a man who could appear and disappear at will would not linger to be caught.

“He’s gone!” Arthur growled, confirming her theory.

“Arthur,” she said softly. “Did you hear his warning? You are to be tested to prove yourself for killing the unicorn.”

“Lies,” he spat. “He senses the weakness of our kingdom and comes to create discord and chaos.”

“I believe he’s telling the truth,” she said and Arthur stared at her, incredulous.

“Then you're a fool,” he accused. “You cannot trust a single word a sorcerer says. You'd do well to remember that.”

Ire rose in her quicker than she could quell it. Hurt follow on its heels. “So I should not have trusted Will, my best friend, who saved all our lived in Ealdor?” she demanded. “The boy who saved me from torment for years. You believe I should have cast him out alone and cursed his existence?”

Arthur realised he had struck a nerve but his conviction was clearly stronger than his care, for he said, “Sorcery is a learned practice. He knew of its dark origins and he studied it anyway. What does that tell you of your friend, Merlyn?”

Okay, so Merlyn knew that Will hadn’t been a sorcerer but Arthur did not and to hear him speak so ill of her recently murdered friend struck her in the chest with the force of a battering ram.

She stepped back, unable to be near him when he was being so cruel. “Your ignorance and your bigotry is nothing new, Arthur,” she hissed. “But I never thought you were heartless.” She turned and stormed up the staircase, tears burning her eyes as grief squeezed her lungs.

“Wait!” Arthur sighed, aggrieved, but she didn’t stop. She needed some privacy before she screamed something she couldn’t take back – like being a witch. “Merlyn!”

She disappeared through the archway at the top of the stairs and was glad he didn’t give chase, though his lack of apology stung. Guess you can’t be sorry for what you don’t regret, she thought sullenly to herself.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait folks. It took me ages to find time to edit it. I split this episode into two chapters so you’d have something to nibble on. Hope you enjoyed!
Also, thanks so much to those who reviewed. It’s always gives me such a boost to read!
The Tests Three

Chapter Summary

Consequences and manipulation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, with her bandaged hands, Merlyn struggled to dress, struggled to eat, struggled to brush her hair, struggled to carry things; pretty much struggled at living. She stood at Arthur's closed door, tray in hand and stared in dismay at the doorknob she was unable to turn. With a sigh, she placed the tray as carefully as she was able to on the ground and crouched to use both hands to twist it without pressing too hard on the cuts hidden beneath the bindings.

Unexpectedly, the door opened without her aid and her hands were let hanging in the air before Arthur’s crotch. She withdrew them with haste, face burning and shifted to lift the tray.

“I thought I heard something scratching out here,” he commented, oblivious to her reaction. “I thought it was the rat that’s infested my chambers.”

“You have a rat in your chambers?” she asked, surprised. “But I always clean up your scraps.”

He sighed, turning to allow her entry and closing the door behind her. “Seeking warmth against the coming winter, I assume,” he said. He paused but she ignored it as she concentrated on setting out his meagre meal. Wouldn’t do to spill and waste some unnecessarily.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “For what I said last night. It was insensitive and callous, and hurt you deeply.”

She stopped, taking a breath before straightening up to face him head on. “Are you sorry, though?” she pushed. “You say these things, lump sorcerers into one category with little regard to personal choice and free will, and paint them with the same black brush. I know your father’s hatred comes from a terrible experience but his blindness need not be yours. You have experienced darkness and greed and ambition from these people who use magic as a source of selfishness. But you have also witnessed good; the druids, Mordred, that cloaked magician who wanders the forest. Could that not mean that the actions of the corrupt are not as a result of their study of sorcery but that their study of sorcery is simply what they are using as a means to an end?”

He stared at her, features grave. “That is why sorcery must be outlawed. Even if what you say is true and magic does not corrupt,” his tone spoke of his scepticism. “You said yourself that it is a means to an end for crooked people to abuse.”

She groaned in frustration. “You’re not hearing me,” she said. "Whether the laws dictate it or not, power-hungry people will seek ways to achieve their goals. Outlawing magic has only allowed that darkness to fester without opposition.”

“Merlyn,” Arthur said sternly, concern and seriousness hard across his face. “Silence your words. You speak as a criminal. If the King heard your words, you would be burned without trial. Camelot
has succeeded thus far with steel and fortitude, and I see no reason why we cannot continue hence. Keep your thoughts to yourself in future, and keep your head down. Perhaps you will see in the coming days that access to such power only breeds depravity.”

Merlyn ducked her head, clenching her teeth as she controlled her breaths. She’d pushed too hard, too fast. She could see in the conviction on his face that he would not listen to another word she said.

She just had to hope his prejudice did not spell the end for Camelot.

The next day, water returned to the land.

“What did you do?” she asked immediately of the prince, entering his chambers with more ease than the day before. She had been able to shed her bandages and wash her hands so now she only had a few, deeper slices covered.

“What do you mean?” Arthur asked, peering out the window to watch the people celebrate below. He had a cup in hand himself, half empty of water.

“Water returns to the city overnight whereas before there was only sand and drought? Come on, Arthur. You passed a test.”

He turned to look at her, shaking his head. “There was no test,” he insisted.

She pointed at him. “You were laying in wait for Anhora last night. What happened?”

The prince shrugged, gulping down some more water before walking closer to refill his goblet. “I guarded. The sun rose. I returned here.”

She narrowed her eyes. A minute hesitation between his sentences. He was lying. “Someone entered the lower levels, didn’t they?” she asked. It was the only explanation that accounted for his silence. “But there was no announcement of execution this morning.” She clicked her fingers then winced and shook out her hand. “You let them go! Was it a frail old man? A child? A woman?”

“A father,” he snapped, giving in. “A father of three whose children hadn’t eaten in two days. I allowed him to live, allowed him to take some grain.” He shook his head, looking down. “My father would be furious.”

“Oh, Arthur! This is wonderful!” she cried, moving closer. “Don’t you see? That was the first test! And you passed!” she took his fingers with her own, unable to clasp his hand as she would like with her wounds. “Your compassion is beyond the bounds of your father’s comprehension, Arthur. Empathy and clemency are not weaknesses, they’re strength. That man will be able to gaze upon his children today and know that they are no longer suffering. He will trust your benevolence and love you for your mercy. As will all the people of the land.”

“How can you have such faith in me?” he asked softly, gazing at her in bewilderment. “I have treated you ill, said cruel things about your friend and yet, you still see so much good?”

She smiled, feeling warm and bubbly with his success. “Because it is there to see,” she replied. “You are not perfect, but no one is. I cannot condemn you for ideals that have been forced into your head since you were born, for what would that make me but someone ignorant enough to believe everyone’s perspective is the same. There’s a quote I read that I believe is relevant; ‘Life is a journey towards enlightenment. Some find it; some don’t. We can only keep our minds and hearts
open and pray we find peace.’”

“You are so odd, Merlyn,” Arthur said, shaking his head. “Whenever I think I have you figured out, you do something that confuses me again.”

“That’s good, I hope,” she murmured, watching him as closely as he was watching her, with as much want in his cornflower gaze. She felt a tingle of anticipation on her skin and butterflies started flapping madly in her belly. Her eyes dropped to his lips.

“Very good,” he whispered and she could have sworn he swayed forward the slightest bit.

Merlyn sucked in a small breath, tilting her head up to meet him when a quiet thump of a boot had them jerking to a stop, inches from each other. Her eyes darted up from his mouth to meet his startled gaze, his pupils dilated with desire. She held her breath, unable to move back, wishing to move forward. What did his lips taste like? What did they feel like? She could smell soapwort, musk and the faintest trace of sandalwood on his skin.

There was a squeak of a rodent and Merlyn’s head automatically twisted to find the source, breaking the spell between them. Arthur moved away and coughed, putting his back to her.

“I must go check on the guard,” he said, voice a little hoarse. “See if you can be rid of that creature. I’ll return later.”

He was gone before she could say yay or nay and she stared at the open door in stunned astonishment. She... she and Arthur had nearly kissed. She and the Prince of Camelot – the Crown Prince of Camelot – had almost kissed.

Merlyn touched her fingers to her lips. Would it be as amazing as her imagination painted it?

Silly girl, she scolded in her head, shaking the idea loose.

It was late in the night by the time Arthur returned to his chambers. Villagers from the outlying regions had ventured forth in desperate hope for food; food that was growing ever scarcer. It dulled any lingering spark of their near-kiss as the gravity of the situation set in.

Merlyn poured some – ahem – mystery meat into a bowl but Arthur looked too lost in thought to eat.

“Do you truly believe I caused this?” he asked, chin in hand as he slumped against the back of his chair, expression pensive.

“Not intentionally,” she said firmly. “But you cannot deny what’s been happening; Anhora’s warning of tests, the water returning after you showed compassion...” she set aside the soup pot, knowing the prince was not going to be pleased with her suggestion but unable to hold her tongue. “Arthur. I think we should seek Anhora out – just hear me,” she pled when he opened his mouth, displeasure written heavily on his face. “The first test brought water back. If we can force the second test, Camelot may be saved before more people die of starvation. The old and young have been falling first. How long until the able-bodied join them?”

“I cannot negotiate with sorcerers. My father wouldn’t hear of it,” he said but he didn’t sound completely decided.
“If you're tested again, you have a chance to end your people's suffering. I know you want that more than anything. Your father is rigid in his ways; don’t let your pride be the downfall of your people.”

Arthur sighed, dropping his hand from his face. He was resigned. “I’m going to the forest, first thing in the morning,” he said. "Perhaps I can pick up Anhora's trail."

“I’m coming with you,” she said, unable to believe he would even question it.

“You are staying here,” he refused. “Despite my decision, Anhora is a powerful sorcerer. I’ll not expose you to that danger.”

Merlyn rolled her eyes. “If Anhora cared to cause me pain, he could appear at will wherever he wanted. Leaving me behind will do little good.”

“Merlyn,” Arthur whined, sounding set on an argument so she plopped the bowl in front of him.

“You have to eat. You’ll not be able to help anyone if you are too weak to pass the test.”

He shot her a glare, knowing her strategy but obediently picked up his spoon and scooped up a chunk of meat. His features puckered as he chewed.

“What kind of meat is this?” he asked, rolling it around in his mouth. “It has a very strange texture.”

“Um,” she said. “Mystery meat?”

“Mystery meat?” he repeated, eyes meeting hers. “It’s very stringy, like game meat…” realisation flattened his expression. “It’s the rat, isn’t it?”

She nodded, sheepishly. “Try not to think about it,” she suggested.

The glare on his face said her idea very much did not help.

Arthur failed the second test and Camelot’s grain stores perished. The kingdom was doomed and Arthur was defeated.

“My people are starving,” he said, looking out over the balustrade. His countenance was crushed as he watched the people linger below. “Camelot is on the verge of collapse. And it is all my doing.”

So now, Merlyn was in the forest, shouting for Anhora and hoping against hope that the Keeper of the Unicorns would listen.

“You want to talk with me?” a soft voice said and Merlyn swung around to see the old man standing solemnly, braced against his staff with a heavy sort of wisdom.

“I’ve come to seek your forgiveness. The people are starving; they will soon be dead.”

“You must believe me when I say it gives me no pleasure to see your people suffering.” And his features were grave; there was no satisfaction in his eyes.

“If it pains you, put an end to it,” she begged.

“It is not in my power to lift the curse.”
“Then give Arthur another chance. He has accepted it is his responsibility, and he will prove himself worthy. He will lift the curse if you give him one more chance.”

He was staring at her intently. “You have faith in Arthur?” he asked.

“I trust him with my life,” she said unreservedly. “He is destined to unite the realms, to become the greatest king in the lands, but he will not rule with fear. His heart is strong and his intentions pure; he will return magic and reign with equality. This I promise.”

“You promise much for one who will not fulfil these oaths,” he commented.

“I know Arthur's heart. I know his wishes. I know his fears. I know what he is capable of and I know that he will reach it.” She stared at him challengingly. “And I know you know of his destiny.”

“It is not a great secret to those who can read the signs,” Anhora said. “I also know of you, Emrys, and your part to play in what is to come.”

“And you would risk it all to condemn him today?”

“The consequences of one’s actions must be dealt without the influence of one’s tomorrow.”

“And children must be guided past their mistakes so that they may grow wise and not bitter.”

Anhora dipped his head, a proud glint in his ageless gaze. He said, “Arthur must go to the Labyrinth of Gedref. There, he will face a final test. If he fails, there is no hope. The curse will destroy Camelot.”

“Thank you,” she breathed, bowing. When she lifted her head, Anhora was gone.

“Wait!” she cried. “What kind of test is Arthur to face?”

In her mind, Anhora replied, *That is for Arthur alone to discover.*

“Wow…” she breathed. Mind speak.

“I cannot believe you ventured into the forest alone!” Arthur shouted, pacing in his chambers.

“After I warned you against it before. How foolish can you be, Merlyn?”

She rolled her eyes. “I think you’re missing the important part of the story,” she said dryly.

“Oh, I heard perfectly well,” he retorted, shooting her a scathing glare as he moved towards the armour Merlyn had predicted he would don. She joined him to give a hand. “But I think you throwing yourself into situations that can be avoided if you used your head for a moment is worth noting.”

“Noted,” she said, a little cheekily. His response was not amused and she sighed dramatically.

“Oh, I heard perfectly well,” he retorted, shooting her a scathing glare as he moved towards the armour Merlyn had predicted he would don. She joined him to give a hand. “But I think you throwing yourself into situations that can be avoided if you used your head for a moment is worth noting.”

“Noted,” she said, a little cheekily. His response was not amused and she sighed dramatically.

“Arthur! This is a good thing. You have a chance to save your kingdom. Anhora said he took no pleasure in this tragedy and I believe him; have you once seen him smiling or smug? He wants this lifted as much as us and he’s been trying to guide us. He did not hurt me and he’s given you another chance. Worry not for where it came from, focus on meeting whatever it is with cunning, compassion and courage.”

He took a fortifying breath, mind finally turning to the task ahead. They were silent as Merlyn
dressed him in his full knight regalia, the only thing left off being his helmet. But she was nervous and she couldn’t keep quiet for long.

“Every test so far has been a judgement on your character,” she said. “On your compassion and your pride. Just think before you act, don’t be rash, or emotional. You must use your heart as much as you use your head.”

“Merlyn,” Arthur murmured and she met his gaze. He gave her a reassuring smile. “It will be fine.”

She turned back to hitching his belt, stepping back to retrieve his sword. She nodded at the overall picture and turned towards the door. “Let me change into riding breeches and I will join you by the stables.”

“No,” he said and she looked back in confusion. He adjusted his vambrace before meeting her eyes. “You’re not coming. I brought this curse upon Camelot. I am going to be the one to lift it – or die trying.”

“Alright,” she said folding her arms. “And how does you dying help anyone?”

He sheathed his sword and moved towards the door and where she stood, blocking his path. “I will die knowing I did everything I can.” He grabbed her shoulders and moved her aside. She let him but she was fuming.

“I’m coming with you,” she demanded and he turned around, mouth tightening with irritation.

“Merlyn,” he ordered and, by his tone, she knew it was an order. “You are to stay here and help the people as best you can. Is that understood?”

She glowered at him. “I understand perfectly,” she muttered and he left without further ado.

She regretted her praise of Anhora when she sat, glued to the stupid stump at the edge of the Great Seas of Meredor. She glared at him, but his pale outfit glowed in the sunshine and glared pretty effectively back, causing her eyes to water.

“Why have you betrayed me?” she demanded, unable to work out the meaning behind the two goblets waiting atop the plain wooden table.

“Betrayal is often a matter of perspective,” Anhora said without glancing her way, eyes tracking something in the distant water.

“Yeah, well, from where I’m sitting, glued to my seat, it certainly feels like betrayal,” she spat.

The old man didn’t answer, gaze moving to where Arthur appeared in the arch of the hedges, weapon drawn and features confused.

“Merlyn?” he asked, moving closer.

“I’m sorry,” she replied. His eyes moved to Anhora’s stationary form, positioned by the arch.

“Let her go,” he pled. “I’ll take your test, but not until she’s released.”

“That is not possible,” the Keeper of the Unicorns said evenly. “Merlyn is part of the test. Please, sit,” he added, gesturing to the other stump. Arthur hesitated. “If you refuse the test, you will have failed and Camelot will be destroyed.”
The prince gritted his teeth but lowered himself onto the stump. He glared at Merlyn. “I thought I told you to stay at home.” She couldn’t reply, couldn’t meet his eyes and he sighed, glancing to Anhora. “Let’s get on with it.”

“There are two goblets before you,” he started, his soft voice carrying to their ears over the crashing waves. “One of the goblets contains a deadly poison, the other goblet, a harmless liquid. All the liquid from both goblets must be drunk, but each of you may only drink from a single goblet.”

“What kind of ridiculous test is that?” Arthur exclaimed. “What does that prove?”

“What it proves is for you to decide. If you pass the test, the curse will be lifted.” With his piece said, Anhora returned his gaze to the sea.

Merlyn leaned forward, palms pressed flat against the table. The bindings covering her hands were dirty and loose from the ride and the maze. “Let’s think about this,” she murmured, staring at the cups. “I drink from my goblet first….”

“If it’s poisoned, you will die.”

“And if it is not, you will have to drink from yours and you will die. There must be a way around it.”

“It is perfectly simple,” Arthur said, sounding resigned. “One of us has to die. We have to find a way to determine which goblet has the poison and then I will drink it.”

“Don’t be silly,” she retorted, staring at him incredulously. “I will be the one to drink it.”

“This is my doing,” he decided. “I’m drinking it.”

She leaned further forward, trying to meet his eyes, though her rump refused to leave the stump. “It is more important that you live,” she said firmly. “You are the future king. I am just a servant.”

“This is not time to be a hero, Merlyn,” he said dismissively. “I’ll not let you be so reckless.”

“This is not your future, Arthur,” she pushed, wishing she could snatch both goblets and drink them before he did something foolish. “Let me drink the poisoned one.”

“Who are you to know my future, Merlyn,” he replied. “I had no idea you were so keen to die for me.”

“Yeah, well, it comes and goes,” she jested, feeling a little desperate.

Arthur snorted but the humour was short lived, the gravity of the situation weighing their minds.

“I am glad you are here, Merlyn,” he said softly, peering at her from under his lashes.

She met his gaze. “So am I,” she replied quietly. She dropped her eyes when the unspoken emotion between them grew too great and stared at the two accursed cups. The two half cups.

“I have it!” she cried. “We pour all the liquid into one goblet and then we can be sure it is poisoned. Then all the liquid can be drunk, and it will be from a single goblet.” She smacked her hand on the table, relieved then hissed and shook out the limb as the cuts thrummed with pain.

Arthur stared at her, amazed. “You never cease to surprise me, Merlyn,” he said and she grinned at him, pleased.
Suddenly, Arthur’s attention was caught on something behind her. “Look out!” he cried and she ducked, glancing back to see nothing but rock, cliff-side and sea.

“What?” she asked, turning back to see Arthur holding the full goblet, the other emptied of liquid. “No!” she cried, reaching out as if she could snatch it from his hand. “I will drink it!”

“As if I’d let you,” he scoffed, holding it up and clearly trying to urge himself to drink.

“You can’t die,” she commanded. “This is not your destiny.”

“It seems you’re wrong again,” he said, breaths heavy with fear. His eyes met hers, regret shining strongly. “I only wish…” he shook his head, huffing with empty amusement. “Never mind.”

He tipped the goblet and drank deeply. “No!” she screamed. “What have you done!”

His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he slipped from the stump. Merlyn was up and around the table before she realised she could now stand. She dropped to her knees, heedless of the hard rock, and tapped his cheek, trying to wake him.

“Arthur, no! Come on. Come on, Arthur! Don’t do this. No, no, no… wake up!”

Tears blinded her eyes as devastation licked her insides. He couldn’t be gone. He was supposed to live until he was old and grey, a valued king of a united kingdom.

She put her ear to his chest, but the chainmail stopped her from hearing any heartbeat. She slid her fingers under his nose and felt breath touch her skin. He still lived!

“Anhora, please, please!” she begged turning to the old man. “Just let me take his place!”

He shook his head. “This was Arthur’s test, not yours.”

“You’ve killed him!” she accused. “This is not the way of the unicorns! They are meant to revere life!” she touched beneath his nose again, feeling his breath. But for how much longer? “I was meant to protect him,” she sniffled.

“He is not dead,” Anhora said, moving closer. “He has merely consumed a sleeping draught. He will come around shortly.”

She stared at him as tears dripped down her cheeks. “What?” she sobbed.

Anhora straightened himself, looking satisfied with his mission’s success. “A unicorn is pure of heart. If you kill one, you must make amends by proving that you also are pure of heart. Arthur was willing to sacrifice his life to save yours. He has proven what is truly in his heart. The curse will be lifted.”

With that, he vanished and Merlyn turned back to Arthur, who slumbered on unknowingly. She brushed his hair from his forehead and lowered her face to rest against it. Her hand cupped his cheek. “You,” she sighed wetly, closing her eyes as she let the relief that he lived soak into her bones. “You are in so much trouble.”

The realisation that he was to live brought more tears but she shed them silently, their release a catharsis for her soul. She hadn’t failed. Arthur still lived, perhaps stronger and kinder for this incident. She hadn’t failed.

“M’rlyn?” he mumbled croakily as he awoke, his hand lifting to touch her hair where it fell over
his face. She didn’t move except to grab the roving hand and press it against her neck, taking breaths to compose herself before facing the prince.

“What… am I… dead?”

“After I’m through with you,” she muttered in a thick tone as she sat back, glaring at him through wet eyelashes. “You are going to wish you had died.”

With a groan and a helping hand, Arthur sat up, rubbing the back of his head as awareness slowly returned. He looked at her beside him, shoulders brushing as he tried to make sense of events. “But – the poison?”

“It wasn’t real poison,” Merlyn shared, closing her eyes in thanks of that. “It was a mild sleeping draught.”

“Sleeping…?” she took a fortifying breath and opened her eyes to glare at him.

“It was to test if you were pure of heart, as the unicorn you slayed was pure of heart,” she whacked him on the back, anger taking hold now that the danger had passed.

“How could you do that?” she yelled, hitting him again. “You are a prince! You don’t risk your life for things like this!”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “I am not worth you losing your life! You are to be King of Camelot. You are too important to be killed before you can – mmfph!”

She stared at Arthur, eyes wide before the press of his lips against her own had her eyes sliding shut instinctively. His lips were soft but there was a little bit of chapping at the corner. She ran her tongue over it experimentally and he hummed, opening his mouth. Her hands lifted to bury in his hair and butterflies came to life in her belly. She sipped at his mouth and ran her tongue over his teeth as his own tongue ventured forth to touch hers. Arthur’s hand slid up into her hair as his other pulled her closer by her waist. She tugged on his hair and the kiss was broken as he gasped in pain.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, panting. Her lips felt swollen and she saw his were too, reddened and glistening.

“It wasn’t –” his voice was gruff as his hand went to the back of his head. “I think I hit my head when I fell.”

“Oh, yeah. You would have. Let me see.” She moved her fingers into his hair and felt the slight swelling on his skin. “Yeah, yeah, there is definitely a bump. Do you have a headache?”

“It’s growing,” he said, flinching away from her insistent fingers. “Watch it,” he scolded.

“Poor baby,” she laughed, still feeling tingly and raw from their kiss. “You deserve it and much more for your stupidity.”

“Not stupid though, was it,” he retorted with a smirk. “I had to prove myself to save the kingdom and I did that through my deeds. I’m a hero.”

She scowled and climbed to her feet. “Your father would be inconsolable if you died. Famine and drought would not be all we’d have to contend with if he went mad.”
“Don’t be dramatic, Merlyn,” he said, also clambering to his feet, though the last effects of the draught had him a little unsteady.

She shook her head. “You underestimate your father’s love,” she muttered, looking left and right for a way to return to their horses without travelling back through the labyrinth. There wasn’t one and she huffed. “Thanks Anhora,” she groused.

Arthur clearly noticed the same dilemma. “Any chance you remember the way?” he asked and she shot him a look.

“I was unconscious for most of it, Arthur. Perhaps you should lead us.”

“Right,” he said, picking up his sword from the table and turning it in his hand contemplatively. “I saw no beasts within the maze. We should be safe on our return journey.”

“As long as we don’t become eternally lost and starve to death,” she commented, just because. Arthur shot her a deadpan glare and she raised her hands, placating. “Just keeping it real.”

He rolled his eyes and started forward into the labyrinth. Merlyn took a breath and shot one last look at the crashing waves before following. She’d never seen the sea; it had always been on the list of things she’d like to do – in that abstract, one day kind of way – but Arthur's near-death on its rocky shores had soured her to the wonder. Maybe another day, on another beach, she would stop and observe the sheer phenomenon of the waves. Bask in the surreal vastness of the water stretching to the horizon.

But today, she turned her back on it and stepped into the narrow path between the tall hedges, trusting Arthur to lead her true.

And if she touched her lips with a secret smile, no one had to know but the hedges.

They returned to find the castle flourishing with fresh harvest. The once dead plants had sprouted anew, fully matured within hours. Sickly animals grew plump in a blink and the children and old that had past the point of no return were breathing easier and able to lift their limbs. The curse had not only lifted; it had reset. Some damage had still been done, some lives had been lost and scars did not just disappear. This time would be remembered and the lesson would be learned but the worst had ended and the people rejoiced.

“There is something I must do first,” Arthur said to Merlyn after he spoke with his father, and he led the way to the trophy room. There, on a soft, velvet pillow atop a pedestal, rested the unicorn’s horn. Merlyn hung back as Arthur walked to over and rested a gentle palm atop it. He murmured something she couldn’t hear then wrapped it in a red cloth and picked it up. “Come on,” he said and she followed obediently.

They remounted their horses, still tacked from their journey and rode, abreast, into the forest. They didn’t speak as he led them to the place where he had slain the creature.

They built a small burial mound atop the horn with nearby rocks and Merlyn felt sorrow at knowing it was gone. Arthur said softly, “I should never have ended your life. I'm sorry.”

With his words, a wave of energy laved at Merlyn's skin, raising the hairs on her arms. A sixth sense prompted her to look towards a break between two thick trunks and there, the unicorn – the same unicorn – stared at her serenely.
“Arthur,” she whispered, reaching blindly for his arm to gain his attention. She knew the moment he saw the same image for he gasped softly and stilled, entranced.

The unicorn reared slowly, a clear display of power and control and Anhora's voice rung clear in Merlyn's head; *When he who kills a unicorn proves himself to be pure of heart, the unicorn will live again.*

“Did you hear that?” Arthur hissed, gripping her hand as he stood, turning in search of the Guardian of the Unicorns. Merlyn looked at him, surprised. She had thought only magicians and magical beings could speak to each other through thought. Seemed not.

“I did,” she admitted. “He spoke in our minds.”

She watched as Arthur visibly fought down his instinctive reaction to cry sorcery and draw his weapon. She was proud when he did not; that he recognised Anhora was not a threat. That he acknowledged that there were sorcerers out there who were not evil.

*Thank you,* she whispered into the ether, hoping, somehow, that it would reach Anhora.

She felt his satisfaction of a job well done and a sudden suspicion arose in her mind. *Did you…?* His amusement at her discovery confirmed it for her and she sat back, stunned.

The unicorn hadn’t just been there that day, oblivious to the threat. It had known – it had planned for it. Anhora and the unicorn had risked everything to teach Arthur a lesson. But why?

Anhora answered in his soft voice, sounding pleased with her comprehension: *Without trial, there can be no growth. And without growth there can be no Albion.*

Merlyn gaped. This whole time, they’d been working towards the same goal, and she’d had no clue, actively accusing him of sabotage. She watched as the unicorn tucked a leg and bowed at them in farewell before trotting off into the undergrowth. Too soon to be natural, it’s glowing hide blended with the greenery and it vanished from sight. Merlyn hoped she would see it again, if under less stressful circumstances.

“Come on,” said Arthur after a moment. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

“Phew!” Merlyn agreed. “Even in Ealdor I’ve never gone so long without a meal. Luckily, I brought this.” She pulled out a large, juicy carrot and took a chunk off the end with her teeth. Arthur stared at her like she was mad.

“Come on,” she said, munching on her snack. “I know you noble types like to stick your nose in the air regarding ground food but carrots are delicious; this one particularly so.” She snapped off another chunk with her teeth and held the carrot out enticingly. Arthur glowered at it before his stomach growled and he snatched it from her hands. With a grimace, he nibbled on a bit and his eyes widened in surprise.

“It’s sweet,” he said and she grinned at him, stealing it back to chomp some more. He grunted and took it back, biting off a large chunk and munching happily. She grinned, triumphant, and pulled another from her pocket. He eyed her in bewilderment before his gaze moved to her jacket.

“What else do you have in there?” he asked and she rolled her eyes, moving past him to where the horses were hitched.

“The kitchens will have created a feast by the time we make it back,” she said. “And I, for one, do not want to miss out.”
Arthur wasted no time following on her heels.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed their first kiss! I didn’t actually intend for it to happen just yet but the characters got away from me. I wonder what their coming conversation will be like… hmm…

R&R lovelies! It feeds my muse like a good Sunday roast!
To Kill The King

Chapter Summary

Merlyn pushes herself, Gwen realises something and Morgana's character is put to the test

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day after the unicorn’s curse lifted, the morning started late as the city recovered from unintentional food comas. Merlyn dragged herself from her bed in the predawn light to visit Skylark with Sunstrider before returning to fetch Arthur’s breakfast. The two motherly kitchen hands fussled over her appearance, plying her with two jam and cream pasties before sending her on her way. Merlyn was speechless, as jam was a commodity for the privileged, but they waved her off as the intake of ripe fruits had overwhelmed their stores. So Merlyn entered the prince’s chambers humming in delight as strawberry jam and fresh clotted cream smeared over her face and fingers.

Arthur was still down for the count so Merlyn sat herself in his seat and gobbled the rest of the first treat before licking her hands clean and setting to work hitching the curtains back. Arthur had no plans beyond that of registering the intake of produce for storage, which was sure to be boring and tedious but should be over by midday if there were no delays. He hadn’t indicated any other plans to her – but then, once the awe of the revived unicorn wore off last night, their interactions had been stilted and awkward. The weighted, unspoken words in the air made it hard to speak.

Merlyn touched her fingers to her lips as she remembered it. The warm slide of his lips against hers, the curl of his tongue as it explored her mouth, the heady sensation of being devoured and wanting nothing more than to devour him back.

“M’rlyn?” Arthur’s groggy voice grumbled and she turned, dropping her hand guiltily. He squinted tiredly against the sunlight shining through the freshly bared window, the rays glinting off a silver goblet and directly into his face.

“Oh, sorry,” she mumbled, moving to his bedside table to remove the offending object. “Breakfast is on the table and your clothes are by the changing screen when you’re ready.”

He sat up, stretching, and Merlyn saw that he wore no shirt. Blushing, she turned away and moved to set the kettle on the fireplace, feeding the flames until it was burning strongly once more. She knew he had gone to bed with a shirt on but he must have grown hot in the night – or he wished to torment her now she knew what he tasted like.

Arthur changed and moved to his chair, still half asleep. He sat and stared for a moment. “Merlyn,” he said. “Why is there a pasty sitting on my table?”

“Oh, oops!” she hurried over and picked up the second treat from the bare wood, sliding his full plate over to replace it. “Grenda and Jasmyn – they work in the kitchens – gifted me this and another because they have a surplus of ripened berries.” She took a bite and hummed in pleasure, saying a little rudely as her mouth was full, “I’ve never had jam before. It’s wonderful.
This is strawberry.” She held it out to the prince, who was watching her with a peculiar expression. “Would you like to try some?”

He shook his head and looked away; she saw his throat bob as he swallowed. “I’m fine,” he grumbled. “I have had jam before.”

She shrugged and licked some cream off her lip. “Of course you have,” she said. “You are a prince.”

He sighed and put down his fork, head bowed. She tilted her head, concerned. “Are you okay, Arthur?”

“Our kiss,” he said and she immediately tensed, food suddenly a struggle to swallow. He hesitated then said lowly, “I thought I was to die. I had prepared for it... And then I awoke.”

A cold sensation washed over her skin. His tone was not one of pleasant reminiscence and she just knew what he said next was going to hurt.

“I understand,” she blurted, looking down at her food. “In-in circumstance of high risk, the brain releases a chemical called adrenalin. It... can muddle some thoughts. Make you act out of character.”

Silence weighed heavily between them before Arthur took a breath and tapped the table with his forefinger. He said lightly, “As you say, I am a prince.”

It felt like a blade had just been delved into her gut. Of course. Arthur was a prince. How silly to get her hopes up.

“I’ll not think on it again,” she assured him numbly, blatantly lying, for how could she not with her senses alight with the memory?

“Good,” he said and picked up his fork. “Now, while I’m with my father, you can clean my armour and the stables. After that, you are free for the rest of the day. I might collect some knights and have some sparring practice. It’s been a while.”

“Yes, sire,” she said and used the excuse to escape, collecting his dirty clothes and slipping quietly from the room. Once out in the corridor, she brushed a hand over her face, feeling the heat in her cheeks. How humiliating, she groaned, to be told she was not worthy.

I am a prince, his voice echoed in her head.

Well. He certainly is that.

And so things returned to a strained imitation of normal, though it might have only been in Merlyn's head that things felt forced. Arthur certainly didn’t seem to act much different, if, perhaps, not meeting her gaze quite as often nor letting her linger before dismissing her for the night.

She longed to share the incident with Gwen or Morgana but couldn’t seem to find the right time to tell them. It wasn’t as if she could work it into a conversation easily. Hey, you know that time that the unicorn’s death cursed the land? Yeah, well in the thrill of surviving poison that wasn’t actually poison but a sleeping draught, Arthur kissed me. And not a simple peck on the lips, there was tongue and moaning involved. Then he told me it was a mistake. So... how’s your father,
“Merlyn!” Gaius said, startling the black-haired girl from her distraction. She knocked over a vial of blueish liquid with her hand but managed to catch it before it spilled – only to send a goblet full of water to the ground with her elbow. She flinched at the ringing clatter and stared at the growing puddle with her nose scrunched in distaste.

She moved her gaze up to Gaius and smiled sheepishly. “Yes?” she asked.

Her mentor raised his eyebrow before sighing and putting down his pestle. “I cannot help but think that there is something on your mind, Merlyn,” he said, his quest for an answer obvious.

“Nope,” she squeaked, knowing how false it sounded as it came out of her mouth. It didn’t stop her from holding to it though. Gaius was the last person she wanted to tell about Arthur. “I’m fine. Nothing is wrong. Everything is… fine.”

His eyebrow rose higher. “Somehow that does not reassure me,” he stated.

Merlyn glanced towards the window. “Oh, look at the time! I’d love to stay and chat but I have – important stuff to do.” She moved towards the door. “See you later, Gaius.”

The old man watched her leave and shook his head in puzzlement. Some days, Merlyn confounded him more than any science experiment.

Merlyn was deeply asleep when the first flicker of awareness licked against her consciousness. Her eyes were open before she was awake and a sense of confusion set in before that flicker turned to a flame and she sat up in surprise. She closed her eyes, trying to reach towards the warmth but like a flash fire, it burned out before she could touch it, leaving her snapping back to herself in the dark of her room. After several minutes the awareness did not return and Merlyn realised that it was not coming back. But tiredness had fled so she slipped from her warm blanket and headed to the door where she could see candlelight glinting around the frame.

Gaius was in the main chamber, reading and swirling a beaker of liquid but he glanced up as she trudged down the stairs. “Can’t sleep?” he asked.

She tilted her head, mind still consumed by the unfamiliar but unmistakeable impression that had disturbed her. “Something woke me.”

The old man’s weathered features pinched in interest. “What?”

“A… feeling.” She frowned to herself then met Gaius’ gaze. “ Powerful magic, here, in Camelot.”

The physician’s door slammed open and Merlyn jumped in fright before Gwen ran through, panic clear on her face. “Gwen!” she said, stepping towards her friend. “What’s wrong?”

“My father’s been arrested!” she cried and Merlyn was stunned. Tom? Arrested?

“What for?” she demanded.

“They say he was making weapons for a sorcerer! They’re charging him with treason!” she fell into Merlyn’s arms and the black-haired girl automatically cradled her, brushing over her hair as her
mind reeled. Tom was a gentle soul with a simple lifestyle. He only wanted his daughter happy and healthy. No way would he risk everything just to help a sorcerer – and no way in hell was he guilty of treason.

“It’s okay, Gwen,” she whispered into her distraught friend’s hair. “Tom is a good man and you have connections to see him face a fair trial. He will be saved, I promise you.”

The maid didn’t answer, though her grip tightened on the back of Merlyn's nightdress.

Merlyn went to see Arthur, who had returned from seeing the King with a solemn expression. When he saw her waiting for him without breakfast he sighed and moved to the table, removing his scabbard and gloves.

“I take it you have heard?” he stated more than asked.

Merlyn didn’t bother with pretence, stepping closer to ask, “Is there much hope? For Tom?”

He glanced at her by his shoulder before turning away and picking some raspberries from the centre bowl. “He was seen consorting with a known renegade. He had been paid in lump sum and the work was being done in the dark of night.” He turned back to her and crossed his arms. “You tell me, Merlyn.”

She ignored his attitude, knowing that he must have had a hard time with this, being friends with Lancelot, who was courting Gwen. “I know Tom. He wants nothing more than to make a living and see his daughter happy. He wouldn’t work with a sorcerer knowingly. You must believe that.”

“It matters not what I believe,” he said but the drop of his head showed his displeasure. “All who have been in contact with Tauren are to be punished.”

“You mean…?” she frowned. “Who?”

Arthur swallowed. “Inn workers, tavern workers, any who he purchased from.”

She moved a hand to her mouth, horrified. “Are they all to be executed?”

The prince shook his head, tiredness clearly weighing on his limbs. “I do not know. I hope he only means to flog or fine them. Perhaps banish. So far, he has called only Tom treasonous. But he is not to be reasoned with; Morgana has already tried.”

“Well is this – Tauren, to create such paranoia?” she asked, never having heard his name before.

“He is part of a collection of sorcerers who vowed to end my father’s reign. He has been a thorn in Camelot’s side for many years.”

“But I have not heard of him,” she said. “He has not attacked in all the time I have been here.”

Arthur reached for a goblet of water and gulped some down. Merlyn automatically moved to the banked fireplace to set a kettle over the fire.

“My father had hoped he had died or given up his quest but it appears he was plotting. He has access to lumps of gold as large as my fist,” he revealed. “That is what we found in Tom’s hand.” He shook his head, slumping into his chair. “He must have a benefactor. I only hope it is not a lord within our own kingdom. My father would not handle a betrayal of that kind very well.”
“Would anyone handle that very well?” she asked rhetorically, putting away his scabbard and gloves.

It was quiet between them until the kettle boiled and Merlyn poured it into a pot with strong black tea leaves. She inhaled the aroma as she set a cup before the prince, saying, “I’ll have the bath boys make a run so you can soak for a little while before you sleep. I’ll fetch you some food until then, alright?”

He nodded, eyes on the dark liquid steaming between his palms as his thoughts occupied his attention. Merlyn slipped away.

Gwen went to see her father then reported back to Merlyn and Gaius what he said. Lancelot hovered by her side, hand on her back reassuringly. “Tauren came to him at the forge, offered to pay him a fortune for his help, not to make weapons, for an experiment or something.”

“What kind of experiment?” Merlyn pressed and Gwen shrugged, looking exhausted.

“Tauren didn't say. But he used some kind of stone... some kind of magic.”

Merlyn met Gaius’ eyes but the old man looked pensive. She looked towards Lancelot instead and the brown-haired knight slid his arm around Gwen.

“Come on,” he murmured, leading her from the dungeons. “You are fatigued.”

Merlyn added, “You can continue to rest on my bed so you are close if anything happens.”

“Oh, I couldn’t’’ said Gwen, resisting slightly as politeness dictated. “I couldn’t impose.”

Merlyn rolled her eyes. “It is my bed and I can use it as I see fit. You are my friend, Gwen, and you care for everyone else around you. Allow me, just this once, to care for you.”

The exhausted maid graced her with a tremulous smile. “You are a good friend, Merlyn. I’m glad I know you.”

Merlyn smiled back. “As am I, Gwen. Your father will be free, I swear it.”

She met Lancelot's eyes over her friend’s head and he saw the determination in her gaze. He just hoped she didn’t do anything foolish.

Gwen slept in Merlyn's room while Lancelot stood guard, and Gaius revealed his suspicions to the black-haired girl in the main chamber.

“Alchemy?” Merlyn whispered, keeping her voice low. “But that’s exceedingly difficult, even with magic’s touch.”

“It is a powerful and obscure study,” agreed the old man, features drawn with the excitement of the last few hours. The sun had only recently risen but they had all been awake for hours. Gaius hadn’t slept at all and he was not young any longer.

“You should rest,” she insisted. “I will do your morning rounds while Arthur sleeps. Nothing has changed in the orders?”
“Everything is the same, though Lady Fenwick now takes valerian root tea instead of hoodwort. The dosages are already made up; it need only be delivered.” He yawned, the prospect of rest already sucking at his limbs so Merlyn led him to his bed and turned down the covers.

“I’ll wake you in a few hours unless an emergency arises, alright?”

“Mhmm,” he said and she left him to it. She had a task to complete and another to solve. Perhaps if she could capture Tauren then the King would see Tom was innocent. She only had to bring him in before Tom’s trial because she knew once the King made his decision, not hell or high water would dissuade him.

Merlyn was in the process of quizzing Favian and a couple of other guards by the city gates on anything they could remember of the sorcerer from past pursuits when she felt the flicker of awareness burst in her mind. She turned her head and tried to reach for it but, again, it died before she could pinpoint the location. Tauren must still be in the city.

“I must go,” she said apologetically to Gregis, who had been telling her the names of some of Tauren’s previous accomplices. “Thank you for your help. I will keep my eyes peeled.”

She missed the adoring expression on his face as she hurried away but Favian did not. He clapped the younger guard on his shoulder and said, “There is little hope with that one, my friend. She has been taken since two weeks into her arrival here.”

“By who?” Gregis asked, puffing his chest up challengingly. “If this man has not wedded her then she may still find someone worthier of her attentions. Someone who would not hesitate to bind himself to her.”

“Ah, Gregis,” Favian smiled, shaking his head. “If you believe she would turn away the prince in favour of you then you have clearly been knocked on the head one too many times.”

The copper-skinned man blanched and stared at Favian, black eyes wide. “The prince?”

“Aye,” he said. “It’ll be a tough road but when you see them alone together. That tells you where their hearts both lie.”

Gregis returned to his post, glum, and Favian returned to his, amused. Yet another man who had fallen for Merlyn’s charms, and the girl had not a clue.

Lancelot was forced to leave Gwen to train with the knights but Merlyn promised to stay until he returned – unless Tauren himself showed his face. She sat by Gwen’s feet on a three-legged stool, browsing one of Gaius’ medical tomes when Morgana poked her head in that afternoon.

Their conversation went about as well as Arthur's, though Morgana was filled with bitter anger instead of Arthur’s regretful resignation.

“Then… there is little hope,” Merlyn whispered.

Morgana turned back from where she had been striding towards the door. “There is no hope at all, Merlyn. None at all.”

She moved towards the door but Merlyn halted her when she spoke, “But… I thought – if we
captured Tauren… the King might redirect his anger.”

Morgana met her eyes, interest swirling amongst the rage. “How would you propose to do that?”

“Well,” the black-haired girl fumbled a little. “I hadn’t yet made it that far. I talked with several of the guards on Tauren’s methods when he besieged Camelot previously but they all likened him to a common crook with mediocre sorcery skills. That isn’t what he seems to be now.”

“No,” Morgana agreed. “Creating gold from lead is a powerful gift, and not the same to how he was before.”

Merlyn moved closer, saying furtively. “Tom said that Tauren had a stone that glowed when he incanted. Gaius believes it is an alchemy stone, gifted with the power of Transfiguration.”

Morgana’s sea-green eyes were wide and her features pale. Merlyn added to reassure her, “This is a good thing. It means that Tauren hasn’t grown stronger; he has only discovered an instrument of magic. If we can find him and we can relieve him of the stone, then we will be able to subdue him and bring him back for trial. Tom will be freed.”

“Perhaps not,” said Morgana, clenching her fist. “Uther may execute both of them.”

“Well… he may,” she agreed, having tried not to think of such things. “We just have to hope he does not.”

The highborn shook her head, beautiful features set. “I cannot leave Gwen’s father to such odds. Uther only sees enemies and I will not have Tom become a victim to his tyranny.”

Merlyn could say little to that and watched silently as Morgana marched out, lavish dress billowing dramatically behind her.

That night, the warning bell tolled, waking the castle from its slumber. Merlyn leapt from her bed so fast, her feet tangled and she landed, shoulder first on the floor. She scurried upright and rushed from the room, finding Gaius rubbing his eyes as he sat at the edge of his bed. “What is it?” Merlyn demanded. “What’s happened?”

“I know as much as you do, Merlyn,” said her mentor, pushing himself wearily to his feet. A pit of dread opened up in her belly. Morgana had been determined to do something but Merlyn hadn’t pushed, believing she was heading to challenge the King once more. But perhaps, she had done something else instead.

Blast and botheration! What if she had done something as foolish as release Tom from his cell? The blacksmith was not a man accustomed to stealth and subtlety; what if he was caught? He’d have no defense against the King’s accusations.

Heedless to her state of undress, Merlyn rushed out of the physician’s chambers, ignoring Gaius’ shout of, “We are to stay inside when the bell tolls!”

Guards were loud in their passage through the corridors, giving Merlyn plenty of time to duck and hide as they rushed past. She headed directly for the dungeons, knowing it would be a good place to search for answers. Gods forbid if Tom had escaped, she would have to find him before the guards. With such a crime hanging over his head, the city would probably kill now and question later.
There was a shout from the depths of a nearby staircase and Merlyn skidded around the corner to peer over the banister. There, Tom stood, surrounded by armed guards with their weapons raised threateningly. Tom dropped to his knees, hands raised in supplication and Merlyn sighed, thinking the danger was over.

“Kill him,” a guard ordered and one leapt forward obediently, his blade sinking into Tom’s gut with a wet squelch.

“No!” Merlyn screamed, startling the guards into shield position. She raced down the stairs and they relaxed at seeing she was just a girl.

“Arthur’s servant,” one of them muttered and moved to intercept. She shoved his arm away and ducked around his frame, dropping beside Tom who was curled around his wound, shuddering in agony.

“No,” she moaned, hesitant to touch him. “Tom…”

His dark eyes lifted slowly to meet hers, irises the exact same rich shade as his daughter’s. “Mer-Merlyn?” he gasped.

“Shh,” she hushed, stroking his short hair before urging him onto his back. “Let me see.”

“Miss,” one of the guards, the captain, protested, touching her shoulder as if to pull her away. “He is to be killed by order of the King.”

“And he is to pass in agony?” she snarled, shoving his arm away. She met his regretful features with defiance. “I am an apprentice healer and he has a daughter who is a very good friend. You would ask me to leave him to die down here without care?”

The man backed away, head dipping contritely. “Make him comfortable,” he acquiesced and gestured for his men to turn away in deference. Another two hurried off to report their success to the King.

“T-tell – G-Gwen –”

“Tell her yourself,” Merlyn murmured so the guards didn’t hear. “You will be fine, I promise you.”

“N-no –” but he curled over again as his pain ratcheted and Merlyn was forced to lean on his far shoulder to keep him flat. She was running out of time.

She knew she couldn’t heal his wound right then – didn’t know if she was capable with such a grievous mess – but she did know a couple of stasis spells that might hold him until she had privacy. Granted, the stasis spells were for food, not living creatures but Merlyn believed she had enough knowledge of the Old Language to adjust accordingly. Maybe.

She glanced furtively at the guards but their backs were still turned. She took a calming breath and held one hand against his wound and another against his forehead.

“Behielde thes mann, áfersce,” she whispered and kept her lashes low so the heat flashing over her irises weren’t noticeable to the guards.

Tom saw though and his face greyed in horror before the spell took hold and his breath stilled. His heart froze mid-beat and his limbs went lax. And she knew it had worked by the immediate strain on her magic, the sensation much like playing tug-of-war with an indominable force, death trying to wrest control from her grasp. But she did not relent; her will was ironclad.
The warning bell was silenced as word reached the sentries there of the task’s completion, leaving
the midnight air chilled with stillness.

“He’s gone,” she announced, the strain in her voice easily blamed on emotion.

The guards stirred into action at her words, one unrolling a thick sheet to cover the body and two
others moving to pick Tom up. The guard captain helped her to her feet and shifted to block her
view of their actions.

“We have it from here, miss,” he murmured. “You don’t need to see this part.”

She peered around him to see them lift his limp body by his arms and legs and looked away in
agreement. “Take him to the physician’s chambers,” she requested. “His daughter will want to say
goodbye.”

“We usually take the bodies to the burial site outside the city,” he said.

“To the unmarked graveyard meant for criminals, I know,” she nodded and looked down as a hard
tug on her magic had her eyes flaring instinctively. “Please,” she whispered. “We will take him
there ourselves. But my friend… she will want to say goodbye. My mentor can prepare the-the
body.”

He hesitated then said, “Very well.”

“Thank you,” she said, meeting his brown-eyed gaze. “What is your name.”

“Alfred, miss.”

She lifted her hand for him to shake but paused as she saw the blood drenching it. “Merlyn,” she
said back, letting her arm fall and resolutely not thinking about Tom’s wound.

He dipped his head to her and they parted ways. She hurried up the stairs, arm pressing against her
chest as the strain grew more insistent, aching like she was holding her breath. She was fighting
against the laws of nature and, slowly, her magic was losing.

Outside, the predawn grey was reflecting off the white stones to illuminate the ground before her,
negating the need for a torch. She passed a guard wheeling a flatbed cart but refused to think on the
load it was to carry. She ducked straight across the empty courtyard, grateful that the day had yet
to truly begin since it meant no civilians were present.

“Merlyn?”

At least, no civilians were supposed to be present.

The black-haired girl turned with trepidation to the worst possible person who could be present
right now.

“Gwen,” she whispered and the dark-skinned maid stepped dazedly down the front entrance
stairway. Her doe eyes were locked on Merlyn’s front and her rich skin was paling in fear. Merlyn
looked down and saw that she was stained with blood. Where she had knelt were two saturated
patches, stark against her white nightdress, and her hands were smeared grotesquely. She hadn’t
realised it had spread so much.

“Gwen,” she said, alarm rising in her throat and she dashed over the cobbles to reach her friend.
“Go to Morgana. I’ll come to you soon and tell you everything. But please, you cannot be here
now?"

The woman was oblivious to her warnings, eyes trapped on the scarlet stains. “Is this… whose –” her voice wobbled with dread. “Whose blood?”

“Gwen,” she said, trying to meet her eyes. “Gwen!” the maid looked up but her gaze directed to something over Merlyn's shoulder. The insistent tugs on Merlyn's magic told her what had caught her attention.

The maid gave a devastated cry.

“No!” she wailed, trying to push past Merlyn but the black-haired girl wrapped her arms around her friend to stop her advance. She eyes heated as another wave of resistance battered her spell and she closed them against it. “Father!”

“Hope is not lost,” she murmured into her hair as Gwen clutched at her, crying and screaming. “Trust me, trust my promise. Hope is not yet lost.”

“My father is dead!” she keened, face buried in Merlyn's neck. “How is hope not lost?”

Merlyn said nothing but continued to rock her as she cried. Then Gwen sniffled and choked out questioningly, “Where are they taking him?”

Merlyn turned also, seeing them lift the shrouded body carefully from the cart bed and carry him into the arch leading to the physician’s chambers.

“They’re taking him to Gaius,” she said. “Come on.” She kept her arm around Gwen’s shoulder as she guided the distraught woman towards that same arch.

“Why are they taking him there? Is he – isn’t he –”

“I need you to trust me, right now,” she muttered, keeping her voice low, though it had started to tremble with exertion. The pain in her chest was growing in intensity, from an ache to a throb. “I will speak when we are able.”

They passed the guards on their way up and Merlyn nodded gratefully to them, only to stagger as her legs weakened and refused to lock. Gwen stopped her from collapsing but let out a surprised grunt as she took her weight.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded, alarm clear in her tone. “You are not injured, are you?”

“No,” Merlyn panted, concentrating on maintaining the spell. It felt like she was holding back a tsunami with an umbrella, sweating and shaking with the effort. Her control was slipping sideways and cracks were forming in her composure. She knew the backlash was going to be tremendous.

She focused on moving up the staircase, foot by foot. She assured Gwen wheezingly, lungs tight, “You will see.”

They reached the door to the physician’s chambers and fell through it dramatically when they overbalanced in turning the handle. Gaius jumped in surprise, spinning on them as he dropped the sheet back over Tom’s face.

“Merlyn!” he exclaimed, seeing the sweat dripping down her temples.

“Guard the door,” she ordered him. “No one can listen.”
His eyes darted to Gwen and his mouth opened to protest but Merlyn growled and said, “If you do not wish me to be burned; guard the door!”

His eyebrow raised but he moved to obey, head peering from the doorway to search both the staircase and the joining corridor. With him occupied, Merlyn stepped up to Tom’s body and removed the cover. Gwen whimpered at seeing the bloody wound but Merlyn didn’t have the strength to comfort her right then. She didn’t even have the ability to worry that her actions might lose her a friend.

She closed her eyes and held her hands over the puncture, searching for a tendril of magic that wasn’t shaking under the strain of holding the stasis. This was going to hurt. A lot.

“Thrhhaele dolgbenn,” she hissed and felt the heat behind her eyelids.

She also felt her hold on the spell shatter with the new incantation and her magic recoiled like an overly taut rope, snapping back at her with enough force to send her across the room with a bang. Her vision burst white as a sledgehammer force crashed into her skull but she was unconscious before she could scream at the pain.

“… rlyn… Mer… erlyn… Merlyn…”

Merlyn came awake with a gasp and a sob, skull throbbing with pressure. She couldn’t tell where she was or what was happening but her temples were screaming. She writhed in a vain attempt to find respite but her hands were trapped by her sides, weighted down by two warm bands around her wrist.

She couldn’t tell if her eyes were open or shut – or if she even had eyes anymore – but her vision was completely white, no shapes or colour to be found. She arched and screamed as they burned and stung like pickaxes were being driven into her sockets. She begged for relief, sobbing for Gaius, not knowing if he was nearby or on the other side of the world.

Abruptly, a vile concoction was poured into her open mouth and she choked, thrashing to rid herself of the liquid. A palm sealed over her lips and another plugged her nose, and all she knew was that she was suffocating.

She twisted and struggled but her instincts quickly took over and she swallowed the bitter liquid down. Her mouth was released but the hands on her wrists did not let go and she cried, trying to roll, trying to find a position that did not have her wishing for death. She could not hear, as the thumping of her heart drowned every other sound but she cried out to be heard.

“It hurts!” she wailed in silence. “It hurts!”

Hands stroked her hair, her face, cool against the fire in her body and she leaned into them, pleading with them to stop the rest of it. Free her of the rest of the pain. But they did not. Only time – accursed time – decided to relieve her. The draught that had been poured down her throat took hold and instead of pain, weakness suffused her limbs. Her struggles eased and her heartbeat slowed alongside her breathing. Exhaustion rolled over her consciousness and she was carried into the ether before she could think to fight it.

Sleep ensued.
Arthur was a little confused and a lot worried. He’d gone to give his condolences to Gwen and, instead, found Merlyn splayed atop the medical cot on her belly, pale and shaking, with her bruised back laid bare.

“What happened?” he demanded as he rushed over. Gaius and Lancelot were tending to her but Guinevere was not present, which he thought odd but understandable given her grief.

Gaius peered up in surprise. “Sire,” he said. “Merlyn had a bad fall.” The girl in question whimpered and the old man’s attention focused on her once more. He had a tub of paste on one hand and was smearing it over the purple swellings erupting across her shoulder blades. With her head turned to the side, Arthur could see dried blood around her exposed ear and nostrils.

“How serious is it?” he asked, a sense of dread sinking, leaden, in his gut.

Gaius was quiet for a heavy moment before he sighed. “I do not know. She hit her head and has only woken once since – incoherent with pain.” He paused in his ministrations, head bowed. “We will have to wait until tomorrow to know whether or not she will improve.”

Arthur stared at his maidservant, sideswiped. “How… how did this happen?”

Lancelot moved away, glancing towards the closed door to Merlyn's room before he said to Arthur, “She tried to do too much at once and found herself overwhelmed.” He looked at the unconscious girl. “I believe that she will be well, Arthur. I have faith.”

The prince looked down, features grim as he said, “Sometimes, faith is not enough. Today, more than any other, has made that evident.”

They were silent for a moment before Gwen trotted down the stairs from Merlyn's room, another dress in hand. She stopped at the sight of Arthur. “Sire,” she said.

“Guinevere,” he said. “I... want you to know that your job is safe. And that your home is yours for life. I guarantee you that. I know that under the circumstances it's not much but, erm, anything you want, anything you need, all you have to do is ask.”

The maid ducked her chin, drawing Merlyn's dress close. “Thank you, sire,” she murmured softly.

Arthur nodded, eyes returning to Merlyn for a long minute before he drew himself up and headed towards the door. “Let me know when she improves,” he said, tone carefully nonchalant.

“Yes, sire,” said Lancelot and he exited.

Arthur walked slowly back to his chambers, mind stuck on the image of Merlyn, weak, delirious, and unsure of recovery. And why? Because of an accident. One, he realised, that hadn’t been specified.

He contemplated returning but, in further inspection, discovered it mattered little. Merlyn was seriously hurt, and he could do not a thing about it. Yet another reminder of his failure to his friends.

Merlyn awoke the next evening much improved. Her temples still throbbed relentlessly but her eyesight had returned and she could interact coherently. Gaius’ relief and exhaustion were paramount, seconded later by anger at her recklessness. He ranted and raved for many minutes.
Contrarily, Lancelot took her hand in his and bowed over it for a long time, not saying a word.

When she felt she could speak without aggravating her migraine, she said quietly to her knight friend, eyes on the ceiling of the chamber, “Gwen knows.”

“I know,” Lancelot replied without looking up and her gaze flicked to him.

Merlyn swallowed tightly. “Is… did Tom live?”

“He lives.”

Her fingers twitched between his but he didn’t react. “How… is he?”

Lancelot finally sat up, lowering their hands but not releasing hers. “The wound did not seal as mine did. Gaius theorised it was because you had stretched yourself too thin and lost control before it could be completed. But its grievousness is much lessened and there has been no infection.”

“Good,” she mumbled, eyes drifting back towards the beams of the roof. “That’s good.”

“You risked… everything, Merlyn,” he finally said and she blinked without replying. She had nothing to say. “Gaius did not expect you to live through the first night.”

She was saddened to hear the stress she caused but she did not regret it. She didn’t die and Tom lived, and was now protected with anonymity. It was dangerous and reckless but Merlyn knew better for next time; she just had to find a stasis spell for living things instead of food and everything would be well.

“Guinevere…” he said when she didn’t speak and her heart skipped a beat at the mention of the maid. “You frightened Guinevere very much. Gaius managed to explain most of it by the time I arrived but… she thought she had lost her father and her friend within an hour.”

“Am I?” she asked, unable to stop herself. The question was eating at her and Gwen’s absence wasn’t making it any better. “Am I still her friend?”

“Merlyn,” Lancelot said and at his pause, the black-haired girl tilted her head to peer at him. He met her gaze with conviction. “Guinevere is cautious and wary but you are her friend, and you have been since the moment you met. The only worries she has is that you will be caught in your crusade to save everyone and lose your life. Neither Guinevere, Gaius or myself would see you ruined by your overly generous heart.”

“I couldn’t allow Tom to die when I could save him – I admit,” she added when Lancelot opened his mouth to protest. “I admit that my tactics were rough and rushed but I had no time to think. I couldn’t save him in front of the guards or we’d both be run through and I couldn’t harm the guards. They only follow the laws; they don’t deserve death for that.”

“And you couldn’t leave Tom to die because that’s not the sort of person you are,” said Gwen and Merlyn's eyes shot up to where the maid hung back by the stairs to her room. Their eyes met and the black-haired girl only saw concern in her gaze. Concern for Merlyn.

“Gwen,” she breathed and the older woman moved closer. Lancelot stood from his chair and melted into the background, but the maid didn’t yet take the seat. Merlyn said to her pleadingly, “I’m sorry for keeping this from you. I... and I’m sorry for revealing it in such a horrible way. It must have been... terrifying, to see a friend act like a demon.” She laughed lightly in an attempt at levity but it choked her on the way out. The word demon struck too close to home. “I wouldn’t hold it against you if you never wanted to see me again.”
“Merlyn, no,” said Gwen, shaking her head and reaching down to take her hand. “You are not a demon or a demon’s spawn.” Merlyn realised Gaius must have shared some of her history for her to be so particular with her wording. Being called demon spawn had stuck in her brain like few insults ever had, and obviously, Gaius had noticed.

Gwen continued; “If anything, you are an angel. You save who you can at great risk to yourself. You live in a city that condemns your kind and, instead of growing bitter and angry, you watch them with sympathy and try to reach them beyond their bigotry. Arthur has grown into a better man with your guidance, Merlyn. You have shown the King that even the small people deserve recognition for their deeds. Morgana has a friend who does not have an agenda and doesn’t serve her.” Gwen squeezed her hand. “You gave me Lancelot and you saved my father. Merlyn… I would be alone without you. Gaius would be alone. Arthur would be alone.”

Merlyn blinked and tears trickled down her temples. She shook her head and laughed at her own emotions but Gwen drew her into a hug, allowing her to hide her face in her friend’s dress. The maid whispered into her hair as she smoothed it, “I’m sorry for the fear you must live with. The secrets you are forced to hide. The loneliness you feel. You are brave and pure and I could not ask for a better person to be my friend. Never lose your goodness, Merlyn, never lose your wonder.”

Merlyn said nothing but breathed deeply Gwen's earthy, lavender scent, letting it calm her mind and quiet her worries. She mumbled into the fabric, “I’m glad Lancelot no longer has secrets from you, Gwen. It was always a pain in the back of my mind that he was forced, by my hand, to keep something from you.”

“I understand,” she soothed, rubbing a hand up and down Merlyn's back. “And I am glad I now know, for you can now come to me and be open, without fear of repercussion. I’ll not turn you away, Merlyn, if you have need of me.”

“Thank you, Gwen,” she whispered, choked. “You are my favourite friend.”

“And you mine,” the maid murmured, kissing the crown of her hair.

As much as it pained all of them, they knew Tom could no longer reside in Camelot. For the moment, he was living out of Merlyn's room, it being too risky to return home – or to show his face at all, to be honest. But he couldn’t remain that way indefinitely.

Gwen fretted over him having no place to go. “I have a brother,” she said, which Merlyn had heard mention of once before. “Elyan, but he does not write home and I do not know where he is.”

“Worry not,” Merlyn assured, the idea having come together as she rested the day away. “Ealdor will take him gladly. The lookout who was killed during the raider’s attack, Matthew, was a blacksmith. I do not think they have replaced him.”

“Oh,” sighed Gwen, hope brightening her face. “Truly? That would be wonderful.”

“My mother will take him in until he is on his feet; I need only contact her.”

“You are a life-saver, Merlyn!” the maid exclaimed, and so it was decided. Now, all they needed to do, was get him from the city.

Arthur visited before dinner, being tended to by a new servant as Morris was now permanently
employed to Lord Harris. He stepped into the physician’s chamber quietly, sliding around the door instead of striding through it with purpose as he usually did. His eyes tracked the room before landing on Merlyn, still reposed on the physician’s cot. She tried to ignore the thrill at the raw relief that settled his features, reminding herself that it was because she was a friend; only a friend.

“Merlyn,” he called, moving closer. “About time you woke. You know, there are easier ways to avoid working.”

She grinned tiredly, pleased to see him in good spirits. “I’m sorry, sire,” she said. “I just couldn’t stand to see your ugly mug every day, I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“How,” he said, folding his hands behind his back. “My new servant, Patrick, is rather good at his job. I’m not sure I want to give that up.”

“Pish,” she scoffed. “You would be bored to tears without me there.”

Arthur looked down, suddenly solemn. “I would,” he admitted then, when the moment grew too heavy, smirked. “You bring a certain… comedy to my days.”

She shot him a look but he only grinned back before eyeing the empty chambers.

“Where is Gaius?” he asked, moving to the table to flip through a tome.

“Updating the King,” she said and gestured to the book he was looking at. “There is a stone within, a mage stone, that he believes Tauren has his hands on to further his goals. On his own, he does not possess the power of alchemy, but with an alchemist’s jewel…”

“He would have the power to change lead into gold,” Arthur finished, turning back to the page with the mage stone illustrated on its surface.

“If we manage to wrest the stone from him then he poses less of a threat to the guards and knights.”

“This is good work,” the prince murmured, fingers lifting to his lips as he thought. “Now we need only find him.”

They were quiet for a moment before Merlyn asked a question that had been plaguing her thoughts. “Where is Morgana?” she asked. Gwen and Lancelot had only said she was preoccupied, but not with what and not for how long. The lack of information had itched at her consciousness like a mosquito bite.

“She… spent last night in the dungeon,” said Arthur, still examining the book as he said it, though his eyes were not moving. “I managed to have her released midmorning. She is resting in her chambers.”

Merlyn felt like the information had garbled in her ear, for she surely didn’t hear correctly. “Morgana… in the dungeons?” she repeated slowly. “But…”

“She challenged my father,” he said, his tone indicating his reluctance to talk about it. “And she paid the price.”

She stared, utterly gobsmacked. “But she’s noble,” she said. “And the King’s ward.”

“Which is what saved her from death,” Arthur admitted, turning to her. “She called my father a tyrant and spoke treason. She had to be punished or my father would have an uprising on his
hands.”

“An uprising?” she said, incredulous. “From the words of an angry ward? She would not have meant them. You know how her temper is, Arthur. She does not see past her rage. Why was she angry?”

Arthur stared at her, a little bemused. “Guinevere’s father was silenced without a trial. Morgana… believed the King was unjust.”

Merlyn looked away, her own mind screaming that it had been unjust. But she did not speak; Morgana was far braver than she in that respect, for Arthur’s warning on holding her tongue still had her mute. But Morgana would be shaken to be treated so callously.

“There is a calming tea blend,” she said as she forced herself upright, flicking off her blanket so she could turn without tangling her legs. “Over by –”

“Whoa, whoa! What are you doing?” Arthur rushed to her side and forced her back onto the pillow. She went with less struggle than she’d have liked, temples throbbing with pressure. The prince’s hand stayed on her shoulder, alarmed face above her own.

“Are you an idiot?” he demanded. “You were on your deathbed not twelve hours ago. You cannot simply go gallivanting around after something like that.”

“Sorry,” she said, a little breathlessly. “I did not think I would be so weak.”

His jaw clenched and he removed himself by a few paces, not facing her any longer. “Illnesses take time to heal. Injuries more so. Do not expect to be out of that bed by tomorrow or I will lock you within the servant’s quarters of my chambers to rest.”

Merlyn reminded herself that he was only worried and not to snap at his rudeness. “I only meant to direct you towards the satchel of tea for Morgana,” she soothed. “I’m sure she would like a visit from a friendly face and a nice hot drink.”

The prince scoffed. “That ‘friendly face’ will have to be someone other than me. Morgana desires to see no Pendragons until she has calmed.”

“Then send Gwen,” Merlyn suggested. “I’m sure both of them would benefit from seeing each other. I believe she is at home, collecting some things while Lancelot trains.”

Arthur bowed his head with a resigned smile and asked, “Where is the tea?”

Merlyn was disturbed that night by a familiar sparking flame of the alchemy stone but the drugs in her system and the heaviness of her own exhaustion dragged her beyond her curiosity and back into deep slumber. She did not remember in the morning.

Merlyn was walking a slow lap around the physician’s chambers to stretch her stiff body when Morgana poked her head into the room. The midmorning sky was dotted with clouds but the day was bright.

“Merlyn,” the older woman said in happiness, venturing inside as the black-haired girl turned with a bright grin, using the table as an anchor.
“Morgana” she exclaimed and drew her into a hug when she was within arm’s reach. “How are you?”

“Much better than you, it seems,” she said, pulling back to look her over, concern marring her brow. “I heard that you had a terrible fall and hit your head.”

“I did,” Merlyn replied, ducking her head. “My own stupidity. But I’m much improved; another day or two and I should be back to normal.”

“Good. I’m pleased.”

Merlyn looked up and met Morgana’s sea-green eyes. Beneath the calm and pleasant veneer, she could see turmoil and bitterness simmering like a thickening soup. A soup rife with acidity and resentment. Merlyn grabbed the noblewoman’s hand comfortingly, wanting to rid her of such poisonous emotions.

“I heard of the trial you suffered two nights ago. I’m sorry you had to experience that.”

Morgana’s features soured and she said tartly, “Uther cannot handle the truth when he hears it. What I suffered was only a measure of what the people endure every day under his rule.”

Merlyn took a moment to absorb the bold words, an alarm tolling somewhere in the back of her mind. The highborn had always butted heads with the King – with their tempers so similar but their ideals so different, it was inevitable. And Morgana had often expressed her distaste of certain laws... but right now, her words rang with umbrage and loathing.

“The King makes mistakes,” she said slowly, cautious on setting Morgana’s temper on herself. “But he tries his best for the good of the whole.”

Morgana scoffed. “He only cares for himself! He cares not for the people, or he would not execute them without a trial.”

Merlyn really didn’t have the strength to tiptoe through a conversation of this magnitude but Morgana needed to vent and the black-haired girl was worried at where the highborn’s head was at. She lowered herself slowly onto the bench seat and rested her elbows on the table, settling in for an intense conversation. While she sat, Morgana stepped away, her ire breeding restlessness.

Merlyn said gently, “I do not know the King very well, for he frightens me too much to linger, but every action I have seen him take has always been in the interests of his kingdom. He is stubborn and... a little biased, but I have never seen him decide an action because it benefitted himself and not his people.” She looked down, rubbing her left hand over the back of her right while she mulled the words in her head. “I found – through Arthur's interactions with his father – that the King believes acts of mercy and compassion will be seen as weakness and therefore, incite rebellion. Knowing that, realising that, makes his actions much more understandable.” She glanced up and stared at Morgana, who was watching her with a scowl but did seem to be listening. “He is a King and every decision he makes could ripple out with devastating results. In his mind, mercy would create rebellion and so he must stay rigid in his laws. Showing compassion could create a sense of no confidence and his authority would fail, so he must stay aloof in his dealings. With all this, Morgana, with all this information on why he believes he must do what he does, do you not feel pity for him instead? He cannot show affection, nor favouritism, nor leniency, nor love. Is that not a sad way to live? I could not do it. I would wither away.”

Morgana said nothing for a long time, exotic eyes aimed towards the middle distance as her fingers fiddled with a mixing stick found on Gaius’ work bench, much in the same way Arthur liked to
pick up odd objects when he was thinking. Her expression remained furrowed, though the anger had banked as she tried to assimilate Merlyn's words.

Eventually, her gaze refocused on Merlyn and she set her jaw. “Despite your reasoning… despite your consideration of his motives, that does not excuse him of all the terrible things he has done,” she said. “He has murdered and massacred and belittled those around him. He is arrogant and believes only his judgement is sound, that only he should have the power to help or harm our people. It is not right, such autonomy. It breeds corruption and oppression, and such tyranny should be stopped.”

Something in the way she said that caught Merlyn's attention. She eyed the highborn uncertainly, a trickle of dread growing like a puddle in her mind.

“Morgana –” she began but was interrupted by the door opening and Gaius returning.

“My Lady,” he said in surprise, dipping his head before depositing his carry basket onto the table. “Are you in need of medicine?”

“I am fine, Gaius,” Morgana replied, kind smile back in place and the well of anger sealed once more. “Merlyn, here, was kind enough to have Gwen visit with a draught last night.”

The old man met Merlyn's eyes with a brow raised high. “Indeed,” he said. “Very judicious of you.”

She smiled at him. “Well, it has to happen sometimes,” she jested. “Or there’d be absolutely no use for me.”

He smiled and shook his head. “There’ll be no use of you if you never allow yourself to recover,” he returned, staring pointedly at the medical bed on the other side of the room.

She sighed but obediently stood. Morgana retreated a little and said, “I must be going. I hope you recover quickly, Merlyn. Gaius.” She nodded at them and swept from the room, train of the dress flowing lightly in the wind.

Merlyn watched her go, worry nibbling at her belly like a hungry rodent before Gaius brought her back to the present.

“Come, on,” he said, hooking one of his arms around her elbow in support. “You’ve had enough excitement today. Time to return to purgatory.”

“Ha, ha,” she said dryly but dutifully moved her legs. She would have really liked to heal herself with magic, this whole bedridden thing eating at her patience, but, unfortunately, her magic had been singularly uncooperative since she had woken. It was acting highly temperamental, twisting out of her control like it was smoke she was trying to catch with bare hands. Or, as if it was a dog she had beaten and it now cowered in the corner instead of coming to call. She didn’t know how to fix it and lacked the energy to try, so she was forced to idle in the normal way. The mundane way.

And, boy, was it boring.

Merlyn slept until the evening, surprising herself with how tired she still was. Gaius woke her with the rich scent of vegetable stew and guided her to the table while she groggily rubbed her eyes. She sat where he placed her and picked up her spoon, scooping some of the food into her mouth.

"Mmm," she hummed as flavour burst across her tongue. She hadn't realised how hungry she was
until now but Gaius' expression said that he had suspected.

"If you want to heal swiftly, you will need to keep your strength up," he said wisely but she didn't reply, her mouth full of stew.

With a meal warming her belly, Merlyn awoke more and, with her growing awareness, she pondered.

"Do you think Uther is a good king?" She asked of her mentor, watching his eyebrow raise at the non-sequitur.

“Sorry?” he asked.

"Uther,” she said, feeling furtive at simply saying the name. “Do you think he's good for the kingdom?”

The old man thought about it a moment then nodded. “Yes. Yes, I do. In the light of recent events, you may find that hard to believe.”

She snorted, looking back at her bowl and stirring the mess around. "I understand why he feels the need to act as he does. He must be strong so the kingdom will be strong. But… everyone hates him. He’s terrifying.”

Morgana's resentment lingered in her thoughts.

“It is not Uther's job to be liked,” said Gaius. "It is Uther's job to protect the kingdom. Most of his methods are right. Sometimes he may go too far.”

“If the word magic is even uttered, all logic and composure goes out the window. Those tavern workers; that inn keeper; that barmaid… Arthur thought they would be flogged or banished, but they were executed, with only a farce of a trial in their defense.”

Gaius looked down. “Despite Uther's failings, he has brought peace and prosperity to this kingdom.”

“But at the cost of women and children, fathers and sons? When will it end?”

“It will end when Arthur is King.”

She chewed on her lip. Morgana's anger at the King was darkening her happiness, her goodness. Making her feel as if she had to act to save the people.

*It is not right, such autonomy. It breeds corruption and oppression, and such tyranny should be stopped.*

“What if… the King was to be removed? And Arthur was to have a chance to be ruler? Would that not be better – for everyone?”

Gaius stared at her, frown deep in his craggy face. “Arthur’s not ready,” he said. “The responsibility would be too great. Brave though he may be, he lacks experience. He lacks judgement.” He watched her closely and said slowly, “Is… there anything you want to tell me?”

Merlyn shook her head, unsure of herself. “Only words,” she said, not wanting to incriminate Morgana – not sure if there was reason to incriminate her. “Only rumours.”

“And what do these rumours say?” he pressed.
She bit her lip and met his gaze from under her lashes. “That Uther’s tyranny needs to be stopped.”

Gaius’ craggy features flashed with alarm and he opened his mouth to question her further but she wasn't yet ready to admit to anything. It might only be words; Morgana needing to vent to a friendly ear.

"As I said,” she cut him off. “It is only words.”

“Words have power, Merlyn,” he said gravely. “You, more than any other, should know that.”

“I also know that judging someone without fair cause can harm more than it can help. Just trust me, Gaius. I need you to trust me on this.”

Gaius stared at her sadly and slowly shook his head. “You have proven in these past few days that your judgement is not trustworthy, Merlyn. You acted rashly and without thought, almost killing and ousting yourself as a witch. You are lucky that both Gwen and Tom are kind and willing to listen, and that your magic is more resilient than your body.”

“Gaius…” she breathed, aghast, but the old man was firm.

“I will not press because I know once your mind is made up, you will not budge, but beware: if Uther dies through magical means, Arthur will never open his heart to its return.”

The next day, Merlyn was quiet until Gaius left for his rounds, feeling like she should apologise for her actions despite knowing she would do nothing different if given the chance again. Tom was alive, Gwen accepted her as she was, she survived the magical backlash…

With that in mind, Merlyn decided it was time to face Tom’s judgement now that both he and she were improved. She wouldn’t be utterly gutted if he turned her away as she would if Gwen or Arthur did the same, but it would still scald like heartburn. Therefore, she was understandably cautious in opening her bedroom door for the first time since Tom had taken residence within.

He was awake and upright on the bed, his rich, dark skin still grey with blood loss but he was alert and coherent – and he put her fears to rest quickly.

“How can I condemn you when it is you who saved my life?” he asked rhetorically and she wished everyone could be as reasonable as Tom. “I mean – I feared, at first. I’ve lived in Camelot my whole life. But I know you, Merlyn, and I trust my daughter’s perception of people. You are not evil, and I am not sure you ever will be.”

Well, she thought. That certainly told me.

Not an hour after her chat with Tom, Merlyn was sitting on the edge of her bed, stitching a tear in one of her underdresses when Arthur poked his head into the chamber. He was wearing his basic knight's apparel, clearly having plans for a training session soon. Merlyn thought it sweet that he would check in with her first, though.

It was he who told her of Morgana’s plans to visit her father’s grave with the King. With only two guards as escort.

It was strange enough that the noblewoman would want to be near the King with her emotions as
they were, but with minimum security and during such a worrying time...

Gaius words of caution rang through her head. "If Uther dies through magical means, Arthur will never open his heart to its return."

"Only two guards?" she repeated, frowning at him as she readjusted his vambrace over his forearm, Patrick having twisted the strap when he buckled it. "But what about Tauren?"

Their knees knocked as the prince shifted on his feet, her seated position gifting the scene a sense of intimacy despite the innocence of their actions. "My father trusts that the path is secure."

"But, Arthur, he has possession of the mage stone. Who knows how silently he can move around. Would it not be prudent to err on the side of caution, despite your father’s confidence? If nothing happens then the King can lecture you for your fussing, but if something does…"

He watched her closely for a moment and she tried to keep her face sincere without seeming too knowing. Finally, he sighed and removed his arm from her hands. "Very well. But if the King wishes to lecture me on my fussing, I will tell him that it was you who urged it."

“I will take his censure gladly if it assures me that he will be safe,” she replied, not intimidated in the slightest. Better to be called a worrywart than the King be dead, Morgana become a murderer and Arthur thrust into leadership before his time. Her fingers fiddled with the Camelot medallion hanging around her neck, worry of all the possibilities making her skin itch with idleness.

There was an attempt on the King’s life but the guards managed to dispatch Tauren’s followers and Morgana killed Tauren himself. Merlyn was unsure what to think. On one hand, Morgana was the King’s ward; she was fiery and compassionate. On the other, the cold fury and utter belief that the King was a plague had shuttered her ability to see clearly. Merlyn had seen firsthand how the desire for revenge could blind people.

But the King was alive, and the danger of Tauren had been extinguished with only one casualty on their side. It might have all been a terrible coincidence.

It didn’t stop her from watching Morgana with new eyes, seeing the almost imperceptible guilt as the highborn observed the downed guard be carried, with honour, into the castle.

There was a celebration that night for Morgana’s heroics, and the defeat of Tauren and his renegades. Gwen bowed out to remain with her father, who was recovering quickly. Soon, he would be forced to leave the city, and his daughter, behind.

Merlyn wished she could bow out. The dark possibility of Morgana's betrayal had destroyed any urge to celebrate. She stood in the shadows behind Arthur's seat, holding a jug of wine, and wished Arthur would turn in early. A wish that did not seem likely as he was deep in conversation with Morgana, who, uncharacteristically, was remaining seated at the high table instead of mingling with the people. Perhaps, she too, was not in a partying mood.

Good, a small, mean part of her whispered and she quickly smothered it, not liking such bile lingering in her head.

A messenger slid through a side chamber into the hall and something about his solemn expression caught Merlyn's attention. She shifted along the back wall as the boy neared, positioning herself
behind the King so when the runner ducked down to speak to the King, she could duck her head to cover her eyes and use a little bit of magic to listen in.

“My Lord, there’s been sightings of a beast heading south from the northern border of Mercia. They paint the beast as having the head of a serpent but a body with four legs.”

The King waved the boy away with an, “I’ll meet with the envoy in a moment. Send him to the Council Chamber.”

“Merlyn!” she jumped and looked to Arthur who was waving his cup in the air expectantly. With a sigh, she moved to top him up. Seemed action never ceased in Camelot. She just hoped Nimueh hadn’t set this beast up in the same way she’d done the poor griffin.

In the north, in the depths of an abandoned cave, the Questing Beast sent out a call.

In the Ceremony Hall, Morgana felt its hunger and an image of the beast burst behind her eyelids. She shuddered in fear, knowing instinctively, that whatever the creature was, it sought her.

Chapter End Notes

A long one for you guys to feast on. We’re almost at the end everyone! Well… for Season One anyway. And damn. I’m a little nervous because I haven’t had a chance to finish Season Two yet, though I’m seriously close. I’ve started a new job recently and it is gruelling. I work an eight day roster and sleep when I’m not working. It’s very physically demanding – which is why I’m sleeping so much – but I Love It! I get to play with horses all day. ^-^ But it leaves little time for writing, which is eating away at me.

This was supposed to be out on Monday since I had the day off for surgery on my mouth but I had to shop for work gear as well as recover and ran out of time to finish it all. Some parts feel a little stilted but I hope you got the gist when Merlyn suffered magical backlash and such. I have a half day tomorrow so I’ll be buckling down to write more. I know what I want and where I’m going and how I’m getting there but it’s so frustrating not to have time to get it all down! Forgive me guys.

And thanks so much for all the lovely reviews! They give me such a boost to push through these restraints.

Hope you enjoyed this addition.
Le Morte d'Arthur

Chapter Summary

This is the end of the beginning; the beginning of the middle and the start of something new.

Chapter Notes

It’s my BIRTHDAY TODAY!!!! I decided that would be as good a time as any to finish this story off, so I really hope you enjoy!
A couple of people mentioned errors of adrenalin being discovered in this time and Gwen calling her father Tom. I definitely didn’t mean for Gwen to call her father by his name, so I will fix it sometime when I have time. However, I had Merlyn know of adrenalin even if such information wasn’t discovered until the 1900s by Japanese scientists because a fair bit of the information used in Canon by Gaius was actually inaccurate for the times as well. I have this story set somewhere around the 1000s as the people who study Arthur as a figure of history say that if he existed, he would have lived perhaps as early as 800AD and that he would be more Romanesque warrior than noble knight. Since the Arthurian legends paint him as a stately knight instead, that puts the estimated century at about 1500s so I decided to go smack in the middle to make things easier on myself. I mean, the Dark Ages has hardly any knowledge about them so – who knows – perhaps they were actually super advanced…
Canon seems to mix the two; some of the clothing making it seem earlier and some of the ideas making it seem later. Since the entertainment value is much higher than the historical-accuracy value, I decided to say hell with ignorance and throw it in there. Since this medieval world contains magic, let’s just say that a High Priestess discovered the chemicals of the body to increase the potency of her nefarious rituals back in the day and the knowledge was spread into the wider world as things generally do over time. Happy? I am.
Also, regarding the Questing Beast; Canon kind of mushed it down into a simple beast with a bad bite, whereas there are whole tales about it in the Arthurian Legends, so I went out on a limb and pulled from those resources to fill out the backstory a little more – giving the Questing Beast a bit more significance and an understanding on why it appeared now and why. It fits so well with Canon that I don’t know why they didn’t do this themselves but… *shrugs* I had fun.
Thanks so much for the constructive criticism and bolstering comments; hope you like the last instalment for this book.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwen, Lancelot and Tom (in disguise) left Camelot a week after the blacksmith ‘died’. To conserve Gwen’s virtue – since travelling alone with an eligible bachelor was considered disreputable – Lancelot proposed the day before they departed. The ring was a lovely gold band with a multifaceted sapphire placed proudly within its setting. And despite the ill circumstances of the situation, it was clear that he'd had the ring for a while as it fit Gwen's finger perfectly and the
detail in the metal was astonishing.

Gwen was speechless at the sight of it, clearly stunned by this advancement in her life, though it didn’t stop her saying yes and launching herself into her fiancé’s arms. Tom and Merlyn congratulated them before retreating to give the couple some privacy. Lancelot had Tom's old house bedecked in flowers and candles with what smelled like a scrumptious meal for the occasion; they didn’t want to get in the way.

The blacksmith and maidservant wandered back up the path to the physician's chambers slowly, Tom wearing a threadbare cloak over his head to obscure his features.

"Oh!” sighed Merlyn, speaking quietly as not to draw attention from the few residents out and about that dusk. "This is so exciting! You must be so happy for Gwen.”

Tom was watching his feet as he walked, pensive. “Lancelot is a fine man with strong moral standards. He treats my girl as a princess, as he should. They will make a fine couple.”

Merlyn heard the sadness in his tone and took his hand, sympathising with his sorrow. “I’m sorry you cannot be here to watch her start her new life. But be glad, for Lancelot will care for her when you cannot, and Ealdor is not so very far; a day and a bit on horseback. You will see each other often.”

Tom patted her hand. “You are a good girl, Merlyn,” he said. “I am glad my daughter befriended you.”

With Tom in the know, his words were more heartfelt than ever before. She swelled with affection and beamed at him tremulously. “I am glad also,” she replied. “Gwen has been a truer friend than I knew existed. I couldn’t ask for more.”

“Look after her for me, will you?” he asked, his worry shining through.

Merlyn nodded solemnly. “Of course; as long as you also look after yourself.”

He bowed his head and they made the rest of the trip quietly, furtively dodging patrols until they were in the safety of Gaius’ chambers once more.

The next morning, they departed amongst the wagons of merchants and travellers leaving the city, unimpeded by suspicion. Merlyn watched them go, trusting in their safety with Lancelot as their guardian.

“Merlyn,” Morgana called and the black-haired girl closed her eyes with a wince before spinning in the corridor and smiling at the highborn.

“Morgana,” she said, trying to appear normal. “How are you?”

The beautiful woman walked closer, perfectly curled hair falling over her shoulders in long ribbons. She wore a sheer purple layer over her tailored teal dress, a golden belt at her waist and soft slippers on her feet. She looked resplendent to Merlyn's shabby work dress and field boots but she had long grown used to the inferiority, Morgana's kindness overshadowing their comparative statuses.

“You have been avoiding me,” the older woman said, straight to the point in a way members of the court rarely were. Merlyn couldn’t lie in the face of that baldness.
She ducked her head, guilty. “I have,” she admitted.

“Why?” Morgana asked and Merlyn felt wretched at the hurt in her voice. “Is it because of my previous statements? About Uther?”

“That,” said Merlyn, raising her face to meet the other woman’s eyes, almost the exact shade of green as her dress. “And also because of what happened after.”

“… What happened after…?” she said in confusion and Merlyn grimaced at having to say it. She peered up and down the corridor but they were alone, thankfully.

She leant forward and said furtively, “Your father’s tomb. I know what happened there. What really happened.”

Realisation lit Morgana’s regal features, followed closely by horror. She stared at Merlyn, speechless, and the black-haired girl checked their surroundings again, feeling exposed.

“Speak in your chambers?” she asked, not wanting to incriminate her friend despite her own feelings on the matter.

Morgana was still in shock but she stepped to the side, gesturing back down the hallway, “Of course,” she said politely, falling into step as Merlyn moved passed.

The silence was heavy between them and Merlyn was eternally thankful that Morgana’s wing was nearby. It was near unbearable for a minute let alone more.

As soon as the door was shut between them and the rest of the world, Morgana spun on Merlyn. “How did you find out? Does anyone else know?”

To be honest, Merlyn thought she should have been a bit more repentant before asking for details, but she figured alarm had her priorities skewed.

“No one else knows,” Merlyn said, lying a little since she believed Gaius also suspected. “And I wasn’t one hundred percent convinced until I saw your reaction just then. Morgana…”

“I know,” the woman said, spinning away and striding to the window, peering out at the world. “I know! I-I was caught up in my anger. I only saw the terrible things he had done… Gwen’s father is dead because of him!”

Merlyn wished she could reassure her, tell her that it wasn’t true, but Morgana was the King’s ward and the only way to reveal Tom’s health was to reveal her magic. And Merlyn wasn’t sure she trusted the highborn enough right then to disclose such a vulnerable part of herself. At least, not before speaking with the dragon.

Morgana took the younger girl’s silence as condemnation and her head dropped. “I allowed my anger to get the best of me, to blind me, just as Uther’s hatred blinds him.” She shook her head, hair shimmering down her back. “I do not know what came over me.”

“You almost orphaned Arthur. You almost committed treason.”

Morgana turned back around, features twisted with contrition. “Can you ever forgive me, Merlyn.”

“Morgana…” she moved closer to the older woman, trying to have her see the severity of her actions. “It is not me who you should seek for forgiveness.”
The woman nodded. “Arthur,” she agreed but Merlyn shook her head.

“You would have broken Arthur’s heart with your actions. But you would have killed the King. The very man who has cared for you all these years, and you were willing, for two days, to have him murdered.”

“I saw the error of my decisions,” defended Morgana, a little desperately. “I stopped it before the consequences could not be undone.”

“You did,” agreed Merlyn, allowing the relief of that choice seep into her voice. “And you are stronger for realising the error of your decisions. Morgana,” she took the woman’s hands then pulled herself in for a hug, needing the reassurance. Morgana’s arms folded around her shoulders, holding her close. “I would not see you fall to darkness for another man’s mistakes. The King has made many of them but we must work on forgiving him and understanding him. For if we do as he has done, how are we any better – and how would we have the right to judge his actions?”

“You are right?” murmured Morgana. “How are you so wise, Merlyn?”

The black-haired girl snorted, pulling away but keeping her hands on Morgana’s arms. “I do not think anyone has called me wise before,” she quipped and Morgana’s heavy features cracked into a small smile, as she’d intended.

“Then I will be the first,” she said firmly. “Though I doubt I will be the last.”

Whispers of a strange beast within Letholdus Woods had Arthur organising a hunt that very same day. It appeared to be the same beast that the runner had mentioned to the King: the serpent-headed, four-legged beast. Lancelot was still away with Gwen but there were plenty of others to take his place, though none as close to the prince.

Merlyn was once again left behind.

“But what if the creature is mythical?” she demanded, irritated by his stupid rules.

“Even more reason for you to remain behind,” he said dismissively, striding around his room in search of his other glove. The glove Merlyn had clenched in her fist.

“I’m not helpless,” she snapped and Arthur groaned, swiping a hand over his face.

“You are not a knight, Merlyn,” he stated, as if the repetitiveness of these arguments drained him. “There is nothing you cannot do that they cannot do better.”

“Lies,” she retorted stubbornly, crossing her arms. “I can ride a horse better than any of them.”

He shot her a look then caught sight of the brown leather in her grip. “Merlyn,” he dragged out, walking over and snatching the glove from her hand. “You are not coming – and that’s final!” he cut in when she opened her mouth. His finger was in her face and it took all her willpower not to bite it.

She glowered, instead, while he strode out the door. If it was a magical creature like the griffin, and it was acting of its own free will, then she had to trust that Arthur’s burnished sword would protect him. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t follow. It just meant she could be a little less anxious. The blade had yet to let her down.
Merlyn had situated herself within a hollowed trunk of an ancient yew. The width of the base was large, easily accepting her into its belly, and gave away just how old the slow growing tree was. She connected to its deep, deep roots and spread her consciousness along the earth to which it was bound.

She sensed the minute flickers of life from the ants beneath the surface, the worms, the bugs, the creepy-crawlies. She touched upon the small mammals, the amphibians, the reptiles, the birds and spread her awareness further. Brushed against red deer, nibbling alertly as the stag scented for danger. Felt the faint presence of a small pack of grey wolves resting in their den. And one lone bear, foraging for food to the west.

The initial distraction of so much life only lasted a short while as one glaring beacon of nothingness attracted her attention. There was still life in the ground, though it was deep into the earth, but all other creatures had fled the area like it was filled with toxic gas. It was a blackspot in her otherwise luminescent vision, and Arthur and his men were venturing right into it.

“Because of course they would,” she muttered, accidentally breaking her own concentration with the sound of her voice. With a sigh, she pushed herself to her feet, ducking from the shelter of the trunk before straightening up. She held up the hem of her red cloak so she didn’t trip and cursed the depth of her hood for hanging over her eyes, even if it was perfect for the shadowing spell to hide her face.

She adjusted her clothes then moved quickly in the direction of Arthur and his knights, unwilling to leave them to face whatever was so terrifying, it frightened every (sensible) living creature away.

There was a startled shout from up ahead and Merlyn broke into a run, using the Sidhe staff to swat branches out of her way. She saw the red capes of Camelot’s knights through the vegetation up ahead but didn’t slow until she could see the prince was safe.

“Who’s missing?” Arthur demanded from the cluster of men and she sighed in relief at hearing his voice.

“Sir Bedivere!” one of the knights called and there was a loud scream from where they’d fled, foliage barring their sight. Merlyn skidded to a halt just behind them and thrust out her Sidhe staff.

“Byre!” she chanted and a strong gust of wind blasted through the plants and hit... a gigantic snake-beast thing in the face. Beneath its four feet cowered Bedivere, right arm up in an attempt to save himself, though he lacked his blade.

“Cume Bedivere!” she twisted the staff and pulled it back in, which pulled the vulnerable knight towards them like he was tethered on a string. He landed in a heap at Arthur’s feet but the prince was preoccupied with spinning towards her, his sword raised.

Thankfully, the beast fled instead of attacking, its heavy tread vibrating through the ground as it retreated.

“Sorcery!” Arthur cried, like it hadn’t been obvious to the entire company what she had done. They, also, had their weapons bared, though they appeared largely unsure of themselves, rightfully too, since she had just saved one of their friends. The man in question staggered to his feet, clutching his head and hunched awkwardly to take the weight off one leg.

She sighed, loudly. “Witchcraft,” she corrected in her altered voice, leaning against her staff since
the soldiers were far enough away that she could react before they touched her. “Will you ever get it right?”

“It is all the same!” he snarled. “Now drop your staff and surrender yourself to the Knights of Camelot.”

“Or,” she held up a gloved finger. “You be thankful I saved your friend and leave before the beast decides it doesn’t care that I have magic.” She gestured towards the place where the snake beast had been, causing heads to turn, though it had long disappeared in the undergrowth.

“You have broken our laws,” he said less heatedly, and – did he sound a touch reluctant? “I have no choice but to have you face the King’s judgement.”

“You are the prince, I suppose,” she conceded, eyeing his men as they fanned out, readying themselves to disarm her. “But I –”

“What is your name, sorcerer?” he asked, sounding curious. Merlyn paused, both at being cut off and the lack of hostility in his tone. Perhaps her efforts to open his mind were not in vain?

But a name?

“What?” she asked stupidly.

“Your name,” he said slowly, like she was a halfwit – and excuse her, but she had just saved his friend. What made him think he could talk to her like that?

“My name,” she retorted crossly then fumbled because – she needed a name. “My name is… it’s…”

Damn. Why didn’t she think of a name before? They were all looking at her oddly now.

“Emrys,” she blurted out. “I am Emrys.”

“Emrys,” Arthur repeated and it shouldn’t have sounded as fateful as it did.

She lost sight of one of the knights trying to flank her so shook off the moment and bowed to the prince theatrically, deciding she’d lingered long enough. Hopefully, Arthur had enough sense to retreat to Camelot now he’d seen the unnatural nature of the beast.

“I bid you good day, Arthur Pendragon.”

“Wait –”

She thumped the staff into the ground and used it as an anchor to slow time. Her magic had been temperamental since she’d abused it to save Tom and she was afraid it wouldn’t work correctly to allow her to escape – thus the accompaniment of the Sidhe weapon. Air, sounds and movement all slowed dramatically but the instant pull on her magic warned her that it was a tenuous hold. Her control was still slipping like water through a grate, gushing out of her reach with indomitable force, so she wasted no time sprinting away from Arthur.

She leapt over sticks and saplings, leaves crunching underfoot, before she hissed as a branch whipped across her face, tearing her hood from her head. It should have been impossible with the obscuring spell active but it seemed the enchantment hadn’t held as well as it should have.

Time restarted with a snap that had her falling forward onto her knees and she was thankful she had
at least a few yards and much brushwood between her and the men she’d left behind. Hopefully
the foliage in that area obscured their sightlines enough for her to remain unspotted, though her
glaring red cloak screamed of not belonging to the green and brown world.

She scrabbled upright and continued to flee, annoyed at the sheer unreliability of her magic. She
hoped it was only temporary, like rehabilitating a damaged muscle after it had healed, and not
permanent like the crippling effects some wounds presented. Some guardian she’d turn out to be if
it was the latter.

She made it back to the city before the prince and his entourage, sweaty, exhausted and thirsty. She
had shed her red cloak long ago and used it as a cover for the herb basket she’d stashed by a
scarred birch by the main north road. She strode past the gate guards with no fanfare except a
raised eyebrow at her dishevelled appearance.

“Tangled in a vine,” she explained as she walked and several of them snorted, believing it since she
was so clumsy.

Arthur returned fifteen minutes later, Bedivere supported by two men, though he was conscious.
He was treated by Gaius for a sprained ankle and left to soak it in chilled water, though he
mentioned, when prompted, of the stranger in a red cloak, saving his life and standing unafraid of
the prince. Merlyn avoided Gaius’ glare and left to tend to the prince, knowing she was going to be
admonished when she returned. Her guardian had been particularly harsh with her since she had
recovered, snapping at every mistake and rechecking what Merlyn had done, if only to niggle at
her method. It was slowly grating on her nerves.

Arthur was still with the King when she asked a guard, so she used a side entrance to the Council
Chamber and waited for them to be done. Instead, the King called for Gaius, wanting his expertise
on the beast.

While they waited, Merlyn approached to pour Arthur a cup of water and remove his gloves,
knowing he liked the freedom after wearing them so long. He gulped down his drink and she
refilled it, topping up the King’s as she did, for courtesy’s sake.

Gaius was announced and she stepped back into the shadows to listen. Arthur described the
creature and her mentor’s face pursed into a solemn expression; whatever the beast was, it was bad
news.

“The creature you describe has all the characteristics of the Questing Beast,” he said and Arthur
scoffed.

“Surely that is a myth.”

Gaius shook his head gravely. “According to the old books, the appearance of the Questing Beast
is supposed to foreshadow a time of great upheaval.”

“Gaius,” said the King. “It’s an old wives’ tale.”

Arthur straightened up from inspecting the maps. He said to the King, “Sir Pellinore of Listenoise
may know more. Was it not his family who has been hunting the old tales for generations?”

The King waved for one of the guards’ attention and said, “Summon Sir Pellinore of Listenoise
immediately. Tell him it is regarding his family’s hunt.”
While they waited, Arthur and the King perused the maps, muttering to each other on strategies. Gaius edged over to Merlyn and asked lowly, “Bedivere said that the beast fled. What exactly occurred?”

“Nothing, really,” she admitted. “I only blasted it in the face with air and pulled Bedivere away. As soon as it recovered from the wind, it ran off.”

“Hmm,” Gaius mused, rubbing his chin as his eyes moved to the window. The day was growing darker with impending rain but the grey clouds sat high and would, more than likely, pass quickly.

The doors echoed as they opened and all eyes turned to see a brown-haired man with a smooth moustache over his top lip enter nervously. He bowed before he approached and said, “Sire, I heard you wished to speak to me of my family’s history.”

“Indeed,” the King said, eyeing the man intently. “We have encountered a beast in the Letholdus woods, which my physician claims to be the Questing Beast. My son told me that your family hunted this legend for generations.” It wasn’t a question but the query was implied.

“Yes, My Lord,” Sir Pellinore said, swallowing apprehensively. “Only… it is not a legend. I was too young to join the hunt before the Purge, as it is a right of passage between boyhood and manhood in my family, but I learned of its habits and its existence. It is strange that it appeared now, as it has not been seen for twenty years.”

The King didn’t look pleased but he gestured Pellinore to continue, “Tell us of your knowledge. Why has the Questing Beast exposed itself now?”

“The – the Questing Beast is excited by blood betrayal – instances like incest, murder, duplicity – and usually appears before a Great Change. The Pellinore maps were… gifted with the ability to track the creature but the maps were destroyed in the Purge and we abandoned our hunt. My Lord, the Questing Beast can only be killed by magic.”

“Why did you hunt this beast if you hadn’t the means to slay it?” Uther asked with a suspicious eye.

Sir Pellinore shifted nervously with the implication but answered, “The hunt of the Questing Beast was not… for the kill, My Lord. There was a prophecy long ago stating that one by the name of Pellinore would slay the beast. My grandfather’s father believed that he was that one and sought the creature but it always remained one step ahead. The tales I was told as a boy said that it was no ordinary beast in its mind. It seemed to thrill in the chase, luring and teasing but never falling. When my grandfather’s father stopped to raise his family after learning the prophecy to be false, it was said that the beast grew lonely. It seemed to lose its intelligence and turned rabid on nearby towns. So my grandfather took up his father’s mantel at sixteen and the chase kept on. To hunt the beast was to keep it from hunting others. I do not understand why it hid away for these past twenty years or why it has reappeared now. All I can say is that with the beast having been alone for so long, its sensibilities will be all but gone. It will be violent and bloodthirsty and a single bite will mean certain death. It is a dangerous creature, Your Majesty.”

“Whatever it is,” said Arthur, hand resting on the table as he stared at Knight Pellinore. “It’s spreading panic. It’ll not be long before people will worry it’s headed for the city.”

“Then we must kill it,” stated the King before adding to Knight Pellinore. “You say no mortal weapon can destroy it?”

“Nay, My Lord,” he corrected, looking anxious. “A mortal weapon can destroy it if it is touched
with magic.”

The King’s face was sour; Gaius met Merlyn's eyes, resignation heavy on his brow. “We have prevailed before when it has been deemed impossible,” their ruler said. “We will prevail again. Arthur, you ride at dawn.”

Sir Pellinore looked on the verge of arguing but the resolution in the King’s tone had him swallowing instead. “Let me ride with you, sire,” he said, turning to the prince. “I have never faced the beast but I know more about it than any other. Perhaps I will ring the prophecy true after all.”

Arthur clasped his forearm in a sign of camaraderie. “I would gladly have you by my side.”

Merlyn looked to the ground and cursed the King in her head. Arthur would be dead ten times over because of his father’s pigheadedness if Merlyn wasn’t there, disregarding his laws.

“Merlyn!” Arthur called and the black-haired girl blinked back to reality, realising that the meeting had concluded. The prince had moved to the main exit, bracketed by the guards holding open the doors. He was staring at her pointedly, eyebrows raised.

“Sorry, sire,” she said, smiling sheepishly as she hurried after him. He rolled his eyes but said nothing, her daydreaming expected by now.

The next morning, Arthur was giving the knights a pep-talk, motivating them to face the magical beast, when Morgana raced down the front stairs in her nightgown. She was hysterical, begging Arthur not to go, crying that she had seen terrible things. Arthur tried to shield her trembling frame, clearly unnerved by her loss of composure but Merlyn was vividly reminded of Gaius’ revelation months ago. Of Morgana’s Seer powers.

She was pulled away by the guards, fighting their holds all the way up the staircase to the castle doors. Arthur looked after her, expression alarmed, but Merlyn was filled with dread. What did the highborn see to make her so panic-stricken? What horrors awaited the prince that Morgana felt there was nothing that could be done?

“Merlyn,” called Arthur and the black-haired girl followed as he led her out of earshot of the knights, who had drawn together with wary expressions. She stopped before him and he stepped closer, his voice lowered to maintain privacy. “I want you to remain by her side until we return. Tend to her as Guinevere would.”

He watched her with a steadfast gaze, braced for argument, but she dipped her head instead. “As you wish, sire,” she murmured.

He narrowed his eyes, immediately suspicious. “You are not to follow. This is much too dangerous for you to be involved.”

“I understand you believe so,” she said neutrally.

He touched her arm, frowning sternly now. “Merlyn. I order you to remain here.”

She frowned back at him. “I heard you the first time.”

“But you are not arguing,” he insisted. “You always argue.”

“And yet, it never does me any good, does it,” she replied, eyebrow raised as she met his blue gaze,
challenging him to dispute her claim.

“So you have finally learned to obey me?” he asked sceptically.

“It was never about learning to obey you,” she said cheekily. “It was about deciding to.”

His eyes narrowed further. “I do not trust your compliance.”

She grinned, teeth shining. “Then you are also learning,” she said. “Well done.”

“Merlyn,” he whined but she stepped away and his hand dropped back to his side. She kept smiling at him.

“You had best be going, My Lord,” she simpered. “You do not want the beast to bring the challenge to you, do you?”

He jabbed a finger at her. “If I catch you following me, you will be in the stocks for a week, do you hear me?”

She curtseyed, enjoying the unnerved reactions she was creating. “Good luck, sire,” she said and jogged towards the castle. She heard a sharp huff from behind her and knew she had left Arthur out of sorts. Good. Served him right for trying to sideline her.

Gaius’ words last night rang in warning. At the very heart of the Old Religion lies the magic of life and death itself. The Questing Beast carries that power. One bite, you die, and there is no cure.

Merlyn checked in on Morgana before she left, finding the older woman pacing her bedchamber with tears streaking her face.

“Morgana,” Merlyn said quietly around the doorjamb but the highborn jumped anyway, spinning to face her.

“Merlyn,” she whispered, features frozen before she launched at the black-haired girl and cried, “You must stop him from leaving! He mustn’t face the beast, for it will be his death!”

“He’s already gone, Morgana,” she said, holding the older woman’s elbows supportively as Morgana’s fingers twisted into her sleeves. “But I am to follow him quickly. I just wanted to see if you were recovered.”

“I am not ill!” the highborn cried, whirling away. “My dreams are not fancies that take my sanity. I see, Merlyn. I see what is to come. And it is our end. It is Arthur’s doom!” she spun back around.

“Please believe me. You are my faithful friend, even when I myself strayed down the path of betrayal. Please, please say you believe me.”

“I believe you,” Merlyn said immediately, unwilling to allow the lost expression to remain any longer. Revealing Morgana’s truth was on the tip of her tongue but she knew she did not have the time and she did not wish to leave her friend alone after such a truth. “You are not mad, Morgana. I believe what you say is true.”

The relief that washed over the woman’s body would have been comical if the situation weren’t so desperate. Merlyn drew her in for a quick hug then retreated towards the door.

“I will return with Arthur and everything will be fine. You’ll see.”
Morgana's face said that she very, very much wanted to believe her.

Merlyn was cantering Sunstrider through the forest, along the path her magic had illuminated to trace Arthur's footsteps. She was nearing her quarry because the golden hue was fresher and there was the tell-tale shouts of knights in distress. An oddly distorted hiss echoed from up ahead but her steed leapt through a wall of branches in their path with no hesitation. She was forced to sit deep as they landed to command he halt, for a large, looming cave rose up abruptly. Sunstrider sank into his haunches as he obeyed, though he snorted in displeasure, nostrils wide and ears straining as they aimed towards the midnight blackness within the deep cave. It was solid stone, carved by unknown things to lead into the bowels of the earth.

Merlyn jumped off Sunstrider and sprinted into the gloom without pause. She had planned to appear as Emrys, concealed in her red cloak, but she clearly hadn’t the time to don the outfit, and she distantly feared its absence might hinder her ability to fight if the wrong eyes landed upon her.

“Get back!” she heard Sir Pellinore shout and there was another loud hiss. She followed it down the right fork and came upon the beast striking for Knight Pellinore as he stood bravely over the fallen prince. The knight bore Arthur’s sword as he ducked under the Questing Beast’s claws and buried it deep within the creature’s chest, rolling aside as it flailed.

It reared with a screech before shuddering in a death throe, toppling onto its back. Knight Pellinore stared at the downed creature, stunned, but Merlyn's attention was on the prince.

“Arthur!” she shouted, dropping to his side and scanning over his face and chest for puncture marks. For blood. “It didn’t bite you. It didn’t bite you.” She felt the warm stickiness of wet on her fingers on his neck and pulled her hand away to see red staining her digits. “No,” she moaned, eyes burning with failure. “No, no… I was too slow.”

“I’m sorry,” murmured Knight Pellinore, moving to the beast and tugging Arthur's sword from its flesh. It came free with a wet squelch. “It launched from the darkness too quickly for me to guard.” He lifted the sword but Merlyn didn’t witness his narrow-eyed perusal of the burnished blade.

“Arthur,” she whispered, shaking his shoulders. He remained unresponsive and there was a sudden clatter as the other knights ran in, weapons drawn.

“My Lord!” Sir Leon cried, dropping down on her other side to check on the prince. He sheathed his sword and withdrew a dagger, placing it under Arthur’s nose. Light mist dusted its surface, proving that he still held breath.

“My steed is outside,” Merlyn said, wiping her face free of tears. “I will return with him to the city at once. Gaius may know of a treatment.”

She refused to listen to the quiet whisper reminding her that he said there was no cure.

Leon didn’t argue; he and another hoisted their fallen prince up and rushed him out of the tunnels. Sunstrider pranced as the knights neared but her touch on his neck begged for his obedience and he relented with a nervous whicker, sensing her despair. She didn’t reassure him, too focused on her duties, mounting up behind the saddle before Arthur was carefully positioned in front of her, astride as if he were awake. She grunted as his weight tilted back onto her but held him steady through force of will when faced with the knights’ uncertain glances.

“Have faith,” she said to Leon, eyes dancing towards Pellinore, who still held Arthur's blade.
“Arthur will not die by this.”

Sir Leon nodded, though his eyes spoke of faltering belief and Merlyn turned Sunstrider towards the south, urging him into speed. Once she was out of sight of the soldiers, she whispered a spell that steadied Arthur's pose and made it easier to balance him upon her steed’s back, thus allowing him to travel faster.

“Run, Sunstrider,” she said, urging him into a gallop. “Run as fast as you can to the city!”

He leapt forward with renewed speed and Merlyn wrapped her arms around the prince’s frame, hoping against hope there was a way to save him.

“There must be something you can do,” she begged, Arthur prone on the table from where the guards had placed his stretcher. The prince was unconscious, had been since the cave, but he was sweating and feverish now as the poison took hold of his body.

“I wish there was,” Gaius lamented, his tone revealing his resignation to the prince’s fate. It made Merlyn angry, his surrender. How dare he not even try.

“Then I will find a cure,” she snapped and raced into her bedroom to grab her magic book. She knew several healing spells by heart but the book had a handful or more with advice on how to personalise them. She dropped the book onto her bed and flipped to the bookmarked page, scanning over the paragraphs to find the best suited.

The main chamber door burst open and Merlyn jumped in fright, moving to peer out her bedroom door. The King staggered in, features panicked. “Where is the prince? Where is my son?”

He caught sight of Arthur’s sickly frame and his face crumpled. “Arthur,” he breathed, moving to his son’s side and touching his cheek tenderly. Merlyn backed away from the door to give him some privacy and glared at the page holding the only viable incantation. If this one failed, all others would as well.

“Do something, Gaius,” the King half-pled and Merlyn steeled herself against the despair before moving out the door. Gaius had his hands folded in front, craggy face solemn as he watched the King cry over his fallen child. Merlyn's heart cracked a little at the mournful scene but she swallowed it down. Hope was not yet lost, if the King would only leave.

“Gaius will find a cure,” she assured the King, stopping at her mentor’s side. “He will not let him die.”

The old man shot her a stern look, warning her against foolish promises but she didn’t meet his gaze, watching the King scoop Arthur right of the bed, displaying strength she didn’t realise he possessed.

“I will bear him to his chamber,” he said, grief scratching his throat.

He walked out. Merlyn furiously scrubbed away the tear that darted down her cheek. There was no need for this sorrow, for this-this gaping hole to have cracked open within her soul. Arthur was not yet lost. Hope was not yet lost.

She would save him.
“Fornimest átor fram Artur,” she incanted, holding a hand to his forehead and his bite mark. “Come on,” she murmured when there was no answering drain on her magic. “Fornimest átor fram Arthur! Gah! Why are you not working?”

Arthur shuddered beneath her hand and she hushed him, feeling his fever burning from his skin as she brushed his face. She grabbed the wet cloth from the bowl and placed it over his forehead. “Ácélest,” she said but, again, nothing. “What is this?” she growled. “I am not trying to cure you. I only want to treat your symptoms. Let me work, damn you!”

The King entered and Merlyn quickly removed herself from the bed. She bowed her head, tucking her hands together. “I am sorry, You Majesty,” she muttered. “I only wanted –”

“You are his servant,” he replied in a tired voice. “It is your duty to see to his comfort.”

“Thank you, My Lord,” she said, curtseying. She watched as the King returned to his seat beside Arthur’s bed, grief wearing on his body. “Have faith,” she said before realising the potential inappropriateness of her statement. Who was she to tell a king what to do? “Gaius may yet find a cure.”

Uther – for it was not the King who was present right then – glanced over at her before returning his attention to his son. “Gaius has told me multiple times that there is no cure for a Questing Beast bite. What faith is there to be had?” he spat the word like it tasted sour on his tongue and Merlyn gulped in nervousness; yet was still unable to keep her peace. This was Arthur.

“Gaius is researching the most ancient tomes and tales from foreign lands,” she said, partially lying. Her mentor was studying ancient tomes but only at Merlyn’s insistence. “He may yet find an untested medicine. The eastern lands have many strange ideas and creatures to study that we do not have here.”

Arthur’s father looked back at her, new interest sparking in his pale blue-hazel eyes. “You believe they hold the answer?” he asked and his intent gaze had her fighting the urge to squirm.

“Yes,” she said, unblinking, forcing herself to trust her own words. “I believe.”

The King sighed and some of his tension left his frame. “Then there is hope,” he murmured to himself and he took up Arthur's hand. Merlyn retreated in silence.

“Please,” she begged the dragon. “Tell me how to save Arthur.”

“What makes you believe that he can be saved?” asked the dragon, his tone hinting at knowledge she did not possess. It ate at her already-thin patience; Arthur was growing weaker by the hour.

“Our destiny has not yet come to pass,” she retorted, a little desperately. “This cannot be his end.”

The dragon lowered his head to meet her on even ground, tilting his maw so he gazed at her with one large, golden eye. “Destiny is paved by the Triple Goddess. If she decides it is forfeit, then forfeit it will be.”

“But what of Albion?” she cried, slashing her torch in agitation. “What of returning magic to the land? What of your freedom? The path still lies clear; why would the Triple Goddess forfeit that which is not yet ruined?”

“The will of the gods is not ours to question, young witch,” the dragon said sagely but his eye
roved over her with speculation. She felt like he was testing her, pushing her, but why?

“I will not stop in my duty, even if the Triple Goddess herself demanded it of me,” she declared. “Arthur’s fate is mine to guard. She can go find another prince to kill.” She thought on that a moment then corrected herself. “Actually, she should just not kill at all. No one deserves doom for deeds undone.”

“Humph,” the dragon said, moving back and shifting on his perch. When he spoke again, his words carried the wisdom of ages; “The Questing Beast is a creature conjured by the powers of the Old Religion. You must use the same ancient magic to save him.”

Merlyn tilted her head. “But the Old Religion died out,” she said. “I thought it only existed in tomes now.”

“The Old Religion is the magic of the earth itself. It is the essence which binds all things together. It will last long beyond the time of men.” His tone was derisive and she felt a faint need to defend her people. She buried it, needing his knowledge more than she needed self-righteousness.

“How can that help me save Arthur?”

“You must find those who still serve it,” he shared. “Those who hold dominion over life and death.”

“Where?” she demanded, anticipation singing in her blood.

“Go to the place that men call the Isle of the Blessed, where the power of the ancients can still be felt. There you will discover Arthur's salvation.”

Relief had Merlyn weak at the knees. She leant against the rough stone wall and simple breathed for a minute. “Thank you,” she said, her voice shaking slightly. “Thank you.”

“And Merlyn,” he said gravely, waiting for her to meet his eyes before he continued. “The young Pendragon must live, no matter what the cost.”

“Of course,” she said softly. “I will give my life.”

Funny how she promised such a thing when it turned out to be exactly what was needed. Gaius was irate, but Merlyn understood his anger. His fear.

“To save a life, a life must be taken. It is the balance of the world.”

She hugged him tightly and shared one last cup of tea, lacing his with calming draught. She hated that she was causing him pain but she could not abide his wishes to allow Arthur to die. The Questing Beast did not choose Arthur because his fate was decided. It chose him to test Merlyn's conviction. It was her duty to protect the prince unto the day he united the land. The ultimate sacrifice was simply the way she would save him today.

It did not mean she was not scared witless.

“Before I go,” she whispered to Arthur, holding his hand between both of hers. The room was empty, the King forced away to tend to stately matters, and she was using the time to say what she was never going to be able, after today. “Arthur, before I go, I just want… want to tell you one last thing about me, something I’ve been keeping a secret for as long as I can remember. About what I
“Arthur… I-I –” the words built in her throat like bile but were unwilling to escape her mouth, choking her instead. She sniffled, feeling a tear leak from her eye and trace his index finger down her cheek, pooling against his thumb. “I have magic, Arthur,” she finally blurted, like a pressure release. “I have always had magic. And I’m sorry, so, so sorry for hiding it from you, hiding what I am, but you’d hate me if you knew.” She imagined his shock, his betrayal, his scorn. “If you knew, you’d watch me burn at the stake with a smile on your face.” She took a shaky breath and opened her eyes to stare at his pale features, his colour slowly bleaching like he was a piece of fabric left too long in the sun. His lips were bloodless and the half-moons beneath his eyes were bruised purple.

“I wasn’t deceiving you intentionally, Arthur,” she continued softly, counting his eyelashes and waiting for any sort of flicker. “I never wanted to break the laws but I cannot help who I am. And I would not change me, for it would have meant your death long ago. I was frightened of my gifts for a long time, of the power so prevalent in my every move. I feared I would accidentally kill someone. Many someones. But I learned to appreciate the gift I was born with because it allowed me to protect you and stand by your side. And no matter what is to come; your anger, your indifference, your sadness of my death… know that I would not change a thing. I hold faith that the gods who set us on this path will guide you true. Albion will exist one day, and you will be revered as the greatest, kindest king of the lands. And if you can find it in your heart to accept that magic is not evil, that I am not evil, then I will happily die today.”

She simply breathed for a long minute, feeling liberated from her confession, even if Arthur was unconscious through it all. Once she felt settled in herself, she removed his hand and placed it reverently at his side. “I guess this is goodbye,” she murmured. She wavered for seconds longer before finally giving into the impulse and leant over him to press a lingering kiss to his cheek. His skin was warm with fever against her lips. “Be well, my prince,” she said and strode away before the tears welling in her eyes could spill over.

Time to meet her end.

Merlyn stepped off the row boat into an old archway, the weathered stone cracked and chipped. She followed the short tunnel up the staircase where it opened to a paved road, also damaged with fractures and potholes. The towers and turrets of the castle were crumbled like broken fingers reaching for the grace of the gods only to be blasted down in disfavour. Balustrades were caved like they had been hit with heavy weaponry and the entire ceiling of what had once been the stronghold was gone, simply vanished as if a giant had grabbed its top and torn it away with bare hands.

But despite all that, despite the bone-deep thrum of ageless magic and the weary ancientness of the battlements to her eyes, not a thing was out of place. The grass was manicured, no rebellious plants speared through the stone, the paths were clear and easy to tread. This place whispered of times long past but it did not speak of abandonment.

Merlyn stepped into a large clearing where she assumed the Council Chamber or some sort of Ritual Chamber had once stood. It was now neat lawn, bare of decoration save a rectangular dais, about half the length of a tomb. Circling it were six oblong pillars of rough stone, raw and unpolished, like a small replica Stonehenge.

Merlyn slowed her pace suspiciously, feeling unseen eyes upon her person. “Hello?” she called.
“Hello, Merlyn,” a woman said from right behind her and the black-haired girl spun to see Nimueh smiling at her. She wore the same clothes as she had in the griffin’s mind, tattered red dress, styled tresses, stunning blue eyes and painted red lips.

“You,” Merlyn hissed, a cold ball of dread settling in her belly.

“Me,” Nimueh confirmed with a smirk on her sculpted mouth.

“You cannot be who the dragon meant,” she said, refusing to believe the beast would betray her so.

“And why is that?” Nimueh asked, tilting her head ever so slightly, like she was innocently curious. Merlyn bared her teeth.

“You tried to kill me. You tried to kill Arthur.”

“That was before I understood your importance,” she admitted. “But Arthur was never destined to die at my hand. And now, it seems, I will be his salvation.”

That statement lit Merlyn's suspicion and she took a threatening step forward. “You know what I have come to ask?”

The older woman appeared entirely unfazed by her intimidation. “Yes,” she stated simply.

Merlyn glowered, hand clenching at her side. “How do you know? Did you set the beast upon Arthur? Did you plan this all along?” she felt magic tingling in her blood, awoken by the deep pulse of the living earth, and she longed to set it upon the High Priestess.

Nimueh’s smirk had widened into a true smile but she did not look victorious. She was knowing.

“The Questing Beast is a force controlled by methods beyond our existence, Merlyn. Blood betrayal… Things like duplicity… murder…” she was outright grinning now and Merlyn was both parts intrigued and wary. Nimueh was selfish and cunning, she could twist truths into lies without ever spitting a falsehood. “Uther’s mistakes do not halt at genocide. His greed extends beyond friendship and trust. Beyond fidelity. Twenty years ago, before he murdered his wife, he took a lover, seduced her while her husband was out fighting Uther’s wars. Can you guess her name?”

Merlyn shook her head, a deep frown on her face. “What does any of this have to do with the Questing Beast?”

Nimueh appeared disappointed in her lack of deductive skills. “Morgana le Fay is not the daughter of Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall. She is the daughter of Uther Pendragon and, by his blood, royalty.”

Merlyn felt as if she had been punched in the gut. She gaped, utterly speechless with shock. Morgana was Uther’s daughter? Wha – but – how –

“Does the King know? Does Morgana know?” she dropped her gaze, unable to comprehend the revelation. This was just…

“The King;” Nimueh spat like it was a dirty word. “Would not be so lenient on one who was not his blood, not even if she were his ward. Tell me, Emrys, what do you believe?”

Merlyn took a minute to compose herself. What did she believe? What did it matter if Morgana was the King’s daughter instead of his ward? Why was she being told this information?

*The Questing Beast is excited by blood betrayal – instances like incest, murder, duplicity...*
Morgana had tried to have the King killed. If she was his daughter, then it would count as blood betrayal. Morgana… Morgana had brought the Questing Beast down upon them. Morgana was the reason Arthur was dying.

“Sweet mercy…” she whispered to herself. If the highborn ever found out, it would break her heart.

Merlyn steeled herself, locking the information away in her mind. What did it matter in the end? The deed was done and the consequences had to be paid.

“Will you do as I ask?” said Merlyn. “Will you save Arthur?”

Nimueh blinked at her, surprise flitting across her face at the quick dismissal of such a divulgence. *Sorry, priestess, there are more important things in life than your games.*

“I do not have the power to mirror life itself and yet give nothing in return,” she stated firmly.

Merlyn gulped but said, just as resolutely, “I know that a price will be asked.”

“To save a life, there must be a death. The balance of the world must be restored.”

Merlyn bowed her head. “I willingly give my life for Arthur's.”

Nimueh smirked, exotic blue orbs sparking with possibilities and said, “How brave you are, Merlyn. If only it were that simple.”

The black-haired girl narrowed her own azure eyes. “What do you mean?” she demanded lowly.

Nimueh stared at her then said, “Once you enter into this bargain, it cannot be undone.”

Somehow, she didn’t think that was what the High Priestess had been about to say. But she did not want to challenge that which might be her only hope. Not when the deal was about to be struck.

“Whatever I have to do, I will do,” she vowed. “His life is worth a hundred of mine.”

Nimueh stepped forward and scooped a goblet off the dais – a goblet that Merlyn could have sworn was not there before. “The Cup of Life, blessed by centuries of powerful sorcerers so that it contains the very secret of life itself. If Arthur drinks water from the Cup, he will live.”

Merlyn took a fortifying breath then took the goblet from the other woman’s hand. Nimueh fought the urge to scratch it from her face.

“Tídrénas,” the High Priestess incanted and rain began pouring, without provocation, from the overcast sky. The drops were icy and Merlyn shivered as it ran down her collar and onto her hidden flesh but she didn’t hesitate to hold out the Cup and let it fill with the pure liquid.

The rain tapered quickly and Nimueh took the goblet from Merlyn's freezing hand. She poured it into a silver flask until the Cup of Life was empty then clicked the top shut with a soft metallic ring.

“The bargain is struck,” she said, handing over the flask. She had a mocking smile on her lips. “I hope it pleases you.”

Merlyn glared at her but turned away to stop the insults tugging at her tongue. Arthur was what was important right then. And soon, Nimueh’s riddles and jibes would be nothing more than a memory to a dead girl.
Merlyn galloped Sunstrider hard. Foam frothed at his mouth and his breaths were heavy and laboured. Even his vast stamina struggled against her demands but she couldn’t slow, she didn’t have time to give him rest – and she knew Sunstrider would obey her unto death.

Instead of asking such a terrible thing, Merlyn poured her own strength into his body, laced with magic to give it potency. His heartbeat steadied, his breathing smoothed and his strides picked up pace. Merlyn clung to his back and refused to pass out; soon enough, she would have no need of energy.

Merlyn did not go to Gaius when she returned. She refused put that burden on his shoulders, to pour her life into another’s body through the water, to knowingly sacrifice her with his actions… she would not allow him to suffer such guilt.

She peered into Arthur’s bedchamber and was relieved to see the King absent. Quickly, she hurried to the prince’s side and sat by his shoulder, placing her hand on his fevered cheek. He was ghostly in his appearance, even his fever-blush had faded, which meant that his heart was struggling too much to raise the blood. Not good.

“Hey, Arthur,” she murmured, uncapping the flask. “It’s Merlyn. I have your cure here, I just need you to drink it and not choke, alright?”

She leant forward, smoothing his hair absently before moving his jaw down to open his mouth. His lips were chapped and dry. When he exhaled, she trickled a little liquid into his mouth and he instinctively swallowed. She was reassured that he still had the reflex, as many reached a point where they were too weak and their bodies too far gone to remember how to act properly.

“What are you doing?” the King’s sharp voice came from the door and Merlyn jumped, cradling the flask so she didn’t drop it. “What are you giving him?”

She turned to face him, thoughts scrambling. “It’s… a tincture made from the, er, the lobelia plant; one of those foreign remedies Gaius was researching, Your Majesty.”

She turned away, face flushing with her lie and hands trembling. She reclasped the lid so she didn’t spill any of the precious water and awaited him to believe or disbelieve.

“A cure?” he asked after a pause, sounding cautiously optimistic.

She looked back at him. “I believe so, Sire,” she admitted.

He stared at his son, emotions swirling clear across his usually stoic features. He moved closer. “Do you really think it will have some effect?”

She also turned to Arthur, staring at his pallid face and sweaty skin. “I do.”

Arthur exhaled and she poured some more water down his throat. “Perhaps you should allow him to rest, Your Majesty.”

“I will not leave him,” the King vowed and sat in the chair beside Merlyn. She tried not to appear unnerved by his presence as she finished treating his son.

“Be well, Arthur,” she whispered before standing and sweeping from the room, a hasty curtsey
thrown at the inattentive king. She walked along the corridors in a daze, lost in her own head, yet thinking not much at all. It was done. Arthur would live. Merlyn would die. When? She knew not. But soon. Too soon.

Gaius had gone to check on Arthur after Merlyn told him what she had done. He had been speechless for a short while, then angry. He disappeared quickly out the door and Merlyn let him be. He needed to process what was happening without her there to raise the grief. So she paced in the physician’s chambers and waited for the verdict on Arthur's survival.

An hour later, Gaius returned.

“Arthur lives,” he stated and Merlyn felt a wave of relief crash atop her. She laughed, giddy, hardly able to believe it but Gaius’ heavy gaze quickly sobered her up.

“This is for the best,” she said, hoping to ease his sorrow. It did the opposite and the old man dropped his focus, unable to speak.

She went to him and drew him into her arms, eyes burning for the sadness she was causing – and, perhaps, her own grief. He hugged her back and she felt his hitched breaths against her shoulder, though she felt no tears wet her tunic.

“It’s all going to be alright,” she murmured, forcing herself to believe it. “Everything is going to be fine.”

That night, Merlyn cradled Gaius’ rabbit foot in her hands, sitting cross-legged on her bed. She wondered if she should have fled the city to die out of Gaius’ sight but the vicious storm raging outside and her own fear of what was to come kept her where she was. Her heart was beating rapidly, almost as if it knew it was to stop soon, and her pulse was jumping in her throat. She felt sick, but didn’t know if it was her body or her mind that was bringing it on. Was she dying right now? Or was it knowledge that it was coming causing a placebo effect?

There was a loud bang and Merlyn sat up in shock. That sounded like it came from inside.

“She scream, sounding peculiarly like Gwen. The black-haired girl shot off her bed and launched at the door, down the steps before her brain caught up with her. She tripped down the last stair but strong arms wrapped in wet, chilly chainmail caught her before she met the floor. She peered up through the flashing gloom and met Lancelot’s grim – and saturated – face. His hair was flattened to his head and his stubble particularly scruffy. Once she was steady, he dropped his arms but didn’t move away.

When he didn’t speak, she said, “You look like you’ve swum home.” She glanced around for Gwen but the knight’s bulk blocked her view of much of the room. She took a step back to give herself some space and cocked her head at him. “Alright?” she asked. “You’re acting strangely.” A horrible realisation popped into her head and she grabbed his arm. “Did something happen? Is Gwen okay? Is Tom?”

“They are fine,” Lancelot said, but he took her hand from his arm and held it within his own. He stepped to the side, giving her a view of the front door. “But your mother…”

“Mother…” Merlyn whispered, seeing a figure curled on the ground with Gaius and Gwen tending to her. “Oh, no…”
She raced to her side, dropping to her knees. A flash of lightning illuminated the dark room enough for her to recognise her face. “Mama!” she cried, reaching out but hesitating to touch. She was covered in raw sores, shuddering in pain and struggling to breathe.

“Merlyn,” she stuttered, staring up at her with pained eyes.

Merlyn touched her face before stroking her hair – the only part of her that didn’t appear to be damaged. “What happened to her?” she asked of Gaius.

The old man said in a solemn tone, leaning back in conclusion of his brief examination. “She is gravely ill.”

She stared at him. “Do something?” she demanded, unable to understand why he wasn’t moving.

He shook his head, glancing to Gwen, who was squatted across from them with a cloth dotted with blood. She was also dripping wet, her head of curls plastered to her skin. “If only I could,” he murmured sadly.

“What do you mean?”

“Merlyn,” said Gwen softly and the black-haired girl looked to her friend, hating the sympathetic expression on her face. “This is no ordinary illness. It appeared almost instantly, laying her low within an hour. No ordinary sickness can do such a thing.”

Merlyn stared back down at her mother, who was in the throes of a pain shudder. “This cannot happen,” she whispered, realisation bleeding into her mind like a burst abscess.

Gaius, it seemed, was thinking the same. “Who did you meet at the Isle of the Blessed?”

She clenched her teeth, dropping her gaze. “Nimueh,” she growled, knowing she shouldn’t have trusted the vengeful priestess. “But I bargained my own life, not my mother’s.” The woman in question whimpered, having drifted into semi-consciousness as exhaustion weighed her down.

“Merlyn,” Gaius murmured, voice gravely with emotion. “I wish there was something I could do.”

Merlyn clenched her fists, pushing herself from the floor. She stared at her mother, cold fury settling her determination. Nimueh betrayed her.

“I will make you better,” she vowed. “I will.”

She marched out the door but quick footsteps followed. “Merlyn!” Lancelot called and she contemplated for a heavy second not to turn. But this was Lancelot and the circumstances were not his fault.

She stopped abruptly and spun around. “Do not try to stop me,” she told him. “And do not follow. Where I go is for magical creatures only.”

“Merlyn,” he said softly, moving closer. “Perhaps you should stop and think of what you plan to do. Nimueh is a powerful sorcerer learned in her arts for decades. She is merciless where you are not. I fear you may wade into waters you will be unable to navigate.”

“Lancelot,” she said tightly. “That is my mother, and I allowed her to be used by Nimueh through my own stupidity. I trusted her when I knew she was bad news and I now need to fix my wrongdoing.”
The brown-haired knight looked torn so she said, more gently and lying only a little, “The time for bargaining is over. I do not go to parlay; I go to end her reign of terror. As I should have before. Worry not, my friend. Everything will work itself out.”

He was heavily reluctant but he said, jesting, “I am to marry Guinevere soon and we would both like you to be there. Your death would not favour that outcome.”

She smiled slightly. “I will be there. I was present when you two met, it would be unconscionable for me to be absent on your wedding day.”

Lancelot’s returning smile was tense but he obediently retreated and Merlyn left to the dragon’s lair.

“Did you know that it would be Nimueh awaiting me at the Isle of the Blessed?” she asked of the gold-scaled beast, torch held aloft to pierce the gloom the dragon’s natural luminescence failed to touch.

The dragon resettled himself on his rock and said, “There are too few who possess such power now. Nimueh is one of two High Priestesses still living.”

“So that’s a yes,” she said flatly. “You admit to allowing me to be tricked by a sorceress who thrives on suffering and chaos.”

The dragon lowered his head, staring at Merlyn with a sharp glint in his shiny eyes. “You said you would do anything.”

“I bargained my life, not my mother’s! Nimueh broke our agreement.”

“The Old Religion does not care who lives or who dies, only that the balance remains.”

Merlyn tightened her grip on the torch handle, fighting the urge to stomp her foot like a pouting child. “The Old Religion is merciless!” she snapped. “If it is the will of such magic to sacrifice innocence then I want no part of it!”

The dragon dipped his head closer, his tone lacking any humour as he said; “You are a creature of the Old Religion, as am I. It is the source of your power. You cannot escape it, Merlyn.”

“My duty is to protect Arthur and return magic. I do not have to abide a dead religion because you say so. Magic is balance, yes, but it is choice and harmony more so. What choice did my mother have to agree or disagree to this pain? This—this murder?”

“Your life is much too important to waste at this time, young witch. Your destiny is to protect the young Pendragon until he claims his crown, and when he does, magic can be returned to the realm. Only then will I be free.”

“So that’s all you care about?” she asked, gutted by his selfishness. “All this time, you only sought your own ends? I thought you were my friend.”

“I am more than that, Merlyn,” he said, drawing up high. “I am your kin.”

“If that is so,” she said, voice trembling. “Then you have betrayed me.”

“Your mother’s life has not been taken in vain. We will achieve great things together, you and I.”
“My powers mean nothing if I cannot save her. She is my mother and she loved me when I was no one and she had nothing. Which is more than I can say for you, Dragon.” She spat the word like it tasted bad and turned towards the exit. “I’ll not allow my mother to die – not even if I have to battle the Triple Goddess herself.”

“My powers mean nothing if I cannot save her. She is my mother and she loved me when I was no one and she had nothing. Which is more than I can say for you, Dragon.” She spat the word like it tasted bad and turned towards the exit. “I’ll not allow my mother to die – not even if I have to battle the Triple Goddess herself.”

“Heed my words, Merlyn,” the dragon called, his voice carrying up the tunnel as she marched away. “You risk the very stability of this land with your decisions. It is not only I who is selfish.”

She refused to be baited by his criticism but the words tethered in her mind anyway. Was she being selfish? She couldn’t tell – but, more than anything else, she was adamant not to trust a word out of that beast’s mouth again.

She went to Arthur’s chamber, the desire to see him one last time, awake and healing, trumped her urge to leave immediately. She knocked lightly and peered inside, finding the prince sitting up in bed, reclined on his throne of pillows with his wounded arm in a sling. He was staring towards the window across the room, his features pinched and pensive.

“Alright?” she asked, wondering if he needed another dose of pain medication.

Arthur startled, head turning to stare at her like he was surprised she was there. He said nothing and she edged a little further into the room, wary of his odd behaviour. “Sire?” she asked. “Are you in any pain?”

Abruptly, he looked away. “I am fine,” he said briskly and she left it, though she planned to mention something to Gaius before she left because, clearly, something was wrong.

“Are you thirsty?” she pressed, moving towards the pitcher on the table and taking it towards his bed where his cup sat on his bedside table.

“Stop,” he ordered and she did so immediately, his commanding tone deadly serious. She glanced around but found nothing that would cause him to speak so. She looked at him and found his jaw clenched.

“Leave,” he said, voice gravelly with emotion, though which one, she had no clue. He still refused to meet her eyes and she was growing alarmed.

“Arthur, I –”

“Do not speak to me so familiarly!” he snapped. “Not –” he cut himself off and shook his head before glaring at her, no humour anywhere in his gaze. Merlyn was stunned, eyes wide and mouth open in utter perplexity. She touched a hand to her chest, a little hurt by his rudeness.

“Get. Out,” he growled slowly. “I do not wish to see you.”

“Have I –”

“Merlyn! For once in your life, do as I say!”

“Why are you so angry?” she asked, trying to understand. “If you are in pain, I can –”

“I do not want your help!” he snarled and she physically retreated at the vehemence in his tone. “I do not wish to see your face. I have no desire to have your presence near! Go away!”
“Arthur…” she breathed, pain lancing through her heart. Is he changed? Did the cure change him? “Did –”

She yelped as his goblet hit her on her shoulder, cool water splashing out onto her face and neck, leaking down her skin. The sharp pain dulled by her shock. She retreated as she brushed at her dress, suddenly afraid of his temper. In all his grumpiness and anger, he had never harmed her before. Not with intention, at any rate – she didn’t count their first sparring sessions when he thought she was a boy. Now, however, he looked furious and ready to throw something else, not a stitch of guilt to be seen.

“Leave me in peace, woman!” he shouted and the black-haired girl was out the door immediately. She held a hand to her heart as she leant against the wall, trying to calm the frantic thumps, trying to regulate her breaths. What just happened? Was Arthur possessed? Did Nimueh do something? Did the Questing Beast?

“Goodness,” she whispered when she found her voice once more. One thing was for certain: Arthur was not the same as he had been – and she needed to find out why.

Gaius tried to beg her out of leaving but Merlyn was adamant. He wanted her to wait until the next morning, but she refused that also. “There is something wrong with Arthur,” she said. “He is being unnaturally cruel; I need to discover what has been done to him so it can be fixed.” She hooked her knapsack over her shoulder and said after a hesitation, “Look after mama, will you? And… if I do not return, guide Arthur as well as you have guided me. He is sure to be a great king under your tutelage.”

“Merlyn…” he moaned, holding her upper arms in desperation. “Do not leave yet. Give me time to say goodbye.”

“Gaius,” she whispered. “You must accept that you cannot stop me. Let me go, Uncle.”

Her guardian bowed his head, tears leaking from his old eyes and her heart broke for his anguish. She cradled his face and lifted his head, kissing his brow tenderly before letting go and marching out the door. If she looked back, she would not be able to leave.

So she didn’t.

Despite feeding Sunstrider some of her energy during their last ride, her steed still suffered the downsides of a hard journey and he was in no fit state to do another. She changed his leg poultices for the swelling then snuck into the guard stables for a messenger horse. The sleek, bay gelding was quiet and sturdy and carried her true. She arrived at the lake’s edge in good time, dismounting and loosening the girth before resting a hand on the gelding’s neck. She asked him to wait a day before returning to the city if she did not appear. The gelding took her instructions with no fuss and set to grazing placidly, reins tied out of the way. If only Sunstrider were so obedient.

She took the little rowboat over the lake, through the reeds clogging the water around the castle ruin and up to the little arch entrance. She was not attacked when she stepped onto land but she felt that the magic was more aware of her presence, zapping at her skin like static searching for an outlet. Something had awoken the Old Religion and it was watching. Experimentally, she held out a hand and concentrated her magic to her palm. It flared like a small, brilliant sun, small blue sparks shooting off in reaction to the energy in the air. And instead of feeling the minute drain on
her strength, Merlyn felt invigorated, as if the magic in the air was pouring into her body as she was pouring it out: a closed circuit.

She released her control and took a moment to settle her pounding heartbeat, adrenalin firing through her veins. “Wow,” she breathed. If she was not on a possible suicide mission, she would have liked to experiment a little. She had never felt such responsiveness from something not living before, certainly not from Avalon Lake, which was the next most sentient place she’d visited.

She approached the narrow arch that lead onto the lawn of the de-roofed Council or Ritual Chamber and glanced around for the deceitful sorceress.

“Nimueh!” she shouted, letting the anger she had been chilling into a cold fury coat her tone.

“Back so soon?” asked Nimueh and Merlyn spun around to see the High Priestess struting from an arch across the lawn. That stupid smirk was playing at her painted lips and it only raised Merlyn's ire further.

“You broke our agreement,” she snarled, storming closer. “I bartered my own life! You are stealing my mother’s.”

“The Old Religion does not –”

“It is not the Old Religion that has done this; it is you!”

“Come now,” Nimueh said, circling Merlyn slowly like a predator toying with its prey. “We are too valuable to each other to be enemies.”

She met her challenge, teeth bared. “I share nothing with you, demon.”

“With my help,” purred Nimueh, unconcerned for her anger. “Arthur will become King.”

“I will make Arthur King. You, selfish wench, will have no part in that future! You,” she jabbed a finger at the woman and turned to meet her head on, forcing Nimueh to stop her orbit. “You are the bane that prevents Albion from forming. You cry for acceptance and yet hide here, in this broken place, surrounding yourself with destruction to feed your resentment. You revel in chaos and seed devastation; why would I allow you to help create a land of peace, and freedom, and equality when you refuse to understand what they are?”

Nimueh’s smirk had vanished and she glared at Merlyn. The black-haired girl was satisfied at the change. “I am a priestess of the Old Religion,” she snapped. “You are but a child caught in forces beyond your comprehension. You do not know the suffering of our kind; you were not there when the Purge began. You did not see friends and family murdered with shame staining their names. This place,” she raised her arms wide. “This place was once whole and thrumming with life. This was a temple of magic, a place of study and immersion. But Uther’s oppression of our people ruined the balance. This place crumbled around us, the very magic holding it together fraying and fracturing. Our history lost, our home ruined, our safety jeopardised. Do not talk to me of peace and equality, little girl, for you have no concept of the sacrifices borne!”

“You are right,” Merlyn said, holding her arms out in acknowledgement. “I was not there when the laws passed. I did not see the anguish that our people endured. The needless deaths; the countless loss. But you know what I saw when I came to Camelot? I saw you, a bitter witch, becoming the exact thing the King feared, feeding his bigotry like an enabler. You talk of the death and pain of our people; but what of the suffering you caused? The pestilence of that water beast laying dozens of citizens low; innocent people. The execution of one griffin to cause the other unspeakable grief;
using its sorrow to your own ends like it was nothing more than a tool. It had a cub, you know. And you orphaned it; a magical beast that by your rights as a High Priestess you should be protecting. What excuses do you have for that, Nimueh? What can you say to make those actions alright?” Nimueh glowered, hand clenching and Merlyn met it with a scowl. “Do not talk to me of sacrifice and suffering. I may be young but even I know your actions are without justification.”

“And what would you do, Merlyn?” she challenged. “Hide yourself away, slip through the shadows and pray for the day you no longer have to hide? Serve a tyrant? Oh… but you already do, do you not? The Great Emrys, saviour of our people, nothing more than a servant to a prince who can never know the truth. What would he do if he knew who you were, Merlyn? Would he watch you burn alongside his father, or would he behead you himself in anger of your betrayal?”

“Arthur will learn the truth when he has been taught to see beyond his father’s prejudice,” Merlyn bit out, hating the unbidden anxiety her words arose, that question always hovering in the back of her own mind. Her hand crept upwards to clench around the Camelot medallion around her neck, bespeaking her as a Friend to the kingdom. What would Arthur do if he found out?

“You hold so much hope for a future that will never be,” said Nimueh, smile too knowing for Merlyn’s liking.

The black-haired girl frowned. “It is written,” she stated. “And our path stays true. Albion will form.”

“That is but one paragraph of a long prophecy,” Nimueh revealed, features smug at Merlyn’s ignorance. “It also holds a warning. ‘The fate of the Once and Future King is not promised. Therein lay two paths; one of acceptance and concession, and one of war and betrayal. The Battle of Camlann is where destiny will be dealt and the future of Albion decided.’ For good or ill, it will be beyond your power to control, no matter your title, Emrys.”

Merlyn's mind reeled with the new information but hope still reigned. “You said two paths,” she repeated. “So the potential remains for our future to exist. Why do you only see darkness, Nimueh? Why do you not strive for the light?”

“I am not naïve, Merlyn,” she retorted. “I had faith once, but Uther crushed it when he crushed our people. Now I know reality and I see Albion crumbling under your guidance. You are too young and inexperienced to face the perils that will come. Join with me and it will stand strong and unopposed.”

“Join with you?” Merlyn scoffed. “A cruel and selfish sorceress? I would rather die!”

“So be it,” hissed Nimueh and, with a word, a fireball erupted into life above her raised palm. It burned a brilliant red, rolling hot with intention and anger.

Merlyn lifted her own hand instinctively, palm out in defense, but she did not call a spell. She huffed, instead, at the priestess’s magic. “It should not surprise me that you go for fire,” she mocked. “The most volatile of the elements, and the easiest to spread ruin. For that is your legacy, is it not? The High Priestess who could not look beyond the past and almost destroyed the future. You shame the Old Religion and you shame yourself!”

“Ácwele!” Nimueh shouted and Merlyn was caught by surprise at how fast the fireball moved. It hit her high on her sternum, near her right collarbone and she was sent soaring backwards with a cry of pain.

She landed on the grass, knocked silly as her head bounced off the ground. She blinked the black
spots from her eyes as she heard Nimueh say, “Pity. Together we could have ruled the world.”

She walked away and the black-haired girl was angry at the dismissal, like one blow would be enough to kill her. Admittedly, Merlyn had acted arrogantly and paid for it but she was not a witch with all bark and no bite.

Merlyn rolled over and pushed herself upright, glaring through spotty vision at the High Priestess. She felt magic crackle under skin as she soaked in the living energy in the air. “You should not have targeted my mother,” she growled and Nimueh turned back in surprise, looking – oddly enough – approving that she still lived. But Merlyn was done with games.

She lifted an arm, reaching with her magic for the cloudy sky above, pouring energy into the atmosphere and electrifying the vaporised water. The clouds darkened as the electricity heated the air and created a loop of conflicted temperatures, the black mass writhing and lightning snapping in response.

She dragged that lightning down and pointed at Nimueh, who looked impressed, then fearful as a bolt discharged into her body. Fed by magic, the lightning blasted Nimueh apart in a horrific, super-intense display of electrodessication. There was nothing but dust left by the time the strike dissipated.

Merlyn’s panted, feeling like she had run a mile while simultaneously buzzed like a drunk. Her heart thrummed like a hummingbird’s and her uplifted hand shook with exertion. She lowered it to her side and stared at the blackened grass, the only evidence of Nimueh’s passing, and tried to feel something other than relieved. The sacrifice had been met, her mother would live. Nimueh’s terrorising would be no more.

She turned back to the archway, ready to leave the ruins behind, and remembered that she had failed to ask what was wrong with Arthur. In the heat of the moment, she had forgotten that the prince was changed. And now Nimueh was gone and she had unanswered questions.

“Bother,” she muttered to herself, pressing a hand near the burnt flesh of her shoulder. She could feel the malicious magic lingering in the damaged skin and knew it would refuse healing through witchcraft. Like with her hands after the unicorn, she was going to have to treat it the mundane way.

“Blast and botheration.”

At least her mother lived.

On top of the balustrade that overlooked the courtyard and lower town, Arthur watched Merlyn return from wherever she had wandered. His arm was still in a sling and he had lingering weakness in his limbs, but strength was returning almost too quickly to be natural.

Arthur watched his servant, bedraggled and windswept, rush across the courtyard to the arch that lead to the physician’s chambers, and clenched his jaw to prevent the growl that wanted to escape.

Merlyn’s words to his unconscious self, spoken in belief of his deafness, rang in his ears as if she had just uttered them. The truth of who she was, what she was, tolled loudest.

Everything he had known her to be – everything he had liked about her – had been a lie. She was a sorceress, a magician, a lawbreaker, a false-heart. He should tell his father, have her burned.
He clenched his fists in preparation, turned towards the door where a sentry stood guard, but he halted. He hesitated.

Despite her lies, her betrayal, she had saved him. He knew not how, but he knew that truth. She had spoken of her intentions and, against all hope, there he stood, healing swiftly. Magic was a dark art and it corrupted everything it touched. But Merlyn. The Merlyn he knew, she was not corrupt.

But did he know Merlyn? Was the clumsy girl who laughed loudly and blushed hotly and cared deeply, was that person even real? She had deceived him this long, perhaps it was all a ploy to get close to him. To – to –

Why would she taint herself that way when she knew the danger? Why would she dement her soul when she was so pure? Why would she betray him like this?

How dare she betray him like this.

How dare she!

Chapter End Notes

The End – of Book One. Did you enjoy? Book Two will be released in a couple of months or so. I want to finish it before I start posting because otherwise I’ll stress myself out. I’m onto the last few episodes now, but I’m at a crucial point with the changes so it’s a lot of tweaking, re-reading and double checking that the things that happen here are written properly so the things that come later make sense. Ripple Effect, Butterfly Effect, Chaos Theory, whatever you wanna call it. Hope you all stick with me; it’s going to be a bumpy ride!

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