The Moment of Trust

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The Moment of Trust

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Summary

"There's something you're not telling me." Her chest constricted when guilt flickered in his eyes, replaced – no, *covered up* – a moment later with confusion. She stepped into his space so she could stab an accusing finger at his chest. "You know something, but you won't say it. Why not? What could *possibly* be worse than this?" she demanded. The tears still burned in her eyes, and a hot wave of anger pushed them closer to spilling over.

Notes

Set during 2x03 ("The Nightmare Begins"). Inspired by my *eternal frustration with Merlin's decisions* and this [text post](#) I made.

Merlin/Arthur if you squint, Merlin/Morgana if you squint.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Flames scorched across the fields outside Camelot, tearing through the landscape – razing forests, trees crumpling into embers as leaves caught alight and blew away, spreading the fire until no part of the kingdom remained untouched by searing heat and smoke. Villages burned, the people and cattle left charred and shrieking, and still the flames raced on, unsatisfied. They sought something, someone, somewhere – They leapt up the white castle walls, blackening the stones, raining down into the city – onto the people – more bodies, more burning, more choked-off screams and pleas –

When Morgana woke, she brought the fire and the terror with her. Her heart pounded against her ribs while she watched the candle flame flare unnaturally high, catching at the curtains until they blazed like the city in her nightmare. She screamed, and as the glass shattered, she knew she was the cause.

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While Uther was interrogating Gwen with the usual degree of suspicion and unvoiced threat that laced his tone whenever his family or kingdom was at risk, Merlin had been clearing away the destroyed furniture and shattered glass. Eyeing the scene as he worked and listening to the theories the king and prince discarded almost as soon as they were suggested, he'd thought that there was something *off* about it all. Something in the air that was more than the lingering traces of last night's storm.

He'd disposed of the burnt fragments of wood, the ashy tatters of the curtains, and the shards of window pane, and resumed his normal duties. The prince's manservant had no further business snooping around in the king's ward's bed chambers, after all, and Arthur in a mood soured by a threat to his friend was even more demanding than Arthur on a normal day. Whatever could be counted as a "normal" day in Camelot, anyway; Merlin still wasn't sure if those even existed. He hadn't encountered one yet.

Two hours later, Arthur's empty (save for the green ruffles of fresh lettuce that Arthur had ignored) breakfast plate in hand, Merlin couldn't get the incident out of his mind. Gwen's confidence that she had not left the candle lit, Arthur's suggestion of lightning as the cause, Uther's assassination theories…none of it quite fit the destruction that Merlin had seen.

As he rounded the corner approaching the physician's chambers, he heard Gaius's voice, hushed and concerned. He slowed, curving his path closer to the door.

"…What I don't understand, Morgana, is how the fire started in the first place," Gaius was saying. Merlin stopped walking, abandoning his duties for the moment in favor of pressing close to listen. The kitchen could wait. The cook would cherish every moment he wasn't underfoot, he was sure.

"It happened so quickly," Morgana murmured. "It was terrifying." Her voice shook just enough for it to be noticeable. Merlin shifted until he could see her through the cracked open door, wrapped in a blanket while Gaius rubbed soothing circles on her back.

"It's alright. You're safe now." Merlin recognized that tone; Gaius used it with his younger patients. That voice was a reassurance of authority, of security, of comfort. Of care.

"You're the only person I've told about my dreams." Morgana looked up at Gaius, hunched over and small and desperate for more of that reassurance. Even with her back to him, Merlin could see the little girl she must have been years before he came to Camelot in the tremor of her voice and the curve of her spine. Here, the confidence and pride that kept her tongue sharp and her head held high receded and left her bare and vulnerable. "I know I can trust you, Gaius."

"Yes, of course you can." Gaius encouraged her with a sympathetic nod.

"It was me," Morgana admitted. "I set the room alight. I started the fire."

Merlin nearly stopped breathing. Had she – did she –

"I don't understand," Gaius said. "Did you knock a candle over?"

"No, that's not what happened," she insisted. "I did it just by looking at it. The flames suddenly leapt higher."

Gaius tried again. "It could've been a gust of wind."

"It wasn't. It was me," she said. "It was magic." There was no doubt in her voice, no questions, only terrified certainty.

Merlin couldn't keep the hope from bubbling up in his chest, making his heart stutter and rise in the surge. *She had said it.* There could be no hiding this from her, not anymore. Morgana had magic, and she knew it, and they could finally *help* her. Help her understand it, help her control it, help keep her safe. The same way Gaius had helped Merlin – was still helping him.

The concern and pity in Gaius's next words made Merlin feel sick. "My child..."

"I'm not a child!" Morgana shouted in frustration. And she wasn't, no matter how young and small she looked swaddled in the blanket like an infant. She was more than old enough to know how to keep her own secrets, and far, far older than Merlin had been when his mother pressed worried warnings and rules into his head as often as she pressed kisses to his cheek. She deserved to know who she was. She *needed* to know, or a few charred curtains could be the least of their worries.

"Last night was an accident. It had nothing to do with you," Gaius lied, and Merlin's heart dropped further. *Stop this*, he thought. *Stop lying to her.* "How could it have? I am going to draw you up a fresh remedy that will make you feel better, I promise."

"No..." Merlin's gut twisted with guilt at the sound of Morgana's quiet plea.

"You must trust me."

He pushed away from the door and continued on to the kitchen. He couldn't listen anymore.

Gaius poured multicolored liquids from bottle to bottle at the one workbench area clear of bottles, jars, vials, bowls, and all manner of mysterious medical instruments of unknown purpose and origin. Golden fluid bubbled and steamed in a glass globe suspended over a flame.

Merlin picked at his food, wondering where to start. Snatches of the exchange he had overheard that morning had been crowding out his own thoughts and making it hard to concentrate on his duties. Arthur had shouted him out of the room after he'd dropped an empty pitcher on his foot during lunch. Merlin would have laughed at Arthur's decidedly undignified, red-faced *squawk* when the pitcher struck had he not been too busy dodging goblets and silverware on the way out.

"I was helping clear up Morgana's chambers earlier," he began, watching Gaius for a reaction. Start the conversation with something small. Be subtle. He could do that, right? Pretend he hadn't eavesdropped on a private conversation between a physician and his patient?

Gaius hummed a response without looking up from his work. He dropped a few leaves into a bowl of brown sludge and stirred. Merlin couldn't help but pity whatever unsuspecting victim this particular concoction was meant for.

"The window was blown out into the courtyard below." He'd noticed the peculiarity when he'd been cleaning up the mess, though neither the king nor Arthur had commented on it. He hadn't been sure what it meant at the time, but Morgana's hushed revelation confirmed his suspicions.

Another noncommittal hum. Gaius studied the particular shade of red a vial of some potion or other had turned.

"It's odd, isn't it?" he continued. "If lightning struck the window like Arthur said, you'd think the glass would've fallen inside of the window." Now for the tricky part. How to approach it…Oh, well. Subtlety had never been his strong suit, no matter how many secrets he had to keep. May as well barge right in. "It was magic. You know it was. More importantly, so does she."

That caught Gaius's attention. He gave Merlin a sharp, high-browed look. "Morgana knows nothing for certain."

Gaius was right. Surrounded by false teachings of magic, Morgana could have no real understanding of her growing powers, only her own observations and fearful speculation. *"What if magic isn't something you choose? What if it chooses you?"* she had asked him once. Did she remember that? Did she still believe it? Was she clinging to that idea, wrapping it around her as protection against Uther's cries of corruption and evil?

"Which makes it even worse," he argued. "She isn't sure what's happening to her and it's tearing her apart." More than anyone, he knew what it meant to be caught between what he had been taught and what he felt to be true about magic. Morgana had no Hunith to calm her

after each magical outburst, and if Merlin failed to persuade him, no Gaius to teach her and reassure her that nothing was wrong with her.

"What would you have me do?" Gaius challenged.

"Talk to her," Merlin said. He stood to approach Gaius, his meal forgotten. "Tell her she'll be okay. Tell her that her powers aren't something to be afraid of." She needed to hear that now as much as he had and more, considering her status and so-called guardian.

"I can't." The genuine contriteness in Gaius's countenance gave him pause. Gaius already harbored one young sorcerer, risking his life while using the resources and respect afforded his position to disguise Merlin's less-than-legal activities. As firmly as Merlin believed that they could not leave Morgana in the dark, he couldn't bear to burden his mentor and friend more than he already had. Whatever Gaius's reasons for refusing, perhaps Merlin could respect them and find some other way.

"Maybe I could speak to her," he suggested, though he already knew what Gaius would say. What was one more burden to him? His very existence was already outlawed.

Sure enough, Gaius looked appalled at the thought. "No, Merlin, you can't."

"Why not?" He could teach her. Gaius didn't need to be involved at all. "I understand what she's going through."

"You must never reveal your secret. Not to anyone," he said, finality weighting his voice. He would not change his mind on this matter, and Merlin wasn't sure he wanted to argue the point. The thought of revealing himself, even to Morgana, terrified him.

"If not me, then someone else."

"Who? This is a kingdom where magic is outlawed, or have you forgotten that?" As if he ever could, between the public executions, the constant revenge-fuelled magical threats, and Gaius's steady stream of caution.

"There are those who still practice it," Merlin said. If neither he nor Gaius could help her… "What about the druids? You said that they help people like this."

"Uther's vowed to destroy them. The druids cannot help her. It would be suicide."

From what Merlin knew of the druids, he doubted that they would refuse a person in need, no matter the risk to themselves. Their culture was built on a desire for peace, and with that came a degree of selflessness. He put the thought aside for now. "Then who can?"

"I will. Like I've always done." With potions and platitudes, he meant. It wasn't enough. Maybe it had been, once, but Merlin himself had cleaned up the blackened and fractured evidence that her magic was exploding out of control.

"Then you need to be honest with her."

"What makes you so certain that you know better than me?"

Because you weren't born into a world that makes you fear yourself, Merlin thought. *Because you can't know what it's like to grasp for any scrap of knowledge you can find, just to make sense of your own abilities. Not like this.*

"Because I went through the same thing," he said instead. "I know exactly how she's feeling right now." Scared, frustrated, confused, hurt. Lost and alone in a kingdom that would see her burn for existing. Like she was falling apart and coming together all at once, but rearranged into something unrecognizable. Like a monster.

Yes, he knew exactly how she felt.

"You cannot get involved in this," Gaius said with the same firm warning tone he used to end most conversations like this one, about risk and consequence. "No good can come of it. I mean it, Merlin. Stay out of it!"

That, Merlin knew, was an order he couldn't follow.

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Though she had been resting for most of the day, excused from dining with the king and prince as she often did, Morgana felt as though she hadn't slept in weeks. She hadn't looked in the mirror in days, but if she had, she felt certain she would see the dark smudges of exhaustion under heavy-lidded eyes. Without Gwen's meticulous care, the dark waves of her hair would be a knotted mess from her constant tossing and turning. Her head throbbed. Her dreams had kept her restless and anxious, but when she tried to remember them, they oozed away and left only a thick trail of dread.

"I can stay if that would make you feel better," Gwen offered. She sat on the edge of the bed next to Morgana. Her presence had been a grounding force ever since the incident. Since before then, to be honest; never had Morgana suffered a nightmare without being comforted by the maidservant who had become more than a friend to her. A caretaker, a confidant, and a sister in all but blood, Gwen had kept Morgana from fleeing the castle out of frustration more than once.

"You've done so much already," she said. No matter how much she wanted her there, Morgana would feel cruel to keep Gwen from her own home and bed for another night.

"I don't mind."

"I'll be fine," Morgana lied. Her skin felt tight, as if it were too small for her body, and the sense of dread settled into her bones. Tonight would be no better than the other, and should she cause more damage, she would not risk Gwen's safety for her own peace of mind. "Really."

Gwen smiled softly, and Morgana knew that even though she didn't believe her, she would do as she asked. She squeezed her hand in a silent show of sympathy and understanding and stood to leave.

"Gwen?" Morgana called before she could exit the room. Her voice small in the dark room, even to her. Gwen turned around expectantly, her brown eyes warm with compassion. "Take the candle." Morgana didn't know how much it would help, if at all, but perhaps she'd feel safer with it far away from where she could call it to life.

Gwen nodded, took the candle, and then she was gone in a soft swish of her purple skirts.

Morgana slipped under the covers and curled up on her side. Reluctantly, she let her eyes slip shut. Her threads of thought unraveled and scattered, and she fell into the darkness of sleep.

Red-orange flames leapt up white castle walls, blackened the stones, raining down into the city – onto the people – more bodies, more burning, more choked-off screams and pleas. Walls cracked in the searing heat. Camelot crumpled into crushing rubble. Thick smoke and ashes throttled the air, and no one could breathe, she couldn't breathe –

She jolted upright, gasping, lungs aching, fingers clenched in her sheets and her eyes stinging like the room was filled with smoke. Her own heartbeat thundered in her ears, and her eyes darted around the room, seeking something, anything that could calm her pulse. They found a splash of white and vibrant pink in the dark room – the bouquet that Gwen had said Merlin brought her. The moment her attention settled there, the vase shattered in a rain of blue shards and dust, the flowers falling limply to the table.

Morgana recoiled, horrified with herself. She was dangerous, her – her *magic* was dangerous.

She couldn't go on like this.

She swung her feet over the edge of her bed, barely noticing the shock of cold stone floor against her heels as she ran for the door. Flinging it open, she hurried down the halls and stairwells, and only slowed enough to shove through any closed doors that got in her way.

When she burst into Gaius's chambers, she almost cried when the only person to greet her was Arthur's manservant.

A glance around the room told her they were alone, but even so, she asked, "Is Gaius here?"

"Er, no. He's not here at the moment," Merlin said. "He should be back soon, though." His brow crumpled into worry as he took in her disheveled appearance, and he stepped away from his task of blowing out the candles in the room.

"I need to speak to him. Where is he?"

"He's gone to see the King." He searched her face with concerned, earnest eyes. "What's wrong?"

Morgana hesitated. Maybe Gaius wouldn't help her as she hoped. Maybe he would hand her another vial of blue liquid and tell her that what she had seen could be explained away, that what she had felt wasn't real. Her hands trembled. She didn't want to be dismissed like a frightened child again.

Merlin was a friend, though, wasn't he? He wouldn't dismiss her; he would tell her what he thought and be straightforward about it. He was a good listener, and loyal to a fault. At the risk of his own life, he had rescued the Druid boy, a known magic user. He had lied for Gwen when she was suspected of sorcery, willing to face execution in her place.

Would he do the same for her, even if the accusations were true? Would he lie for her?

"You can trust me, Morgana. You know you can." The sincerity in his voice crumbled her indecision. She hoped she wasn't making a fatal mistake by telling him the truth.

"I'm scared, Merlin," she whispered. She hated the way her voice warbled, the way she still couldn't quite catch her breath, the way she could feel tears threatening to fall. "I don't understand anything anymore. I need to know what's happening. Please."

Merlin glanced over her shoulder at the door as though he hoped his mentor would appear there before he had to say anything more. "Gaius will be back soon. He'll be able to help you," he said, but even he looked uncertain about that.

"He won't. I don't want any more remedies. They won't do any good." She almost choked on her next words, but she forced them out through the tightness in her throat. "It's magic, Merlin."

Shock slackened his pale features. His blue eyes widened, disbelieving. "What?"

"I'm your friend," she pleaded. "You know I wouldn't make this up."

"Of course," he said. His voice was firm, but a mix of emotions she couldn't place tugged his expression into something unreadable.

"Then you believe me? You think it's magic, too." His lips had tightened into an uncertain line, and Morgana felt her hope slipping away like water through loose fingers. "Please, Merlin, I just need to hear someone say it so I don't have to keep feeling like I'm imagining it."

"I really wish there was something I could say."

The words made her feel the cold of the stone floors and the chill in the air seep through the thin fabric of her nightdress and curl around her heart. She backed away from the pity in his eyes. She spun to the door, desperate to escape Merlin's lack of a reaction, so much worse than Gaius's patronization and useless remedies.

Maybe he wouldn't tell anyone, but he wouldn't help her, either.

"Morgana," he tried, reaching out in an aborted movement, and suddenly his face and voice were flooded with desperate regret. "Morgana, wait."

She paused, her hand just touching the door, torn between running from him to deal with this on her own and seeking someone, anyone with whom she could share her fears. She wanted to believe that he would support her. She had to believe she wasn't alone.

When Merlin didn't continue, she turned to study his expression, trying to read his thoughts in the conflicting emotions flitting across his face. With a jolt, she recognized the tension in his shoulders and the tightness around his eyes.

"There's something you're not telling me." Her chest constricted when guilt flickered in his eyes, replaced – no, *covered up* – a moment later with confusion. She stepped into his space so she could stab an accusing finger at his chest. "You know something, but you won't say it. Why not? What could *possibly* be worse than this?" she demanded. The tears still burned in her eyes, and a hot wave of anger pushed them closer to spilling over.

He dropped her gaze to stare at the floor. He shook his head minutely, less for her benefit and more like he was arguing with himself. When he met her eyes again, he looked resigned and apologetic.

"Morgana, I – "

"No," she snapped, cutting him off. "Don't lie to me. *Please,* Merlin. I trust you." She took a shaky breath. "Why can't you trust me?"

A tense moment passed, and Morgana wasn't sure Merlin would answer her. He studied the floor with an intensity he usually reserved for glaring at Arthur.

"I want to," he said at last. He spoke with the barest hint of sound, as if he were afraid to be heard. "I don't know if I can."

Of course you can, she almost said, but she stilled before the words fell out. Her mind raced to explain his vague answer and the bizarre, conflicting mess of emotions and reactions he'd had since she had told him about the magic.

With sudden clarity, she recalled his open wonder and hope during their talk about their motivations for helping the Druid boy. *Why are you looking at me like that?* she had asked him, and he'd shaken his head and suppressed the smile that had been blooming on his face like a flower in sunlight. *Nothing*, he'd answered.

But it wasn't nothing, was it?

"You have magic, too," she whispered. His eyes squeezed shut and she heard a faint stutter in his breath, saw him restrain a flinch. He tensed as if to run and keep running, away from her and Camelot and the threat of death, but then he calmed. The tension bled from his shoulders. His chest rose and fell on a lung-clearing breath. His clenched fists loosened at his sides. He opened his eyes, and when he looked at her, she could see no trace of uncertainty or fear.

He said, "Yes."

Morgana's legs felt weak. The surge of fear that had sped her down the halls and kept her on her feet drained away and left her trembling and empty. She stumbled back until she was leaning against the door frame, the latch digging into her spine.

"You weren't going to tell me."

"I couldn't. I wanted to, I swear, I just – I couldn't." Couldn't risk it, she supposed, and maybe she could understand that. He looked down again, but it was only for a second before he met her eyes. "I don't like lying to my friends."

Without her permission, a smile wobbled its way onto her lips. "Friends?" she repeated, and he nodded. An answering grin crinkled his eyes into dark crescents with only a glimmer of blue shining from between his thick lashes.

Maybe he would be willing to open up to her now. Maybe neither of them had to bear this secret alone.

Somehow, this thought was what finally made the tears well up and tumble down her cheeks. She lifted an unsteady hand to swipe at the wet tracks before she gave up and let them flow. She took a tentative step forward, watching for Merlin's reaction, but he looked as relieved and hopeful as she felt.

Without another thought, she flung her arms around his neck and clung, knocking him back a step with the force of it. She buried her nose into his shoulder, and her tears soaked into his red tunic. His arms encircled her in a warm, solid embrace.

For the first time in days, Morgana felt safe.

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Gaius was going to *kill* him.

It wouldn't matter that Merlin hadn't actually told Morgana anything until she'd already figured it out. He'd be poisoned within the day.

Oh, I'm sorry, Sire. I don't know where Merlin is, Gaius would say. *He went to the tavern and never came back. Now excuse me, I need to dump this victim of an unfortunate and fatal disease in the forest somewhere. We don't want the body infecting the citizens, do we? No, Sire, we don't.* And that would be the end of him, never to be seen again.

Despite his anxiousness, he couldn't bring himself to regret his confession. He could have lied, told her she was wrong, and she couldn't have proved otherwise. But he didn't want that, and he still couldn't tell if he'd been selfish or selfless for it. Perhaps both.

His gaze wandered to where she slept curled on his straw mattress, her hair splayed across his pillow in dark waves. She stirred occasionally, head rolling back and forth, brow furrowing. He curled his fingers around hers where they lay clenching and unclenching, stilling the movement. He willed calming threads of his magic to seep through her skin in the hopes that he could ease her restless dreams.

She hadn't wanted to return to her room, even though he'd promised they would talk more soon. He'd eyed his mattress, dubious that she would be able to sleep somewhere so unlike her large, plush bed with its soft sheets and feather pillows, but she reminded him, scathingly, that she had slept on root-ridden forest floors just as he had and survived. He'd read fear in

the bite of the remark and conceded, taking a spare blanket and the floor and promising to wake her before Gaius so she could return to her room in the morning.

An hour of fidgeting and persistent thoughts later, he'd given up on sleeping. He'd leant against the wall by his bed to sort out his mind and keep watch over Morgana.

When Morgana's breathing evened and the creases on her forehead smoothed, he released her hand and wrapped his arms around his knees, pulling them up so he could rest his chin on them.

He wouldn't tell her about Gaius, and he wouldn't tell Gaius about what he'd done. Not yet, anyway. He didn't want to lie to either of them (and Gaius saw through too many of his lies for it to work for long), but they were all too raw at the moment. Morgana needed time to learn some measure of control, and Gaius…

No amount of time would make Gaius less furious that Merlin had let Morgana learn his secret, but that wouldn't stop Merlin from putting off the inevitable explosion for as long as possible.

He wouldn't tell her about his destiny just yet, either. Or the dragon. Oh, gods, the dragon. If Gaius would poison him, the dragon would spit roast him. Slowly. And eat him. And pick his massive teeth with Merlin's bones. *Foolish young warlock,* he'd roar first. *You have doomed Camelot to destruction! Your destiny can never be fulfilled!* And then he'd have a crispy Merlin-sized snack.

Not for the first time, Merlin wondered where the dragon's meals came from, or if he really needed to eat. He knew all too well (from more experience than he cared to have) that the dragon's breath reeked of death and smoke, but he'd never seen him eat or ventured further into the cave than the small ledge at the entrance.

Merlin shooed that line of thought out of his head. Regardless of the dragon's meal plan, he didn't want to talk to him unless it was absolutely vital to the kingdom and Arthur's survival. He'd had enough of his manipulations and infuriatingly unhelpful riddles. Morgana didn't need to know about him, and he didn't need to know about Morgana – if, that is, he didn't already know.

Merlin sighed, then muttered a curse aimed at ambiguously evil, prophetic dragons under his breath.

He could tell Morgana about everything else, though: his life in Ealdor, the magic book (perhaps he'd claim that he found it in an untended corner of the library, or that he brought it to Camelot when he first arrived), his own discoveries and observations about magic. Maybe he could tell her his side of a few of Arthur's stories of adventure – leaving out the "two sides of the same coin" bit, of course, because that was entirely too embarrassing.

Try as he might, the smile that had been stretching his face since just before Morgana had hugged him refused to be suppressed. He buried it in his arms, aching with giddy relief and glee. Morgana was one more person with whom he could *truly* be himself, and she could do

the same in return. He ignored the complications, the reality of what he'd done, so he could take a moment to bask in the pure, idyllic idea of it.

He fell asleep with the smile still firmly in place.

"What are you smiling about?" Arthur asked the next morning, glaring at Merlin all bleary-eyed and grouchy over his breakfast.

Merlin beamed at him and straightened the prince's linens with a snap. "It's a beautiful morning, Sire! What isn't there to smile about?"

"Oh, I don't know," Arthur said, rolling his eyes in exasperation as if Merlin possessed the thickest skull in all of Camelot. "The assassination attempt on Morgana, perhaps?"

"I wouldn't worry about that, Sire." Merlin had woken Morgana well before Gaius would stir or Gwen would arrive for her duties, and he'd escorted her to her chambers before leaving for the kitchen to fetch Arthur's breakfast. Even though he had only caught a few hours of sleep, Merlin felt bright-eyed and chipper. Morgana had magic, Morgana *knew* she had magic, Morgana knew *Merlin* had magic, and they could talk about magic and do magical things together and he had one less friend he needed to lie to about magic.

"And why not?"

Merlin gave Arthur his best wide-eyed expression of absolute sincerity. "Because Camelot's knights are the finest in the land. I'm sure they'll find the assassin in no time at all."

Arthur stabbed viciously at a sausage. As the leader of the knights, the blame fell to him if he couldn't find the (nonexistent) culprit. Merlin felt a bit bad about that. Arthur didn't deserve his father's wrath for failing to accomplish an impossible task.

Privately, Merlin believed that Arthur hadn't done anything to deserve a single second of his father's wrath in the entire time he'd known him. No matter how much of a prat he could be.

"I didn't know you thought so highly of us," Arthur said before he bit the sausage in half.

"Not you," Merlin clarified as he rummaged through Arthur's cabinet to pick out his clothes for the day. "You're an ass. The rest of the knights are very fine indeed."

Arthur choked, and instead of blurting out a response around his half-chewed food, he retaliated by flinging his fork (and the rest of his sausage with it) across the room. Merlin barely needed to dodge; it bounced off the open cabinet door. He turned around and put his hands on his hips in mock reprimand, one of Arthur's red tunics dangling from his fingers.

"See, this is what I'm talking about!" he exclaimed. "It's rude to waste food. I know for a fact the cook worked very hard to make those for you." He *did* know for a fact that the cook worked hard to keep Merlin (and his "thieving fingers") out of her kitchen, but whether she'd put any special effort into making the prince's breakfast was anyone's guess.

Arthur grumbled something unintelligible that Merlin chose to ignore, swallowed, and picked up his next sausage with his fingers to wave it in Merlin's direction. "Whether you worry about the assassin or not, *I* still need to. I've a meeting with the knights this morning, and in the meantime…"

Merlin sighed as Arthur rattled off a list of chores for him to work on while he and the knights investigated the heinous, imagined sorcerer who had menaced the king's ward.

Noon found Merlin ineffectually rubbing a cloth over Arthur's chainmail while his mind wandered from absent thought to persistent worry to mild annoyance. He stared, unseeing, at the worn wood of the doors to Arthur's chambers until they swung open to allow Arthur and Sir Leon entry.

"You sure this is all of them?" Arthur was asking.

Merlin's attention snapped back to the present, and he renewed his scrubbing so it would seem like he'd actually been making an effort.

"Names and last known dwelling places," Leon answered. Merlin shot a quick, curious glance at him, wondering whom they meant by "them."

"My father suspects the fire was started by sorcery." Well, he was right in one respect.

"Indeed, Sire. I've included the details of everyone we suspect of consorting with sorcerers, witches, or druids."

Arthur spread the scroll on the table at which Merlin was working, examining the list to confirm Leon's explanation.

"Gather the men," he ordered. "We'll arrest them immediately."

A cold wave of nausea swept through Merlin's chest. He hadn't considered what would happen when they couldn't find enough evidence to point to a specific culprit; he'd been too busy soaking in his own personal relief. It seemed that they wouldn't be letting the incident go as an accident, as Merlin had hoped.

Leon nodded and exited, and Arthur turned his attention to his servant.

"I thought I told you to do that yesterday," he said, meaning the chainmail.

Yesterday, when Merlin had been running around doing everything he could think of to make Morgana feel better. Yesterday, when his chores had been the last thing on his mind.

"I didn't have time. I was cleaning the stables," he explained, latching onto one of the few things he *had* accomplished.

"That's strange. Because a little bird told me you were somewhere else." He turned away to tug off his dark blue coat, and Merlin took the chance to nudge the scroll open with a trace of magic. He tilted his head to scan the names and locations; perhaps he could help a few of them escape arrest.

"Mucking out the stables is strange and a talking bird isn't?" he responded absentmindedly to Arthur's comment, hoping Arthur would continue to talk without turning around.

No such luck. He let the scroll roll shut as Arthur said, "Merlin, what've we said about you trying to be funny?"

"I shouldn't."

Arthur nodded in smug agreement, as if he didn't love all of Merlin's jokes (as Merlin knew he did, no matter what he said). He threw a look at the table before he walked away to continue changing. "So where are my flowers?"

The moment Arthur's back was turned, Merlin unrolled the scroll again with a touch of power and kept reading. "Your flowers?"

"I heard Morgana got some." The scroll snapped shut. Why did Arthur have to keep *looking* at him as he spoke? "I assumed you'd be putting them in all the rooms." By the insincere lilt of his words, he had assumed no such thing. "Or is she the only one to receive a token of your affections?"

"Yes," Merlin answered without fully registering the question. He realized his mistake when Arthur tilted his head back, his mouth quirked into a triumphant grin and what would certainly be a retort laden with implications on his tongue. "Er, no," he amended hastily, despairing at the way Arthur nodded in mock-belief, as if he knew Merlin was lying and had decided to humor him. "Er, uh…what? It's not a token of anything, affection or otherwise."

"I see. So why were you trying to hide them from me yesterday?"

Gregory Cdharium; Camelot, Lower Town; Suspected sorcerer.

"I wasn't. Erm, I mean, I was. Just, erm, I didn't want you to get the wrong impression."

Callum Mallor; Camelot, Lower Town; Suspected of crafting magical items.

"And what's the right impression?"

Forridel; Camelot, Lower Town; Suspected of consorting with Druids.

"That I was trying to cheer her up after the fire."

Tomas Fletcher; Camelot, Lower Town; Suspected of harboring sorcerers.

"Pick them yourself?"

Merlin gave up on trying to memorize names and carry on a conversation at the same time. He snatched the scroll off the table and tucked it in his jacket, out of sight, just in time for Arthur to finish fastening the red quilted underlayer.

"Maybe," Merlin said, flustered at the way Arthur kept grinning at him as though he expected him to suddenly drop to his knees and proclaim his undying love for Morgana. Or as though he enjoyed seeing him squirm, at the very least. "I was only trying to be nice," he insisted.

Finally, Arthur let the subject drop, asking for his sword before dismissing him. Merlin hurried out the door.

He had to get to the Lower Town before the knights did.

Merlin managed to get out of the castle and into the city without a problem. He felt inclined to sneak, since what he meant to do wasn't strictly legal, but the guards had no reason to look at him twice; he wasn't on their list, and therefore, wasn't worth their time. As long as he didn't run into Arthur, no one would question him.

Many of the names on the list had already been taken. Guards filled the streets, dragging people out of their homes as they protested, wailed, or called aborted reassurances and farewells to their friends and families. Their neighbors watched in silent horror from their windows and through cracked-open doors, while strangers stared over their shoulders as they went about their daily tasks.

Merlin gritted his teeth and moved on to the next street. He couldn't help these people, but he could warn others.

Gregory, a stout man with a scraggly brown beard that narrowed to a point, blanched at Merlin's hushed warning and slammed the door in his face. Merlin listened at the door for a moment, and he only hurried away when he heard cabinets slamming inside – as if the man were packing in a rush.

Tomas trembled. He was trembling when he opened the door, and Merlin began to seriously worry for him (and wonder if Gaius had any remedies to alleviate this sort of thing) when he started to tremble even harder at the news of arrests. Shorter and even thinner than Merlin himself, he threw his arms around Merlin's torso in a grateful hug before running off down the road without taking so much as a jacket with him.

Callum had the thick muscles of a man accustomed to heavy labor and the disposition of a priest. He thanked Merlin for coming, promised not to tell anyone that he'd been there, and politely told him that he could handle himself and would face the guards safe in the knowledge of his innocence. Before Merlin could tell him that innocence didn't always find its footing in Uther's courtroom, he'd been patted on the head, given a sweet roll, and pushed out the back door.

When Merlin arrived at Forridel's house, he thought she wasn't home. He unlocked the door with a few whispered words snooped through her rooms, swiping aside curtains to look for

her until he felt the sharp point of a sword digging lightly into his back.

"Move and I kill you." The voice was level and sure, and he did not doubt that she would follow through with her words if he gave her reason to doubt him.

 "Forridel?" he said.

"Who are you?"

"There is no time to explain, we have to get out of here." He raised his hands in a gesture of peace and looked over his shoulder despite the threat. He met the wary, even stare of a young woman with her hair tied back in messy twists and braids. Blonde wisps framed her face. "The King's men are coming for you."

Pounding on the door confirmed his words just a second later, and after a few assessing moments, Forridel nodded and lowered her sword.

"Open in the name of the King!" The command came through the walls, muffled but clear, as Forridel led Merlin out through the back door. They paused several houses beyond hers, peering around the corner to watch the guards.

"How did you know they were coming for me?" she asked.

"I'm Prince Arthur's servant."

"You took a great risk, thank you."

"I'm just sorry I couldn't help them all." There were far, far more people being arrested than had been on the list given to Arthur – dozens of citizens being marched down the street, shoved back into line whenever they strayed.

"We better go," Forridel said, but he caught her with a hand to her shoulder before she could take more than a step.

"Wait! Will you help me warn the rest?" he asked.

She hesitated, and he couldn't blame her. She would be risking as much as he if she remained in the city for any longer, instead of fleeing while she had the chance. He had to ask, though; two of them could reach more people, and maybe they could save more lives.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked at last. Merlin let the breath he'd been holding huff out all at once.

He pulled the crumpled scroll out of his jacket and showed it to her, pointing out the people that, as far as he knew, hadn't been taken yet.

"I'll get to the ones closer to the guards. It's less of a risk to me if I'm found there," he said, and she hummed in agreement, her eyes fixed on the list.

"I'll warn the rest, then." With a sharp nod, she left without another word.

Merlin checked down the street before he darted across it in the direction opposite Forridel, his gait an awkward mix of "act natural" and "hurry up hurry up *hurry up.*"

By the time he returned to the castle, exhausted from running from one end of town to the other and the constant surges of fear and stress, he wasn't sure how many the two of them had been able to reach, how many had escaped after they'd been warned, or if Forridel herself had avoided capture. He wondered how many people were in the cells now, and if they would all be able to return home.

Or, the more cynical side of him added, if *any* of them would.

<center>oo00oo</center>

Morgana felt better than she had in days. She had slept soundly, despite the discomfort of Merlin's tiny cot – how he could bear to sleep there every night was a mystery to her, and she wondered if she could convince Arthur to increase his salary so he could afford something more suitable to one of the highest-ranking servants in the kingdom.

One of the highest-ranking servants in the kingdom – the kingdom that *banned magic* on pain of death – had magic. Uther himself had hired Merlin to be Arthur's servant, and wasn't that the greatest irony of all? She could still hardly get her head around it.

She couldn't get her head around her own magic, either, if that really was what was happening to her. How was it possible? Had it…latched onto her somehow, or had she always had it? She used to think magic had to be learned. The years had shaken that belief. Now, she didn't know what to expect.

Knocking interrupted Morgana's thoughts, and she slipped off her bed to open the door.

"Merlin," she greeted him with a smile. Perhaps now she could get some answers.

"My Lady."

She caught sight of the familiar vial in his hand, but he pocketed it when he noticed her wariness.

"Just an excuse for the guards," he explained. There were more sentries than ever patrolling the halls surrounding her chambers, despite half the Lower Town sitting in shackles awaiting Uther's twisted version of justice. She had seen them being driven like cattle through the courtyard. The sight had left a bitter taste in her mouth, and now anger sharpened her fear.

She gave him a short nod of understanding. Even without the current security situation, Merlin had little reason to go to Morgana's chambers outside of errands for Gaius.

"We'll need to do better than that if I'm going to learn anything," she said. She stepped aside to let him enter and shut the door behind him.

"You're right. We don't have a lot of time." He bit his lip and his brow furrowed, as though he were weighing his next words carefully.

"I have so many questions," she said, fighting to keep the tremor out of her voice. "I'm still so confused, and scared – "

"You don't need to be." At her disbelieving expression, he amended, "Not of your powers, I mean. I know what it is to feel alone, like there's something wrong with you. I don't want you to feel like that."

"Thank you," she whispered. The words felt like a balm, soothing and cool against her nerves.

"You have magic." She could see the delight and wonderment shining through his earnestness, and she felt for the first time that maybe this wasn't such a bad thing. "You didn't choose it, but you can learn to use it. It can be a force for good."

"I've always been taught that magic is evil, that it corrupts your soul."

"I know." Blue eyes searched her green ones, and he asked, "Do you really believe that?"

"No." His answering smile was small compared to his frequent full-body grins, but she found herself trusting its sincerity more. "I haven't believed that for a long time."

Merlin jogged down the steps from Morgana's room, knees jarring with each impact and reminding him how much he'd run that day.

Morgana had assured him that she had a plan for how to meet alone more often without suspicion, but before he'd been able to ask what the plan *was*, she'd shooed him out the door.

"If you stay any longer, it'll look suspicious," she'd said, and wished him a good night before shutting him out.

To be honest, Merlin was feeling uneasy about her plan, whatever it was, and the fact that he didn't know one detail of it.

"This has to stop." Arthur's voice made Merlin start, and he turned to see the prince leaning against the wall, his arms crossed. Had he been standing there, waiting for Merlin? "The King would have your head if he found out, and there's no point denying it."

Merlin felt cold fear shudder up his spine. He'd overheard them speaking, hadn't he? He was going to die. They were already building the pyre. Morgana would be safe, probably, if she claimed he'd enchanted her –

He cut off that line of thought before it spun even further out of hand. "Denying what?" he asked instead.

"Your affections for the Lady Morgana."

He said it so *seriously*, Merlin couldn't tamp down a chuckle. "Right."

"Take a bit of advice from someone who knows about women."

"Well, if such a person existed, I would."

Arthur, of course, ignored the jab. "Stick to girls who are more...how can I put it? On your level."

"Thanks."

"She can't be your friend," Arthur said, but his gaze had lost its focus, and Merlin wondered if this piece of advice were meant for Merlin or Arthur himself. "Let alone anything else."

"Yeah, I know."

Arthur returned to the present and shot his servant a grin, patting him on the shoulder with a warm, heavy hand. "You can't hide anything from me, Merlin," he said as he walked away.

For a moment, Merlin found it funny, and he let out a short laugh. The things Merlin hid from Arthur could fill Gaius's shelves with books, perhaps earn an entire section in the library, and Arthur didn't even realize there was something he didn't know.

Then the ache returned. The weight of his deceit made his heart feel like a stone, sinking further and further with each lie. One day, it might drop out of his chest entirely and leave nothing but a ragged hole.

His smile faded.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Merlin…

Merlin groaned and buried his face into his pillow. The *last* thing he wanted to do tonight was talk to the bloody Great Dragon.

Merlin…

They weren't on casual speaking terms anymore. Merlin had made sure of that, and the dragon had cemented it when he'd given his aid only for a price that Merlin wasn't sure he was willing to pay.

Did he know about what happened with Morgana already?

Merlin!

"Alright, fine, I'm coming," Merlin grumbled, shoving his feet into his boots. He padded past Gaius, who snorted and rolled over in his sleep, through the halls, past the dozing guards watching over the dragon's cave, and down the long, rough-hewn tunnel.

"Something has changed," the dragon hissed before Merlin could get a word out. "What have you done?"

"Nothing. I haven't done anything. What are you talking about?"

The dragon narrowed his massive golden eyes, his heavy head lowering until it was almost even with Merlin. He had never seemed so reptilian, so like a snake, coiled and dangerous, until that moment. Merlin gulped.

"I've lived more than a thousand years, seen civilizations rise and fall. Do not believe that you can lie to me," the dragon said. His voice was a low, rumbling rasp. "I can sense the currents of fate, and they have shifted. *What have you done?*"

Merlin hesitated. A vivid image of the dragon, delicately holding a bone between two claws and using it to pick his teeth, flashed through his mind.

"Morgana knows about my magic," he blurted.

Merlin staggered a step back from the force of the roar. The hot stench of decay stung his nostrils, and he raised the hand that wasn't carrying the torch to shield his face before he choked. He spared a moment of gratitude that it was only breath, not flame.

"I didn't tell her! She figured it out on her own!" Merlin yelled in his defense. He wasn't to blame for this, and anyway, where was the harm?

"That does not matter." The words boomed in the echoing cavern, and Merlin wondered if the guards would be startled awake. "You have given the witch – "

"She's not a *witch*. She's my friend!"

"You have given the *witch* the keys to Camelot's destruction. She cannot be trusted. She will betray you, and Camelot will fall."

"You're wrong." He had to be wrong. The dragon was the one who couldn't be trusted; Merlin had fallen for his manipulations before, and his mother had almost died because of it. He would not sacrifice another friend based on the words of a liar. "I know her. She has a good heart."

"It would be better if the witch never learned the true extent of her powers."

"Stop calling her that!" His fingers clenched into fists, the nails biting into the soft flesh of his palms.

"You failed to heed my advice in the past and it brought grave consequences," the dragon reminded him. "If you allow her to live and her power to grow, the cost will be more devastating than you could possibly imagine."

"I won't abandon her, let alone *kill* her," Merlin shouted. The thought of it made his stomach churn. "She needs my help, and I'm going to give it to her."

"If you continue this course of action, you do so alone." With that, the dragon launched himself from his stone perch, his wings beating the air until he rose out of sight. Only the dragging chain, scraping across the rocks, remained as Merlin spun and stormed out of the cave, his heart and head pounding with fury and frustration.

He wouldn't be alone. Not this time.

He had Morgana.

He had a *friend*.

End Notes

I have much more planned for this AU! I mean, it changes *everything*, and I want to write all that out. But I also have like 7 other AUs I want to work on, so I'll be alternating my focus between chapters. Sorry.

side note: i will love you forever if you leave a comment and that's not even an exaggeration

plus kudos and constructive critiques are always welcome and much appreciated

(I'm greedy for feedback, I admit it.)

{ come say hi! }

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!