

## A Path Unwalked

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# A Path Unwalked

by [AnneLilian](#)

## Summary

When Uther pursues Balinor to Ealdor, he finds Hunith instead, and takes her prisoner. What he doesn't know is that she's pregnant. When he finds out, he is unable to kill the child, and entrusts Hunith's imprisonment to his ally, King Olaf. but the other King falls in love instead, and adopts the newborn. Uther is not pleased. Destiny, however, is a fickle thing...  
Royal!Merlin, FemMerlin! Eventual Merlynn/Arthur, but will be slow burn. Rated T for language.

## Notes

I've posted this before on ff . net, but I figured I could put it here too, since it's gotten so much response. I know this isn't typically a popular theme (genderbend), but I really do think it's worth a read.

I've written 8 chapters of this already, so updating should be regular (Mondays and Thursdays, I think).

# Prologue

## Chapter 1: Prologue

She'd never known another life. She was a Princess of Galdara, though she'd never inherit the throne – and that life was hers. So when her mother told her that the reason people called her names and talked about her behind her back, was because her father wasn't really her father... It was only natural she wanted to be alone. Of course, being alone for Princess Merlynn meant sneaking into the woods and sitting with a pack of wolves. It was hours before they found her.

Her mother decided she needed a change of scenery, and pleaded with her husband to take her with him on his diplomatic visit to Camelot. Merlynn was 10 years old, and she adored her father, but now, during this long voyage, she didn't know what to say.

"Talk to me, my darling," he said after they'd been on the road for several hours, and hadn't tried to talk his ear off.

Merlynn looked up at the man who had raised her. How could he not be her father? "I don't understand. Mother told me you aren't my father, but... I don't understand," she repeated, frustrated that she couldn't seem to voice her own thoughts. She wanted to know what had happened, how she came to be, who was her real father, and where was he now? Had he not wanted her? Looking up at the King of Galdara, she dared to think the one question she wanted to ask most: did *he* love her?

King Olaf's eyes softened. "We should have told you much sooner, little bird," he said, adopting the nickname her mother usually used for her. "We just... *I* just wanted you to grow up without having to worry about it."

Merlynn didn't say anything, didn't know *what* to say, and just stared out the window of the carriage.

"Merlynn," her father – no, *the King* – said, drawing her attention back. "You are still my daughter, and I love you, no matter your parentage. You are as dear to me as my own Vivian, do you understand?"

The girl's vision swam, as tears rose to the surface and spilled over her pale cheeks. "Come here, my darling," her father whispered, and held out his arms. Merlynn dove across the carriage, into his arms and sobbed. She wasn't even sure why she was crying, but it felt good to be held. Her father didn't usually show this kind of affection, especially to Vivian, who wasn't much of a hugger, but his youngest had a way of bringing it out of him. Only in private, of course.

The next day's journey was spent in a much lighter mood, with Merlynn chattering on about everything and nothing. If she wasn't buried nose-deep in another of her books, that is. As they neared Camelot, Olaf took his place on his grey mare, while Merlynn hung out of the window to talk to the soldiers accompanying them. They were members of the royal guard,

and had gotten quite used to the little girl's enthusiasm. Most of them simply listened, amused, and occasionally offered a comment.

Merlynn was fairly well liked by most of the staff and soldiers, but it was her beautiful sister Vivian who was well-liked amongst the nobles, even if she could be horribly arrogant. That made Merlynn quiet again. The King, hearing the lull in conversation, slowed his horse until he rode by the window again. "What is it, Merlynn?"

The girl bit her lip, thinking. "Does this mean Viv isn't really my sister?" Oh, she and her older sister fought, of course, like all siblings would, and Merlynn simply didn't understand Vivian's obsession with boys and make-up, as her sister didn't understand Merlynn's love of books and knowledge. But the sisters loved each other. When confronted with the outside world, they were a united front. It was odd for Merlynn, knowing her sister's temperament, and that she could be incredibly rude and arrogant, while still knowing her sister loved her, and would never let anyone speak ill of her... How could she *not* be her sister?

"Merlynn... Even though you are not of my blood, I have chosen you as my family. You are my daughter, and Vivian, though she may not say it, loves you. She is your sister, in all the ways that matter."

"Is that why everyone always says I'm not a real princess? That I'm worthless?" she asked. She had meant it innocently, an honest question, but her father looked angry now.

"Who said that? I'll have their heads! Don't let anyone *ever* tell you that you are worthless, Merlynn, do you understand? You are a legitimate princess of Galdara, and the only reason you will not inherit it, is because your sister is older than you. If anyone ever says that again, I want you to come tell me, or Sir Fredrik," he said. Merlynn shrank back in the face of his anger, even though she knew it was not directed at her. Sir Fredrik – the head of the royal guard – looked solemn, but nodded when she looked over, and offered a tiny smile.

"Yes, papa," she said, dutifully. The King nodded shortly, and moved back to the head of the column, looking every bit the fearsome northern king that he was.

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It took them another hour to get to the gates of Camelot, but when they got there, a welcome party was standing on the steps. Merlynn had only been there once before, when she was five, and she didn't remember much of it, but she did recall being amazed at the beauty of the city. And now it amazed her again.

The King of Camelot, Uther, stood at the front, knights in bright red cloaks flanking the steps, and a blond boy of about Vivian's age stood behind the King, next to a pretty, raven-haired girl.

Merlynn's father and King Uther were friends, she knew, so when they clasped arms, it was done with big smiles on their faces. That smile melted away when Merlynn stepped out of the carriage. Uther whispered something angrily to Olaf, but the man simply glared and responded, equally angry. Their clasped arms seemed far more hostile now.

As Olaf let go, he motioned for Merlynn to come closed, and, gripped with an unexpected shyness, she rushed into his side, hoping to hide in the many furs he still wore. “May I present the Lady Merlynn, my youngest daughter,” her father said, somewhat louder than before.

Uther looked like he’d chewed on a week-old root, but managed a nod in her direction. He scared her. “And may I present my son, Prince Arthur, and my ward, the Lady Morgana.”

The two children walked down the steps and bowed and curtsied respectfully. At least they didn’t seem angry at her presence. She quickly curtsied in response, but stayed close to her father. Where the city had seemed so beautiful to her before, it seemed darker now, like it wanted to draw her in and keep her prisoner.

She was shown to her rooms by a serving girl who couldn’t have been much older than herself, and Morgana, who seemed curious about Merlynn. The princess was equally curious about this new addition to Uther’s household, as she was sure the other girl hadn’t been there 5 years ago. “Are you really Olaf’s daughter?” the Lady asked, seeming more curious than sceptic.

Merlynn nodded.

“You don’t look like him.”

“I look like my mother,” Merlynn replied. She’d gotten her mother’s dark hair and blue eyes. At least now she knew why she had no features connecting her to her father.

“She must be pretty then,” Morgana said diplomatically. Merlynn only blushed. She paled in comparison to her sister’s beauty, and wasn’t used to being complemented when they were in the same room – which was most of the time – so she had a hard time accepting compliments.

“She is,” she managed to say, but stared at the ground.

“Milady?” the dark-skinned serving girl said. “Your bed has been made and there’s a banquet in an hour. I can help you get ready.”

“Thank you... I’m sorry, I forgot your name,” Merlynn said with another blush.

Gwen looked sheepish. “I didn’t give it, I’m so sorry! My name’s Gwen. Well, actually it’s Guinevere, but my friends call me Gwen. Not that I’m presuming that you’re my friend, milady, but–”

Morgana interjected. “She’s a friend, she can be yours too, if you’d like. And if she’ll fetch my things, I can get ready in here.”

“Alright,” Merlynn said, still a little shy, but bolstered by this girl’s kindness.

“See? We’re friends already,” she replied with a grin while Gwen slipped out to get the lady’s things.

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She finally met Prince Arthur at the banquet that night. The food here was strange, and Morgana helped her sort it out, but Arthur wasn't so kind. "What kind of strange land are you from if you even eat normal food?" he asked haughtily.

For the first time since arriving at Camelot, Merlynn found her temper again. She glared at him. "We do eat normal food, you're the ones with strange food!"

Morgana hid a giggle behind her hand, so Arthur sent a glare in her direction as well. The rest of the meal was spent mostly in silence, except when Morgana whispered a few words to her. Merlynn decided she didn't like the Prince of Camelot one bit.

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By the end of that week, she was ready to go back home. She had found a friend in 11 year-old Morgana and Gwen, but Arthur, at 13 years old, was insufferable. He used every opportunity to tease her, and even made her trip in front of King Uther. He still scared her, even though he glared at her less often now. When she told her father of this, the man had only sighed and said that Uther had his reasons.

When they returned back home, Merlynn finally understood why her mother had made her come on this trip. She had no longer felt like she was a part of the family when she'd left, but as she returned, she realized that she had missed and her mother her sister, even though the latter was not related by blood. She was home.

# 11 years ago

## Chapter Summary

The events that lead up to Merlynn growing up in Galdara:  
Hunith has to deal with the backlash of Balinor's visit to Ealdor and is taken captive by King Uther.

### **Chapter 2: 11 years ago**

Knights were searching the village. Knights wearing the red capes of Camelot. Hunith knew that this was bad news, that this was why her beloved had fled, and it chilled her to the bone. After all, it wasn't only her own life on the line now.

She stood by her window, trying not to be too obvious as she watched the patrol, when she noticed him. The King himself had come. She was about to go check again if she'd left anything of Balinor's behind when movement caught her eye. One of neighbours, Clara, was pointing at her house. She'd never gotten along with the woman, but she never thought that she'd stoop this low.

Moving back from the window, Hunith considered running, but the men were on horseback and they were blocking all the village's exits. She had nowhere to run. Trying to calm her racing heart, she decided she could be brave, and sat down calmly at her table, and waited.

She didn't have to wait long. A minute later, the door was kicked in and Uther Pendragon strode in. She'd never seen him up close before, just from a distance when she'd visited her brother Gaius once. He was even more intimidating than she remembered. "Are you Hunith?" he asked, glaring.

She refused to shrink back, and sat up straighter. "I am."

"Then you are under arrest for harbouring a dangerous fugitive. We will take you to Camelot, where you will be tried and sentenced, do you understand?" he asked, even as his men grabbed her arms.

"I do," she replied, thanking the goddess that her voice didn't waver. She knew that the trial would be a mere formality, and that she would be put to death as soon as they got what information they needed out of her.

"Put her on a horse. We ride for Camelot," Uther ordered. Hunith tried to hold her head high as she was put on a horse, her hands bound to the saddle. The position was not only uncomfortable, but made her fear for the child inside her. She'd heard stories of women losing their children in the womb after sloppily riding a horse, or taking a fall. She hoped to

the goddess that this wouldn't become one of those stories. This child was all that she had left of her Balinor.

It was a two day ride, and it was every bit as uncomfortable as she had imagined, but at least she didn't lose blood, which was the first sign of a failed pregnancy. At least there was one good thing about going to Camelot: she could see her brother again.

One of the knights took pity on her when they stopped to make camp that night. He untied her bonds and kept watch as she stretched her legs. She wasn't used to riding on horseback, and she was sore, but grateful for the young knight. "Thank you," she whispered, and held out her hands to be bound again. The man nodded and retied the rope, a little loosely this time. She could have wriggled out, in time, but why would she? She couldn't run, they would catch up to her in no time, and she had nowhere to run.

As the men sat down around the campfire, Uther strode over. Hunith steeled herself. She wasn't sure what to expect, but she would be damned if she would appear afraid. He sat down on the log in front of her, glaring at her. "Where is Balinor?" he questioned. So it began. It appeared the King didn't have the patience to wait until they'd reached Camelot.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully.

"You lie. Where is he?" he asked forcefully. "Tell me now and I may spare your life."

"I cannot tell you what I do not know," she replied calmly. She knew not to antagonise this man, so she would tell him all that she knew. She trusted Balinor to take care of himself, to hide where he would never be found.

Uther glared. "Tell me how you met him," he asked, and it took Hunith by surprise. She hadn't expected him to ask that. From the look on his face, he'd noticed her surprise.

"I found him, injured in the woods just past the village. I took him to my home and nursed him back to health. When he was well enough he told me who he was and why he was running. He offered to leave me in peace." Uther simply regarded her, no expression on his face. Hunith wondered what he was thinking. "I declined. He lived with me for another season, helping me with the harvest, and whatever else I needed, to repay me for my kindness."

"You loved him." It was a statement, not a question, but Hunith nodded all the same.

"I still do."

"You loved a man, even though you knew what he was?"

"Magic is not outlawed in Cenred's kingdom. Your laws did not apply to me, or so I thought." It was a subtle jab, and one she probably shouldn't have uttered, but she couldn't help herself. Uther was the reason she'd lost the love of her life. The reason her child would grow up without a father, if it got the chance to grow up at all.

Uther glared. "He left, why?"



Hunith looked at her bound hands. “We got word that patrols from Camelot were searing the border towns, and knew that it would be a matter of time until you’d reached Ealdor. He left in the night, leaving me a note to tell me he was sorry, but that this wasn’t the sort of life for me. I burned it straight away. A month later, that patrol rode into my village and my neighbour turned on me,” she said matter-of-factly. She didn’t blame Clara for turning her in. The woman didn’t like her, and had five mouths to feed, and no one knew about her pregnancy.

“Tell me where he went, and you shall be free.”

“I stand by my choices, sire. And if it comes to that, I shall die by them. But it does not matter, because Balinor refused to tell me where he went. He didn’t want me to follow him, and he didn’t want you to torture me for his location.” Still, Hunith was perfectly calm, staring the King in the eyes. Confusion and pain passed there, for what reason, she couldn’t fathom, but it was there nonetheless.

Abruptly, he stood up and stalked away, leaving Hunith somewhat confused. He’d not gotten what he’d wanted, and yet had not raised a hand towards her. From what she’d heard of him, Uther usually did not shy away from violence to get what he wanted. So why hadn’t he?

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The next day was even worse than the previous day. She’d only gotten some water at supper, and some stale bread at breakfast. She was used to small rations, but this was a little extreme. She hadn’t eaten at all the previous day. She feared that if not for the ropes holding her in place, she would have tumbled off the horse long before they reached the capitol. As it stood, she only swayed sideways when they’d finally come to a stop in the central courtyard of the citadel. Hunith was vaguely aware that it was the King who caught her before she fell, but then everything went dark.

She woke up in a cell, with her brother hovering over her. “Gaius,” she whispered.

He looked worried. “What is it?” she asked, her hands automatically resting protectively over her belly.

“I had to tell the King, I’m sorry Hunith,” he said, and put a hand over hers.

Her breath left her. What would the King do now? He would never allow the child of a known magic user get away. “What’ll happen now?” she asked, not even bothering to hold back tears.

“He wants to interrogate you further, find out where Balinor is, how he escaped Camelot... But I don’t think he’ll do anything, at least until the baby is born. Which I’d say is in about... six months...”

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It had become a habit of the King, to come to the cells every night. He asked her the same questions, every time, but her answer never changed. He yelled at her, tried to bribe her,

threaten her, starve her, anything he could think of, but she wouldn't break. Almost against his will, he had started to admire the strong woman, whose character so resembled his beloved Ygraine. Even thinking of comparing this whore to his wife made him sick. Hunith definitely had spirit, though, and yet never raised her voice, and – though he knew she cried when he couldn't hear her, as reported by the guards – she never showed weakness when faced with him. There was a kindness in her that he had not expected. Gradually, she began to overtake his thoughts, until he couldn't let go of her. He hated himself for thinking these vile things. She was the lover of his enemy, of a sorcerer, who was no doubt planning Uther's demise by now. He had to be eradicated.

It was on one such day that he went down to the cells again. He almost didn't hear the screams until he was at the cell door. He raced ahead, to see what was going on. Gaius was already there, holding Hunith's hand. "You cannot push, my dear, it is not yet time," he was saying. Hunith was about to give birth.

He had known she was pregnant of course, and had stopped the starving and physical violence when he'd found out, but that didn't stop him from feeling the revulsion all over again. This was Balinor's bastard child. It had to be put down before it could spread the filth that was magic any further.

He remained in the shadows by her cell, untouched by the woman's screams. He would be ready to intervene the moment the child drew breath. Hours passed, and the night wore on, but Uther remained where he was, ever vigilant of the sounds he'd only heard once before. As he dwelled on that thought – his son's first screams as he entered this world – the very same sounds from his memory came to life as Hunith's child was born.

Uther stepped out of the shadows, observing the scene before him. Hunith lay on a heap of straw, covered by a blanket Gaius had no doubt produced. And at her breast lay the child. Anger coursed through him as he stepped into the cell. Instantly, Hunith's eyes were on him, and the walls he was used to seeing were erected once more.

"Sire, she needs rest," Gaius tried to say, getting to his feet. "She's–"

Uther ignored him and stepped up to the prisoner, who was now holding the wailing child even closer. "Please, sire," she whispered, utterly exhausted, but holding on to her strength for her child. Unbidden, admiration rose in him for this peasant woman. But his disgust outweighed his admiration, and he snatched the child from her clutching hands. "No!" she sounded desperate, and tears spilled over her cheeks, letting him see her weakness for the first time.

Glaring, Uther took the babe, and turned on his heel, ignoring the protests of his prisoner and her brother.

Evil, Uther knew, could only be cleansed by fire and water, so he headed to the well. He'd ordered many magical children to be drowned there, and now, one more would join their ranks.

Only now did he look at the child – who was no longer wailing. It was a girl. Uther frowned. Could girls even inherit the powers of the dragonlords?

The baby looked up at him with huge, blue eyes, only a shade darker than Arthur's when he'd been born. Uther tried to fight it, but the memory of his son's birth came rushing back as he stared at this child.

He recalled with perfect clarity his own son's screams as air filled his lungs for the first time, his tiny fists clenched and feet kicking. Uther had been so proud, so focussed on his child that he hadn't noticed Ygraine's laboured gasps and Gaius's worried eyes. With her last breath, she had asked him to be kind, and Uther had interpreted it as 'be kind to our son'. He had handed the infant to his nurse and had sat with his wife as life left her body. Arthur had gone quiet then, too.

Looking up, he saw that a light burned in his son's room. He refused to admit it, but Uther knew Arthur was afraid of the dark. The little two-year-old always asked his nurse to keep a candle burning.

The babe in his arms made a sound, and Uther glanced down to see the child yawning widely, and grabbing a tiny fistful of the King's shirt.

Perhaps... perhaps a *girl* would not be so dangerous, his mind whispered treacherously.

Uther swore. If he couldn't be sure that the child would be a danger, he couldn't kill her. He wracked his brain for a solution, because surely the child couldn't remain here in Camelot. And the mother... Hunith couldn't remain either. She evoked uneasy feelings in him, feelings that made him feel unclean. She would have to go as well, but where...?

"My lord?"

Whirling around, Uther faced the soldier standing behind him, and sent him a glare. "What?"

"W-we have received word, sire. King Olaf will be here by morn."

A thoughtful look crossed the King's face. Olaf was a dear friend and ally, and slavery was not yet outlawed in his kingdom. Perhaps...

He walked past the soldier, back towards the dungeons. The wench would have her wish then, her child would live, and she would be free of him. As the King re-entered the cell, he saw Gaius hugging Hunith, who now sobbed uncontrollably. The man got up immediately, though, when the King entered. Silence reigned suddenly, as the woman held her breath in anticipation.

Uther handed the child over to the physician without a word, and headed out. He had important matters to attend to.

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She left Camelot with Olaf three days later, as a prisoner. It would be months before Uther heard of her again, though the news did not please him. Olaf had fallen for the whore's wiles and had married the woman, claiming the baby girl as his own.

Had his friend gone completely mad? Or was magic involved somehow? He'd been sure that Hunith possessed no such power, and the child was far too young.

He'd raced to Galdara, but was not met with the hospitality he'd come to enjoy in the allied kingdom. Uther cautioned Olaf, almost pleaded with him to get rid of his new bride and her daughter, but his friend would not listen. He claimed he loved Hunith, and that Merlynn was his daughter now. Not even the knowledge of who the girl's father was could sway his old friend.

There was nothing he could do.

# Old Haunts

## Chapter Summary

Merlynn and her family arrive in Camelot for the 20th anniversary of the Great Purge.

## Chapter Notes

And this is where the story truly begins...

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

### **Chapter 3: Old Haunts**

It had been a few years since Merlynn had been here, and she wasn't thrilled to be back. Vivian, on the other hand, had never been there, and she was excited enough for both of them.

"I wonder if the stories are true, and there's an actual dragon being kept under the city," she mused aloud.

Merlynn rolled her eyes and set her book down. "Oh come on, that's poppycock, how would you even keep a creature that large underneath a city? How would you trap it? Everyone knows the dragons are extinct, Viv," she said.

Vivian rolled her eyes. "You're no fun."

Merlynn knew what her sister really wanted to gossip about, but didn't dare bring up in the presence of their mother. Vivian wanted to ask Merlynn what she remembered of the knights and other noblemen in Camelot. Merlynn didn't know why, because aside from some flirting, she didn't actually like them. No one was good enough for her, and many a hopeful lad had gotten his heart broken by her.

Merlynn glanced over at her mother, worried. Hunith hadn't been back in Camelot since Olaf had taken her to Galdara. She could only imagine how she must feel. Reaching out a hand, Merlynn rested it on her arm, smiling gently. Hunith looked over and returned the gesture. "I'll be alright my love. It's just a long journey."

"I don't know why you're so worried, mother," Vivian said brashly. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Merlynn resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose. Sometimes her sister could be so obtuse. But Hunith only smiled. "You're absolutely right, darling. I look forward to seeing you in that new dress you commissioned." Queen Hunith, master of diversion.

Vivian's face lit up. "It looks amazing! Wait until you see it, mother, you'll love it!"

Merlynn, however, wasn't paying attention to her sister anymore. The white towers of Camelot had become visible in the distance, and she knew that the city was only a few hour's ride away now. Impatient as she always was, she suddenly got an idea. "Driver, I would like to stretch my legs," she called out. The carriage halted, and the door opened. Sir Fredrik was looking at her suspiciously as he helped her out.

Merlynn rolled her eyes. "No need to look at me like that, captain. We simply haven't had a break since we left the campsite this morning," she said with a grin. "And I think mother could use a moment to gather herself," she added in a whisper.

Sir Fredrik looked torn between doubting the princess's reasons for wanting to stop, and wanting to help his Queen. Eventually, the latter won out. "Stay near, princess, I mean it this time, no running off!" he warned, raising a finger at her.

"Of course!" she said cheerfully, and grabbed her bag from the carriage. Her mother sent her disapproving look, but didn't order her to stay. She knew Merlynn would listen if she asked.

Walking over to her own horse, Merlynn heard Hunith tell her husband why they'd stopped. "Hello there Ciar," Merlynn whispered. The black stallion had been a birthday gift from her father four years ago, and had only been a colt back then. It had been her job to work with the marshal to train him. This was his first long trip, but Merlynn was grateful that she was allowed to bring him along. He was big, much bigger than normal riding horses, such as the palfrey that Vivian usually rode, and her father often joked that he'd accidentally given his daughter a war horse.

Ciar was spirited, and had a tendency to bite, but Merlynn had raised him well, and he listened to her. Glancing around quickly, Merlynn mounted her horse and spurred him on, past the soldiers and her parents. "Merlynn!" her father's voice boomed. "Come back here!" But she ignored him, letting the wind comb through her hair as she sped on.

It would take her family until nightfall to reach the city, but Merlynn could get there in about two hours, if she didn't tire Ciar out too much. She stopped in the woods outside the city and quickly pulled her dress off. She was happy she'd chosen to wear her breeches underneath it. Pulling a jacket from her pack and pulling her hair into a braid, she figured she looked enough like a peasant now to sneak into the city unnoticed.

She led Ciar by the reins and walked through the marketplace, on her way to the castle's central courtyard. The stables were accessible from the outside, but were guarded, naturally. "Excuse me miss, these are the royal stables," a man said, barring her entry. Two soldiers flanked him, showing that there was no way she'd get in there without a royal seal. Luckily, she had one of those.

“Marshall Eames, I presume. I’m princess Merlynn of Galdara, I believe you’re expecting me,” she said, showing the man her seal. The man was robustly build, and a bit older, maybe in his forties. He looked like reasonable man, which he had to be, being in charge of the care of all royal horses.

“My lady,” he said, respectfully nodding his head, and completely unperturbed, even as the two soldiers looked a bit red in the face. Merlynn could appreciate a man who could keep his cool. “Let me take your horse. I shall have your belongings sent to your chambers.”

“Actually,” she interrupted before he could lead Shadow away. “I would appreciate it if you kept my arrival quiet for now,” she asked, a little more unsure now. An honest man was all well and good, but she needed him to lie.

He looked at her appraisingly. “I shan’t lie if someone asks... but I won’t tell.”

Merlynn grinned. “Thank you, marshal,” she said, relieved.

She moved to walk around him, but the man stopped her with a hand on her arm. “I’ll keep my mouth shut, but these two lads...” he said in a low voice.

Merlynn glanced to the soldiers, who’d moved back to their station. They were fairly young, only a little older than herself. She nodded in thanks to the marshal and walked over to the pair. “No need to tell anyone I’ve arrived yet, yeah?” she said, pressing a silver coin into each of their hands.

They nodded gratefully. “We’ll not say a word milady.”

Merlynn turned around and walked across the main courtyard. Time for a family reunion.

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Meeting her uncle again was... interesting. He’d been so startled when she’d walked in, that he’d fallen off a balcony. Luckily, Merlynn’s magic reacted instinctively and moved the old man’s bed under him to break his fall.

“Are you alright, uncle?” she asked, concerned, as she helped him up.

She’d last seen him eight years ago, but had exchanged letters over the years. She hoped he still recognised her.

He squinted. “Merlynn? My goodness, you’ve grown. You must be...” he trailed off, studying her.

“I’m eighteen, uncle,” she replied with a grin. He looked older as well, the years had not been kind to a man as old as him. He had to be nearing 70 now! He was her mother’s half-brother, on their father’s side, but the age difference had never mattered to Merlynn. Her uncle was a man of science, a scholar, and Merlynn had found in him a kindred spirit.

“Well then, you’re old enough to know better than to flaunt your magic like that, what if someone had seen?” he scolded.

Merlynn had the decency to look sheepish, at least. “I’m sorry, I’ll be more careful next time, I promise. Please don’t tell mother.”

Gaius seemed surprised. “Your mother is coming?”

“You didn’t know?” She had honestly thought her mother had told him that she was coming. If she hadn’t even told Gaius... did the King know? “Mother, father and Vivian are arriving tonight, if all goes well. Which reminds me, I promised Morgana I’d stop by first thing. I’ll see you later, okay?” she said, kissed him on the cheek and went through the door.

She knocked on Morgana’s door and slipped inside quietly. The Lady stood at the window, looking sadly down into the courtyard. “Morgana?” she said, stepping closer.

The Lady whirled around, frowning at her. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“Calm down, it’s me, Merlynn,” she said, holding up her hands.

Morgana’s face broke into a smile. “Merlynn, I hadn’t recognised you! What on earth are you wearing?”

Merlynn accepted the hug Morgana offered, and shrugged. “I figured it’d be easier this way to walk about unnoticed. Did you really not recognise me?”

Morgana rolled her eyes. It has been eight years, you’ve changed quite a bit. And those clothes aren’t exactly a hint. I thought you were arriving this evening?”

Before Merlynn could reply, drumrolls could be heard through Morgana’s open window. “What’s going on?” she asked, going over to where Morgana had stood before. In the courtyard below, a crowd had gathered around... an executioner’s block. Merlynn hadn’t even noticed that when she’d walked across the courtyard earlier.

Morgana didn’t answer, but came to stand beside Merlynn, her face a mask of silence once more.

Uther stood on the balcony below, and made a speech about the evils of magic, and that this man, Thomas Collins deserved to die. He motioned for the executioner to do his job.

Merlynn had to avert her eyes, as did Morgana, she saw. She couldn’t believe that this was so public. In Galdara, such executions took place in a private courtyard, and only the families of the accused were allowed in. They didn’t make a spectacle of it. Only a red flag announced what was happening.

In the silence that followed, Uther made a big speech about how it had been 20 years since the end of the Great Purge, and that he’d saved Camelot and imprisoned the Great Dragon. Honestly, it surprised Merlynn more that the rumours about the dragon were true, than that the King felt killing hundreds was a good reason for a festival.

She was about to turn away when a woman’s wail echoed across the courtyard. The beheaded man’s mother stood there. “There is only one evil in this land and it is not magic!” the heartbroken woman called out to Uther. “It is you! With your hatred and your ignorance!”



Merlynn's heart went out to the woman. "That poor soul," Morgana whispered.

"You took my son!" the woman sobbed. No one said a word, not even Uther, who just stared at the woman. He seemed so cold, like he didn't care that the woman had lost what was most precious to her.

"But I promise you, before these celebrations are over you will share my tears! An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a son for a son!"

Uther ordered his guards to capture her, but the woman grabbed her necklace, spoke a few words in the Old Language and vanished in a gust of air.

Merlynn was torn between compassion for the woman, and dread for what was to come. She understood the need for vengeance, but to take it out on someone who had nothing to do with it? She didn't like Arthur very much, but he didn't deserve to die, especially not for Uther's sins.

"I'm glad she got away. That poor woman lost everything today," Morgana said absently, closing her window.

"I feel sorry for her, but to swear to kill someone else's son... It's just not fair that this sort of thing has to happen in the first place."

"Arthur can take care of himself. I just wish there was something I can do besides stand by and watch." Merlynn wasn't entirely sure what to say to that, but thankfully, she didn't need to. Morgana turned to her with a smile. "I'm glad you're here. At least now I won't have to suffer through the feast alone."

Merlynn grinned. "I'll be right there for you to complain to. I was actually planning on exploring the town first, but I'll come back here and we can get ready together, alright?"

"Of course. I'll let Gwen know, she'll be happy to see you... It's so strange. We haven't seen each other in years, but it feels like we just talked yesterday."

"Well, I received your last letter just a week ago, so it's almost like we talked yesterday," Merlynn joked. "I do have to go now, I'm going to help Gaius with some errands."

"I'll see you tonight," Morgana replied with a smile.

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Running errands apparently meant distributing medicine to the sick and wealthy. The first noblemen she delivered a potion to was Sir Olwin. She'd never met the man before, but apparently he was blind, and he didn't wait for her to explain that he couldn't drink it all at once. "I'm sure it's fine..."

Lady Percival was at least a tad more attentive, but luckily didn't recognise her either. Not that Merlynn expected her to. There were only a handful of nobles she'd talked to the last time she was here, and only Morgana talked to her regularly.

Merlynn was taking the scenic route back to Gaius's chambers when she came across a few knights training on the fields just outside the castle walls. They were bullying a servant, throwing knives at the target the poor boy was carrying around. The servant stumbled and fell, the target rolling towards Merlynn.

"That's enough."

"What?" the leader, the blond one, said. He seemed strangely familiar... It suddenly dawned on Merlynn who this could be. Prince Arthur.

"You've had your fun, go play with someone your own size," she said, clenching her teeth. She couldn't believe Arthur hadn't grown out of this sort of behaviour yet. He was still an arse, even after 8 years.

"Do I know you?" he asked condescendingly, striding over confidently.

"Evidently not," she replied, glaring at him.

"Only my friends can talk to me like that," he said.

"My mistake." Arthur looked a tiny bit mollified. Couldn't have that, now could we? "Yeah, I could never have a friend who could be such an arse."

Arthur scoffed. "Nor I one who could be so stupid. Tell me, *girl*, do you know how to walk on your knees?"

"Is that supposed to sound tough?" she asked, genuinely curious. Did he go around threatening he people all the time? "Because I've known you since you were five, and you don't scare me, Arthur." Blast it, she hadn't planned on giving away her identity.

Arthur frowned in confusion. He looked closer at her face, to which she raised an eyebrow. Suddenly he blanched. She might not have planned on it, but the look on his face was definitely worth it.

"Like I said, pick on someone your own size next time," she said, and walked off before he could retort.

It took him about half a minute to catch up to her. "What are you doing here? And dressed like that!" he snapped at her as he grabbed her arm and dragged her into a side alley.

"Get your hands off me!" she hissed and snatched her arm back. "What was that back there? Do you regularly go around threatening servants like that? These are your own people, Arthur," she said, shoving him lightly to bring home her point. "You can't treat them like dirt just because you think you're better than them!"

"I don't!" Arthur protested, but they both knew he was lying.

"I was hoping you'd changed over the last eight years, but I can see I was wrong. You're still the same bully you were when you were twelve." And with that, she turned around and left the Crown Prince in an alley, alone with his thoughts.

## Chapter End Notes

I had waaaaay too much fun writing Arthur and Merlynn's little scene. Hope you liked it!

# And Old Friends

## Chapter Summary

Merlynn and Morgana get reacquainted, and Merlynn's family catches up to her.

### **Chapter 4: And Old Friends**

Too worked up to do much else, Merlynn dropped by her uncle's to tell him that she'd delivered the potions, and then to the stables, to ask a servant to bring her things up to her room. To her dismay, she found out that she'd be staying in the room adjacent to Arthur's. After that was settled, she made her way to Morgana's chambers to get ready. Her door was open, and – figuring the other Lady was expecting her – walked in.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about Arthur. I wouldn’t touch him with a lance pole,” she said as she disappeared behind her changing screen. “Pass me that dress, will you, Gwen?”

Merlynn snorted. “You know, Morgana, before taking your clothes off, you might want to check if the person walking in is actually the person you’re expecting,” she teased, but handed over the dress anyway.

Morgana stuck her head around the screen. “Oh, Merlynn, I’m so sorry, I thought Gwen...”

Merlynn grinned at her friend. “It’s alright. Imagine if I’d have been a servant or a guard, though.”

Giggling along, Morgana took the dress and pulled it on. “Here, I’ll help you with the lacings,” Merlynn offered. “What were you saying about Arthur?”

“Ugh. The man’s a total joustier. Just because I’m the King’s ward doesn’t mean I have to accompany him to the feast, does it?”

“Why would you need to accompany him?” Merlynn asked in honest confusion.

“Exactly. If he wants me to go then he should invite me. And he hasn’t.” Was it just her, or did Morgana seem a little disappointed by that? “So do you know what that means?” she asked just as Merlynn finished with the lacings. “It means the two of us are going by ourselves.”

She walked out from behind the screen, over to her mirror. “So, it’s whether I wear this little tease, or give them a night they’ll really remember,” Morgana said with a wicked grin.

“Honestly, Morgana, it’s like you’re doing it for the attention alone,” Merlynn replied cheekily. “I think you should wait to have them drop their jaws on the floor until tomorrow.

You'll be able to compete with my sister. Vivian just commissioned a new dress, and she's been gushing about it for a week. I swear if I hear one more word about it, I'll kill myself."

Morgana narrowed her eyes. She was known as the most beautiful woman in all of Camelot, but Vivian was known across the Five Kingdoms for her looks, even though she had barely been outside the kingdom. She'd never been as interested in diplomatic missions as Merlynn. "Well, I doubt it's as exciting as *this* dress," Morgana said, perhaps a little venomously as she held up a gorgeous red dress. It left her shoulders bare, and showed off every single curve.

Merlynn raised her eyebrows. "It's a little racy, isn't it?" Truthfully, it was elegant enough to appear tasteful, while still being edgy, but Merlynn felt like she should say something.

Morgana was about to say something – probably in protest – when Gwen walked in. "Milday. Who's...? Wait, you're that girl from the training fields! I saw you from the window, you stood up to Arthur."

Morgana turned to Merlynn, surprised. "What did you do?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing," Merlynn insisted, keeping her eyes on Morgana's dress rather than the Lady herself.

But Gwen wouldn't have any of that. "She stood up to Arthur when he was bullying his servant again. I couldn't hear everything that was being said, but Arthur stopped terrorizing that poor boy. He even chased her down the street. Arthur, not the boy," she said, sounding far too excited for Merlynn's tastes.

Morgana turned to her. "Really? You leave out the best stories, Merlynn!"

Gwen's eyes turned round. "Merlynn? *Princess* Merlynn? My Lady, I'm so sorry, I didn't recognise you!" she apologised, dropping into a quick curtsy.

Leaning against the table, Merlynn waved her away. "It's fine, Gwen. Honestly, we're friends, there's no need for any formalities."

The serving girl looked pleased at that. "Were you going to get ready for the feast? I could help you," she offered.

Merlynn looked relieved. "If it's not too much trouble. The only thing I can do with my hair is a braid. My mother usually does my hair, but I expect she's not too pleased with me at the moment. Could you get my dress from my room? The green one."

"Of course, my L– sorry, old habits. I'll go get it, Merlynn."

Gwen left swiftly, and Morgana had taken up her position at the window again, where men were disassembling the executioner's block. "It seems your family has arrived," she said motioning towards the courtyard. "Let's see this sister of yours."

As Merlynn stood beside her friend, she could see the carriage being pulled onto the courtyard, and Uther and Arthur standing on the steps leading to the castle proper, to greet their guests. Olaf dismounted from his horse first and heartily shook Uther's hand. Vivian

was next, and all the Camelotian guards gawked. Morgana scoffed. Vivian looked distinctly unimpressed with Camelot so far.

Olaf asked something, and his naturally loud voice carried over to where the two women were standing. “Now, if you could tell me where my daughter’s run off to...”

Even from this distance, Merlynn could see how uncomfortable Arthur looked, and thought it served him right. Uther answered the question, but – while they couldn’t understand what he was saying – the question in it was clear. Uther had no idea Merlynn had already arrived.

Arthur spoke up then, but they could hear even less of that. Uther rounded on his son. “What?” that was clearly audible to all. “Tell me that had nothing to do with that altercation I head of.”

“What altercation?” Olaf demanded. “Where’s my daughter?”

Arthur held up his hands, and seemed to be assuring the two Kings that he hadn’t, in fact, hurt her. Amusement rose in Merlynn. It was quite funny to see Arthur squirm like that. “I have to say, whatever you did, I like the show we’re getting now,” Morgana whispered.

The nobles kept talking for a minute, before Olaf happened to look up. Merlynn squeaked and ducked out of sight, but she was fairly sure she’d been seen. In these clothes. Oh, was she going to get it...

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Merlynn decided she needed to face her father at some point, so after donning a simple dress, she’d gone and talked to them. Her father had silently glared at her, which was never good, while her mother had given her a stern talking to about going off on her own, unescorted. Vivian had just listened with a smirk on her face.

Her mother and sister had also declined going to the feast, claiming to be too tired from the long journey.

Which meant her father was accompanying her to the feast. Wonderful.

Olaf had also made it clear he expected her to go apologise to Arthur, because he figured it was somehow *her* fault that she nearly got into a fistfight with the crown prince.

Merlynn couldn’t believe her parents sometimes. She wasn’t five anymore! As she raised her hand to knock on Arthur’s door, she noticed that it was left open. It was just a crack, but it was enough to hear what was being said inside.

“–derstand why father dislikes them so much. He’s always said that Olaf was a good friend and ally, so why is he so against his wife and daughter?” Arthur asked.

Merlynn vaguely wondered who he was talking to, but the bigger part of her was just surprised they were talking about her.

“I don’t know, Merlynn never mentioned anything to me...” Morgana’s familiar voice floated over.

Merlynn sighed. She’d known she’d have to explain it at some point, but she’d been hoping to put it off a little while longer. As she pushed open the door, she saw Arthur pacing up and down his room, while Morgana sat elegantly on a chair at his table, following him with her eyes. “I suppose you haven’t been listening to gossip then,” she said quietly.

Morgana jumped up, and Arthur froze, both of them staring at her with wide eyes. “I’m so sorry,” Morgana said. “We shouldn’t have—”

Merlynn waved her apologies away. “It’s alright, I’m used to it,” she said, walking over and leaning against the table. “If you must know, your king hates me because of my father, my real father.”

Confused faces met that statement. “He was a criminal,” Merlynn explained, keeping her eyes on her hands, “on the run from Uther’s army. Uther pursued him to a small village in Cenred’s kingdom, where he found my mother. Someone told the king that she’d cared for him, so Uther arrested her and took her here.”

Merlynn glanced up to see the two royals listening intently. They really hadn’t known. How novel. Everyone in Galdara knew the story. “He wanted to know where my father was, what he was planning, but my mother didn’t know anything,” Merlynn continued. Unable to sit still, she walked over to the window and watched servants scurry across the central courtyard. “Eventually, the King gave up and sent her to King Olaf to work as a slave. But he fell in love with her, despite being an unwed mother, and a prisoner. He married her and adopted me as his own, very much against Uther’s wishes.”

Finally, she turned around to look at her friend and the Prince properly. “So you can understand why he’s a bit miffed. He thinks I’m the same as my father, but what he doesn’t understand is that Olaf is my father. *He* was the one who raised me, who cared for me, not this nameless criminal my mother doesn’t even talk about.” Morgana and Arthur were stunned into silence, so Merlynn figured this was the perfect time to do what she’d actually come here to do. “My father asked me to come here and apologise, so I’m sorry,” she said unconvincingly, turned on her heel, and exited the room.

She still had some time before the feast, but didn’t really know what to do with herself. She’d planned on getting ready with Morgana, but maybe that wasn’t a good idea anymore. She could go back to her room, or—

‘*Merlynn...*’ a voice called.

The Princess stopped dead in her tracks. There was no one in the hall with her, so that could mean only one thing. Someone was calling to her in her mind. She tried reaching back, but there was a barrier. Whoever it was, knew how to protect themselves.

She was about to follow the sound when footsteps sounded in the hall behind her, and she got distracted. “Merlynn,” Morgana sighed as she rounded the corner. “I was hoping I would find

you. Do you still want to go to the feast tonight. I'd be happy to hide out in my room with you."

Merlynn was about to decline, to tell her that she promised her father she'd be there, but... why would she have to go? Her mother and sister were both not attending. "I'd love that," she said instead, smiling at her friend.

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Her father never showed up at Morgana's room that night, so Merlynn assumed that he'd just gone straight to the feast. Uther, however, did knock on the door about an hour after the feast had started.

"Morgana, what is it? Why are you not joining us at the feast?" he asked, not even acknowledging Merlynn's presence.

"I just don't think chopping someone's head off is cause for celebration," she replied scathingly.

Merlynn decided to intervene before a discussion about magic could start. "She stayed behind on my account, sire," she said, getting up from the table. "I was too tired to attend the feast and begged Morgana to keep me company. It's not her fault."

The King regarded her with cold eyes. "I see."

"I was only doing my duty as Lady of the Household," Morgana said with a slight smirk. Technically, there was nothing Uther could do.

He pressed his lips together, clearly not pleased. "Lady Helen arrived. You will join us for breakfast tomorrow, and I will not hear another word about it," he said sternly, and strode out the door.

Morgana sighed. "He may be my guardian, but he forgets he's not my father," she said bitterly.

Trying to comfort her friend, Merlynn put a hand on her arm. "Come, let's play a game."

Morgana frowned at her, but Merlynn could see that her curiosity had been piqued. "What game?"

"My father gave it to me on my last birthday. It comes from the far east," Merlynn explained as she pulled out the wooden box she'd put away on Morgana's dresser earlier. "It's called chess, and it's a rather fun game, I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

Merlynn set up the board with the finely crafted pieces she so treasured. The King and Queen resembled her parents, while the rooks were the spitting image of her father's advisors. The Knights were Vivian and her, seated on war horses, and the towers...

"Dragons," Morgana said, picking one up carefully. "Better not let Uther see you with these, he wouldn't be amused."



Grinning, Merlynn took the piece back and put it in its rightful spot. “Father taught me how to play and subsequently forbade me from every playing again.”

Morgana frowned as she took up the seat across from Merlynn. “Why?”

“I always beat him,” Merlynn replied cheekily. It wasn’t entirely true, but she *had* beaten her father enough that he’d gotten annoyed and told her to play with someone else. It bored Vivian, but her mother sometimes indulged her, even though she never won.

Morgana returned the grin. “Well then, let’s see if I can match the master,” she said in jest, a determined look on her face.

“Yes,” Merlynn said. “Let’s.”

# The Dragon's Call

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **Chapter 5: The Dragon's Call**

Merlynn went to bed early that night, hoping to lose herself to sleep, and the dreams that came with it. Unfortunately for her, someone else had a different idea.

'*Merlynn...*' the mental voice whispered, rousing her from the edge of sleep. '*Merlynn...*'

Curious, Merlynn got up and sneaked out of her room, following the mental sound past numerous corridors, and into the bowels of the castle. She only came across two guards sitting at the entrance to the dungeons, but she distracted them easily enough. Seriously, Uther would have to strengthen his security.

Lighting a torch on the way, Merlynn made her way down some stairs. There was a layer of dust an inch thick. No one had been down this way in a *long* time. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up straight when she entered a huge cavern. How could a space this big exist underneath a city as big and populous as Camelot? And, more importantly, who was down here?

'*Merlynn...*'

"Where are you?" Merlynn called out, holding up her torch as high as she could. For all the strangeness of the situation, she wasn't afraid. Something inside her told her that whoever was calling her here wasn't an enemy.

Suddenly, a big shape hurtled past her, making her jump back in surprise. It landed on an outcropping of rock in front of her, and only then did she realize what it was.

A huge, golden dragon stared back at her. "I am here," it said calmly, as if it was the most ordinary thing in that world. "How small you are, for such a great destiny."

Merlynn didn't know what to say. What *did* one say to a supposedly extinct creature? "The stories are true... I never thought – wait, what? What destiny?"

"Your gift, Merlynn was given to you for a reason."

Her breath left her. "So there is a reason? I've wondered, but... the druids I learned from at home never answered me when I asked..."

The dragon seemed amused. "Arthur is the Once and Future King who will unite the lands of Albion."

Merlynn was sceptical now. "Right..." She'd heard the legends, of course, but there was no way *Arthur* could be the legendary king who would bring about the golden age.

"But he faces many threats, from friend and foe alike," the dragon continued cryptically.

"I don't see what this has to do with me," Merlynn said truthfully.

"Everything. Without you, Arthur will never succeed, without you, there will be no Albion," he explained. He seemed far too gleeful about this whole situation.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she burst out. She respected the dragon for its wisdom, but this was taking it a bit far. Perhaps it had gone crazy sitting down here by itself for almost 20 years.

"You must protect the young Prince on his way to the throne, be by his side at all times."

"You've got to be joking. What am I, his maid? There has to be some kind of mistake, you've got it wrong!" Merlynn protested, already turning around to leave this insane lizard to his delusions.

"There is no right or wrong," the dragon said, stopping her in her tracks. "Only what is and what isn't."

"I'm serious, if anyone wants to go kill him, they can go right ahead. In fact, I'll give him a hand," she bluffed, putting a hand on her hip. When she'd come down here, she'd expected to find a kindred spirit, not a crazy dragon babbling on about some destiny.

The dragon chuckled. "None of us can choose our destiny, Merlynn, and none can escape it."

Merlynn stood firm, despite his warning. "I don't believe that. I *can't* believe that our futures are set in stone, the world doesn't work like that. Arthur's a prat, and I whole-heartedly believe that I can ignore him until I go back home to Galdara in a week. That's where I belong, not here."

"A destiny is not the same as a future, little sorceress. The road may vary depending on your choices, but the result will always be the same. Or all will fall in ruin," the dragon said sagely.

"But I'm just me. How could *I* be responsible for the world standing tall or toppling down. I'm just a girl..." And she supposed that that was her real problem with the situation. Not that Arthur couldn't be a good King, but that she couldn't possibly be that important.

The dragon looked somewhat sympathetic. "Even the smallest person can change the course of the future," he said gently. "The young Prince will need you before long, little one, and you must be there to protect him."

Merlynn shook her head. "No. There must be another Arthur, because this one is an idiot."

"Perhaps it is your destiny to change that?" he suggested, and then jumped up and stretched his wings, flying up and out of sight.

"No, wait! Stop! I need to know more!" she shouted over the flapping of wings and rattling of chains. But it just ignored her, and Merlynn was left to stand alone in the massive cavern...

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After tossing and turning for most of the night, Merlynn gave up around dawn, and decided to go out to clear her head.

She dressed in a simple, brown peasant dress, took a bag, and made her way to the outer walls. The guards nodded at her, but thankfully didn't comment. She wandered around the woods until she came across some herbs she knew. She was sure her uncle would appreciate it if she picked them, and it gave her something to do while her mind wandered.

How could *Arthur* be the Once and Future King? He was a bully, plain and simple. The way he treated his servant the day before... she couldn't understand why there were so many who were born into nobility and didn't appreciate it. Didn't they realize what it was like to be the servant? To be the one who had to work from daybreak to day's end, to break their backs on the fields to put food on the table? No, she supposed they didn't. Merlynn herself didn't really know what that was like, but she did know that everyone deserved kindness and respect. Just because one happened to be born to peasants instead of royalty, didn't make their lives worth any less.

The snap of a twig alerted her to someone else's presence. She whirled around, her magic tingling just below the surface. "Who's there?" she called out, her hand on the dagger she'd thought to bring.

"It's only me, your highness." A man stepped out from behind a tree, hands up in surrender. He seemed familiar somehow...

"You're the boy," she said, realizing. "Arthur's servant. What are you doing here?" she asked, dropping her hand from her dagger.

The boy blushed. He must've been about her age, maybe a little younger. "It's Prince Arthur, milady, he asked me to keep an eye on you."

Merlynn narrowed her eyes. "That supercilious arse! What did he think I was going to do? Pick a fight?"

The look on the boy's face told her exactly what Arthur had said. "Really? He's such a prat! He's not my father or my brother, he doesn't—" Merlynn caught sight of the boy again and held her tongue. A Princess shouldn't use those kinds of words, as her mother was fond of reminding her. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that..." she trailed off, realizing she didn't even know his name.

"It's Morris, milady."

"Well then, Morris, as long as you're here, would you mind carrying these herbs while I collect more?" she asked as kindly as she could. After all, it wasn't the boy's fault Arthur was an idiot...

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By the time she made her way back to the castle, Merlynn had decided that the dragon's words were just that; words, and that she was perfectly within her right to ignore them. She had more pressing matters to attend to than a senile lizard, after all.

She delivered the herbs to Gaius, and was immediately asked to deliver some more medicine. She left Morgana's draught with Gwen, and then went in search of Lady Helen's room.

It was on the other side of the nobles' wing, but a guard was kind enough to show her to the room. There was no one there, and while Merlynn looked around, her curiosity got the best of her.

On the vanity was a straw puppet, which was odd, it was the sort of thing a poor peasant child might play with. So what was it doing in a Lady's room? Next to it was a big tome, but it wasn't bound properly, like the books in the Royal Library. This was old, full of loose and inserted pages, bound together by a string. When she picked it up, it sent a tingle through Merlynn's fingers. It couldn't be... why would a Lady have a book on magic?

When she heard a sound in the hallway, Merlynn hastily put the book back and dragged a cloth over it for good measure. Why was there a cloth hiding the mirror from view anyway?

Lady Helen entered the room, narrowed eyes staring at Merlynn. "What are you doing in here?" she sounded suspicious, rather than arrogant, like Merlynn had expected.

"Lady Helen, I've been looking for you."

"Who are you?" she asked, still looking suspicious.

"I'm Lady Merlynn... King Olaf's daughter?"

Gone were the narrowed eyes, but there was still no hint of a smile. "Of course, I didn't recognise you."

This time it was Merlynn's turn to look suspicious. "You wouldn't, we've never met..."

Helen looked to the side, and looked distinctly caught. There was a set to her shoulders that Merlynn didn't particularly like, so she smiled to diffuse the tension in the room. "How silly of me, I haven't even told you why I'm here." Reaching for the potion bottle behind her, Merlynn saw how the other woman stiffened. "I have your tonic. For your voice..." she trailed off. Everything about this situation was so odd. "Is everything alright, Lady Helen?"

An obviously forced smile appeared on the Lady's face, but Merlynn decided not to comment, and instead smile back. "I'll take my leave then. I look forward to hearing you sing," she said, more as an excuse to get out, than out of any sort of sincerity. As Merlynn walked back through the hallway to her uncle's, she willed the hairs on the back of her neck to lay back down.

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Merlynn decided to walk back through the lower town to see some more of Camelot, when, of course, she bumped into the one person she didn't want to see.

"Merlynn, what are you doing here? Where's Morris?" he asked, sounding irritated. He was flanked by three other knights, who seemed far too interested in what was happening.

"I sent him home. I don't need a babysitter, Arthur," she ground out, keeping her back to him. "He has enough work as it is."

Arthur scoffed. "That idiot? He—"

Merlynn whirled around. "You just don't get it, do you?" she snapped, stepping right up to him. "Morris is one of your people, the people you're sworn to protect! How can you expect them to respect you when you refuse to do the same?" They had quite an audience by now, but Merlynn didn't care, maybe an audience was exactly what the prat needed.

"You can't talk to me like that," Arthur hissed, clearly angry now. Good.

"And why not? Are you afraid I might say something close to the truth? Look, I've told you you're an arse, I just didn't realize how much of one until now."

"Now look here, princess—"

"Merlynn," a voice called from behind her. The crowd went silent. No one had probably ever seen a woman that beautiful. "What *are* you doing, sister?" Vivian asked in a bored tone, coming to stand beside her.

Arthur seemed a little dazed at the turn of events, and stayed quiet. "Just... talking to the locals, Viv. Did you need something?" she asked, turning to face her sister.

"Yes," Vivian answered brightly. "I need you to do my hair, there's not a competent person in this place. I mean, have you seen them?" Vivian turned to face the Prince. "They look like they don't know the front end of a horse from the back." That had clearly been a jab to Arthur, but either he didn't realize, or he was a lot better at ignoring her insults than Merlynn's. Strangely, this made the raven-haired princess feel strangely proud.

Vivian turned on her heel, and walked back to the castle, so Merlynn followed her. She realized that her sister had gotten her out of a quickly escalating situation with her usual... *charm*.

"Honestly, Merlynn," she said once they were back inside the castle walls, "you'd think you'd have learned to keep your mouth shut by now. I insult people all the time and I never let it get to a brawl."

Merlynn frowned. "That wasn't a brawl, we were just talking."

Vivian raised a perfect eyebrow at her sister. "If it wasn't already it was going to be, soon, with the way Arthur was fingering his sword. Either that or he was thinking something *entirely* different, which wouldn't be much better. You know how father feels about you being near the Pendragons."

Merlynn made a gagging sound. "In his dreams, maybe, and even that sounds offensive. Honestly, Vivian. Can't an argument ever just be an argument to you?"

Vivian smiled sweetly as they came to a stop outside her room. "Oh, my sweet sister. No discussion that looks like *that* could ever *just* be an argument." And with that, she disappeared in her room, leaving her sister somewhat confused and disturbed in the hallway.

## Chapter End Notes

Finally the Great Dragon makes an appearance! I had so much fun having Merlynn call him names ;) So what did you think? I know I'm drawing this episode out a bit, but I felt like it was necessary. I'm writing Valiant right now, and I think that one will be 3 chapters, tops.

# A Feast to Remember

## Chapter Summary

The final part of the episode The Dragon's Call

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### Chapter 6: A Feast to Remember

Merlynn had spent the rest of the day trailing behind Morgana as she organised the last few details for the feast, while Merlynn complained about Arthur. By the time they were heading back to the Lady's rooms, Morgana was rolling her eyes.

"Honestly, Merlynn, if you hate the man so much why are you still talking about him?" she asked, exasperated.

"I'm not," Merlynn protested. "I won't mention him again. In fact, I've forgotten why we're talking about him at all." She was bluffing, of course. That accursed man would just not let her be, not even in her thoughts. She just couldn't understand him.

"Great, let's get ready, then," Morgana said. There was a little edge to her voice that suggested that she was still a bit irritated, though. Gwen was working on the Lady's hair, while Merlynn was still in her brown dress, sitting at Morgana's table.

"Alright, I'll go put on my dress," Merlynn said, stepping behind the changing screen. She slipped out of her clothes and looked at the dress. And looked.

"Merlynn, are you alright back there?" Morgana asked.

Merlynn shook herself. "I should've known Vivian would do this to me," she muttered.

"Do what?" Gwen asked, sounding far closer than Merlynn had thought she would be. She'd stepped behind the screen as well, probably to help her.

Merlynn jumped. "Nothing, it's just... When Vivian commissioned a dress for the feast, she had the seamstress make one for me as well. I didn't look at it before now... I can't wear this."

Merlynn heard Morgana's chair move and figured the other Lady would come see what was going on as well. Merlynn pulled on a light dressing gown and watched as Gwen ran her fingers over the exquisite fabric of the dress.



As soon as she laid eyes on the dress, Morgana gasped. "I can't believe it... I'm definitely going to be upstaged tonight..." she whispered.

Merlynn turned to her friend with wide eyes. "I'm not wearing that! I can't pull that off, not with Vivian in the room. And you for that matter. I'll just look ridiculous, like a little girl playing dress up..."

The dress itself was gorgeous, of course. It was purple with golden accents, like Galdara's colours, and the fabric was soft to the touch. The problem for Merlynn was the open back and the dozens upon dozens of golden roses that adorned the back. The cleavage wasn't too bad, thank the goddess, but it was lined by golden thorns, as though the roses had grown onto the dress, instead of having been sewn on. It was far too beautiful, and Merlynn couldn't wear it.

"Don't be silly, Merlynn, you're beautiful!" Morgana protested. "And it's your first feast in Camelot, you have to make a statement. You have to say 'I am the Princess, be amazed'. Which this dress will accomplish beautifully," she said with a smirk.

Merlynn groaned. "You're not going to let me get out of this, will you?" she asked, eying the dress apprehensively.

"You might as well give in now," Gwen advised. "When Morgana gets an idea in her head, she usually gets her way."

"Fantastic..." Merlynn said sarcastically, but with a little more determination this time. At least she knew the dress would fit. Her sister was nothing if not a perfectionist when it came to fashion...

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Merlynn had absolutely refused to come in through the front entrance. They were already running late, and this would only draw attention to them. Of course, attention was what Morgana loved. So she'd gone that way, while Gwen led her to the servants' entrance.

"It'll be alright," Gwen assured her, before stepping through the door. Merlynn took a minute to breathe and cursed Morgana again for hiding her shawl.

Logically, Merlynn knew that she wasn't unattractive, it was just that being compared to Vivian and Morgana... wasn't her idea of fun. It was just fact that she was less attractive than those two, a fact that she usually had no problem with. Merlynn didn't much care for her appearance, but she knew she had to make an effort at social gatherings such as these.

Steeling herself, Merlynn stepped inside. It wasn't too crowded, though every noble in Camelot was in attendance. She saw her father, and knew that she'd have to face him at some point, so she might as well get it over with. But of course, as soon as her father spotted her, he smiled broadly – wasn't he annoyed with her? – and held out his arms. "There she is, my youngest daughter!" His loud voice carried, and Merlynn did her best to seem composed.

Her mother stood next to her father and smiled sympathetically. Hunith wore a simple, dark blue dress that was perhaps a little too modest, while her father bore the traditional colours of

Galdara – just like Merlynn herself.

Her father's outburst – no doubt brought on by a goblet of wine – had drawn the very attention Merlynn had been trying to avoid. People stared as she made her way across the room towards her parents. Before she got there, however, an arm hooked through hers.

"You look beautiful, sister, far more beautiful than this miserable little kingdom deserves," Vivian whispered through her smile.

"I can't believe you did this to me," Merlynn replied, equally quietly.

"You should know by now I have impeccable taste, Merlynn, I wouldn't have chosen a dress that didn't look good on you. I still look better, of course, but we can't all be the most beautiful Princess," she teased.

Her father kissed their cheeks when they arrived, and their mother gave them a hug. Uther, who had joined them, looked like he'd swallowed something sour, but kissed their hands anyway, as was protocol. As she was trying to avoid the King's eye, Merlynn happened to see Arthur standing next to Morgana a little to her right. He was staring. Why was he staring?

"Mother, you look wonderful," Vivian was saying, smiling sweetly. Merlynn turned her back on Arthur. It wouldn't do to try and decipher what Arthur Pendragon was thinking.

"As do you two, my darling girls," Hunith replied. There was something forced about her face, and the arm that was hooked through Olaf's looked a little tense. It was understandable, of course, seeing as Uther was still standing next to her.

"Yes, my old friend, I must congratulate you on two such beautiful daughters," Uther said to Merlynn's father. Olaf smiled in reply, and Vivian preened under the attention, but – like her mother – Merlynn wasn't entirely comfortable. Suddenly the thought of having to talk to Arthur didn't seem quite so bad, especially if Morgana was there. But she didn't get the chance to excuse herself.

The trumpets sounded, announcing the start of the feast. Everyone made their way to their seats on the edges of the ballroom. The royals sat at the High Table, of course, with the two Kings in the middle and their respective families on either side, with Arthur and Merlynn at the ends. She wouldn't be able to talk to Morgana, but at least Gwen stood close by, and her sister was seated next to her, of course.

"We have enjoyed twenty years of peace and prosperity," Uther began. "It had brought the Kingdom and myself many pleasures. But few can compare with the honour of introducing Lady Helen of Mora!" Uther gestured to the end of the hall, where Lady Helen now stood on a small stage, ready to perform.

A harp started playing, though Merlynn couldn't see where it was, and then Lady Helen started singing. It was truly beautiful; a haunting melody that spread throughout the hall.

The first clue that something was wrong was when Vivian slumped in her seat, as though she'd fallen asleep. Merlynn looked around, and saw the nobles everywhere, just laying down

as if they'd all just decided to take a nap.

Her magic must've been protecting her, because Merlynn couldn't feel a thing. Lady Helen had stepped off her stage and was coming closer and closer to the High Table. Every table she'd passed was covered in cobwebs, the candles blown out. Merlynn had never heard of this kind of magic, but it couldn't be good.

As the song reached its climax, Helen arrived at the High Table and pulled a dagger from her sleeve. She was looking intently at Arthur, and suddenly, Merlynn remembered the old woman on the courtyard the day before; Mary Collins. She'd vowed to take Arthur's life in exchange for her own son.

Looking around frantically, Merlynn searched for a way to stop her. Just as the song reached its climax, her eyes landed on the chandelier. A quick burst of magic broke the chain holding it up and crushed the woman, causing her to change back into Mary Collins.

The hall was silent for a moment as Merlynn held her breath. But then people started moving and she could breathe again. They whispered amongst each other when they noticed the crone laying on the floor, crushed by the chandelier. Suddenly, the woman managed to push herself up and throw the dagger with the last of her strength.

Merlynn acted on instinct alone. Time slowed down, even as she sped towards Arthur, praying to the goddess that she would be fast enough. With her last step, she pushed off and launched herself at the prince, pushing him out of the way. They toppled to the ground rather painfully, but at least they were alive. When she looked up, Merlynn could see that the blade had imbedded itself into the centre of Arthur's chair, almost to the hilt.

"Merlynn!" her father yelled, and rushed over to help her up.

"I'm fine, father, just some bruises," Merlynn assured him, giving in to his hug.

"You saved him." Uther sounded so confused. Merlynn stepped back from her father, but allowed him to keep his arm around her. He needed to contact more than she did. Arthur was looking at her incredulously too. She didn't blame him.

In order to avoid having to look at either Pendragon, Merlynn glanced back towards the woman. She'd died without anyone noticing. Merlynn closed her eyes briefly as guilt flashed through her. The poor woman had only wanted her son back. And she was her kin, in a manner of speaking. What she'd done was wrong, but she didn't deserve to die.

Uther quickly ordered the body and chandelier to be taken away, and the festivities to be postponed until a later date. It would give everyone some time to rest before the tournament that was to be held in two days.

He never even thanked Merlynn.

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Back in her parents' rooms, Vivian mostly just wanted to complain about cobwebs getting into her hair, her father was hovering like a mother hen, and her mother was looking more worried than ever before. Probably because she was the only one who'd realized what had really happened.

She needed to get out of there quickly, so she made up an excuse about a headache and went to her uncle's. "Ah, there's our hero," he joked when she walked in.

Merlynn smiled. "Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"No, I've known for a while now. You saved my life, too, remember?" he said, gesturing for her to sit while he put on the kettle.

"But that was magic," she said halfway hopeful. He'd always cautioned her not to use it, to hide it, just like everyone else did.

Gaius nodded. "And now it seems we've finally found a use for it."

Merlynn's smile vanished. "What do you mean?" It sounded eerily like what the dragon had told her; that she had to protect Arthur from certain doom. Though, in retrospect, she supposed fate had made her intervene after all, no matter her protests to the big lizard.

"Perhaps that's the purpose you've been looking for. Helping people."

Merlynn let go of the breath she hadn't even known she'd been holding. "My destiny," she said, perhaps a littler bitterly. Was it really her fate to run around after Arthur for the rest of her life and make sure he didn't get offed?

"Indeed," Gaius replied, pouring her a cup. "There are worse fates than saving people's lives, Merlynn."

Okay, he had a point. But he didn't know that she was supposed to be saving a very specific prat's life. "I suppose."

Gaius looked at her for another minute, before getting up and pulling a wrapped package out of a little compartment Merlynn had never noticed before. "What's that?" she asked.

Her uncle smiled knowingly and put it on the table in front of her. "This was given to me a long time ago, but I think it may be of more use to you."

Curious, she unfolded the red cloth to reveal... "A book..." She loved books, but it was a little strange that her uncle would be so secretive about this one. Gently, she opened the clasps and turned to a random page. "*A magic book*," she whispered, full of wonder.

When Merlynn had been a little girl, she'd been unable to control her magic. It had been a miracle that the rest of the kingdom hadn't found out, but she supposed it helped that her mother refused to have a maid take care of her. So Hunith had done the only thing she could think of; she'd contacted the local druids. They'd sent a man who would become Merlynn's tutor. Only he didn't just teach her about geography and politics, he also taught her a little about magic, and – on occasion – subtly countered her magic with his own. He only wanted

to risk teaching her the basics, so as not to tempt her to use it too often, but soon enough, her magic grew stronger than his. He'd left, saying that he'd taught her everything she needed to know.

But this... This book had spells, incantations and rituals far beyond anything her teacher had every shown her. Some of the spells in there required great amounts of power, and she couldn't wait to read all about it.

"You must keep it hidden, of course, but it's yours now."

"Oh, thank you uncle! I'll study every word!" she said, throwing her arms around him for a hug. This was the best gift she'd even gotten.

She was fairly sure that Gaius had rolled his eyes at her antics, but she didn't care. Finally, she could learn some *real* magic! "You must be careful with it, Merlynn. Magic is nothing to trifle with," he warned, but he was smiling, so she knew it was only a warning, not an expectation of failure.

"I will, uncle, I promise." And she would. She'd have to be careful when smuggling it back to her room, but once there, she knew exactly which loose floor board to hide it under. At least she knew what she'd be doing for the rest of the night...

## Chapter End Notes

Please comment and tell me what you think! Next chapter: Arthur and Uther's POV of the feast, and a small confrontation between Uther and Hunith!

I've written up to chapter 9, so updates should continue to be regular!

# A different view

## Chapter 7: A different view

Arthur was bored. The feast had only just begun, and he already felt like the evening was wearing on him. Morgana had offered a little distraction when she'd entered. She'd looked spectacular, of course, probably trying to out-do Lady Vivian. He'd talked to Merlynn's sister briefly, but found her insufferable, and for quite other reasons than the younger of the two siblings. At least Merlynn was somewhat amusing in her absolute lack of manners, Vivian was just... arrogant. But of course, the blonde looked spectacular in her sky-blue dress, and seeing his knights' reactions – to both her and Morgana – was both funny and mildly irritating.

Arthur was just about to get a servant to refill his goblet when Morgana came to stand beside him. She was smirking in a way that he recognised all too well. "What are you up to now?" he asked, almost bored.

Morgana grinned even wider. "Oh, you'll see. I just came here to get a good vantage point," she said mysteriously and sipped her goblet.

Arthur half-turned towards her. "What–"

He was interrupted by the booming voice of King Olaf. "There she is, my youngest daughter!" He'd obviously already downed a goblet or two of wine, and looked rather cheerful.

Arthur fought not to let his jaw drop when he saw the object of Olaf's declaration, though. Merlynn stood near the side of the room – how had he not seen her enter? – and looked... regal was the only word that fit. Her face was calm and her back straight as she walked towards her parents. It was suddenly quiet in the banquet hall – save for the music, and whispers of the guests. The only thing betraying the tension inside her was the nervous motion she kept making with her hand. A motion that was halted when her sister linked arms with her. Some of the tension drained out of Merlynn's back.

Which was incredibly visible, due to the lack of fabric there. Her deep purple dress hugged her curves, and exposed her back and neck. Arthur was loathe to admit it, but she looked absolutely gorgeous. And slightly uncomfortable. He wondered if it had been Morgana or Vivian who had put her up to wearing it.

Merlynn held her own during the conversation with the two Kings and her family. It was a little surprising, as Arthur'd had the impression that she didn't have a filter on her thoughts. Maybe that was just when she was angry.

Soon after that, Lady Helen was announced and Arthur sat down to listen.

He wasn't even aware that he'd fallen asleep until he woke again, covered in cobwebs and a darkened hall. In front on the High Table, Lady Helen had been replaced by an old crone,

laying underneath the chandelier. When had that happened?

Suddenly, the old crone raised herself up and threw a dagger. Arthur froze, uncomprehending. All his reflexes abandoned him as the last vestiges of a magical sleep left him and he saw the dagger—

Something large flung itself at him from the side, pushing him out of the dagger's deadly path. With the shock of being pushed, his reflexes returned to him, and he broke his fall easily. His saviour wasn't that lucky though.

Arthur looked over and was shocked to see Merlynn, of all people, had been the one to push him out of the way. He couldn't help but stare. She looked a little ruffled, and grimaced at what had to have been a painful landing, but... she'd actually saved him. He'd thought she hated him.

The princess was staring at his chair, where the dagger had imbedded itself, almost halfway up the hilt.

"Merlynn!" King Olaf shouted and ran over, helping his daughter up and crushing her to himself. Arthur picked himself off the floor.

"I'm fine, father, just some bruises," she replied, giving into his hug and avoiding Arthur's eyes.

"You saved him," Uther said, sounding utterly confused. Arthur could understand that sentiment. How had she even managed to run all the way over to him and push him away in time?

In his shock, Arthur made it all the way to his room that night before he realized something. He never even thanked her.

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It was impossible. And yet... The girl had saved his son. He watched as Olaf took her in his arms and Arthur stared at her in confusion. Why would she have saved him? By all accounts, they'd been at each other's throats since that blasted girl arrived in Camelot, and she knew how he despised her. Why not just let him die? If she took after her father, it would have been better to just let the Crown Prince die. Uther would no doubt be grieving, leaving Camelot vulnerable... any enemy would take advantage of that, since none of the blame could be put on them. Did the girl wish to be in his good graces? Did she want to seduce his son and take over the throne? Or maybe she just wanted to kill them at a later date?

Uther caught his son's eyes, and all he felt was relief that he hadn't died. And then he felt another presence behind him. Hunith. If the girl took after her mother... Impossible, magic always left its taint.

He would watch the girl closely, he decided as he ordered the body to be removed, and the festivities postponed.

He went to his chambers, leaving the hall to be cleaned by the servants. He knew the girl was with her family, so having her watched didn't do him any good. Perhaps he could assign her a lady's maid who could report back to him?

The girl may not have harmed Arthur, but he didn't trust her. He needed to be sure that she wasn't a danger to his kingdom and his son, but how...? He paced up and down his chamber, thinking, when a knock came to the door. "Enter," he called out, straightening his posture and facing the door.

The person who entered was the last one he wanted to see. "What are you doing here?" he spat, struggling to contain his anger.

"I came on behalf of my daughter, though she doesn't know it," Hunith said, clasping her hands in front of her. She looked solemn, but a slight tremble in her voice betrayed her fear.

"What of it?" Uther replied, in no mood for pleasantries. He was under no obligation to be polite to the harlot while she was in his private chambers.

"She doesn't know where she comes from. I told her that her father was a criminal, and she doesn't acknowledge him as her father. She loves my husband, and he is the one who raised her. I entreat you not to treat her as her own person, instead of the daughter of a man she's never met, nor knows anything about. Treat her as you'd want your own daughter to be treated," she pleaded.

Uther's blood ran cold. She couldn't know, no one did! "What did you say?" he hissed, taking a step closer.

Hunith flinched, but stayed where she was. "I know Morgana isn't yours by blood, but you treat her as such. That look in your eyes is one I know well, for I see it every day in my husband's eyes when he looks at Merlynn. She's just a girl, and she's not her father."

Uther glared. "Magic leaves its taint on everything. It leaves nothing unblemished."

A steely resolve entered Hunith's eyes, and suddenly she seemed every bit the Queen of a powerful nation. "You forget, Uther, that I know how your son came to be. You should be careful when speaking of the taint of magic."

Filled with rage, Uther strode over, raising his hand. "You dare-!" he shouted.

Hunith backed up against the door in fear, but her resolve remained. "My husband knows where I am," she said hurriedly, and Uther forced himself to stop moving. "As do a dozen servants. You strike me now, and Olaf will break the alliance."

She was shaking, but Uther realized that she was also right. With effort, he lowered his hand, but stayed where he was, towering over her with a death glare on his face.

"There is nothing I won't do for my daughters," she said, blinking away the tears that gathered in her eyes. Damn her.



Uther growled in frustration and turned away. "Leave," he barked, and was grateful when he heard the door open and close. His eye fell on a table, and with a quick motion, he overturned it. Pity it didn't do anything to work off his anger.

An idea occurred to him. Regardless of the woman's threats, he still needed to know if her daughter was a threat. And what witch would say no to an offer of acceptance and power...?

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The girl was with Gaius in his study, apparently. Uther contained his anger as he strode over to his physician's chambers, no need to let the girl know he was planning something.

He entered without knocking and saw Gaius working on a tonic of some kind, with the girl assisting him. She dropped an empty flask when she noticed him. "Sire," Gaius said, leaving the girl to get a broom to clean up the glass. "Can I help you?" he asked, walking over.

Uther kept his eyes on the girl. Most people raised in a noble family wouldn't even think about cleaning up a mess themselves, but the girl had done it automatically. "A word," he said to her, keeping his tone even.

Gaius understood, bowed and moved to leave the room. "Uncle!" the girl's voice stopped him in his tracks. "Don't forget this, I'm sure Geoffrey would want this back," she said, and handed him a cloth covered bundle.

Gaius nodded, but sent his niece a look Uther couldn't decipher. "Of course, thank you, my dear." And with that, he went out the door, leaving the King and the Princess alone. Uther remained by the door, and watched as the girl squirmed.

"I'll just finish cleaning—" she started saying, but Uther didn't have the patience to listen to her blabbering.

"You saved my son's life today," he said calmly, watching as she faltered.

She breathed deeply, and visibly composed herself, her face schooled behind a mask. Not very well, to Uther's trained eye, but certainly enough to fool most. "I only did what was right, sire," she said, her gaze on the ground, but her head held high.

"Most would ask for a reward," he commented, and slowly started circling the room. The girl stayed where she was.

"I want for nothing, sire, what would I ask for?"

He studied her. She looked nothing like her father. Where Balinor was sturdily built, she was slender, where his face was sharp angles and square jaw, her features were much softer, almost elfin. Even her eyes were a deep cerulean like her mother's. Only the raven colour of her hair matched that of her father's.

"What would I have to give that would equate with my son's life?" he said eventually. "Or perhaps that is exactly what I should offer. My son."

The girl's head shot up, her eyes wide. "What? No!"

Uther raised an eyebrow at the girl as he continued to circle her, making her turn around to face him again. "No? Is my son somehow not worthy? You're not in line for the throne, so it isn't that. Then what?"

The girl swallowed. "I mean no disrespect, sire," she said, though there was obviously some anger in her voice. "And you may find this childish or irrelevant, but I do not love your son. In fact, I find him very irritating. Since, as you pointed out, I am not in line for the throne, I can marry whomever I choose," she said.

Her answer puzzled Uther. Even if she wasn't a witch hell bent on destroying Camelot, surely the prospect of marrying a wealthy prince was desirable. Yet here she was, turning his offer down.

"I belong in Galdara, sire, by my sister's side. I won't be in Camelot long enough to make a match with anyone, let alone your son," she continued, staring him straight in the eye. Now she reminded him of Olaf. Perhaps the fact that he saw his old friend more clearly in this girl than his enemy should mean something. She was also like her mother, determined, and calm in the face of fear. And she was afraid, Uther could see her hands shaking, even though they were mostly hiding in the folds of her dress.

Inclining his head in acceptance of her statement, he said, "Very well. But know that this offer will never be made again."

"I understand, sire," she said, and dropped into a curtsy. It was slightly shallower than considered appropriate, but as she was a princess, she wasn't required to give him any sort of bow, so Uther merely accepted the gesture and strode outside.

His little test had revealed less than he had hoped for and had gone in an entirely different direction than he had expected. But perhaps, given her approaching departure, he could rest easy. And until then, he would continue to watch her, and decide what it was that he thought of her.

# The Tournament

## Chapter Notes

The start of the episode Valiant. Sorry it took me so long to update!

### **Chapter 8: The tournament**

It was decided the day after the incident with Mary Collins, that the women of the royal family of Galdara would go home, while Olaf stayed to negotiate with Uther about a border dispute. And to witness the tournament, of course.

Vivian was just about ready to jump onto a horse and get back home, but Merlynn felt conflicted. She'd been having so much fun with Morgana, and the dragon's warning about her destiny had rattled her more she cared to admit.

"It's just a few more days, papa, and then I can come home with you. It will be just you and me, like when I was little," she said.

"Absolutely not," Hunith said, putting down the dress she'd been holding. "You're not staying here, Merlynn, it's not safe!"

"Oh come on, mother, it's Camelot, not the Darkling Woods," Vivian said, rolling her eyes as she lounged on the bed. "I know Uther hates her, but it's not like anything can happen."

Hunith stared Merlynn in the eye, silently telling her that she should just go home where she was safe. Merlynn felt guilt rise up in her, but firmly pushed it down.

"Papa will be with me, and it's just a few more days. Then I'll be back home, safe, I promise," she reasoned. She stepped up to her mother and held her hands. "Nothing will happen, mum, it's just a tournament, and then I'll be home. I promise I'll keep my head down."

Hunith sighed and pulled her daughter into a hug. "Please make sure that you do," she whispered.

"Don't worry, my love, I'll take care of her," Olaf assured his wife. Hunith stepped out of the embrace to go to her husband, but her eyes stayed on her daughter. Merlynn would just have to find a way to make sure that Arthur didn't die, while staying out of trouble herself. Simple, right?

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Goddess, she'd forgotten how much she hated tournaments... It was the first day of the tournament, and all the best knights in the land had arrived. All arrogant bastards who thought they were *so* charming. They all thought Princess Merlynn should be falling over herself trying to get their attention. Please.

But she swallowed her comments and put up with the unwanted attention. Her father *loved* these things, and had been talking to Uther about maybe organising a competition between the knights of Galdara and Camelot, as an annual thing. Merlynn had already resigned herself to the prospect.

She was wandering the tournament fields while her father sat up in the royals' box with Uther, when she spotted a familiar blond. Morris was putting on his armour silently, as Arthur tapped his foot impatiently. "You do realize the tournament starts today?" he ground out.

Merlynn came up behind him, a smirk on her face. "Nervous?" she asked cheerfully.

Arthur jumped. Not quite as vigilant as he thought himself to be, then. "I don't get nervous," he said once he calmed down.

Morris went off to get the Prince's helmet. "Really? I thought everyone got nervous?" she teased.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" he snapped.

Merlynn grinned. It was so easy to rile him up. She rolled her eyes and went back to the royals' box. Morgana and Gwen were already sitting, so Merlynn joined them. "Oh, Merlynn, perfect timing. Gwen and I were just discussing the competing knights," Morgana said when she noticed her friend.

Merlynn took a seat next to the Lady and eyed the gathering knights. Arthur finally joined them, looking no less irritated than he had earlier. "They're quite a sight," Merlynn agreed, scanning the warriors. They were a diverse bunch, with one knight sticking out head and shoulder above the rest, and another checking his double, curved swords.

"So, which one would you choose?" Morgana asked, sounding far too giddy for Merlynn's tastes.

She turned to her friend. "I'm sorry, what?"

"She wants to know which one you think is the most handsome," Gwen explained with a playful roll of her eyes.

"I think that one is quite good looking," Morgana said, pointing to a knight with a yellow cape. "But Gwen prefers Sir Ewan. He only joined Camelot's knights last year, but he's representing his family this year."

"They're not bad," Merlynn admitted. Unbidden, her eyes landed on Arthur, looking far too serious. She couldn't help but think that he looked very knightly indeed.

"So which one would you pick?" Morgana prodded.

“I don’t know. I don’t know any of them,” she replied uncomfortably.

Morgana rolled her eyes. “It’s not a personality contest, Merlynn, it’s a purely aesthetical discussion.”

Merlynn pursed her lips. Going solely by how they looked, she’d have to choose Arthur. Sadly, the prat was fairly blessed in that department. It was entirely unfair. Of course, if she mentioned that to Morgana, she’d never hear the end of it. “What about that one?” she said instead, pointing to a knight with a green cloak. He was a bit younger than most of the contestants, but he had sharp features that stood out.

“He’s so strange-looking... No, Valiant is far more interesting. They say he’s quite skilled with a blade.”

Merlynn eyed the knight in question, but didn’t find him all that impressive. He was muscular, and had a strong jaw, which she supposed was attractive. Like she said earlier, he wasn’t bad, but there was something about him that Merlynn just couldn’t put her finger on. “If you say so,” she said.

Then, the trumpets sounded and the knights lined up, facing the royals’ box. Uther had walked onto the arena floor and addressed the knights now. Merlynn only listened to the speech with half a mind, instead choosing to let her eyes wander over the crowd.

Gaius stood near the entrance to the arena, ready to treat the no doubt many wounded. Merlynn could also spy Morris near the entrance, looking in excitedly.

“The tournament begins!” Uther shouted suddenly. Merlynn had completely lost track of his speech, but figured it wasn’t all that important.

The first to fight were Arthur and the knight Merlynn had thought handsome. Given Arthur’s prowess, chances were he’d win, which was too bad because Morgana was sure to tease her about that.

Arthur lashed out first, so quickly that the other knight almost couldn’t parry in time. They circled each other, like wolves, looking for weaknesses. Arthur easily caught the other knight’s feint, spun around, and used his momentum to hammer down on his opponent’s shield. Merlynn winced. That was definitely going to bruise.

Almost against her will, Merlynn became engrossed in the match. She’d seen plenty of duels back home, in practises or even to the death – Vivian’s last admirer came to mind – but this was different somehow. Arthur moved with a gracefulness she wasn’t used to seeing in knights weighted down by armour and fatigue. She’d noticed that he didn’t wear quite as much armour as most men in the North, but even so, his movements were incredibly fluid and precise.

Before long, he’d knocked his opponent down and won the fight. As he took off his helmet, their eyes met briefly, and Merlynn couldn’t help but blush. She applauded along with the rest of the audience, but managed to keep her decorum – the blush notwithstanding.

“Enjoying the view?” Morgana teased. But she was. Arthur might still be a prat, but it was easy to see why he was so often praised as one of the best warriors Albion had ever seen. If she was honest with herself, Merlynn couldn’t wait to see his next match...

Both Sir Ewan and Valiant won their matches, and Merlynn had to admit that they were both skilled fighters as well. She just didn’t understand Morgana’s infatuation with the latter. It’s true that he fought well, but he did so without mercy, and always made sure his opponents knew that they’d been beaten.

After the last match that day, Merlynn excused herself and went to Arthur’s tent. “You’re still alive, I see. I suppose a girl can’t have everything,” she joked.

Arthur rolled his eyes, but before he can retort, Valiant strode over. “May I offer my congratulations on your victories today?”

“Likewise,” Arthur said with a nod. Merlynn is somewhat gratified to see that he doesn’t seem to like the knight any more than she does.

“And who is this?” he asked, looking Merlynn up and down. It wasn’t a leer, but it was close. Years of training kept Merlynn’s face in check, even if she was shuddering on the inside.

“This is the Lady Merlynn, King Olaf’s youngest daughter. My lady, this is Sir Valiant,” Arthur introduced. At the mention of her father, something in Valiant retreated. No one dared to come too close to Olaf’s precious daughters.

Merlynn nodded as Valiant bowed. It was a little less deep than it should be when faced with a royal, but not enough so that she could call him out on it. “I’ll see you at the reception this evening.” With that, he walked away, rolling his shoulders in some misguided attempt to draw attention to his muscles, she supposed. “Creep,” she muttered.

Arthur actually snorted out a laugh, before composing himself. “You should get back inside, your father must be looking for you.”

Merlynn was utterly bored at the feast, but at least she didn’t have to stand there and greet all the knights, like Morgana – and, by extension, Gwen – had to do. She watched as Valiant flirted shamelessly with Morgana, and wondered by Uther didn’t put a stop to it, despite his apparent like for the knight. Her own father would have challenged him to a duel already. When she asked about it, Olaf reasoned that Uther was different from him, and Morgana was different from Merlynn. Merlynn was just glad that her father’s reputation kept the creepy knight at a distance.

She wandered off towards the refreshment table, where Arthur joined her. “Can you believe him? He just struts around like he owns the place.”

“I know someone else like that,” Merlynn muttered.

“What?” Arthur asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

“Nothing. Are you sure you’re not just being an overprotective prat because he’s talking to your sister?” she asked, slyly.

Arthur scoffed. “First of all, she’s not my sister, and second of all, I don’t care what Morgana does.”

“You grew up with her, you’re *practically* siblings, and you do care what she does. I’m a little sister myself, I can tell. Vivian may not always be very vocal about her affections towards me, but I always know when she’s being protective.”

The Prince seemed a bit uncomfortable. “Even so,” he said stubbornly.

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t trust him either. There’s no compassion in him, no mercy. A man who *fights* like that, *lives* like that, and it’s not the sort of person I’d want to get to know.”

Arthur glanced at her sideways, even as she kept suspicious eyes on Valiant, and grinned just a little. “Is there something amusing I’m missing?” she asked.

Not even bothering to his grin, Arthur picked up a goblet. “Nothing. It’s just that he seemed incredibly interested in you, earlier.”

Merlynn snorted. “First time I’ve been glad for my father’s reputation.”

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The next day, as Merlynn walked past Arthur’s room on her way to the tournament, she happened to look in and saw Arthur’s servant fumbling with the lacings on Arthur’s armour. “Let me,” she said before she could even comprehend that she had walked in.

Arthur looked surprised, and his servant relieved, but neither said a word. Silently, she fastened the cords. “I used to do this for my father all the time,” she whispered as she fastened the hauberk. “He called me his ‘good luck charm’.” She wasn’t sure why she was telling him all this, but she felt the need to fill the silence, especially since Arthur’s servant had left at some point, and she hadn’t even noticed.

“Not your sister?” Arthur asked, more curious than anything.

Merlynn snorted. “My sister’s more interested in getting knights *out* of their armour, much to my father’s frustration. There’s a reason he’s so overprotective, you know.” She moved to stand in front of him, checking the lacings on his chest plate. When she looked up, she froze. She hadn’t realized she’d gotten that close to him.

Arthur opened his mouth to say something, but they were interrupted when his servant entered the room again. Merlynn stepped back, flustered. “I should... I should go, my father’s probably—” As she was backing away, she bumped into the table. Quickly, she turned around and left the room, her cheeks flaming.

# A Snake in our Midst

## Chapter 9: A Snake in our Midst

The second day of the tournament went about the same way as the first, with both Arthur and Valiant winning all their matches. But it wasn't until Valiant defeated Sir Ewan that things got very interesting. Gaius had two guards carry the wounded knight to his chambers, and Merlynn was unable to keep sitting still. Ignoring her father and Morgana's queries, she left the royals' box as soon as the last match was over, and followed her uncle to his chambers.

"It looks like a snakebite," Gaius explained, pointing to two small puncture wounds in the knight's neck. He was still alive, thankfully, but barely. Gaius said that he needed the venom of the snake that bit him before he could make an antidote. If he didn't get that venom, the knight wouldn't survive much longer.

"He was fighting Valiant..." she muttered, but Gaius didn't hear her. Merlynn stormed out of his chambers and made her way to the guest wing, where she knew the knights were staying. She followed Valiant to his room, and looked through a crack in the door as he fed a mouse to the snakes on his shield.

Fighting the revulsion that rose up in her, she raced back to Gaius, telling him about what she'd seen. "I have to tell Arthur," she said, already turning around.

"Is there any chance you might be mistaken?" Gaius asked, standing up.

Merlynn turned back around and frowned at her uncle. "I know magic when I see it, uncle." When Gaius asked about proof, she was a little hurt. "Don't you believe me?"

"I do, but it's the King you need to convince. And his opinion of you has not changed. He does not trust you, and would never believe your word over that of a favoured knight," he explained calmly.

"But he has to. I'm a princess, in front of the court, he has a duty to listen to me and investigate my claims."

"Perhaps," Gaius allowed. "But that returns us to the matter at hand; what proof is there? If it is magic, I assume Valiant has a way of keeping the snakes inside the shield, and thus studying the shield would reveal nothing."

"So my word doesn't mean nothing?" she said bitterly, turning away.

"I'm afraid it means very little when it comes to the King."

Angrily, Merlynn strode out of her uncle's chambers and made her way to her own, where her father was waiting for her. "Where have you been?" he asked, with only a hint of suspicion in his voice.



"I was with uncle Gaius. I wanted to see if there was anything I could do for that knight," she replied, shutting the door behind her.

"And?" he asked, more out of politeness than real interest, she expected.

Merlynn hesitated. Perhaps she could tell her father? "It was odd..."

"What was?" he asked, his interest piqued. He was standing by her window, but she now motioned for him to sit at the table.

"Sir Ewan didn't collapse because of any injuries he sustained in the tournament. He was bitten by a snake. But I didn't see any snakes in the arena, did you?" she asked innocently.

Olaf sighed. "What's your theory?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said, looking away so that he couldn't read the lie off her face.

"I've known you since birth, my darling, I know when you have a theory."

Merlynn sighed and crossed her arms. "I have no proof, and Uther would never believe me."

"Proof of what?" he asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She looked up into the earnest face of her father. "That Valiant is using magic to cheat in the tournament. I saw the snakes come out of his shield myself, papa. Sir Ewan was pinned under his shield, he didn't stand a chance."

Olaf sat back, frowning in concern. Merlynn knew that her father had liked Valiant as well, praising his fighting style. His own style was quite aggressive as well, but there was always mercy and compassion there, and never arrogance. "Stay away from Valiant, Merlynn, this is a matter for Uther to resolve. There is no need for you to get involved."

"Are you going to tell him?"

Olaf sighed. "I'm afraid that when it comes to magic, my word is worth about as much as yours. Though I dare say he wouldn't break protocol over me."

Merlynn let her head fall onto her arms. Tomorrow would be a *long* day.

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The next morning, Merlynn couldn't sit still. Her father sent her a sympathetic look, but didn't say anything. The first match of the day was already over, and there was a short break while the next knights got ready. She got up, unable to control her nervous energy anymore, and made her way to the training fields, where the knights' tents were set up. She wandered around, watching servant carrying equipment or sharpening swords while the knights practised or were talking to other nobles.

She paused near Arthur's tent. Morris was helping him with the last of his armour, while the Prince himself eyed his next opponent; a huge man, who had at least a foot on Arthur in length. "You've got to fight that?" she asked without meaning to. She pressed her lips together, but refused to look sheepish, even if she could feel a blush creeping up on her.

Arthur turned around, dislodging Morris in the process. He looked surprised to see her. "Yes," he said eventually. "And he's strong as a bear."

Merlynn wasn't sure whether he was boasting or just stating a fact. "Do you have a tactic, then?" she asked, taking a step closer.

She didn't expect him to answer. She thought he'd say something along the lines of 'I don't discuss strategies with women' or something similar. But he surprised her. He was doing an awful lot of that lately. "He's slow," he said simply.

Merlynn couldn't help the slow grin that crept up on her. "And you're fast," she said, nodding in understanding.

Arthur nodded once, before Morris stepped in between them to sheathe Arthur's sword. "You're all set, my lord," he said submissively.

Arthur looked at her one more time before marching off towards the arena. He was so odd. One moment he was the most arrogant man she'd ever met, a complete arse, and sometimes... sometimes she thought that maybe there was a little more to the Crown Prince than met the eye.

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The fight was fierce, with the opposing knight getting in some good hits, but Arthur made use of his speed, and struck quickly under the other man's guard, knocking the air out of him. A swift and forceful hit with his shield knocked him out, leaving Arthur the victor of this battle.

Merlynn had to admit that she'd been wringing her hands throughout the whole thing, but luckily Morgana didn't notice, because she was just as worried.

The only other match scheduled that day was Valiant versus Sir Yaxley. Needless to say, Valiant won, dealing his opponent a fatal blow. The crowds didn't care, they loved the violence, but Merlynn couldn't stomach it. She left the royal's box before anyone else. It was a clear sign of her disapproval, and a subtle insult to Valiant, but Merlynn didn't care. Let him know she disliked him.

She met Gaius just at the wounded knight was being carried off. "Valiant will fight Arthur in the final tomorrow. He's not skilled enough with a blade, he'll use the shield to kill him." She didn't want her uncle to feel guilty, she was just stating a fact, but the hopelessness of the situation was getting to her. She *needed* to say it out loud, to make it real.

Angrily, she stalked off to her room, but once there, the energy abandoned her. She slumped down at her vanity, idly picking pins out of her hair. What was she supposed to do? Both Gaius and her father told her that even if she went to the King, nothing would happen, that he

wouldn't listen. She didn't particularly like Arthur, but she was slowly developing a grudging respect for him, and besides, no one deserved to die like that.

That's how her uncle found her a little while later, brushing out her hair mechanically. He took the brush from her hands and placed it on the vanity. "Merlynn, bout what I said yesterday... You were right, we can't let Valiant get away with this."

"But we don't have proof," she replied, turning around to face him.

"If we could cure Ewan, he could vouch for your story. The King would believe one of his own knights," Gaius said. "But how to get the antidote... that's another matter entirely."

All the knights were in the banquet hall, dining with the King, so Valiant shouldn't be anywhere near his shield... But if she was seen anywhere near that area of the castle, she'd have no excuse. But she had to try. Without another word, Merlynn rushed out of her room. By now, she knew the noble's wing well enough to find Valiant's room with ease. The door was locked, but a simple spell moved the bolt and allowed her entry.

Getting the snakehead was easier than she'd thought. All she had to do was turn her back and look out for its shadow. With a quick slice of her dagger, the head fell the floor. Merlynn scooped it up quickly and ran out, hoping the other two heads wouldn't come chasing after her. She heard footsteps, and hastened to Gaius's chambers.

By the time she burst in, Gaius was already tending to Ewan. "Merlynn, what—?" he started to ask.

"I got it," she said breathlessly, handing over the head. "You can make an antidote now, can't you?"

Gaius examined the head briefly. "You cut this off?"

"No need to sound so surprised," she said, a little offended. She might not be on par with the knights of Camelot, but she could certainly handle a blade.

Gaius shook his head good-naturedly and set to work, draining the venom from the snakehead. "There, I can get to work now."

Merlynn grinned. "Great, I'll go tell Arthur."

A hand on her arm stopped her. "Why Arthur?" Gaius asked.

Merlynn sighed. "You were right, the King won't listen to me, but Arthur may be able to convince him otherwise. And when Ewan backs up his story, Uther will have no choice but to arrest Valiant."

Frowning, Gaius let her go. "Be careful."

She grinned. "Always."

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"You?" Arthur asked, incredulously. "*You* cut this off?"

Merlynn rolled her eyes. Why was that so hard to believe. "Valiant is using magic to win the tournament," she repeated.

"Look, I don't like the man, but he wouldn't dare to use magic in Camelot."

Merlynn growled in frustration. Why wasn't he getting this? "Look, I'd go to the King myself, but he doesn't trust me, he'd just ignore my accusations. He probably wouldn't even convene the court on my behalf." Arthur still looked sceptical, but he didn't look quite as sure as before. "He'll use the shield, it's the only way he can win from you. Gaius is preparing an antidote as we speak, you can go see for yourself."

Arthur hesitated, studying the snake.

"I know we're not exactly friends, but you're the only one who can convince your father," Merlynn said. She honestly didn't know what else she could do to convince him.

"Did you mean it?" he asked.

Merlynn blinked. "What? Did I mean what?"

Arthur faced her. "You said that the only way Valiant could win from me was to cheat."

Turning away, Merlynn hoped she wasn't blushing. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "I may not like you very much, but I do recognise skill when I see it," she said dismissively. She didn't tell him that before this tournament started, she was sure the best swordsman in all the lands was her father. Now that she'd seen Arthur, though... Still, that didn't mean she had to like him. Respect him, maybe, but not like him.

Arthur smirked. "That's an awful lot of faith for someone who thinks I'm nothing but a... what was that word you used? A prat?"

Merlynn glared at him. "Actually, I believe I said you're an arse. Just because you know how to swing a sword doesn't change that."

Arthur grinned. He *actually* grinned at that. "You're the strangest girl I've ever met."

"I'm not sure if that's the worst insult or the worst compliment I've ever received," Merlynn said with a frown.

"If you swear that what you're telling me is the truth, I'll talk to my father," Arthur said, ignoring my statement.

"I swear," she said solemnly.

He nodded. "Then let's go tell my father."

# The Court Convened

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **Chapter 10: The Court Convened**

The court was convened quickly, and Valiant was escorted in by three guards. Merlynn stood by her father, next to the dais where Uther and Arthur stood. She was determined to keep her mouth shut and to let Arthur handle this. Her father's grip on her arms was enough to make sure of that.

Arthur seemed confident while he accused Valiant, even when Merlynn's hands were shaking. If Uther didn't believe there was sufficient evidence...

"Do you have proof?" Uther asked of his son.

Arthur handed over the snakehead and let Uther examine it. But then Uther looked at the shield, and for all intents and purposes, it seemed like a regular shield. Gaius came in through a servant's entrance and walked over to Merlynn.

While Arthur was explaining about Ewan, he told her that the knight in question had died.

"He should be here," Arthur said, and looked in their direction.

There was no way around it now. Merlynn stepped forward and bowed to the King. "Sire, I regret to inform you that Sir Ewan died of his injuries a little while ago."

Uther glared, but not at Merlynn. His gaze was trained on his son. "So you have no proof to support your accusation."

How could the King look his own son in the eye and embarrass him in front of the court like that? In front of his guests? Anger surged to the surface and before she knew what she was doing, Merlynn had drawn the King's attention back to her. "No proof but my word."

The hall was silent, and she knew her father was fuming behind her.

Valiant scoffed. "With all due respect, the princess is just a girl, what does she know of weaponry? Perhaps it was a trick of the light, and she was mistaken?"

Why, that filthy, little—

"How was that in any way with due respect?" she snapped. "*Sir* Valiant," she added, emphasizing the knight's lower rank.

He bowed. "I meant no harm, my lady."

"Be that as it may, Valiant has a point," Uther said, glaring at the raven-haired princess.

Her father was about to insert himself in the conversation, Merlynn saw from the corner of her eye, but she motioned for him to stay out of it. “In Galdara women are allowed to learn how to fight, for those without swords may still die upon them.” She felt bolstered by that old saying from her country. If the women of the old legends could fend off dire wolves with simple blades, than she could stand her ground in the court of King Uther. “I saw the snakes come out of the shield myself.”

There was something else in Uther’s eyes now, something calculated. “Your own laws state that if a visiting dignitary offers a complaint you are required to investigate the matter to my satisfaction,” she continued. “And I do believe the rules of the tournament include that any participant under investigation of the use of magic is to be disqualified.”

Morgana was struggling to hide a grin and Gwen was looking on with raised eyebrows. But it was the King’s reaction that mattered. Uther regarded her thoughtfully, but obviously Valiant wasn’t that smart. “If Arthur needs a girl to defend him, perhaps he is just frightened. If he doesn’t want to compete in the final, I’ll gladly accept his surrender.”

The pompous bastard didn’t even realize how misplaced his arrogance was. Uther held up his hand to indicate silence. “My lord, if I may,” Merlynn interrupted.

“What?” His reply was a little more rude than was proper, but she supposed that was understandable in the circumstances.

“If you do not want to cancel the tournament, let Valiant compete with a different shield. That should determine the winner of the fight easily enough. Afterwards you can have the shield examined by whomever you please and the matter can be put to rest.”

Her heart was beating in her throat. What if Uther refused? He didn’t have to listen to her, he didn’t even have to abide by the laws, since they stated that he must investigate if a *male* dignitary complains. She left that out, hoping Uther wasn’t that familiar with that old law.

“Very well,” he said, and it was as if the entire hall let out a breath they’d been collectively holding. “The final will proceed as planned tomorrow. Valiant, you shall choose a different shield from our armoury. A guard will be stationed at your door and will escort you to the arena come morning. The court is dismissed.”

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Before the fight the next morning, Merlynn stopped by Arthur’s room. His door was wide open and Morris was helping Arthur into his armour. It was almost like the first day of the tournament, except that teasing wasn’t on Merlynn’s mind. As she walked in, Morris bowed and left without a word. She’d have to thank him for his discretion later.

Arthur was facing the window, and thus didn’t see her. He did notice when she tightened the cords. “Let me help,” she whispered, putting her hands on his shoulders to keep him from moving.

Even without the shield, Valiant was a formidable opponent, and Arthur would have to work hard to defeat him. “Valiant was injured in one of his first fights. He favours his left leg ever

so slightly, and his guard is less strong on an upward swipe, that's how Ewan got him," she said in a low voice, keeping her eyes on his armour.

"Is that concern I hear?" he asked. His words were mocking, but his tone was soft. Much softer than she'd ever heard before.

"Caution," she corrected. She had nothing left to do, but she was unwilling to step away just yet, so she busied herself with checking the fastenings again.

"Sprinkled with concern," Arthur tried again.

"You flatter yourself." She stood in front of him now, facing his chest plate. She didn't want to look at him, because then she might actually have to admit that she *was* concerned. It was her destiny to protect him, after all, it wouldn't do if he died on her watch.

"I'll see you at the feast," Arthur said, stepped away and left.

"Arthur!" she called out before he could leave. "I... be careful."

Arthur nodded, and turned back around. Merlynn could have hit herself over the head. What, by the goddess, was she doing? She shook her head and left the room, trying to lose the foreboding feeling she had.

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Merlynn never let go of Morgana's hand during the fight. Not that she could have even if she wanted to, the other noblewoman had quite a grip.

Arthur and Valiant fought aggressively, each trying to take the upper hand. A swipe from Valiant nearly slashed open Arthur's abdomen, but he jumped backwards just in time. They went back and forth like that for a while, until Valiant managed to stamp on Arthur's foot and knock him on the chin with his shield. Arthur flew backwards, and landed on his back, winded. Valiant wasted no time and strode over, intent on stabbing his opponent in the chest, but Arthur let go of his shield and rolled out of the way. He'd lost his helmet, and now he had no shield.

Almost to mock him, Valiant took off his helmet as well. Merlynn held on to Morgana with a vice grip, and vice versa. They were both worried.

The fight continued, even though Arthur was now at a disadvantage. He used his speed and agility to compensate, and managed to get some good hits in. Eventually, he saw his opening and disarmed Valiant, who now had to defend himself with his shield alone. Arthur finally took charge of the battle.

He slammed his sword into Valiant's shield, who was forced to back up with every step. A quick turn of his blade wrenched the shield from the other knight's hand, and then he levelled it against the other man's throat... it was over. Arthur had won the fight.

The audience burst into applause and cheers for their new champion. Arthur was obviously winded, and Merlynn had a feeling his shield arm was heavily bruised underneath his tunic,

but he still raised his sword to accept the people's acclaim.

All Merlynn could do was let out a relieved sigh and sink down in her chair. She'd been on edge during the whole last fight, but now she would finally relax.

Valiant was escorted out of the arena by two guards, glaring hatefully at... her. She smirked. He'd lost. And even if his use of magic was never proven, he was humiliated, and no one would trust him now.

When all ceremonial engagements were over – Arthur getting crowned, and receiving the prize money – Merlynn hurried to get back to her chambers. She longed for a hot bath before the festivities began that night.

She was so distracted by those thoughts that she was caught completely by surprise when an arm went around her waist and a hand clamped over her mouth. She kicked out, but hit only air, her fingers clawed at the face that was behind her, but she couldn't be sure if she'd hurt him. Her assailant dragged her into one of the unused guest chambers. Merlynn tried to scream, but the man's hand was still firmly placed over her mouth, and panic was threatening to overcome her.

“Not so smug now, are you, you little bitch.” She knew that voice. Valiant.

Fear clawed its way up her throat and threatened to smother her. Valiant hated her. He would not hesitate to kill her, most likely in the most painful way he could imagine.

In sheer desperation, Merlynn bit his hand until she could taste blood. “You filthy–” he started to say, but she didn't let him finish. The second his hand was no longer covering her mouth, she screamed, louder than she'd ever screamed before.

Valiant let her go, but slapped her in the face to shut her up. It was effective in its crudeness. Merlynn was on the ground, but now her panic was receding, replaced by anger. She was about to let her magic loose, to let him feel what it was to be faced with a terrible force like that – but then the door burst open.

Arthur, followed by two guards rushed in, swords drawn. He immediately levelled his blade at Valiant, who wisely backed up slowly. He was bleeding; three parallel scratches ran down his left cheek. Good. She hoped it would scar. She hoped she'd left a permanent reminder that he hadn't beaten her.

Arthur looked livid. “Valiant, you are under arrest for the assault of Princess Merlynn. Guards, take him to the throne room and alert the King. We'll deal with this right away.

As the guards grabbed hold of Valiant, he glared at her. “I'll get you for this, you whore! You'll die at my hand, I promise you that!” A shiver ran down her spine as she watched him being dragged off. There was no magic in his words, but the oath shook her nonetheless.

“Merlynn,” Arthur said gently, crouching down beside her. “Are you alright, did he hurt you?” he asked, examining her face. She hoped it didn't look as bad as it felt right now.



She looked up at him. He looked so concerned, so kind. So very different from what she was used to from him. “I’m alright,” she managed to say as he helped her up. “My jaw’s going to take a little while to heal, but nothing serious.”

“I know you probably want to return to your rooms, but Valiant needs to be tried as soon as possible. Do you think you could stand in court and tell my father what he did?” he asked, not unkindly.

Merlynn studied his face for a moment. “He’s not going to get executed is he?” It was more a statement than a question, but it needed to be said out loud anyway.

Arthur pressed his lips in a thin line. “Probably not.”

“If he was anyone else, there’d be no question.”

“Most likely.” Arthur clearly wasn’t happy about this either.

Merlynn studied her hands. There was blood under her fingernails from where she’d scratched Valiant. The sight sickened her. “I’ll talk to the court,” she whispered eventually. Her cheek was throbbing in time with her heartbeat, and starting to feel uncomfortably warm. She was definitely going to bruise.

Arthur nodded and opened the door, gesturing for her to follow. On the way to the throne room, Merlynn couldn’t help but glance at every door they passed, jump at every servant who scurried by. She hated feeling this way, she hadn’t even gotten that badly hurt!

Luckily, Arthur stayed by her side, quietly walking with her, and for once not teasing her about being jumpy. Whenever she glanced at his face, his eyes looked stormy, and his thoughts far away, but then she’d almost stumble, or jump just a little too high, and his hand was on her arm, guiding her, letting her know he was there. Perhaps Arthur wasn’t that big of a prat after all.

## Chapter End Notes

Anyone notice the subtle Prince of Persia reference?

# The Aftermath

## Chapter Notes

Sorry, a bit late! School stuff got in the way.

For the Americans reading this: happy Thanksgiving! Consider this a Thanksgiving present ;)

### **Chapter 11: The aftermath**

The trial went by in a blur. Merlynn told the King about what had happened in an emotionless voice, stating facts. The bruise rapidly showing up on her face said more than she ever could in any case.

Valiant barely spoke in his own defence. He was stripped of all his riches and his title, and banished from both Camelot and Galdara, on pain of death. Olaf had wanted him executed, but Uther had reminded him that they were in *his* kingdom, and therefore his laws applied. Apparently, he also owed Valiant's father a debt. Olaf was not pleased.

Merlynn herself choose to forego the festivities that night, leaving Morgana and the other ladies of the court to show off their gowns and try to look better than the others.

She'd been about to go to bed when someone knocked on her door. "Come in."

Gwen walked in, concern and kindness striving for dominance in her eyes. "Merlynn, how are you?" she asked in her gentle voice. Merlynn hugged her friend, resting her head on her shoulder.

"Shouldn't you be at the feast? I'd think Arthur and Morgana would need a minder," she asked, only half-joking.

Gwen led her friend over to the vanity and started braiding her hair. "They'll be fine for one night. I heard your father talking to Uther. He seemed angry, but I think he and Uther came to some sort of agreement. And you didn't answer my question."

Merlynn sighed and looked in her mirror. Her face now sported a nice purple bruise on one side. "I'll be alright. He scared me, but I would have been fine."

"You were very brave. And I'm glad Arthur showed up when he did. You could have been seriously hurt if he hadn't..." Gwen said softly.

Merlynn closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of her friend's fingers running through her hair. "I was angry and scared, and I thought he was going to kill me, but I didn't need him to

save me,” Merlynn said, making a face.

Gwen playfully pulled at one of Merlynn’s tresses. “Perhaps, but he did, and you should—”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Couldn’t everyone just leave her alone tonight? “Come in,” Merlynn called out.

In the mirror, she watched as Arthur stepped inside, looking decidedly uncomfortable. Merlynn unconsciously tightened her dressing gown around her. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” the Prince said.

Gwen curtsied respectfully. “I’ll see you tomorrow, my lady.”

Merlynn really wished Gwen would stay to form a barrier between them. Things had become a bit intense between Arthur and her, and she wasn’t entirely sure how to act around him now.

Arthur stepped aside to let Gwen pass, and then shut the door behind her. He looked like he wanted to say something, but wasn’t sure where to start. “I’m fine,” Merlynn said eventually.

Arthur looked confused. “What?”

“That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To ask me how I am? Everyone in the entire castle’s been by, I swear. It’s just a bruise, and they’re all acting like I had a brush with death or something...” she said, irritation bubbling up.

“No,” Arthur said, stepping forward. “Well, I did want to see how you were, but...”

“Yes?” she prodded.

“I... I wanted to thank you.”

Merlynn was taken aback, she hadn’t been expecting that. She was about to ask what he was on about, when he started pacing. “If you hadn’t... if you hadn’t told me about Valiant, he would most likely have killed me with that shield, so... thank you.”

What was she supposed to say to that? She’d never expected him to realize she’d saved him, let alone thank her for it. “You realize I’ve saved your life twice now,” she said instead. She still wasn’t entirely sure how to act around him, but going back to their usual banter could never hurt.

Arthur made a face. “Only indirectly,” he mumbled.

Scoffing, Merlynn got up and crossed her arms. “Admit it! You’re the damsel in distress in this situation, and I’m the knight in shining armour. Though after what your father tried to offer me as a reward last time, I’m not sure I want to bring it to his attention that I did it again.”

“What?” Arthur asked, confused.

Merlynn bit her lip, she hadn't meant to say anything about that. In fact, she was trying her damnest to forget it ever happened in the first place. It had just come out! "Uhm... nothing," she said, trying to sound innocent while she tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

Arthur narrowed his eyes and took a step closer. "What did he offer you?"

"It's not important," she insisted, and turned around, busying herself with clearing her vanity so she wouldn't have to look at him. For someone with such a big secret, she was a horrible liar.

"Merlynn..." Arthur grabbed her wrist and turned her around to face him. His grip was surprisingly gentle, especially considering the irritation in his voice. He also hadn't let go of her wrist.

"He.. sort of offered me..."

"Yes?" he prompted.

Merlynn looked at her shoes. "Your hand in marriage," she muttered.

"What?" Arthur asked. He stumbled back a step, letting go of her wrist.

"I said no, obviously," Merlynn assured him. Though Arthur looked like he was still processing the fact that his father had offered him as some sort of reward.

"But he hates you..." he whispered, more to himself than to her. "Wait, you said no?" he asked, looking up at her.

"Well, yes. Obviously."

"Why obviously?"

Merlynn rolled her eyes. Only Arthur would be insulted by that. "Because one of the only perks of not being first in line for a throne is that I have a say in who I marry. I want to marry for love, not riches or power. Vivian may not have a problem with her fate, but I won't just marry the first nobleman with a lot of money."

"Your loss," Arthur replied haughtily, though Merlynn wasn't sure he was entirely serious. "I'm a catch."

Merlynn laughed. "You think so, do you?"

"I do, indeed," he said, puffing up his chest.

"I pity the girl who'll end up your wife. She'll have to be an incredible woman to put up with your arrogance," she said, poking him in the chest.

Arthur glared, but there was no real heat behind it. "Well, I pity the man you'll marry. He'll have to put up with your obnoxious attitude and horrible manners. He'll have to work hard to keep you in check!"

She was fairly sure it was meant at least partly – as a joke, but she couldn't help but be genuinely insulted. "Excuse me, but I'm my own person. I don't need anyone to keep me in check! I don't belong to anyone but myself," she replied heatedly.

Arthur frowned. "You belong to your father," he said, like it was obvious. "And once you marry, you'll belong to your husband. It's not a matter of opinion, Merlynn, that's just fact."

She searched his face. "Do you really believe that? That women belong to the men in their lives? Can we not make decisions for ourselves? Make our own choices, our own mistakes? Or are you just saying that because it's been told to you your whole life?" She was genuinely curious what he believed. She also hoped he thought as she did, that men and women could be equals.

Arthur looked away. "It's not up to me, it's the law."

"That's rubbish, and you know it. Women can be just as smart and skilful as men."

"Look, I don't even know how we got to this topic, I just wanted to thank you, and tell you that your father asked for a heavier punishment for Valiant."

"What?" she asked, confused at the sudden change of topic.

"Your father asked for Valiant to be punished more severely, so my father agreed to send him to the mines in Galdara for three months. He's to be sent there tomorrow."

How could her father think this was a better solution? She wanted that man as far away from her as possible, not closer by. "Excuse me, I need to speak with my father," she said distractedly.

"Your father's at the feast. I'll tell him you require his presence," Arthur said. And with a quick nod, he was out the door.

That was probably the strangest conversation she'd ever had with him. Merlynn shook her head to clear it and went to sit at her desk. While she waited for her father, she might as well write in her diary. She'd had one since she was little, but she only wrote in it once every few days. One thing she always made sure of was, though, was that she was brutally honest with herself. She wrote down things that she barely dared think.

It was in the middle of one such entry – writing down her thoughts about Valiant – when her father entered. Without knocking.

"You know, at the end of your arms, there are these things with five digits, and if you fold them all together, you can make a fist. You might want to try to use that for knocking next time," she said, irritated.

Her father shot her a deadpan look. "Arthur said you wanted to speak with me."

Merlynn nodded, and gestured for her father to sit down. "He told me you asked for a more severe punishment for Valiant."

Olaf sighed and ran a hand over his face as he sat down. "I did. But before you unleash your ire upon your father, please let me explain."

Biting her lip, Merlynn kept herself from saying anything. She had a bit of a short temper when she was around people she loved.

"What that man did to you, to my baby girl," he said, looking angry again. He paused for a moment, and swallowed. "He didn't deserve to get off that easily, even if Uther owed his father a favour. That... that filth didn't deserve that."

"But why that mines? Why Galdara?" Merlynn burst out.

Her father put a calming hand on her shoulder. "In Galdara I can be sure where he is at all times, I can keep an eye on him."

"Papa, I... I don't want him that close to me. I know I'd be safe, that's not the issue, but..." She trailed off, feeling just a little helpless.

"That's why you won't be," he replied resolutely.

"What?" she asked incredulously.

"I want you to stay here in Camelot," he said. Merlynn opened her mouth to protest, but her father silenced her with a gesture of his hand. "You'll be safe here. And there is another reason. In a few weeks, King Bayard will be here to sign a treaty with Uther. I need you to stay here in a diplomatic role."

Merlynn was dismayed. As much as she'd felt a connection to this place, and wanted to stay to reconnect with Morgana and Gwen, she'd also been missing her home. She wanted to sleep in her own room, to be *home*. "Why me? Vivian is going to be Queen one day, why not her?"

Her father grabbed her hands in his. "Vivian is my firstborn, and will inherit my throne, but I cannot be certain of her tact. She is my daughter and I love her, but you will need this to stand by her side when the time comes for her to be crowned. You shall be her primary advisor, and you'll need to know about things like this," he explained.

Merlynn didn't know what to say. She'd always known she'd be there for her sister, but to become the primary advisor? A woman as ruler was rare enough, as were female advisors, but both of them? They had the right, of course, but Merlynn couldn't imagine everyone in their court would be pleased. "What will I have to do?"

Olaf smiled at her acceptance. "Nothing. Just observe and try to befriend the King. Alliances between friends are much more likely to endure, and I've not seen Bayard in years, and never in an official capacity. Make him respect you, make everyone see what a true Princess of Galdara is like, and you'll succeed. I know you'll win them over the moment you smile that beautiful smile," he said, cupping her cheek.

Merlynn wanted to roll her eyes at the sentiment her father was showing, but she was so touched by his trust in her, that she refrained from doing so. He would never show this much affection in public, though everyone knew how close he was to both his daughters. Strangely, Merlynn was closer to him than Vivian, but then, her sister was closer to her mother. Merlynn had always been a little strange, while Vivian was more girly. Her mother loved both of them, obviously, but Merlynn had a feeling Hunith understood Vivian better. But she didn't mind, she loved her family.

Olaf stood up, gave her a kiss on top of her head, and went to the door. "I need to go back. I'm leaving in the morning, but I'm leaving Sir Fredrick with you for the time being, until a more suitable guardian can be found."

"Father, I don't need a guard, I can take care of myself," Merlynn protested.

Her father gave her a pointed look, and Merlynn's jaw throbbed helpfully. Right. She looked at her father sheepishly, having almost forgotten her recent attack. "Alright, father. But I'm coming home for Vivian's birthday next month," she insisted stubbornly.

Her father pulled her into a last hug. "I hadn't expected anything less."

# 22 years ago

## Chapter Notes

Phew, I finished this in the nick of time! This episode is giving me so much trouble! Also, my title is once again ridiculously unoriginal, but what are you going to do, right?

This might be the last time I update twice in one week. Since this last chapter is giving me so much trouble, I'm not sure I can create a big enough buffer anymore... I'll try to update Tuesday, but it might be Friday... Send me lots of encouragement! It might help me write! ;)

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

### Chapter 12: 22 years ago

"The magic is holding up, sire," Nimueh said proudly.

"Good. And what of those hedgewizards causing trouble in the southern regions?" Uther asked as they made their way to the counsel room.

Biting her lip, the young sorceress focussed on her shoes. "They're... more troublesome than we had anticipated, my lord. But I've sent another emissary who's tracking skills are unparalleled. They'll be caught in no time."

Uther sighed irritably. "Those magic users can't be allowed to run amok, Nimueh, I appointed you court sorceress to stop things like this from happening."

Nimueh bit down her angry retort and hid her balled fists. Her mother had often told her to mind her temper. "I understand, sire, I'll see to it personally," she managed to say.

"See that you do. I also need you to find a spell to fix the harvest. The farmers have been complaining about a drought," he said sternly.

It was like she could never do anything to please the King, she thought bitterly. She'd only been appointed a few months ago, and summer was at its height. Her 18th, since she'd been born on the equinox. She doubted she'd have time to celebrate with how Uther worked her. If not for her magic she would have collapsed from exhaustion long ago. "Yes, sire," she replied. It was all she could do. The King barely listened to her suggestions, he would not heed her warning that all magic came at a price. If she made sure the farmers had a mild summer now, the winter would be unforgiving.

"My lord!" a voice drifted down from behind them. Nimueh's mood brightened immediately. She knew that voice.



Uther turned and regarded the man coming their way. "Lord Balinor," he said with a nod.

The man in question bowed to both of them. "Sire, I have that report for you," he said with a grim look on his face.

Uther nodded. "Go to the counsel rooms, I'll join you shortly." It was obvious there was no love lost between the two men, which was unfortunate, because it meant that Balinor spent as little time in Camelot as possible.

As Balinor bowed again and strode out of sight, Uther turned back to the sorceress. "I want your assurances that you'll take care of that matter we discussed earlier." He said it so evenly that Nimueh thought he meant something else. The look on his face, however, assured her that her guess had been correct.

"It is another week before my initiation as high priestess, my lord. Before that time there is nothing I can do," she said. She wanted to argue, to try to change his mind about this request, but Uther was a stubborn man, and he always got what he wanted. After all, when he'd wanted Ygraine, he'd gotten her, despite her marriage to another man.

Uther scowled but didn't say anything else on the matter. "You're dismissed. See to those hedgewizards, Nimueh," he warned darkly, before striding off after Balinor.

Nimueh disliked the King, but loved her work. At least the Queen was kind, and could calm her husband's temper. She decided she might as well do as she was bidden and send that emissary. After that she'd need to head to her lab and continue her experiments with the crystals she'd need to end the drought. She sighed and trudged down to the local pub, where the emissary was most likely to be. Perhaps after her work she could find Balinor and they could share a meal together. That thought cheered her up considerably.

/\*/

It was some time before she felt she could leave her laboratory without feeling guilty at the work that still awaited her, and went in search of the dragon lord. She found him in the library, pouring over some old tome. It couldn't be very interesting, all the magic books were in her own study. "Balinor," she said softly, to get his attention.

He looked up distractedly. "Nimueh? What are you doing here?" he asked, confused.

Clasping her hands in front of her, she smiled at him. "I thought perhaps we could share a meal together. A picnic perhaps?" she suggested, excitement bubbling up within her.

He frowned. "I don't have time, I have to work. I suspect you do as well," he said, and turned back to his book. The refusal stung, but she understood. He was very dedicated, he wouldn't have stopped to have a meal with anyone. But she thought perhaps a little pushing would be good for him.

"You still need to eat. The sun went down hours ago, and I know you haven't eaten. And... I feel that..." she trailed off. Perhaps she was being too bold. She shouldn't—

Balinor looked up again, confused. "You feel what?"

"Well. We've only recently been betrothed, and I know it was an arranged match, but... perhaps we could... get to know each other," she said. She felt so flustered, and nervous. Usually, she hated feeling like that, but somehow if it was him making her feel this way... it wasn't so bad.

The dragon lord sighed, carefully marked his book and closed it. "Nimueh... This marriage is a purely practical venture. You're young, and naïve in the matters of the heart. Emotion doesn't come into play here, I would have thought your mother would have explained this to you. Vivain is usually more alert about these things."

Nimueh took a step back, away from him. She could feel her heart constricting as she heard the hidden message in his words. He didn't *want* to know her, didn't want to be any more invested in this than he had to. She didn't understand. With no parents to speak for him, he'd agreed to the marriage proposal himself. But though she was hurting, she needed to talk to him. "I just think that being at least on speaking terms might make this... venture, more agreeable for the both of us. Or perhaps there is another lady who commands your heart?"

The thought had only just occurred to her, and she hoped beyond hope that it wasn't true. She wasn't sure what she'd do if she found out his heart belonged to another. Clinging to her outward composure, she waited for his answer.

Balinor ran a hand down his face, like he was conducting an exasperating conversation with a child. "My heart belongs to no one but myself, girl. Now, weren't you supposed to take care of that drought?" His voice wasn't unkind, like he was really trying to be nice, but just couldn't find the patience for it at the moment.

Nimueh swallowed past the lump that had formed in her throat, but nodded bravely anyway. "Of course, I'll..." She left her sentence unfinished. There was no need, Balinor had already opened the book again and was completely immersed in it. Oh to be a book.

Shoving the hurt away, she made her way back to her lab. Absentmindedly, she organized her crystals for her next experiment. She was certain that Balinor would learn to love her, or at least care for her. After all, her own parents hadn't been in love when they'd gotten married.

Their wedding was only a year away, and she'd be a high priestess by then. Perhaps her higher status would be enough for Balinor to be more impressed. She was, after all, not of noble birth as he was.

They would finally be a match, and be happy together...

/\*/

## **Present day**

Morgana and Gwen were thrilled that she was staying, but Merlynn hadn't talked to Arthur at all since their bizarre conversation. She didn't have much time to think about it though,

because not two days after her father had returned home, a deadly illness spread through Camelot.

Merlynn only found out about it when a servant dropped dead in the middle of the banquet hall, where the ladies of the court had been playing games. He'd been serving drinks when he'd suddenly fallen down.

Merlynn grabbed one of the other servants. "Get the King, and find Gaius," she ordered, before turning back to the man.

His face was white as a sheet, and he looked terrible, but he was still alive. The other ladies wouldn't go near him, of course, but Morgana was right beside her. "Is there anything we can do?" she asked anxiously.

Shaking her head, Merlynn took off her cloak and put it under the man's head. He couldn't even talk anymore. "I've never seen anything like it. Anything we do might even make it—"

Suddenly, the man grabbed Merlynn's arm and started gasping for air. She was too shocked to do anything other than watch as the man died. His hand went slack. Merlynn couldn't stop staring. She'd seen dead men after a run in with bandits, or after an accident, but she'd never witnessed anyone die before.

Vaguely, she was aware of the King striding in, followed by Arthur and then Gaius. Her uncle pulled her up, and she complied. What was wrong with her? All her bravery has abandoned her, and she couldn't stop staring at the man.

"It's the second case I've seen today," Gaius was saying. That got her attention. Uther demanded to know what had caused this, and Gaius was forced to admit that the most likely cause was magic. The thought repulsed her. How could anyone use magic like this?

"Merlynn, are you alright?" Morgana whispered as Uther ordered the city to be searched.

"I'm fine," she replied. She waited until everyone was dismissed and made her way to the parapets. There was a place on the western side of the castle that no one ever walked by because of the wind. She leaned against the cold stone and shut her eyes, enjoying the feeling of the wind combing through her hair.

All she could think about was that if she'd been alone, she could have saved that man's life. It wasn't fair that she had to hide her magic from the world, that she couldn't just show everyone what she could do. Maybe then people would stop saying that she was just a useless princess, that all she could do was look pretty. But what she hated most was knowing she could help people, but being unable to do so...

"Merlynn?"

Merlynn ignored the voice and continued staring out at the city. She could see people bustling about, and she even saw Gaius walking through the lower town. If this disease spread...

"Merlynn?" the voice called again, softer, and closer this time.

She finally turned around and smiled. "I'm fine, Gwen, just tired."

Gwen smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry. Morgana asked me to make sure you were alright. She's worried."

Gently squeezing her friend's hand, she stepped back from the wall. "I'll stop by her chambers on my way to Gaius. Thank you, Gwen."

The maid curtsied briefly, smiled one last time, and left. Running her hand through her hair, Merlynn turned back towards the city. Arthur had already started his search; the red uniforms of the guards was visible throughout the town. She rolled her eyes. If Gaius was right, and it was magic, they wouldn't be hiding in someone's home.

As she saw Gaius returning to the castle, she turned and went down the stairs. She should really reassure Morgana that she was alright. Merlynn didn't even know what was wrong with her. She shouldn't have gotten so—

Before she could finish that thought, she collided with someone. "Oh, I'm sorry," she apologised.

Hands grabbed her shoulders to steady her. "Merlynn, what are you doing here?" Arthur asked. Of course. It had to be Arthur, didn't it? "Were you up on the parapet?" he asked, looking confused.

"Yes," Merlynn replied somewhat defensively. "I like to go up there to think."

"About what?" he asked incredulously.

She looked away, suddenly embarrassed. "Nothing," she said with a shrug. Arthur would only laugh. But on the other hand, she didn't know who else to turn to. Morgana obviously didn't understand, and Gwen hadn't been *there*.

"Merlynn, are you alright?" There was that tone again, that gentle tone he'd used when he'd come to talk to her about her father's decision regarding Valiant.

"It's really nothing. I just... when that man died..." She was still avoiding Arthur's eyes, but when she looked up and saw the confusion in his eyes, she knew she'd made a mistake. "It's nothing. I need to go see Morgana," she said and quickly ducked around him, hurrying down the steps towards her friend's room. Perhaps there she'd have some peace.

## Chapter End Notes

So what did you think? Did you like my take on Nimueh? At least she really, really has a reason to hate Merlynn, right?

Anyway, like I said, next update might be on Friday, but I'll try to keep to my schedule. Send me lots of reviews, that'll help me write, I promise! ;)

# Origin

## Chapter Summary

Arthur shows his soft side, and Merlynn has an important conversation with her uncle about her father...

## Chapter Notes

Sorry this is so late! I'm a horrible person, I know!

Also, we get to see a little bit of Arthur's soft side.

“Search every inch,” Arthur ordered his men. He’d lost count of how many places he’d already searched today, and he was losing hope that the sorcerer would be hiding in the city.

His men tore the place apart as the family waited outside. The man of the house had his arms around his wife, who was holding a toddler, while an older child stood next to them. The little boy had tears in his eyes.

“We’re never going to find him here,” he said quietly to Leon, his second-in-command.

“It’s your father’s orders,” Leon replied, giving him a sympathetic look. Leon was a pragmatic man, and far more level-headed than Arthur sometimes. It’s what made him a good captain, and an even better friend.

Arthur was about to respond when the little boy he’d been watching suddenly dashed off into the house.

“Hey!” A soldier stopped his search and grabbed the boy, holding him even as he struggled.

“What’s going on?” Arthur demanded to know as he stepped into the house. The parents of the boy were right behind him, hovering worriedly. “Put him down,” he said to the soldier.

The man obeyed his prince, and put the boy down, only for the child to sprint off towards a curtained off area. Arthur noted that it was probably the family’s sleeping area. A moment later, the boy re-emerged, carrying a bundle of cloth.

“Boy,” Arthur said, walking up to him. “What do you have there?”

The boy shied away and held the bundle closer to his chest. Realizing how frightening this all must be, Arthur knelt down and did his best to seem unthreatening. He held up his hands to show that he meant no harm. "May I have a look?" he asked.

The looked at him uncertainly. "If it's not dangerous, I promise you'll get it back unharmed," Arthur said, still using a gentle voice.

Gingerly, the boy held out the bundle, but as soon as Arthur tried to touch it, it moved. Instantly, the boy drew it back to him. Gently, so as not to scare the child, Arthur drew the cloth away.

In the boy's arms was a kitten, barely old enough to open its eyes. Arthur let out a sigh of relief.

"I think we're done here, let's move on," Leon said, ordering the soldiers out.

Arthur remained where he was. He smiled at the boy. "Where did you get that?" he asked, but the boy just drew the kitten closer to him.

"He doesn't speak, my lord." Arthur looked over his shoulder at the father of the boy.

"How come?" What would make a little boy, barely 6 years old, stop talking?

"His parents died not a year ago, in an accident. Darian witnessed it, and hasn't spoken a word since. He was my sister's, so we took him in," the woman explained.

Arthur looked back at the boy. There was no physical sign of his ordeal, but then, Arthur knew that what was on the inside didn't always translate to what was seen on the outside. Leon was still hovering near the door, waiting to see if there was anything his prince needed.

Standing up, Arthur turned to the boy's aunt and uncle. "What is it that you do?" he asked the man.

The man bowed his head. "I'm a simple carpenter, my lord, my wife makes candles to sell on the market," he replied, sounding confused.

"And your names?" he inquired.

"Garrek, my lord," the man said. "And my wife Miriel and our daughter Teresa."

Arthur nodded to himself. "Perhaps when this is all over we can talk," he said, and then walked out.

Leon joined him as they moved on to the next house. "That was kind of you, sire," he said nonchalantly.

Arthur rolled his eyes. He'd know Leon almost his entire life, and he knew that tone by now. His captain was confused by his actions, and Arthur couldn't blame him. He wasn't even sure what he was doing himself. "Perhaps Morgana is finally rubbing off on me," he said evasively, and Leon let the matter drop, thankfully.

They were in the middle of a plague, he couldn't afford to stop to think about a single family. Besides, he thought darkly, there was no guarantee that any of them would survive this disease...

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Merlynn purposefully strode into Gaius's chambers.

"Merlynn? What are you doing here?" her uncle asked. He'd been examining a body, which lay on top of the table in the middle of the room.

Merlynn swallowed, remembering the servant from earlier. "Morgana needs a potion, she has a cough and I know you don't have time for it," she explained, turning to Gaius's cupboard and rummaging around for the right ingredients.

Her uncle frowned. "She's sick? Not the illness, I hope?" he asked.

Focussing on what she was doing, Merlynn ground down some herbs. "No, it's just a cough, she might have a cold or something."

She left the brew stewing in a kettle on the fire and turned to watch her uncle work. He was examining a vial of turbid liquid. "What is that?" she asked, curious, despite herself.

Gaius glanced at her. "The contents of that man's stomach. I'm hoping to determine how the disease spread."

Walking over, Merlynn studied the vial. "You think it's something he ate?"

"Or drank," he agreed.

She looked over at the body. "He was a servant, likely he wouldn't have drunk anything besides water and ale." Gingerly, she stepped up to the body. She'd seen dead bodies before, but she'd seen this man die. It was... different somehow. Leaning over carefully, she sniffed. "He doesn't smell like alcohol..."

"Neither do his stomach contents. I can't be sure, but I don't think he ate much more than bread."

Merlynn thought about that for a moment. "So... either it was the water, or the bread. Or perhaps something entirely different. For all we know it's spread by touch or air. And even if it is the bread, is it the wheat? Or perhaps the rainwater, or something in the soil..." she summed up. "How does this help, uncle?"

"It can eliminate a few things, Merlynn. I'm afraid it's all we can do for the moment."

Merlynn frowned and looked away. "This is so pointless. You have to wait for someone else to die before you can eliminate any more factors." She looked at her uncle. "Doesn't this kill you? Having to sit here and do nothing while people out there are dying?" she whispered.



Gaius gave her a sympathetic look. "It's not nothing, Merlynn, but it is hard. As a physician, I swore to help those in need. Right now I'm doing that in the only way I can; by examining the deceased and hopefully come up with a cure."

It wasn't easy for Merlynn to accept. "I have to go," she said. She got the draught off the fire and poured it into a vial. "Morgana needs this, and I'll see if there's any way to set up a sick bay for those affected," she said, turning to the door without glancing back.

"Merlynn," Gaius said, stopping her in her tracks. Merlynn turned around and faced her uncle. "I know this is hard for you, but you mustn't draw too much attention to yourself. Uther already hates you because of your father, do not make it worse," he cautioned gently.

For the briefest moment, Merlynn wanted to ask him what her father had to do with this. For a tiny second, she'd forgotten about her birth father, a man she barely knew anything about. "Gaius," she asked in a small voice. "What was his name?"

Gaius looked at her, confused. "Who's name?"

"My birth father's, what was his name?"

Gaius frowned at her. "Did your mother never tell you?"

Merlynn shook her head. "She never wanted to talk about it, and I knew my father didn't care for it either. Besides, he didn't even know him."

Sighing, Gaius walked over and took her hands in his. "What *did* your mother tell you?"

She shrugged. "Just that he was a criminal on the run from Uther and that he hid at her house before running again. It's strange though, I get the feeling she really did love him, but she's never told me anything positive about him. Not even his name, and I don't know why."

"I suspect it was because she was afraid you'd recognise the name, or look it up in the records."

Merlynn frowned. "Why would I recognise the name? Where would I have heard it?"

Gaius looked troubled, and let go of her hands. "I promised your mother a long time ago that I wouldn't tell you."

"Uncle," she protested, grabbing his arm. "I have a right to know. Who was he?"

Gaius looked at her, hesitating. "I knew him, long ago," he said eventually. Surprised, Merlynn let him go, so he could sit on a bench. She didn't know what to say, she never would have imagined that anyone but her mother would know him. "I helped him escape from Camelot long ago. Uther doesn't know, obviously, but then, Uther didn't know of my friendship to him."

Gaius sighed and massaged his forehead. "The reason your mother was afraid you'd know his name is because you've studied the history of Camelot, far more intensively than your sister."

“What do my history lessons have to do with my father?” Merlynn asked, confused again.

“You studied the Purge in particular, and I understand your interest, but...”

“My father’s name was in those records?” she asked incredulously. She couldn’t believe she was finally learning something more about where she came from.

“Your father... was Lord Balinor,” Gaius said.

It was rather... anticlimactic in the end. While the name did ring a bell, Merlynn couldn’t remember anything specific about it. Perhaps seeing her confusion, Gaius explained. “He was the dragonlord who summoned the Great Dragon to the castle. He was tricked by Uther, told that he wanted to make peace with the dragons. But Uther lied, and trapped the dragon deep beneath the castle.”

Merlynn felt faintly nauseous. She’d spoken to that dragon, and he hadn’t said a word. Did he even know? And she couldn’t believe her mother! The only crime her father had committed was practicing magic, and she’d made her believe he was a horrible person!

“She did it to protect you, my dear. If Uther found out that you knew who your father was, he’d be even more suspicious.”

“Suspicious?” she asked. “He suspects that I’m like him, that I have magic?”

“Your father’s magic wasn’t as strong as yours, but he did possess it, yes. And he could also speak to, and command dragons.”

Merlynn let that sink in, she couldn’t command dragons, but she *had* inherited her father’s magic, it would seem. “You said he was a Lord. So I’m really of noble birth?” she asked. It didn’t matter much to her, but the rest of the nobles seemed to find it incredibly important.

“In a way,” he admitted. “Though Uther stripped the dragonlords of their titles during the Purge.”

Merlynn sank down on the bench beside her uncle. How was she supposed to process all of this? She’d learned more about her father in the past few moments than she had in a lifetime. “Is he still alive?” she asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know,” Gaius said honestly. Uther never caught him, but we lost touch after he left Ealdor.

“But what do you think?” She *had* to know.

“Balinor was always a survivor, and he’d learned to live off the woods long ago... there is a chance he’s still alive, but I doubt anyone could find him if he didn’t want to be found.”

Suddenly, Merlynn realized that sitting down hadn’t been a good idea, she needed to get rid of this excess energy, to go over everything Gaius had told her. “I need to go,” she said, and quickly went out the door, leaving Gaius sitting dejectedly on the bench.

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“No!” Nimueh shouted angrily, hitting the water in her scrying bowl. How could this be? Balinor *couldn't* have a daughter, he was *hers*!

That little whore's mother must have put a spell on him, perhaps even murdered him. *And then married into royalty to protect herself*, she thought bitterly as she paced the length of her cave. *Well, the witch Queen might be out of my reach, but her stupid brat is right here. And I'll make her regret the day she came to Camelot!*

# The Mark of Nimueh

## Chapter Notes

I'm updating early because I felt kind of bad for not updating sooner.  
Little bit of Arthur/Merlynn interaction here! :)

### **Chapter 14: The Mark of Nimueh**

As time went on, more and more people got sick, and the death toll rose. Merlynn had begged her uncle to let her use her magic, after she saw them being lined up in the central courtyard, but he insisted that it was too dangerous. She'd complied with his wishes so far... but then something happened that made Merlynn unable to just stand by anymore.

Arthur was continuing his search in the castle proper now, having worked his way from the furthest houses of the lower town to the centre of the city. So, of course, Merlynn's chambers couldn't be spared.

She'd been alone in her room when the guard came knocking on her door. Without waiting for an answer, Arthur strode in and ordered his men to search every inch of her quarters.

"Excuse me!" Merlynn protested angrily. "You can't just barge in here!"

"King's orders, Merlynn," Arthur said, far too cheerfully. "We're required to search every room."

She glared at him. "And what if I'd been indecent? Or taking a bath? I'm sure my father wouldn't mind the journey if he could have the pleasure of taking off your head!" she snapped.

Merlynn was pleased to see a faint blush creep onto Arthur's face, even though his expression remained resolute. "Well then I suppose it's fortunate you didn't choose today to bathe."

"Well, maybe if you bathed a little bit more often we wouldn't be in this situation." At his dumbfounded look, she smirked. "What, you don't think your smell is as viable a reason as any that people are getting sick?"

Glaring, Arthur turned around and joined his men in the search. Merlynn crossed her arms and watched them. "Oi! Don't you touch that drawer!" she shouted at one of the soldiers.

Arthur looked up. "Got something to hide, Merlynn?"

Oh, now she was really mad. “Those are my underthings, I’m not letting your brutish men go through those!”

Again, that faint blush crept up Arthur’s cheeks, and Merlynn decided it was quite an amusing sight. Or, it would be if she wasn’t also furious at the moment. “We have to search everything, Merlynn!”

“I don’t care! Besides, what do you expect to find? Why would I be poisoning Camelot?”

Arthur glared right back at her. “Well, you are a foreign princess.”

She couldn’t believe this! “From an allied Kingdom, you dolt! Do you honestly believe I have something to do with this?”

Arthur took a deep breath and managed to calm down somewhat. “No, I don’t, but orders are orders. Just because you didn’t hide anything in here, doesn’t mean someone else couldn’t have.”

Merlynn grit her teeth, because damn him, he was right. “Fine,” she ground out, and turned around. If Arthur was going to go through that particular drawer, she didn’t want to see it. Nor did she want him to see her face. As she faced her bed, she noticed her magic book laying half-hidden under her covers. If Arthur saw that...

Merlynn risked a glance over her shoulder, and saw that one soldier was going through her closet, while another was inspecting the cupboard by her dining table. Arthur... she could only see his red ears from where she was standing. She was going to have to risk it. Focussing on her blanket, she let her magic bubble to the surface, just enough to move it to cover the book. Her bed wasn’t made, since Gwen was busy tending to Morgana. Arthur wouldn’t notice an extra bump.

“Merlynn,” Arthur called, and she jumped. Had he seen? But Arthur was at her vanity now, not looking at her. “Don’t you ever clean this up?” he asked, gesturing to all her things laying on top of the vanity. “All these drawers are empty.”

“Gwen’s busy enough as it is. Besides, there’s an order to the chaos,” Merlynn replied, a little defensively.

As if summoned, the maid in question burst through the door and ran at the princess.

Merlynn caught her and the girl sobbed onto her shoulder. “Gwen, what’s happened?” she asked urgently. Arthur’s men stopped their search and looked on uncertainly .

“It’s Morgana,” Gwen managed. “Her skin... it’s like paper, her veins turned blue,” she sobbed.

“No,” Merlynn whispered. It couldn’t be true, Morgana couldn’t have the sickness, there was no cure! She shook herself, she had to keep a steady head. “Gwen, go to Gaius, perhaps he’s made some progress. I’ll see to Morgana.”

Gwen nodded and ran back out the door. “We’re done here, rejoin Sir Leon. I need to inform the King,” Arthur said.

Merlynn shot him an apologetic look. Morgana was like a sister to him, and she knew this must be difficult. Arthur nodded and then ordered his men out, following on their heels.

Merlynn went to Morgana’s room, which luckily, wasn’t too far. Morgana had been coughing since the day before, but Merlynn had thought it was only a cold or something. When she walked in the door, though, it was obvious she’d been wrong.

Morgana lay on her bed, curled onto her side. Like Gwen had said, her skin was pale, and blue veins were clearly visible. She shivered, so Merlynn rushed over to pull the covers over her more securely. “Oh, Morgana. You’ll be alright, I promise,” Merlynn whispered, but the Lady barely responded.

It was one thing for this illness to strike servants in the castle, but a Lady of the court? Morgana ate completely different things, and drank wine, never ale... except... There was one thing she had in common with all the other victims. “The water supply!” Merlynn muttered to herself.

At that moment, the doors banged open and the King entered, looking grave. Merlynn quickly backed away. For all his faults, the King did love Morgana like a daughter, and no one deserved to see their loved ones suffer like this.

Uther took the seat on the bed, where Merlynn had been, and took one of Morgana’s hands in his. At a loss for something to say, Merlynn just bowed and walked out. The King needed a moment, and Merlynn needed to see her uncle.

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“It’s the water!” Merlynn shouted as soon as she entered Gaius’s chambers. Gaius had been bent over yet another body, holding a small flask with white flowers in it, but he jumped up at her voice.

“Really, Merlynn, must you shout?” he admonished.

“I’m sorry, but, uncle, it’s the water, that’s how it spread!” she said excitedly. Gaius looked troubled, but not surprised. “You knew?” Merlynn asked, confused.

“I came to the same conclusion only moments ago,” he said, gesturing to the body on his table. It was a courtier Merlynn was unfamiliar with. “I’ve tested the water, but I can’t seem to find what’s causing it. I need a sample from the source itself.”

Merlynn frowned. “The water reserves? Uncle, by the time you’ve analysed those, Morgana will be dead!”

Gaius looked down. “There’s nothing I can do for her now.”

“No!” Merlynn shouted. “You have to! You can’t just leave her to die! She’s my best friend, Gaius, she can’t die!” Impatiently, she wiped at the tears that had started to fall. She had to

say focussed.

“I’m sorry, Merlynn, I simply don’t have a cure. Gwen asked for it earlier, and I gave her the same answer.”

Merlynn let out a growl of frustration. “Then let me cure her!”

“Merlynn!” Gaius shouted. “You can’t! Besides, curing one person doesn’t help stop this plague.” He took a deep breath. “I know you want to save your friend, Merlynn, but it is not worth exposing yourself. You would only be exchanging one life for another, and may I remind you that your life matters very much to your family?”

Merlynn sank down onto a chair, and let her tears fall. It wasn’t fair. She could barely stand by and watch the townspeople die, but to see a friend go through that...? It was too much to ask. “Gaius, I have to do something,” she insisted in a whisper.

“There is nothing *to* do...”

As Merlynn looked at her uncle, she couldn’t help but feel defiant. He wouldn’t be happy about it, but there was *something* she could do...

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Under the cover of night, Merlynn made her way to Morgana’s room. It was close to her own chambers, so she didn’t encounter any guards, but she was still on edge. A quick spell opened the door noiselessly, and she slipped inside unnoticed.

As she turned around, however, she nearly let out a gasp of surprise. She’d expected the room to be empty, but found Gwen slumped over the edge of the bed instead.

Merlynn pressed a hand to her heart, hoping to slow down its frantic tattoo. Thankfully, the maid slept on, unaware that someone had entered. She could still do this.

Carefully, Merlynn made her way to the other side of the bed, keeping her eyes on Gwen and Morgana at all times. She clenched the poultice that she’d made in her hand, suddenly nervous. What if it didn’t work? What if she got caught?

Merlynn steeled her nerves and cautiously slid the poultice underneath Morgana’s pillow. It *had* to work. As she backed away to the door, she whispered the incantation under her breath that she’d spent all evening learning by heart. For a moment, nothing happened, and Merlynn worried that she’d done something wrong, but then the poultice glowed and Morgana’s face cleared. Merlynn watched as Morgana sighed deeply and turned around, no longer looking like she was at death’s door.

The princess grabbed the other poultices that she’d prepared from a pouch on her belt and grinned. Tonight, things were going to change.

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In the morning, Merlynn awoke with a smile. Morgana would be alright, and no one would be the wiser. She dressed as quickly as she could, and made her way to her friend's room. But before she could raise her hand to knock, two guards exited the room, dragging Gwen between with them.

"Merlynn!" she called out. "I didn't do anything, tell them I didn't do anything!"

"What are you doing?" Merlynn demanded to know. The two guards ignored her, but then Arthur stepped out. "Arthur! What's going on?" Merlynn asked.

"I'm arresting her for the use of magic," he said neutrally.

"That's ridiculous!" Merlynn protested, but on the inside she was panicking. Had she left a trace?

"Gwen was the only one in Morgana's room all night, and we found a poultice under Morgana's pillow this morning," Arthur explained, his voice still carefully neutral. But his eyes gave him away, Merlynn could tell that he was at least somewhat remorseful about having arrested one of her friends.

"She didn't do this, Arthur," Merlynn insisted desperately.

"Who else could have done it, Merlynn? The guards never saw her leave the castle, and she was the one who reported Morgana was healthy again. There is no evidence to suggest anyone else was ever in here," he said, but his voice was softer now, matching the look in his eyes.

Merlynn clenched her fists and fought the tears that threatened to fall. "There's no evidence to suggest she did it either! Anyone could have walked in and cured Morgana!"

"That's assuming that whoever did this meant us no harm," Arthur replied, frowning.

"Exactly. This was an act of kindness, Arthur, not malice. Not every user of magic is evil," she argued.

"Magic is evil, Merlynn, no matter how it's used," he said, in a tone that brooked no dissent. He sighed. "You'd better see to Morgana. She was upset as well." And then he strode off down the corridor, following the guards.

The only thing Merlynn wanted to do was go back to the previous evening and undo what she'd done. No, that wasn't true. She just wished she'd been more careful. Gwen wouldn't be in this situation if it hadn't been for her arrogance and carelessness. And now her friend would die, and there was nothing she could do.

Merlynn forced herself to school her features and walked into Morgana's room. Gwen may have been arrested, but the game wasn't over yet.



## Creature

Uther had sentenced Gwen to death. He'd heard none of her pleas, not even Morgana's arguments, and had demanded that she end the curse. Even Arthur had argued that even if Gwen was magic, that didn't mean she'd caused the disease. But Uther would have none of it.

Merlynn had kept her mouth shut, but she was starting to see why Morgana disliked her guardian so much. In Galdara, this never would have happened. Their laws forbade magic as well, but at least there the punishment fit the crime, and everyone had a right to a fair trial.

It was horrible, listening to Gwen plead for her life, and the King ignore her. Merlynn had avoided Gwen's eyes, unable to face the confusion and hurt she'd no doubt find there. It was all her fault, her friend was going to die, and it was her fault.

So now she stood outside the council chamber doors, debating whether or not to come forward. With what she'd learned of her father, she knew that Uther would waste no time to execute her. Her status as a Princess would be of no help here.

She was about to throw open the doors when a voice interrupted her. "Lady Merlynn!"

Startled, she turned around to find Morris, Arthur's manservant standing behind her. She hadn't seen him since this whole situation with the illness had begun, and he looked pale. "Morris. You're not sick, are you?" she asked worriedly. She didn't know him as well as Gwen, but he was a kind person, and she liked him well enough.

"What? No, of course not. What are you doing here, my lady?" he asked, frowning at her. Merlynn was about to feed him an excuse, when he interrupted her again. "No matter, where is Gaius? Is he in there?" he asked urgently.

"I believe so," she replied, confused. "Why?"

"I found something!" he said, still pale. "Gaius sent me to the water supply, underneath the castle, for a sample for him to test, but when I got there, there was a creature! It was huge and hideous, and I think it's been causing this plague!"

For a moment, Merlynn's breath left her body. If this was true... If she could slay the creature before Gwen's execution in the morning, Uther would have no choice to let Gwen go. "Come with me, Morris. You can't present your findings to the court until you know what it is that you saw. We have some research to do."

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It took them nearly the entire rest of the council meeting, but they eventually found the creature in one of Gaius' old books. It was an Afanc, but the book only described it and said that it caused catastrophes, not how to stop it. Merlynn convinced Morris to stay there and wait for Gaius, while she went to talk to the dragon. If anyone knew, it would be him.

The Dragon was as cryptic as ever, but did manage to tell her that it was a creature of water and clay, and therefore, could be destroyed by its opposite elements: air and fire.

By the time she got back to Gaius's chambers, her uncle was there, looking over the book they'd found the Afanc in. "Ah, Merlynn, good news, Morris found the creature causing the illness," Gaius said, looking up as she walked in.

"Really?" Merlynn replied, feigning innocence. Morris had apparently not mentioned Merlynn's involvement then. She walked over and studied the image again. She now knew how to defeat it – more or less – but how would she do it...?

"I need to tell Arthur about this," she said. Morris opened his mouth to protest, but she silenced him with a hand. "I'll tell him you were the one to find it, Morris, but I don't think the King should know just yet. This is still magic, and we all know how irrational he gets when it comes to magic," she reasoned. What he didn't tell them was that she just couldn't risk the King blaming the creature's existence on Gwen as well.

Gaius nodded. "Go."

Running to Arthur's chambers, Merlynn began to feel nervous. She'd never used her powers to attack anything before, what if she couldn't do it? What if the Afanc proved to be too strong for her? She shook her head to clear it, knocking with more resolve than she felt on Arthur's door.

It didn't take much to convince him. Arthur was desperate to help his people, but until now, he'd had no foe to defeat. Merlynn was happy to change that.

"You're sure about this?" he asked, still a little hesitant to disobey his father.

"Absolutely." Merlynn hesitated for a moment, before stepping closer. "I know we don't always see eye to eye, but I need you to trust me on this. Gwen's not responsible for any of it, the creature is. And even if she did cure her father, like you said, it was an act of kindness, not cruelty... You're a better man than your father, Arthur."

Arthur looked at her like he'd never seen her before. She fidgeted a little under his gaze, but she'd meant every word. "Alright. Let's go slay a beast," he said eventually.

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They went straight to the water reserve. Merlynn had never been there, never had cause to, but Arthur knew every inch of his city, and never faltered. "You should stay here, Merlynn," he said as they stood before the entrance.

She frowned at him. "I'm not staying behind, Arthur, so don't even bother," she replied, grabbing a torch from the wall, and drawing her dagger with the other. She gave the stunned prince a smug look, and preceded him down the steps.

"Merlynn, it's too dangerous," he insisted, dashing down after her. "If you get hurt—"

"I won't. And if I do, it'll be my own fault. Now would you keep your voice down? We're hunting down a creature," she said, smiling to herself. It was a rather exhilarating experience, the suspense was thrilling.

"I highly doubt your father will see it that way," Arthur muttered, but he didn't force her to turn back.

Finding the creature was easier than Merlynn had thought it would be. Mostly because it found them and attacked before they got very far into the tunnels. It reared at Arthur, swiping at him with its claws, but Arthur ducked, darting out of its range. By the time he'd turned, the creature had retreated back into the darkness. Merlynn held her torch higher, but it was no use. Clearly this monster favoured quick strikes and remaining unseen. It would make killing it a lot more difficult.

"What do we do?" she whispered. She hated to admit it, but in this case, Arthur was of more use than she was, since he'd know how to find the creature, even down here in the dark.

"Stay close," he whispered, and crouched to look at the ground. It was sandy, but Merlynn didn't think that would be enough to find paw prints... "This way," Arthur said, carefully and silently walking forward.

"How do you know?" Merlynn asked, unable to suppress her curiosity.

"The sand's been disturbed," he replied easily.

Oh. She hadn't thought of that. There wasn't enough traction to leave prints, but in the other corridors, the sand was smoother. She felt a little slow now.

It wasn't long before they reached the central reservoir, and there were no further signs that anything living had been there. "Maybe they were Morris's footprints," Merlynn suggested, peering down at the ground.

For a moment, Merlynn thought that Arthur would snap at her in irritation, but he just sighed. "Perhaps... Just keep your eyes open. This thing is quick."

He'd barely finished that sentence, before Merlynn sensed something behind her. She whirled around, only to be slapped aside by the creature. She hit a wall and was momentarily dazed as the creature swiped at Arthur. The Prince dodged and rolled out of the way, but was forced to drop his sword. He only had a torch to defend himself with.

Merlynn scrambled to her feet, but kept a steadying hand on the wall. Her head was pounding from her collision with rock, but she managed to stay on her feet. The Afanc was now between her and Arthur, so she drew her dagger and stabbed it.

It howled in pain, and turned on her, seemingly more angry than injured. She risked a glance at Arthur, who gave her a nod, and held up his torch, ready to strike. In an instant, Merlynn knew what to do. Shrinking a little further back into the shadows, she whispered an incantation under her breath just as Arthur stabbed the Afanc with his torch. The flame engulfed the creature as it let out a high-pitched whine and was reduced to ashes.

Breathing hard, Arthur and Merlynn locked eyes. For a moment they just stared at each other, catching their breaths. "We should go," Merlynn whispered, but her voice sounded louder in the confined space of the tunnel.

Arthur nodded and carefully stepped over the Afanc's remains. Merlynn turned to head out of the underground complex, but she'd barely put one foot in front of the other before her vision swam, and her knees buckled. Not good. Merlynn, having been a rambunctious child, knew the signs of a concussion, since she'd had one or two. "Merlynn?" Arthur asked, gripping her arm before she could fall.

She didn't answer him, focussing on her breathing and hoping the tunnel would decide to stop swimming soon. "You're bleeding," Arthur said. Dazed, Merlynn raised a hand to her head. That hurt. She didn't need to look at her hand to know that the sticky warm stuff that was in her hair was blood. "Come on," Arthur said calmly as he slid an arm around her waist to help her walk.

Merlynn cooperated as much as she could – though she wished dearly she could tell him to bugger off and that she could walk on her own. The truth of the matter was that she couldn't. She let Arthur guide her to the end of the tunnel, before he got impatient and had her hold the torch while he carried her. She protested, but only a little. Honestly, it didn't bother her that much, so long as he put her down before anyone else saw her.

It wasn't much later that Merlynn was sitting at Gaius' table, getting her head looked at, while Arthur explained the situation to his father. She wished she could be there to throw her diplomatic weight around and get Gwen released, but Gaius had insisted that she stay where she was.

"That was very brave of you, Merlynn," Gaius said as he bandaged her head. "Foolish, but brave."

Merlynn winced as he prodded her wound again, however gently. "I wouldn't have even gotten hurt if I'd been able to use my magic openly."

"It's only a minor wound, Merlynn, hardly worth exposing your secret over," Gaius admonished mildly. "You'll be fine in another day or so, provided you don't go bashing your head against any other hard surfaces."

Merlynn gave him a half-amused, half-exasperated look. "I'll try, thanks," she replied dryly.

Her uncle grinned at her, giving her shoulder and affectionate squeeze. "I want to go down to the water supply, to be certain none of the creature's influence remains, and perhaps find out who sent it to Camelot."

"Uncle?" she called after him. "Be careful," she said. Even though the creature was gone, she'd felt watched down there, and the Afanc wasn't intelligent enough to have been the one that caused it.

Gaius nodded and headed out the door. Merlynn needed to go back to her room, but she didn't feel like being on her own right then. As she stepped outside Gaius's chambers, two guards

immediately fell in step with her. She shot them a confused glance.

"We've been ordered to see you safely to your quarters, milady," one of them said.

Merlynn frowned. "Did Gaius ask you to..." she trailed off. Gaius may have some authority here, seeing as he was the physician, but he wouldn't have sent guards to protect her. "Arthur sent you, didn't he?" If that prat thought her incapable of walking a few flights of stairs...

"Yes, milady," the other guard said. The man hesitated, shooting his colleague a glance. "He said he was worried about your injury, milady, and that you'd not want to be disturbed on your way to your quarters."

Merlynn frowned to herself, but kept walking. Arthur was... more complex than she'd first given him credit for. He certainly *was* arrogant and conceited, proud, vain, and a complete part, but... he also had a protective streak, he was honourable, and could be kind when he put his mind to it. He was under a lot of pressure from his father, and the Kingdom depended on him for so much, she understood that.

Shaking her head, she pushed the Prince from her head. Gwen was due to be released any moment, and Merlynn wanted to be there for her. "I'm going to the dungeons, no need to accompany me there," she said, already turning to a different hallway.

The guards followed her. "We were ordered to stay with you, milady," the first guard said. Merlynn had the distinct impression that he was amused.

She tried not to grumble in irritation. "Really, I'll be fine," she insisted, but didn't outright order them. It wouldn't help. They followed her all the way to the dungeon, where Morgana was waiting with a dark-skinned, older man – presumably Gwen's father. Merlynn managed to convince the guards that Morgana would accompany her to her room, and they weren't needed any longer.

"How are you?" Morgana asked concernedly, once the guards had left. "I heard you were injured."

Merlynn frowned. "I'm alright, just a little dizzy. Where did you hear that? I thought Arthur didn't want anyone to know I was even there."

Smirking, Morgana leaned in. "A couple of servants saw you two exit the underground reservoir. He was supporting you. Of course, they all think you're lovers now, but I know better."

Merlynn groaned. Of course. She would have grumbled some more, but then Gwen came out and rushed straight into her father's arms. And then she gave both Morgana and her a hug too. "Thank you," she said to Morgana.

"Don't thank me, it was all Merlynn," Morgana said, smiling widely. "She was a real hero."

Merlynn was fairly certain that she was blushing fiercely. "It was nothing, it was all Arthur. I just held a torch, is all," she said, trying to downplay her role.

Tom, Gwen's father, smiled at her. "All the same, without you my daughter might still be on her way to the pyre. We cannot repay you milady," he said, tears in his eyes.

Merlynn waved him away. "Honestly, Gwen is my friend, I require no thanks." Though, she had to admit it was nice. Usually, she had to do what she did in secrecy, with no one the wiser, but this time, she was glad she'd gotten a bit of the credit. But most of all, she thought as she watched her friend hug her father again, she was glad that everyone was safe.

# Preparations

## Chapter Notes

Hey! It's been a while, hasn't it? Sorry about that. Anyway, this is sort of a bridge chapter, connecting the last episode to the next one. I've figured out how I want it all to play out, so from now on, updates should come a little more often. This chapter focusses mainly on Merlynn's relationship with Arthur. Enjoy!

### Chapter 16: Preparations

Preparations for the negotiations with Mercia began in earnest after the Afanc was defeated. Gaius took care of the last few sick people, and their relocation back to their homes, while Uther and Arthur prepared for the negotiations themselves. This left Morgana and Merlynn in charge of the festivities.

"Doesn't it bother you that we're planning a feast when they're still burying the dead outside the city walls?" Morgana asked, a few days before the Mercia delegation was due to arrive.

Merlynn sighed and put down the 'to do' list she'd compiled. "Of course it does, but these things happen. These peace negotiations are important, and will prevent further deaths. Besides, it's not like we have a choice. If we tell King Bayard that we want to postpone, he'll most likely grow suspicious and we'll never see peace," she explained. She was just as tired as Morgana, and would love to be doing anything but this, but she had little choice.

Morgana nodded thoughtfully, and went to speak with a servant, while Merlynn turned back to her list. She hated these sort of things, and usually her mother was the one who organized it, but Camelot only had Morgana as the Lady of the House. It was her duty to oversee all social matters, and Merlynn knew that her friend hated them even more than she did.

Morgana didn't have a lot of patience for these things, and usually left these things to the head of the household staff; a portly woman with an eye for detail. But Uther had gotten it in his head that because Merlynn would be part of the negotiations, she should help Morgana organize the feast. Honestly, Merlynn thought it was a way for the King to make sure Merlynn stayed away from the preparations, but there was nothing she could do. It was considered an honour, and to decline would mean she'd be excluded from the peace talks.

The morning dragged on, with endless requests from 'which tablecloths should be used, milady?' to 'Are these the right flower arrangements? And where should they be put, milady?'. Merlynn's own patience was wearing thin, and Morgana had already yelled at three servants. She'd retreated to her chambers after a young serving boy had dropped a vase and spilled flowers and water all over the floor.

During a rare moment of peace and quiet – most of the servants were setting the table – Merlynn managed to sit down and massage her throbbing forehead. "You look awful."

Merlynn looked up and glared. "You try to organize a banquet some time, I guarantee you, you wouldn't last a day," she snapped.

Arthur held up his hands in surrender. "I'd rather fight an angry bear, thanks." Merlynn really couldn't appreciate his jokes right now, so she kept her mouth shut and hoped he'd go away.

"What, no witty retort? You must be exhausted," he said, still sounding far too amused for her tastes.

"Please go away," she groaned, rubbing her temples in her exhaustion.

"Where's Morgana? Isn't she supposed to be helping you with this?" Arthur asked. Merlynn glanced up to see him frowning at the banquet hall. Several servants that had been heading her way, quickly scurried away after seeing the Prince standing with her. Huh. Maybe there was a good side to having Arthur here.

"She's supposed to be in charge, but I sent her to her room to cool down after she shouted at several frightened servants," she explained.

Now after turned his frown on her. "Morgana was shouting at the servants? That doesn't sound like her."

Merlynn shrugged and got up, rolling her shoulders. "She's tired and frustrated. Trust me, I've yelled a few times as well. I suggested she needed some rest, so she apologised and went to her chambers." Merlynn looked Arthur over, he looked a little tired himself. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"Nothing, just... Taking a break from preparations," he replied evasively. Avoiding his father, no doubt.

She sighed. "Come on, I'm starving, and you look like you could eat too. I'm sure the servants can handle the next few catastrophes without me," she said, getting up.

Arthur went with her willingly, but about halfway to their destination, he realized they hadn't been going to either of their rooms. "Wait, where are we going?" he asked.

Merlynn stopped and turned back to look at him. "The kitchens," she said, not quite understanding why he was confused. Arthur's eyes flitted over to the corridor leading to the nobles' wing, and suddenly, Merlynn understood why he was acting so strangely. "You've never been there, have you?" she asked incredulously.

"I've never had any reason to. Why have *you* been there?" he shot back.

Merlynn shrugged, continuing on her way to the kitchens. "I love exploring," she said simply. At Arthur's questioning look, she sighed. She was going to have to explain this, wasn't she?



"When I was little, I usually spent my days avoiding my maid and exploring the castle." She smiled as a memory surfaced. "I always thought I'd find some secret passage somewhere, that would lead me to a new part of the castle, and I'd have some grand adventure... I thought maybe then the other nobles' children would finally like me and play with me," she admitted. She hadn't known it at the time, but they stayed away from her because they knew the truth about her parentage. But when she was a girl, all Merlynn wanted was to be liked by her peers.

She cleared her throat as she realized that Arthur was waiting for her to continue. He was still walking with her, listening attentively, something she hadn't seen him do a lot. "One day, my father told me that a certain section of the castle was off limits, but he wouldn't tell me why. He even put up a rope and had a guard stand watch to deter me. He told me that if I went there anyway, he'd take away my horse. I was dying of curiosity, but I knew he was serious, so I stayed away. Of course, that just meant that I spent my time figuring out ways to sneak out of the castle."

"You must have been a handful, I feel for your parents," Arthur teased.

Rolling her eyes, Merlynn elbowed him. Not very ladylike, but Arthur was still smiling, so he probably wasn't offended. "No more than Morgana, I'm sure," she replied wryly.

Arthur conceded that point. "So what happened?" he asked.

"About two months later, we were invited to a wedding. One of the noblemen serving my father had an estate at the edge of the Kingdom, so we attended it, and when we came back, the rope was gone. My father offered no explanation, so I went exploring again. There was a new painting where before, there had been an ugly statue. You'll never guess what I found behind it," she said cheekily.

"A secret passage? You actually found one?" he asked, grinning.

Merlynn nodded. "It led all the way to the corridor where my room was. I was so excited, I couldn't believe it. Of course, later I found out that my father had had it built just for me. The only people who know where it is, are my father and the men who built it. It was the best gift he could have ever given me."

Arthur remained silent as they continued their walk. "You sound like you're close. You and your father, I mean."

Merlynn looked over, recognising the question underneath. "You mean we sound close for two people who aren't related by blood," she said. Arthur looked away. "He is my father. I've never known another, and even if I did know him... he left us, he let my mother get arrested, and he never came looking for us. Olaf is my father in every way that matters. Why do you think I'm so insistent on calling Morgana your sister? To me, blood doesn't matter. Your family are the ones who stay with you even through the difficult times, who love you no matter what. That transcends any bond of blood." Suddenly, Merlynn realized that their light-hearted conversation had grown a lot heavier than she'd intended, so she looked away and tucked her hair behind her ear.

"I had no idea you felt so strongly about this," Arthur said eventually.

A few servants scurried by after shooting them several furtive glances. "I suppose that's what happens when you grow up like I did."

It was strange, talking to Arthur like this. She was far more used to having shouting matches or banter exchanges, but this? This went a lot deeper than that. Merlynn had grown to respect Arthur over the past month, but she hadn't really opened up about herself much, so this was new. It was nice. "so what about you?" she asked curiously. "Didn't you ever explore the castle?"

Arthur shrugged. "Not really. My father made sure my schedule was so full that by the time I was done, I'd barely have enough energy to eat and get changed for bed. I didn't really have any free time."

Merlynn frowned. "That's sad."

Looking at her strangely, Arthur ran a hand through his hair. "I didn't think so. I didn't know anything else, so I couldn't miss it."

"I suppose that makes sense," she replied as they made the final turn. There were a lot more servants in the hallway now, and they were all staring at them. Merlynn had been there a few times before, but the Crown Prince hadn't. Arthur had an unfortunate lack of curiosity, Merlynn thought. "We're here," she said to him, before walking into the kitchen and approaching the woman she knew to be the head cook.

Arthur looked mightily uncomfortable, but kept his mouth shut, and let Merlynn do the talking. "I'm sorry to bother you, but could we get something to eat?" Merlynn asked kindly.

The cook didn't look up, but huffed. "You're going to have to wait for dinner, lass, like everyone-" She finally glanced up and cut herself off the moment she recognized the two royals in front of her. "Oh, your highness! I'm so sorry, of course you... why didn't you send for a servant, milady?" she said in a rushed voice, turning to a pot behind her and gesturing for one of her helpers to get bowls.

"It wasn't far, and most of the servants were working so diligently in the banquet hall, I didn't want to disturb them," Merlynn replied cheerfully.

"Of course, milady," the cook said, not daring to say anything else. Merlynn felt a bit bad for making the woman put her usual chores aside to help her, but the same thing would have happened if she'd sent a servant – only with more complaining, probably.

Arthur accepted the bowls when they were handed over, and Merlynn thanked the woman with a smile, leading Arthur out the door. There was a small dining room next to the kitchen, meant for the servants, but as they were all busy, and it wasn't anywhere near lunch or dinner, it was empty.

"I had no idea this was here..." Arthur said in a whisper. Merlynn suspected it was more directed towards himself than to her, but she figured she needed to say something anyway.

"My father used to say that if the head of the house doesn't know his house, he doesn't know how to defend it. When I was little, I took that literally, and dragged Vivian with me through the whole castle. It was only later that I realized he'd meant his kingdom as a whole, not the castle specifically. Once I realized that, I started learning all I could about my people, our culture and legends, and the tribes and creatures that live in the mountains."

Looking at her thoughtfully, Arthur put his bowl down. "You're really not like other people, are you?"

Inexplicably, a blush rose on Merlynn's cheeks. She was sure he hadn't meant it as a compliment, but she couldn't help herself. "I guess," she said, suddenly shy as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Arthur either ignored her sudden flustered state, or didn't notice. Either way, he turned back to his food and ate in silence.

Once again, Merlynn felt that she had to readjust her view of Camelot's Crown Prince. He could still be an insufferable prat sometimes, but... somehow, he'd become... important to her, someone she could call a friend.

A smile tugged at her lips. Perhaps that wasn't the worst thing ever...

# Negotiations

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for the lateness of this chapter! Hope you like it! Also, see if you can't spot the teeny tiny Buffy the Vampire Slayer reference :p

The Mercia delegation arrived with far more fanfare than Merlynn thought strictly necessary. The two Kings met in the Throne room, each of their delegations behind them. Merlynn was right next to Uther, as a representative of her own kingdom. The atmosphere was tense, as Camelot and Mercia had been at war for years. King Bayard and King Uther stared at each other for a moment – Merlynn fought not to roll her eyes at the appraising look in the men's eyes – before clasping each other's forearms.

A few words were exchanged, and a collective breath that had been involuntarily held until now, was released. Bayard turned to Merlynn, and she curtsied. "Your highness," she said respectfully. "My father sends his greetings and hopes that you are well."

Bayard looked her over, eyes more shrewd than most men's. This was someone who knew not to underestimate her. "I am well, as I hope your father is. I have not seen him for many years," Bayard replied, giving her a shallow bow. It was a courtesy he did not have to extend, as she was of lower rank than him, and she was grateful for the respect it showed. It was more than Uther had ever extended towards her.

"My father is doing well, my lord, I thank you for your concern. He had hoped to be here himself, but he was needed in our homeland." The formal speech rolled off her tongue, due to years of practise, though she despised how much politics were hidden in the simple words. She had to be careful, the wrong word, spoken with the wrong intonation could spark a war.

Turning back to Uther, Bayard smiled. "Uther, when you told me there would be a delegate from Galdara, you did not tell me she was this lovely," he said.

Usually, the compliment would have made Merlynn blush, but she knew that there was nothing but politics going on in this room. Nevertheless, she appreciated the compliment, and the effort to lighten the mood, so she smiled. "I'm sure the King had more important things to worry about than the presence of a mere princess," Merlynn said, slightly self-deprecatingly. It was a tiny jibe at the King standing beside her, for it had been his responsibility to inform the visiting King. She was implying that Uther didn't think her important, and that she had taken note of it. By the slight lowering of the Camelotian King, he had noticed the insult, too.

"Indeed," Uther said. "These negotiations have been a long time in the making. I apologise if certain matters were overlooked."

And that was an affirmation of his low opinion of her. Bayard, with his sharp eyes travelling from her to Uther and back, had taken note. “Well, I’m sure I’ll get to know Lady...” the trailed off, looking at her expectantly. Uther had still made no introductions, after all.

“Merlynn, my lord,” she supplied, dropping into another shallow curtsy.

“Merlynn. I’m sure I’ll get to know the Lady Merlynn of Galdara well enough during our negotiations,” Bayard said. “And now, may I present my chief advisor, Lord Merrin, and my scribe, Mr. Giles,” he said, gesturing to the two men on his left. The rest of his entourage was mainly servants and guards, and merited no introduction.

“And may I present my son, Prince Arthur, my ward, the Lady Morgana, and my chief advisor, Sir Geoffrey of Monmouth,” Uther said, gesturing to each in turn. Morgana was standing to Merlynn’s left, while Arthur was on Uther’s right side, as was proper.

Merlynn almost rolled her eyes again. Politics was nothing if not theatrical.

A few more words were exchanged between the Kings (something about a banquet), and the respective parties retreated. King Bayard and his were shown to their accommodations, and the Camelotian servants went to prepare for the feast.

“Thank the Gods it’s over,” Morgana whispered, and Merlynn couldn’t help but smile.

“It wasn’t that bad,” she whispered back as they made their way out of the room.

Morgana shot her a look. “You say that now, but you don’t know Bayard, the man loves his own voice too much to ever shut up. He’s known for his long-winded speeches.”

Merlynn stifled a very unladylike snort, and bade her friend goodbye. She had about an hour before she was expected to be in the council chambers. She was just thinking about how an hour of peace and quiet was just what she needed, when Arthur fell in step beside her.

“Arthur,” she said, half respectful and half mocking.

“You know, I don’t envy you,” he said cheerfully.

“And why is that?” she asked sardonically. For all the time they’d spent together, Arthur was still somewhat of a mystery to her.

“Because your father so graciously asked you to sit in on the peace negotiations, I’m no longer required to be there.” He was outright smirking now.

“Your point being?” she asked, getting a little annoyed. Though at the same time, she found herself fighting a smile. Arthur riled her up, but he also challenged her, and it was something she couldn’t resist.

“Peace negotiations aren’t just agreeing never to fight each other again, Merlynn, it’s hefty discussions, and arguments about every single little point, interchanged with long hours of going over old treaties and laws.”

“I already know this, Arthur. Just because I’ve never done this before, doesn’t mean I don’t know what goes on. I’ve read dozens of transcripts of treaty negotiations, I know what to expect,” she replied, a little testily.

Arthur was still smirking. “Perhaps. But, you see, I’ll be out hunting with Sir Leon while you’ll be in here, either bored to tears or frustrated beyond measure. And makes me extremely happy.”

Merlynn glared, swatting at him. Arthur danced out of the way with a laugh. “Have a nice day, Merlynn!” he called over his shoulder as he ducked around a corner.

With Arthur out of sight, Merlynn let out a breathy chuckle and rolled her eyes. That man was incorrigible, but he did have an uncanny ability to make her smile despite her irritation.

The princess shook her head, shoving all thoughts of the prince from her mind. She needed to look over some last documents to prepare for the peace talks, and she was determined to be early to the council chambers. She quickly hurried to her rooms to get started. She had to be at her best today, if she didn’t want to disappoint her father. And she was determined not to do that.

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Dear Goddess, what had she gotten herself into?

It seemed that Arthur had been right. She’d already spent hours being either bored or frustrated to no end. Currently, she was very close to banging her head on the table from the sheer annoyance of the argument that was going on around her. The disagreement had broken out when an old document had been dusted off by Geoffrey of Monmouth, which stated that a certain border territory that Mercia had been using to supply their army with food, actually belonged to Camelot.

Obviously, the Mercian delegation argued that the territory had been used by Mercia for close to a hundred years, but Camelot wanted it back, seeing as it was legally theirs. Neither party was willing to give an inch, and it was driving Merlynn insane.

“My lords!” she shouted as she stood up, finally having had enough. The lords in the room quieted down, surprised by her outburst. “If I might make a suggestion?” she asked forcefully.

Uther glared, but Bayard looked at her calculatingly. “Go ahead, my lady,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said. Having the attention of all the lords on her wasn’t exactly comfortable, but she was angry enough to be able to push it aside. “It seems we have come to a stalemate. Legally, the land belongs to Camelot, but taking it from Mercia would cripple their army,” she summed up.

“We already know this,” one of the more vocal lords said, sounding bored. He was one of the ones who had protested her presence.

“I am aware, Lord Merrin, I was merely summing up what this argument is about, seeing as some here seem to have forgotten,” she said, managing not to snap. “As I was saying, the problem is complex, since Mercia cannot keep the land, but Camelot cannot just take it.”

“And what do you suggest?” Uther asked. He didn’t seem hostile, but Merlynn had learned a long time ago that the King of Camelot would always look on her unfavourably.

“The land does belong to Camelot, so it should be yours to claim,” she told the king. “But since Mercia relies on that land, I’d suggest that Camelot pays a tithe to Mercia until they are able to sustain their army on their own again.”

“Your plan would never work,” the Mercian advisor sneered. “Why would Camelot agree to pay tithes? And you can’t honestly expect Mercia to rely on Camelot?”

“I think you fail to see the point of this meeting, *Lord Merrin*,” she said, emphasizing his title. She’d found that she had to do that a lot to remind everyone that she was still a princess and thus, technically, higher of rank than them. “You’re in negotiations to become allies. One of the basic points of any treaty is that if one is in danger, the other will come to their aid. That implies that there is trust between the two kingdoms to abide by the treaty. It is no different when it comes to this. Camelot can’t afford not to pay the tithes, because they’d be risking war, and Mercia cannot lay claim to the land for then *they’d* be the ones risking war.”

Merlynn looked around the council chambers, putting her hands on the table. “The whole point of a treaty is trust. And to impose consequences if that trust is broken. If you’re so unwilling to accept my suggestion simply out of misplaced pride, that you’re willing to risk war, then be my guest. Unless you have a better solution?” That might have been a little more venomous than she’d intended, but the man was grating on her nerves. He was glaring at her, his hands fisted on the table, but Merlynn would not back down. She was a princess and well within her right as a diplomat to state her opinions, no matter who might find them offensive.

“It’s an interesting proposal,” Bayard said, diffusing the tension somewhat. “What do you think Uther?” he asked genially.

“I believe it’s a fair suggestion,” he said evenly.

“Fantastic, then we’re in agreement. Scribe, make note of this,” Bayard said, smiling.

Merlynn sat back down as Geoffrey read out the next point on the agenda. And immediately two of Camelot’s advisors got into a heated discussion with one of Bayard’s men. She resisted the urge to bang her head against the table again. This was going to be a *long* day.

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It had been two days since the Mercian delegation had arrived, and Arthur was glad that they would finally be leaving in the morning. There had been a tense atmosphere in the castle, and though Arthur had been able to escape it by going hunting, others were not so fortunate. He idly wondered how Merlynn had fared. He hadn’t seen much of her aside from at mealtimes, and even then she’d been seated far away, and had seemed preoccupied.

If he was being completely honest with himself, he missed having her around. She always managed to get under his skin, or start an argument, or made him think differently about things. Now it was... quiet. He'd rather stab himself than admit that to her face though, he'd never live it down.

Pulling on his jacket and throwing one last look into the mirror, he left his room to go to the banquet hall. No doubt the signing of the treaty itself would be boring, but perhaps the dancing afterwards would provide some entertainment. It was always funny to see the unmarried ladies of the court – and some married ones as well – throw themselves at every eligible nobleman in the room. Merlynn wasn't like that, though. Arthur knew for a fact that some of his knights, as well as some of the other noblemen in the court, were interested in her. But the princess hadn't shown the slightest sign of even being aware of the attention. Which was ironic, because she was very perceptive about most other matters.

Arthur shook his head, why was he even contemplating *Merlynn* of all people? He focussed on the stones in front of his feet. Today would just be another feast, and tomorrow it would be over. The Mercian delegation would be gone, and Merlynn would be... He sighed in frustration. How did that woman manage to invade his every thought like that? Not only did she annoy him in person, she had managed to do it in his mind as well, now.

“Arthur?” The voice shook him from his mental scolding, and he looked up to see Morgana a few steps away. “Has the floor done something to upset you or are you just in a foul mood?” she asked, amused.

The Prince rolled his eyes. “Morgana. No, just contemplating how boring this feast is going to be if Bayard decides to give another one of his speeches.”

A knowing light danced in his foster sister's eyes, and Arthur didn't like the look of it one bit. “And here I was thinking someone else had been the cause of your ire,” she said, and Arthur knew exactly to whom she was referring. Those bloody women spent far too much time together.

He chose to ignore her implication, and offered his arm. “May I escort you, my lady?” he asked, only slightly grudgingly.

Morgana grinned, probably seeing this as an acknowledgement nonetheless, and took him up on his offer. “Why thank you, my lord,” she said, and Arthur was relieved that she wouldn't keep going on about it. “Although I think there's another lady who would have loved it if you'd offered her the courtesy instead.” But of course, she would never let this go.

At least Morgana wasn't seated next to him. Let her annoy Merlynn with her glib comments. He really wanted this day to be over.



# The Poisoned Chalice

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **Chapter 18: The Poisoned Chalice**

The King of Camelot sat on his chair, facing the banquet hall as it slowly filled up. The past few days had been tiring, but... interesting. The treaty, like all others of its kind, was not that difficult to create, though it took long, arduous hours of negotiations. There had been the usual arguments over plots of land, and old treaties and such nonsense, but then... The Galdaran Princess was obviously new to diplomacy and probably wasn't aware that such arguments were normal, and to be expected. She'd been quiet throughout the discussions, as she should be, but then she'd stood up and offered a compromise. It had considerably sped up the process, though he was loath to admit it.

Uther watched as his son and ward entered the hall and started mingling with the other nobles. Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, he reconsidered the Princess's actions. He could see his friend Olaf's influence in the girl, but there was also something wild, something different, that she'd no doubt inherited from her father.

After what she had done to speed up the peace talks, some might say that he owed her, but Uther scoffed at that idea. The Princess had been there on official business, she had merely done her duty, nothing more. To suggest that anything else was laughable. That said, he wasn't above setting aside his dislike for the girl in order to implement her suggestion. He wouldn't risk a war with Mercia because of his aversion for the person who offered a solution.

He would wait and observe her. He still wasn't certain that she hadn't inherited more from her father than just her attitude, but he had no proof. And honestly, he was starting to doubt that the girl was anything special at all. Perhaps she did have some intelligence, but she was nothing more than just a pretty face.

The King's eyes rested on his son, who had turned away from his fellow knights to stare at something across the hall. Following his gaze, Uther saw that the object of his son's fascination was the Princess he had just been contemplating. His mood soured immediately. He might be willing to give her a chance, but he would never permit his son to chase this fancy. Their bond with Galdara needed no strengthening, and he would not permit that woman to taint his bloodline. He would have to find a way to send her back to her home, now that her official business here was done. But how...?

His thoughts were interrupted, however, when King Bayard entered, and the banquet began in earnest. He would have to consider the matter later.

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As he had predicted, Bayard insisted on a speech before they could actually begin the banquet. Arthur had to fight not to roll his eyes or show any other outward sign of his boredom. And he didn't even have Morgana or Merlynn to share his annoyance with, since they were seated at his father's other side; Merlynn on his left, and Morgana next to her.

Bayard gestured to his advisor, Lord Merrill or something, who promptly handed over an ornate wooden box. Arthur's interest was finally peaked. Maybe now something interesting would happen.

"For this momentous occasion, I commissioned these chalices," Bayard said, lifting a beautifully crafted, silver cup out of the box. "To commemorate the start of a strong friendship between our nations." He handed Uther and Merlynn each a chalice, and Arthur had to admit that they were beautiful. Servants instantly rushed forward to fill them with wine.

"To friendship," Bayard said, holding up his own cup, "and a new alliance."

Everyone in the hall held up their cup in a toast, muttered "to friendship", and –

"Stop!"

Arthur whipped around in time to see his idiotic manservant Morris charge into the room like a madman. "Morris, you fool, what do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"My lady, don't drink, it's poisoned," Morris warned, his eyes focussed on Merlynn. Arthur paused and glanced at the princess. How could it be poisoned? The wine came from his father's personal cellar, and they were all drinking it, so why only warn Merlynn?

"Preposterous!" Bayard protested, glaring fiercely at the servant.

"What are you on about, you buffoon? Have you been at the cider again?" Arthur snapped. Morris wasn't usually one to overindulge in drink, but it was the only explanation for this behaviour he could think of at the moment.

"My lady, please, the cup is poisoned! Lord Merrin did it, he was seen!"

That gave Arthur pause. He'd heard that the Lord hadn't been very happy with Merlynn during the peace talks, but to think that he'd go this far...

"Morris, are you sure?" Merlynn asked gently, while the lord in question shouted in indignation.

"I'm sure my lady."

"And how did you come by this information, boy?" Uther asked. It was the first time he'd spoken, and Arthur didn't like the cold glint in his eyes.

"Er..." Morris hesitated, his eyes flickering around the room.

“Uther, do you let your servants speak to nobility like this? My advisor has done nothing to warrant such suspicion. I am willing to vouch for my man,” Bayard said.

“Then the princess should have no problem drinking from the cup,” Uther said coldly.

Arthur shot up from his seat. “Father, you can’t! If the cup is actually poisoned...” he trailed off, not even wanting to contemplate that situation.

Merrin stepped forward, towards Merlynn, and Arthur had to stop himself from drawing his sword. “Please, my lady. I may not have agreed with you in the council chambers, but I would never betray the trust of my king, nor risk another war over personal dislike.”

It wasn’t a very nice way of putting it, but Arthur had to admit that it didn’t sound like the man was lying. Indeed, why would he? If Morris hadn’t come in to warn everyone, and the cup was indeed poisoned, then why use Mercia’s gift?

Unless, of course, Merrin had planned to push the blame on Bayard. But, once again, that theory didn’t sound right. Bayard had been getting along with Merlynn just fine, while Merrin was the one with a known grudge. If push came to shove, Bayard would simply give his word that he had nothing to do with it, and suspicion would fall on Merrin again. It all made no sense. And why poison Merlynn in the first place, she had nothing to do with the treaty. He explained as much to his father.

Uther looked thoughtful, but Morris intervened again. “I am absolutely certain the cup is poisoned my lord,” he said, looking more confident than Arthur could ever remember him being.

“Then, if the boy is so certain, maybe he should drink?” Uther said casually, leaning back in his chair.

Morris looked pale, and had subconsciously taken a step back. “No!” Merlynn shouted. She took a deep breath and stepped forward. “No. I’ll drink from it. After all, like Arthur said, Lord Merrin has no reason to want to harm me.” Arthur knew that she’d only done it to protect Morris, seeing as she looked a little queasy herself, and it angered him more than he thought it would. He didn’t want to see Morris die either, but that didn’t mean that she should be throwing her own life in the balance.

“What if there is no poison?” Bayard asked, holding his head high.

“Then you may do with the boy as you please.”

No one asked what would happen if there *was* poison. “Well then. Cheers,” Merlynn said, her voice only slightly unstable. She put the cup to her lips and took a sip. It took all of Arthur’s will power to remain where he was and not snatch it from her.

Everyone in the hall held their breaths. For a moment, nothing happened, total silence reigned. Then; “Nothing,” Merlynn said, sounding relieved. Her shoulders sagged, and she caught Arthur’s eyes, smiling.

“Guards,” Uther said, and the men stationed in the room advanced on Morris. Arthur was about to protest when the sound of metal hitting stone interrupted him. His eyes were drawn back to Merlynn, who stood in front of the table, her cup on the ground. The red liquid stained the brown stone, but Arthur’s eyes were on her face. It was pale, her mouth agape as she gasped for air.

Once more, their eyes met, but there was only despair in them this time, before they rolled up in her skull, and she collapsed.

“Guards!” Uther shouted. “Seize them all!”

Arthur paid no mind to the chaos around them, having run to Merlynn’s side almost before she’d hit the ground. He put an arm around her shoulders, trying to get her to sit up, but her head fell limp against his chest. Gaius knelt next to them. “Get her to my chambers! Quick! And someone grab that cup!” he ordered.

Picking her up, Arthur ran towards the physician’s chambers, wasting no time to see what was going on behind him. He got there in record time and was told by Gaius to put her on the cot. “She’s struggling to breathe,” the physician said. “Gwen, fetch me some water and a towel. Arthur, I’ll need your knife,” he said as he lifted Merlynn’s eyelids.

Arthur handed it over. “Why?” he asked worriedly.

Gaius didn’t reply, instead he just started cutting away the corset Merlynn was wearing. Arthur’s first instinct was to look away, but he couldn’t bear to look away from her for long. “It’s restricting her breathing,” Gaius finally explained.

Arthur was happy to see that Merlynn’s dress was still intact beneath the now-ruined corset. Gwen rejoined them and used the towel and water to cool Merlynn’s face. “You can cure her, can’t you, Gaius?” she asked anxiously.

“Not until I identify the poison,” the old man replied as he got up to inspect the goblet.

Arthur focussed on the unconscious woman before him again. How could she have been so foolish? She’s a princess, even if she’s not first in line to the throne, her life is far too important to risk!

Gaius mentioned a flower stuck on the inside of the goblet, so Arthur went over to look. Gwen would keep watch over the wayward princess. “It’s the petal of the mortuus flower,” Gaius said as he peered at one of his books. Apparently, whoever got poisoned by that flower could only be cured with a leaf from the same plant. Which, incidentally, only grew in the forest of Balor, on the roots of a mortuus tree. And that was without mentioning its dangerous and venomous protector, the cockatrice.

There really was no choice, however, and Arthur was about to volunteer to go after it, when his father strode in. “Gaius, what’s her condition?” he asked without preamble.

“It doesn’t look good, sire. She needs the leaf of a very rare plant, that only grows in the forest of Balor.”

Uther's eyes sharpened. "That place is crawling with dangerous creatures, not to mention the difficult terrain," he said thoughtfully, his gaze finally landing on the gravely ill princess.

Arthur stepped forward. "I'll go and retrieve the plant, father," he volunteered.

"No," Uther said, his tone brooking no protest. "I'll not have you endanger your life, Arthur. I can send a party of scouts. Meanwhile, I've had a carriage prepared to take her back to Galdara. Should she die, she ought to be with her family."

For the first time that Arthur could remember, he could see why some people called his father a monster. How could he do this? Sending her on a two day trip while she was so ill? "Father, you can't!" he objected.

"I must agree with Arthur, my lord, I advise against moving the princess, she is too ill," Gaius said, frowning at the king.

"I'll hear no more on it, my decision has been made!" Uther said sternly. "Balor lies closer to the Galdaran border than to Camelot, if a scout manages to retrieve the flower, it would be wiser to send them on to Galdara."

"Father, let me retrieve the plant, I'm the best knight, the swiftest rider. Sending others would only send them to their deaths," Arthur tried to reason.

"No, and that's final!" the king shouted. Arthur almost felt like a child again, having been denied a favour by his father. "I'll send men for that flower, but you're staying here!"

"My lord," Gaius interrupted. "May I ask permission to accompany my niece? She may require medical attention on the way there," he asked respectfully. Arthur couldn't understand how Gaius could be so calm while his niece lay dying.

For a moment, it seemed like Uther would say no. "Very well," Uther said, and swept out of the room.

Everything was silent in the physician's chambers for all of a heartbeat. "How long does she have?" Arthur asked.

"The mortuus flower induces a slow and painful death. If she doesn't receive the antidote, she may hold out for three or four days, but... after that, she'll die."

Arthur nodded to himself. He didn't care what his father said, he would *not* let Merlynn die. He strode over to her cot and knelt down next to her. Gwen got up, presumably to get fresh water or something. "Don't die on me now, Merlynn, I'm not done with you yet. I still have to best you in a race. Remember? You said that I could never win, but I beg to differ," he murmured. He pushed a stray lock of hair out of her face, and was surprised at the heat emanating from her. She was burning up. "I'll be back soon," he whispered, before getting up and striding out of the room, ignoring Gaius's lingering gaze.

So, what did you think? Did you see that coming? I know it's not that much of a deviation from canon, but I really like this episode, and I honestly don't think it's all that bad. About Uther, keep in mind that he still doesn't like Merlynn, and is still not entirely convinced that she didn't inherit anything else from her father. Her getting poisoned is, in his eyes, the perfect moment to stop worrying about it. If she lives, she'll be far away in Galdara, with no reason to come to Camelot any time soon, and if she dies, he doesn't have to worry about her having magic.

# The Morteus Flower

## Chapter Notes

Okay, so this chapter has been up for about a week on fanfiction . net, and I completely forgot to update it here, too! I'm such a bad writer, I'm sorry!

Anyway, we're nearing the end of the episode, and we'll get to see some more of Galdara in the next chapter, yay!

### **Chapter 19: The Morteus Flower**

Morgana stood on the steps leading to the central courtyard, watching with worried eyes as Merlynn's prone body was carefully placed inside the waiting carriage. She still couldn't believe that Uther was going through with this. He'd truly gone mad.

A Galdaran captain came out of the castle next, dragging the chained Lord Merrin with him. He'd been the one to make the arrest at the banquet, having moved before anyone else could. He paused next to her. "My lady... I'm sure if the Princess were able, she'd tell you that you're always welcome in Galdara, and that she'll miss you..." There was an unspoken implication there: Merlynn would miss Morgana... *if* she survived.

"Take care of her, Sir Fredrik," Morgana said.

The man nodded, before shoving Lord Merrin at one of the soldiers, who helped him onto a horse. Morgana glared at him. All through the night, the man had insisted on his innocence, loudly, so before he'd been brought out, he'd been gagged.

The next person to come out of the castle was King Bayard. He had vouched for his advisor, and thus guilty by association, but Uther had let him go. The Mercian King had insisted on accompanying his man to Galdara, however, to plead with King Olaf.

"My lady," a voice next to her said. It was Gaius, looking more tired than she'd ever seen the old man. "Be cautious. Morris told me of a serving girl who had supposedly seen the Lord poison the goblet, but the girl is nowhere to be found. I don't know what her purpose was, but..." he warned in a low voice.

Morgana was shocked. Did this mean that the Mercian Lord had nothing to do with it? Or was she perhaps only an accomplice? "I'll do whatever I can to find her," she vowed.

Gaius nodded. "I've left some sleeping tonics in your chambers, my lady. I don't know when I'll return," he said, and turned to go down the steps.

"Gaius?" she called out. When he turned, she bit her lip and wrung her hands, her worry for her friend surfacing once more. "Please..." She didn't know what to say. Save her? Bring her

back? But Gaius nodded, understanding her meaning, even without the words.

As the carriage pulled away, starting its long journey to Galdara, Morgana's worry slowly turned to fury. She turned on her heel and stalked back into the castle, intent on her destination. She marched into the throne room, glaring at its sole occupant. "If she dies, it's on your head. And her father *will* declare war, and every single casualty will be your fault," she said angrily.

Uther merely returned the glare. "Olaf will not fault me, I've sent him the man responsible."

"You think he will care?" she asked, incredulously. "Would you, if it was me or Arthur? She was under *your* protection." When Uther offered no reply, she started pacing. "Why is it that you hate her so much? Just because her father was a criminal doesn't mean she is, she never even met him! She's denounced him, and she despises him. Why can't you see her for what she is?"

Uther got up from his throne almost faster than Morgana could see. "Because he was more than a petty thief, Morgana, he was a traitor, and he deserved his fate!" he shouted.

Morgana stared at him in shock. "A traitor?" she asked quietly. "How? Was he of Camelot?" Morgana's interest was piqued. Merlynn hadn't said much on the subject, and Morgana didn't think she knew much more than she'd said, too blinded by hate for the man who had abandoned her and her mother to ask any further.

Uther hesitated, half turning away. "He... was a friend, and he betrayed me. This all happened before your time, Morgana, and it is none of your concern," he said, but his tone wasn't as firm as it had been before. There was a strange emotion in his voice that she couldn't quite place. It wasn't hurt or guilt, but... something similar maybe? Or a combination of the two?

"Before my..." she repeated to herself. "Do you mean during the Great Purge?" she asked, a scary thought dawning in her mind. "Was Merlynn's father magic?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Uther turned on her, glare in place again. "I told you this doesn't concern you!" he all but snarled. Surprised at his harsh tone, Morgana left the throne room, but the question kept going through her head. If Merlynn's father had magic... was there a chance she had it too?

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Arthur spurred his horse on, he had no time to lose, and slipping by the guards his father had stationed near his room had already taken longer than he'd anticipated. He was almost at the forest of Balor, and he'd already caught up to the two guards his father had sent to retrieve the flower. Arthur respected their courage, but the two men had never seen any action, and were palace guards. He doubted they would have returned alive if Arthur hadn't found them.

They were both young men, with no real experience, though they were stalwart and loyal to their king, they were unsuited for the task. And they were both without families. Arthur



didn't want to admit it, but they would not be missed, and in his father's eyes, they were most likely dispensable.

"My lord," one of them called out. Arthur looked up. He'd been lost in thought, even as they galloped at a high speed towards the forest, and had lost track of his surroundings. "We've just crossed into the forest, my lord," the man continued.

Looking around, Arthur realized that they must've crossed the border or this accursed land at least ten minutes ago. Right. He needed to concentrate. He nodded to the guard to show that he had heard him, and slowed his horse's pace somewhat. It wouldn't do to run the poor beasts into the ground and then be stuck in this infernal forest with no transportation out.

Besides, Merlynn really needed that flower, and time was of the essence.

The forest itself looked a lot less menacing than Arthur had imagined, from Gaius' descriptions. He'd thought he'd be fighting off creatures at every turn, but so far it didn't look any different than the forest that surrounded the city.

And no sooner had he thought that, than the other guardsman gave a shout. Whipping his head around, Arthur saw a creature tear the man off his horse and pin him to the ground. Wasting no time, the prince charged at the beast, sword drawn.

The creature noticed his advance and left the guardsman alone to face this new threat. It lunged, but Arthur was quicker, dropping down to let the creature dive over him, and bringing up his sword as the creature's belly passed over his head. As soon as he could, Arthur rolled to his feet to face the creature again. It was wounded, but still snarling, even as it trembled with the effort to stand. Feinting to the left, the prince managed to stab the creature in the chest. It gave one more pitiful whine before slumping over.

Arthur allowed himself a brief moment to catch his breath, before running over to his fallen man. The guard was still on the ground, groaning and clutching his shoulder.

"My lord, what can I do?" Arthur looked up at the second guardsman. Evidently, he'd managed to catch and hold on to the horses, and he looked calm, if a little shaken. A good man in a crisis, then. The man – or boy, really – wouldn't have been any good in the fight with the creature, so he'd made himself useful in a different way.

"I have some emergency medical supplies in my saddlebags, bring it," the prince ordered briskly.

They set about patching their wounded comrade up, but he was still pale and unsteady by the time they were finished. "You'll have to take him back to Camelot," Arthur said.

"Bu, my lord... I can't leave you here on your own," the other guard said.

"What's your name?" Arthur asked.

"Timothy, sire."

“Well, Timothy. We can’t take him with us, the mission is time sensitive, and he’d only slow us down. And we can’t leave him here, he’d be dead by morning. I can finish this on my own, and ride on to Galdara,” he explained calmly.

“But, my lord, the reason I was chosen for this was because I know the area,” Timothy protested.

Arthur held up a hand silencing him. “Then you’ll have to point me in the right direction. He needs help, soon by the looks of it, and we can’t provide that here. Tell me where to go, and I’ll leave immediately.”

The man hesitated for another brief moment before pointing east. “Go that way for another mile or two, you should find the entrance to a cave there, right by a clearing.”

“Good man,” Arthur said, clapping him on the shoulder, before getting back on his horse. “Tell my father I’ve gone for the flower, and I’ll return as soon as the princess is well again. And stress that you returned on my orders.” Throwing one last look at the wounded guard, Arthur dug his heels into his horse’s flank, urging it forward. If Gaius’ predictions were correct, he had about two days to get the antidote to Merlynn. If nothing went wrong.

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Merlynn’s fever was up, and Gaius was getting worried. The carriage wasn’t the ideal place to keep an ailing patient, but he had no choice. Luckily, the group was making good time – despite the bumpy ride – and they would arrive at the palace by nightfall. Merlynn had begun muttering to herself though, mostly in the Old Language, and it worried him.

He’d found out not two hours ago that his niece had a rash on her arms, which wasn’t supposed to set in until a day before death. That could only mean that the poison had been made more potent by magic, and Gaius wasn’t sure he’d be able to cure her without a counter-spell.

Gaius sighed. He was an old man, he shouldn’t be worried that he would outlive his young niece. And yet... what would he tell her mother? Or her father, for that matter.

Gently, he tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. He remembered when she was born. She was so small, and fragile. But at the same time, Gaius had felt the enormous power that resided in her. He’d written it off as his imagination, but... She really was special, and she didn’t deserve to die in such a meaningless way.

Gaius had just turned away to reach for the water skin he’d taken with him, when Merlynn jerked. “Arthur... no... danger...” she mumbled.

Unsure of whether she was just dreaming, or actually seeing what was happening to the prince, Gaius stilled, listening. “No... don’t... don’t go... Not in there.” Gaius frowned and went to check her fever again. “Too dark... can’t... can’t see... Need light.” Suddenly, light filled the carriage, and Gaius looked on in shock as an orb of light floated over Merlynn’s hand. What on earth was going on?

He had to hang on. It was too dark to see any handholds, and Arthur had a feeling that the creepy spider creature had friends, but there was nothing he could do about that. He just had to hang on. He should never have trusted that woman. She'd promised to show him to the flower, only to betray him and use magic to make the floor cave in. So now he was hanging over an abyss, and that woman hadn't even stayed, she'd just left, like she had more important things to do.

Just when he thought he was either going to hang there until he lost all strength in his arms, or until he was eaten by those creatures, something lit up behind him. It was a bluish light, and far too steady to be a torch. "Come back to finish me off, have you?" he shouted, sure it was the woman again.

No answer came, and Arthur risked a quick glance over his shoulder. An orb of blue light floated there, almost serenely, and he couldn't help but marvel at how beautiful it was.

"Climb," a voice whispered.

"What? Who's there?" he shouted.

"Climb. Quick," the voice whispered. It tugged at something in the back of his mind, like he should recognise it, but he couldn't place it. *Either way, I don't have much choice except to follow it's command*, Arthur thought, hearing the scuttling of those creatures somewhere beneath him. Looking up, he saw the small yellow flower he needed. He reached for it, but couldn't quite make it. "Leave it," the voice pleaded. But Arthur had made a promise that he would get that flower back, and he wasn't about to give up now. Scooting over slightly, he reached for it again, and this time, managed to grab it. "Quickly," the voice urged, as Arthur put the plant in a pouch at his belt.

The light floated closer, indicating handholds, and Arthur set to work. It took quite a while to reach the top, and the silence was only broken by the sound of the creatures and the urges of the orb. Finally, light started to sweep away the darkness, and Arthur knew he was almost there. With some luck, those creatures didn't like the outside too much.

Arthur crawled out of the cave, and into the moonlight. Good, it was still the same night. He'd been afraid that he had spent the entire night in that cave. He took a moment to catch his breath, as the orb floated near the entrance, perhaps keeping the creatures at bay. He still wasn't entirely sure what to think about that. It was clearly magic, and yet... and yet it had helped him.

"Go," it whispered. Once more, Arthur had the feeling that he knew that voice, and that he could trust it. He just didn't understand *why*. Regardless, he did have to get up and find his horse, if that evil witch hadn't scared it off. Now which way was...?

The orb floated ahead of him. "This way." Should he really trust it? It could be the woman leading him into another trap. But then, why not just let him die in that cave? Why help? "Who are you?" he asked, and immediately felt silly for taking to a ball of light.

“Friend,” the orb whispered, and kept going. Arthur sighed, he really didn’t have a choice. Not two minutes after he’d started following the orb, though, he came across his horse, grazing peacefully in a clearing. It hadn’t been the place the prince had left his horse, so he assumed the witch had tried to scare it off, but either she hadn’t succeeded, or the orb had somehow brought his horse back. Whichever it was, he really didn’t have any time to spare.

The orb kept floating ahead of him all the way to Galdara. It only vanished when the city was in sight. Arthur only hoped that he wasn’t too late...

# Cured

## Chapter Notes

I know I'm late with this chapter, but a lot has happened in the last week and a half. As many of you probably know, Brussels was attacked on 22 March. Since I live in Belgium, you can imagine that this struck a little close to home. Thankfully, I personally don't know anyone who was injured or killed, but it was still a bit of a shock. Still, we're a resilient people and we'll get on top of this.

Anyway, on to the chapter. It's a bit longer than usual, to make up for the week that I missed. I'm going to try to update next Tuesday again, but I can't really promise anything. Enjoy!

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

### **Chapter 20: Cured**

Olaf prided himself on being an even-tempered man, aside from the occasional angry outburst when it came to his daughters' suitors. But when he received word that his daughter had returned to Galdara a week early, and that she was ill, he couldn't care less about decorum.

He'd been in a meeting with the head of his knights and Lord Rowan – his most trusted advisor – when a guard had burst in, giving him the news. Olaf had sprinted out, ignoring the indignant shouts of anyone who stood in his way. His daughter needed him.

He arrived at the courtyard just in time to see two Camelotian guards carry his daughter on a stretcher to the healer's hut, just off the square. To his surprise, Gaius was there. He fell in step beside the older man. "What has happened?" he asked. Even though he yearned to be with his daughter, he needed information first.

Gaius looked grave. "Poison, sire. By the mortuus flower," he replied, hurrying after the ailing princess.

Olaf's step faltered. "What?" For a brief moment, he blamed himself for not protecting his child enough, thinking of what he could have done – before he shoved those thoughts aside. They would benefit no one, and his daughter needed him.

Inside the physician's hut, Merlynn lay on a cot, her brow slick with cold sweat, while she mumbled to herself. "Ask sir Fredrik, sire, I really must see to my niece now," Gaius said, somewhat shortly.

Olaf stopped in the door opening. He would be of no help, and there was no finer physician than his brother in law. Turning around, Olaf watched as two more Camelotian guards helped

a handcuffed man off his horse. Rage filled him, as he strode over. He had planned on... well, he wasn't sure. He saw red, and all he could think of was violence. If his daughter didn't survive this...

Sir Fredrik stepped in his way. "Sire. We must speak."

Olaf shoved the man, intent on doing harm to the man who had hurt his daughter, but Fredrik stood his ground. The man was captain of the royal guard for a reason. The King allowed himself another moment to seethe in his anger, before sighing and gesturing for the captain to follow him.

The rapport he received was... not exactly what he had been expecting. His precious daughter had been poisoned, and it had looked like Lord Merrin had been responsible, but Fredrik told him of his suspicions that someone was trying to undermine the peace talks. Olaf had had to hold himself back. Someone had hurt his daughter, because *he* had left her there in Camelot, on a mission that was of no real importance.

His anger was softened minutely when Fredrik told him how much Merlynn had done during the negotiations. She had been instrumental in calming down both sides and coming up with compromises. Olaf knew his daughter would make a fine first advisor to Vivian one day.

"Out of my way!" Speaking of his eldest child, there she was, barrelling through the guard as if they weren't even there. She strode over to the healer's hut without even looking around. "Where is she?" she shouted.

Olaf dismissed Fredrik to see to their prisoner, before hurrying after his daughter. Vivian was sitting on the side of Merlynn's cot, glaring at her younger sister. "Wake up!" she yelled.

"My lady-" Gaius started, but Vivian didn't let him speak. Elric, Olaf's own physician, frowned, but didn't try to stop the princess. He'd learned long ago how pointless that would be.

"You had better wake up, now!" And for the first time, there was a waiver in her voice, and Olaf stepped closer, knowing he would be needed soon.

"Don't you *dare* leave me, you hear me?" the princess screamed. Her eyes were tearing up, but Olaf knew that his daughter wouldn't let them fall, not yet.

He moved closer and pulled Vivian into his arms. "We must trust in Gaius and Elric to care for her."

The physicians in question exchanged a look that Olaf didn't like. "Pardon me, your majesty, but..."

"What is it?" he asked, trepidation pooling in his chest. "Spit it out!"

Gaius stepped forward. "The only cure for this poison, my lord, required the leaf of the very plant that poisoned her; the mortuus flower. Unfortunately, it only grows in the forest of

Balor. Uther sent men to find it, but... I fear they won't be in time," he explained, gazing at the feverish princess.

Olaf did his best to push past the pain he felt at that revelation. Vivian was still in his arms, but had gone incredibly quiet. "How long?"

"Sire?" Gaius said, not understanding.

"How long does my daughter have to live?" the king forced himself to ask. He needed to know.

Gaius and Elric exchanged another look. "If Merlynn doesn't get the antidote by sundown... I fear there is no hope."

Vivian made a desperate sound, and Olaf tightened his arms around her. Grief welled up in him, but he refused to let it take hold. His daughter was not dead yet. "Is there anything we can do?" he asked resolutely.

Holding up a bucket of water, Elric held out a cloth. "Keep her brow cool, it will help fight her fever. Gaius and I are researching alternative cures."

Vivian pulled out of her father's embrace. "Give me that," she snapped, yanking the cloth out of the physician's hand and sitting by her sister's side. She dipped the cloth into the freezing water – seemingly impervious to the cold herself – and applied it to Merlynn's brow. She looked at her little sister with a combination of determination, love, anger and desperation. Olaf wasn't sure if his eldest would survive her sister's death.

"Gaius," the king said, motioning the old healer over. "I don't care which laws must be broken, I will not lose my daughter. Do you understand?" he asked, peering resolutely into his law-brother's eyes.

Gaius looked gravely back. "I agree that no law should stand in the way of Merlynn's recovery, sire, but I fear that this poison was already magic to begin with. Only a high priestess or a dragon could cure her without the flower," he explained.

"Regardless. You will try," he pressed. It was more of a question than a command, but Gaius seemed to know what he was saying.

"I'll do my very best, your majesty. I'd rather not part with my niece just yet."

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Arthur spurred his horse on, despite its obvious exhaustion. He was almost there, and Merlynn needed that flower right away. Speeding by the guards at the outer gate, Arthur really hoped he could catch the ones at the castle unawares as well.

The orb of light had stayed with him until he'd exited the forest, lighting the way in the waning light. And he'd felt... sort of comforted by it. Which was strange, considering it was magic. Arthur had decided not to think too closely about it.

Arthur sped through Galdara's lower town, towards the castle. Perhaps if he hadn't been in such a hurry, he could've appreciated the beauty of the city, but as it was, it barely registered.

"Halt!" Damn, Arthur had really hoped the palace guards would let him pass. He didn't have time for this! Couldn't they see the Camelot colours and just wave him through. "You're under arrest!" one of the guards shouted. Arthur was dumbfounded, Galdara and Camelot were allies, why were they arresting him on sight?

"I need to see the physician right away," he said as he dismounted. Struggling would only delay him even further.

But the guard ignored him. "Take him to the dungeons and notify the king," he ordered another soldier. Arthur tried to protest, but it fell on deaf ears. He was restrained and marched towards the castle.

As they crossed a courtyard, he saw Princess Vivian step out of a side door. "Vivian!" he shouted. "I have the flower! Tell Gaius I—" he got no further though, as the guards roughly shoved him through a door. He could only hope that Vivian would pass on the message.

Instead of taking him to the dungeons, though, the guard who had been sent to fetch the king came back and led them straight to the throne room. Distractedly, Arthur noticed that it was darker, but held more tapestries than the one in Camelot. There were also two fireplaces that were lit against the cold.

The king sat on his throne, swathed in grey furs and scowling fiercely. Olaf may have been an older man, but his prowess in battle had not diminished, and he was a large man, most likely stronger than Arthur.

"Arthur Pendragon," he said, displeasure dripping from his words.

Clearly, the Galdaran monarch was not pleased with how Camelot had treated his daughter. "Your highness," Arthur said, bowing his head as far as he was able while two guards still held him. "I've come—"

"I don't care why you've come," the king interrupted. "Your father has gravely mistreated my youngest child. Tell me why I should not just have you beheaded right now, seeing as your father only sent my daughter to me to die." Olaf was gripping the armrests of his throne and shook with repressed rage.

"No, I can't be too late," Arthur muttered, unaware he'd spoken out loud. "Gaius said she had until tomorrow."

Olaf narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. "What did you say?"

Arthur snapped back to attention. Merlynn needed him to see this through. "I have a flower, Gaius said he needed it to cure Merlynn. Please, sire, whatever you do to me, get this to her!" he pleaded, getting the precious flower from his pouch.



The guards holding him tensed, but Olaf held up a hand to stay them, and strode over. Ever so delicately, he took the flower from the prince, inspecting it. “The mortuus flower,” he whispered. He turned his eyes to Arthur. “I shall give this to Gaius, but mark my words... if my daughter dies, I will keep you alive only long enough so that your father might know what it is to lose a child,” he threatened.

Arthur nodded. If Merlynn died... he wasn't sure what he'd do.

“Take him to the dungeons,” the king ordered, and stalked out of the hall, hopefully going straight to the physician's chambers.

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Everything was foggy. And everything hurt.

Merlynn struggled to remember what had happened, but couldn't seem to focus long enough. Had she fallen out of a tree again? No, wait... Camelot... there was something about... She'd been there! She was in Camelot... Wasn't she?

Merlynn racked her mind, trying to piece together what she knew. She'd gone to Camelot with her family, but... yes, Viv and her mother had left. And then her father had left... The peace negotiations! She remembered. She remembered Arthur teasing her about it.

Suddenly, a flood of memories washed over her. Stopping Arthur from using his servant as target practise, Arthur figuring out who she was, him staring at her at the feast, saving the prat from that old crone, teasing him during the tournament, saving him *again*, Arthur's soft words after he'd saved her from Valiant, joking with each other, Arthur catching her before she could hit the floor after she was poisoned, Arthur rushing out of the castle to go get the poison...

Wait.

Poison? No, that couldn't be right. Or... no, she remembered drinking the poison. And... she remembered Arthur being in a cave, hanging from a ledge in the darkness. But she hadn't been there, not really.

This was just confusing her even more. Merlynn decided that she'd probably learn more if she could just wake up. Her head was just so foggy, it took her a moment to remember where her eyes were and how they worked.

Almost before she had a chance to blink her eyes open, a voice cried out. “Merlynn!” It was a voice she knew almost better than her own.

“Mama,” she managed to rasp out. A pair of arms immediately encircled her, and Merlynn found herself being held close to her mother's chest, like she used to do when she got scared.

“Oh, my darling. We thought...” her mother sobbed. She actually sobbed. Merlynn couldn't remember her mother ever crying.

She was finally let go, only to be scooped up again. “Don’t you ever do that again, you hear me?” Vivian snapped, hugging her even more tightly than her mother had done. “You’re not allowed to go off and die.” Vivian wasn’t prone to hugs or spontaneous outbursts of affection, but here she was...

Merlynn couldn’t help a smile. “Not allowed, huh? I’ll do my best.” She still felt weak, but knowing that her family was near helped immensely.

A large hand rested on her head, and Merlynn knew instinctively that it was her father. She looked at him and smiled, even as she kept holding on to her sister. Olaf smiled down at her as well, and Merlynn was again shocked when she saw tears in his eyes. She’d known her family loved her, of course, but to see them like this... it made her heart swell.

Finally, Vivian let her go, and quickly wiped at her tears. “I need to go... fix my hair,” she lied, walking out the door confidently. Merlynn knew her sister would deny having cried until the end of her days, but that only endeared her sister even more to her.

“I’ll let you rest, my little bird,” her father whispered, and followed his oldest out the door. Merlynn’s mother, however stayed with her, looking at her intently through her tears, as if she was memorizing her face. Gaius and Elric, the physician of Gadara, had stood back to let the family reunite in peace, but now the younger healer bowed and left the room. Gaius, being part of the family, stayed, but kept back so that mother and daughter could talk. Merlynn nodded to him in thanks.

“Mother? I’m alright now. Please don’t cry,” Merlynn whispered, turning back to her mother. Her throat was still sore, but she wasn’t about to interrupt the moment to ask for a glass of water.

“But you almost died. I had my doubt about letting you stay in Camelot, but now I know I was right. You’ll be safe here.”

Merlynn winced. “Mother, I can’t stay here.”

“You’re not going back there, Merlynn, I don’t understand why you’d want to.”

Biting her lip, Merlynn debated telling her mother. But in the end, she couldn’t lie to her.

“My destiny is there. Do you remember the prophesy about the Once And Future King?” she asked softly.

Hunith frowned, but nodded. “It’s Arthur. And I’m supposed to protect him,” Merlynn said, taking her mother’s hand. She glanced around the room, and frowned as something occurred to her. “Wait, where’s Arthur?”

Yay! We're in Galdara! Next chapter might be a transitional chapter again before the episode 'Lancelot' (maybe), but it's definitely going to take place in Galdara, so we'll get to know that country a little more.

Just so you know, I haven't exactly planned anything out, so I'm just sort of writing by the seat of my pants. I don't know what's going to happen until right before it happens.

# Misunderstandings

## Chapter Notes

Little bit of sisterly bonding here, because I do so love the relationship between Vivian and Merlynn. I have 3 sisters of my own (all older), so I know a bit how it feels :) Enjoy!

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

### **Chapter 21: Misunderstandings**

After Hunith had told her that Arthur was still in the dungeon, the princess had wasted no time and strode down there. She could barely stand on her own two feet, but that wasn't important. Her anger gave her the energy she needed to make it down there. She immediately ordered the guards to let him out. They'd seemed a bit hesitant, but unwilling to go against their princess, especially when she was holding on to her mother for support.

The moment the cell door was opened, Arthur shot up, not having heard their exchange. But then his eyes had landed on her, and Merlynn had seen an emotion she couldn't quite identify on his face. "Merlynn, you're alright."

She grinned at him. "More or less." She was exhausted, both physically and mentally, but she had to hold on for just a few more moments. She saw her mother look from her to Arthur, and was frustrated when she saw something there that she couldn't identify either.

"Perhaps you'd be so good to escort my daughter to her chambers?" the queen said. Merlynn whipped her head around. What was her mother thinking?

"Of course, my lady," Arthur said with a small bow. The guards looked like they wanted to protest, but didn't want to go against the queen.

"Thank you," Hunith replied. "I must see my husband now, so I leave her in your capable hands, young prince."

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Arthur wasn't entirely sure what to think. He was grateful that Merlynn had gotten him out of prison, of course, but he'd expected to stay there for at least another few days. And Merlynn still looked ill, though she was obviously on the mend.

The princess leaned heavily on the walls, and Arthur resisted the urge to just pick her up and carry her to wherever she wanted to go. Knowing Merlynn, though, she wouldn't appreciate it all that much.

“Thank you,” she said suddenly. They were out of the dungeons now, in a deserted corridor, but she hadn’t been looking at him, so he wasn’t sure who she was talking to.

“For what?” he asked hesitantly.

Merlynn stopped, leaning a shoulder against the wall and finally making eye contact. “You risked your life getting that flower for me. You didn’t even know if my father would believe you and not just kill you on sight. But you went anyway,” she said earnestly. And then a mischievous light entered her eyes. “I didn’t know you had it in you,” she teased. This was the Merlynn he was familiar with.

“Well, saving damsels is part of my job, you know,” he boasted mockingly.

The princess’ playful grin turned into a smirk. “Really? Considering the amount of times I’ve had to save *your* arse, you wouldn’t say so.” She started walking again, and this time, Arthur had no compunction about slipping an arm around her waist to keep her steady. She didn’t protest.

“Well, we’re even now. And you’re hardly a damsel, Merlynn. I can hardly call you a lady at all,” he teased right back.

She stuck out her tongue, but didn’t reply. It struck Arthur how tired she looked. Then he could’ve hit himself over the head; *of course* she was tired, she was on death’s door just a few hours ago. Without asking, he scooped her up in his arms. It was a testament to her exhaustion that she only offered a small noise of protest. “Where to?” he asked.

She scowled at him, but didn’t try to get free. “Down the hall to the right, third door,” she said grudgingly.

“You shouldn’t have come for me, Merlynn, you can barely walk,” he said, his worry for the young princess rearing its head.

“You were in a cell, Arthur. After you’d saved my life! My father was being petty and stupid, that’s not how you treat a friend,” she said heatedly.

Arthur couldn’t help but be amused at how passionate Merlynn got about some things. He clearly remembered her shouting at him after he’d used Morris for target practise. In hindsight, she’d been absolutely right, of course. He’d been a prat, as Merlynn would say, and she’d been right to shout at him.

“Your stubbornness never ceases to amaze me,” he replied dryly.

“I’m secretly a mule,” she said with a wide grin that was interrupted by a yawn. Arthur walked a little faster. He turned right, as Merlynn had told him to, and came to a covered walkway, overlooking a small courtyard. There were a few pine trees with benches underneath them, and he suspected that Merlynn used to spend quite some time there.

He set her down in front of her door and let her enter her chambers herself. He paused by the door as etiquette demanded, waiting for her to invite her in. Merlynn stepped in and, as she

turned and saw him waiting on the doorstep, snorted. “No need to stand there like an idiot, Arthur,” she said.

Arthur rolled his eyes. He couldn’t understand how she could be the perfect princess one moment, and the next have absolutely no regard for decorum. Though, he supposed he was glad she felt comfortable enough with him not to care.

As she dropped down into an armchair and leaned her head back, Arthur was suddenly at a loss for words. An awkward silence stretched between them, though Arthur wasn’t sure Merlynn noticed. “Would you hand me that blanket?” she asked, pointing to the chest at the foot of her bed. Her eyes were still closed, so Arthur just walked over and put it in her outstretched hand. She kicked off her shoes and curled up on the chair, seemingly ready to never move again.

The Camelotian prince wasn’t sure if he should leave, or stay, or even if Merlynn had already fallen asleep. After glancing around her bedroom, he settled for lighting the fireplace.

Galdara was one of the more northern, colder countries, and the air seemed thinner, so close to the mountains. Arthur wasn’t sure exactly what to think of the rugged country yet. But Merlynn seemed to love it here, and that was enough of a reason for him to give it a chance. They were friends, after all.

Arthur mused on that as he struck a flint over the logs in the fireplace. She’d said, just a few moments ago, that she considered him a friend. He thought back to when she’d come to Camelot a little over a month ago, and had told him she wouldn’t have a friend who could be such an ass. Merlynn was, without a doubt, the strangest girl he’d ever met, but he found that he’d come to enjoy her name calling and brash attitude. He could even admit, in the privacy of his mind, that her opinion was something that had become important to him.

A knock came to the door, and suddenly, Arthur was acutely aware that he was alone with the princess in her private chambers. But before he could say anything, Merlynn did. “Come in.”

A woman of about Merlynn’s mother’s age walked in, carrying linens and a basket of – presumably – laundry. “Welcome back, milady,” the woman said. Although her eyes lingered on Arthur for a moment, she didn’t say anything. She must’ve been Merlynn’s maid.

“Hello Helga,” Merlynn said tiredly.

Arthur rose from his place by the fire. “I’ll take my leave then, princess,” he said formally, offering her a small nod. Merlynn smiled and shot him an equally small wave.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Arthur,” she replied, purposefully not mentioning his title. Perhaps it was to let her maid know that she and Arthur were friends, or perhaps she just didn’t want the maid to know that he was a prince. Whatever the reason, Arthur nodded at her and strode past the servant and out the door. He needed some fresh air, and to think.

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“I hope you haven’t picked up some of your sister’s tendencies while you were in Camelot, milady,” Helga said mildly as she set about changing the princess’s bed.

Merlynn made a face. “I love Viv, but I would never. I’ll leave the flirting to her, thank you.” She settled back into the chair, resting her head against the back. She was so tired, and her head was pounding, and her little excursion to the dungeons had only aggravated her already sore body. “Why would you say that anyway?” she asked tiredly, resting her eyes for a moment.

She heard Helga snorting as the maid shook out the linens. “Was that not Prince Arthur of Camelot you were talking so familiarly with. And alone together in your chambers, no less,” the woman said, though the amusement in her voice was clear.

Merlynn’s eyes snapped open. “Arthur? And I? No, never. We’re friends, that’s all. And we argue more than anything,” she protested. And then cursed herself, no doubt Helga would use that as an argument that they were secretly in love, or something equally silly.

“That’s often how you can tell. If a lad and a lass spend all their time arguing, you know they’re either going to be mortal enemies, or lovers,” the other woman said.

Groaning, Merlynn leaned her head back against the chair. She should just learn to keep her mouth shut. “Trust me, there are no such feelings between Arthur and I. And if you’ll keep insisting, I’m going to bed, so I’ll hear no more of it.” But her tone was far lighter than her words, and she grinned at Helga, to show that she wasn’t truly angry.

“Very well, milady,” the maid said with an answering grin, and helped her lady to bed. Merlynn knew that the maid wouldn’t soon give up, though. “And may you dream well, of daring princes,” she teased.

Merlynn groaned. She was never going to hear the end of this.

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For all that getting poisoned wasn’t exactly desirable, Merlynn was, for once, glad to be confined to her chambers. Vivian’s birthday was coming up, which meant that a grand ball was to be given. After all, she was turning 20. The castle was abuzz and servants were constantly running to and fro, always busy. And Merlynn’s mother had to oversee it all. Not that she minded, of course, the queen had a talent for organization and had infinite patience.

Merlynn was just happy that she’d finished her present ages ago, and wouldn’t have to scramble around for something now. It did leave her with too much time on her hands, though, and boredom soon took hold. She wasn’t even ill anymore, the poison had worn off, and she only felt a little fatigued sometimes. As she stared out the window, she longed to ride her horse through the woods.

Gaius had left after she’d passed out of mortal danger, but Arthur, curiously, had remained. Her thoughts turned briefly to what Helga had said, and she scoffed at the idea. Sure, she’d come to admire Arthur recently, as a knight and as a leader to his people, but that didn’t mean there was any kind of affection between them. Besides a platonic one, perhaps. Yes, Merlynn

did consider him a friend, a dear one even, though she'd sooner jump off the highest tower of the castle than admit it to anyone. She –

Her reverie was interrupted when the door opened. Only one person entered her room without locking, so Merlynn smiled. "Hello, Vivian, avoiding mother?" she teased.

Vivian swept into the room and rolled her eyes at her younger sister. "Of course not, this is *my* ball, why wouldn't I want to have a say in its organization?" she asked. She was carrying a rather large bundle of cloth, and Merlynn wondered at its purpose... until Vivian spread them out over her bed. As Merlynn got up from her chair and looked it over, she realized her sister's reason for visiting.

"You simply must help me choose a gown, Merlynn." There were at least 15 different bits of cloth sitting on the bed now, all in different colours, some of them so close together Merlynn couldn't spot a significant difference, though she knew her sister would.

"It's your birthday, Vivian, you can wear whatever you like. You could wear a sack over your head and you'd still be the most beautiful woman in the room," Merlynn said, smiling at her sister. She wondered why Vivian still bothered to ask her about these things, as Merlynn didn't have the slightest bit of inclination towards fashion.

"True. Although I daresay that if I were to wear a bag over my head, you might just overtake me in beauty," she replied easily, keeping her eyes on the fabrics in front of her.

Merlynn blushed. It wasn't often she got a compliment about her appearance, especially when compared to her sister, and it never failed to make her feel uncomfortable. "Then wear the turquoise, and add some gold. I remember hearing many a nobleman and noblewoman say that it makes you look like an angel.

Vivian grinned widely. "Perfect! It does, doesn't it? I shall have two gowns made immediately."

"Two?" Merlynn asked, puzzled.

The older princess looked at her sister with a mischievous smile. "Though you may not surpass me in beauty when I am wearing a new gown, you're my sister, and I'll have every guest be amazed at your radiance." She glanced back at the fabrics. "But I think silver would be more suitable to me." Vivian looked up and grinned widely at her sister. "Thank you, Mellie!"

As Vivian gathered up the fabrics again and made her way to the door, Merlynn asked, "Mellie?"

The older princess paused, an uncommonly soft expression on her face. "It's what I called you when I was little. I couldn't pronounce your name, so I dubbed you Mellie."

"Why did you stop?" Merlynn asked, even as she thought back. She couldn't remember her sister ever calling her that.



Vivian shrugged. “You were my annoying little sister who followed me around everywhere. And I wanted so badly to seem more grown up...” Merlynn stared at her sister as the blonde lingered near the door. She remembered following Vivian all over the castle like a little puppy, and the subsequent argument they’d had, but she couldn’t recall the nickname. Vivian sighed and smiled. “It was silly of me, and after what happened...”

She didn’t need to finish her sentence. After Merlynn’s brush with death, her sister wanted to remember a sweeter memory. “Besides,” Vivian said as she opened the door. “It suits you.”

And with that, she slipped out of the room, leaving Merlynn by herself once again.

## Chapter End Notes

Not a lot of action, I know, but it was a necessary chapter. Next up: Vivian's birthday, and Galdara faces a threat...

Also, take a look at 'A Nightly Conversation', which takes place right after this chapter. It's part of the series, so you should be able to find it like that.

Please review!

# Galdara

## Chapter Notes

Early update for once! Yay!

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

The day of Vivian's birthday dawned far too early, in Merlynn's opinion. Generally speaking, she was a morning person, but she'd spent the night talking to her mother, and it had tired her out more than she'd expected it to.

Helga quickly helped her dress for the day – a simple dress for now – and then Merlynn was on her way to her parents' chambers. They were to have breakfast together in their antechamber, and Merlynn wanted to get there first. She'd told Helga the previous evening to get Vivian's present set up there, and Merlynn wanted to make sure it was still perfect.

Her mother was in the main bedchamber, and smiled at Merlynn when she entered. "Good morning, darling. Your sister hasn't arrived yet, and your father is in the dining room, go ahead, I'll follow in a moment."

Merlynn grinned in anticipation and entered the antechamber. Inside, her father and his chief advisor, Lord Rowan, were talking to each other. They stopped before she could hear what the conversation was about, but their serious faces told her it wasn't good. "Is there something wrong?" she asked cautiously.

"Nothing, Princess, I apologise for intruding," Lord Rowan said with a small bow.

Olaf held up his hand. "She has a right to know," he said gravely. Rowan hesitated, but nodded. "The watchtower in the mountains was attacked last night," he said.

Merlynn gasped. "By whom? Did any survive?" she asked quickly, taking a step towards her father.

Before the king could answer, though, Hunith walked in. "She's nearly here. Lord Rowan, will you join us?" she asked, smiling easily. Obviously the king hadn't told her about the attack yet.

Merlynn glanced at her father, who motioned for her to leave the matter be for now. She acquiesced for now, but she vowed to speak to her father on the matter later. "I wouldn't want to intrude," Rowan replied, but Hunith waved it away.

"Nonsense, you're always welcome at our table, Rowan," she said.

Lord Rowan bowed and thanked the queen for her generosity. Just as he looked back up again, the door opened and Vivian stepped out. Merlynn, who had been looking at her father, and not facing the door, was the only one to see a peculiar look cross Lord Rowan's face. It was only there for a moment, before he schooled his features again, but she'd definitely caught it. Had that been admiration?

Merlynn turned to watch Vivian give Hunith a hug, and she had to admit that her sister looked wonderful. She was wearing a light grey dress that was simple for Vivian's standards. But her blonde hair was half tied up with a silver hair pin, and half cascading down her back. Vivian didn't naturally have very curly hair, so she must have had it styled last night.

Glancing back at Lord Rowan, his features betrayed no particular emotion, but his eyes followed Vivian as she moved on to kiss her father's cheek. Did the lord feel some regard for the blonde princess? Merlynn had never noticed anything before, but Lord Rowan was very good at hiding how he felt.

"Already distracted, sister?" Vivian asked playfully as she made her way over to her.

Merlynn shook herself from her thoughts, she could contemplate the matter later. "Just blinded by your radiant beauty," she replied, somewhat sarcastically. "Perhaps you should tone it down somewhat tonight?" she suggested teasingly.

Vivian looked positively affronted at the idea. "And deprave the masses from my wonderfulness? I could never be that selfish," she quipped without missing a beat.

Grinning widely at her sister, Merlynn pulled her into an embrace. "Happy birthday, Viv."

"I hope you've gotten me a present, I'll settle for nothing less than diamonds," Vivian joked.

"Impatient, are we?" Merlynn shot back, grinning. She hadn't had a chance to check if the present was still alright, but there hadn't really been a need for it. "Very well." She walked over to the far side of the room, where it leaned against the wall. Suddenly, she felt nervous. What if Vivian hated it?

Vivian followed eagerly, excitement dancing in her eyes. As her parents and Lord Rowan looked on, she pulled the cloth off her present and looked at it. Vivian blinked, and Merlynn was sure she didn't like it. "You hate it, don't you? I'm a horrible sister, I should have gotten you that necklace you liked," she lamented.

But Vivian looked up and her face broke into a beautiful smile. "Merlynn... It's beautiful! Where did you find the time to make this?"

Looking down at the painting, Merlynn couldn't help a small smile breaking through at her sister's praise. It showed Vivian and Merlynn in the royal garden behind the palace, both dressed in gorgeous, elaborate gowns as they sat on a bench, whispering to each other. It was by no means a traditional portrait, and it showed far more intimacy than was proper on a painting, but Merlynn had felt it would be appropriate. It was a memory Merlynn treasured from the day of Vivian's eighteenth birthday ball.

"Oh, darling," Hunith said, coming over. "It's so lifelike, I've never seen anything like it!"

Merlynn bit her lip, a little guiltily. She'd used magic to perfect the painting, which her mother would most likely not approve of, but at the moment, she decided it was worth the look of admiration on Vivian's face. "It's to remind you that no matter how far apart we are, we'll always be sisters," she said to Vivian, grabbing her hand and squeezing lightly.

"Thank you, Mellie, it's perfect!" Viv said, pulling her in for a hug. "Not that there was ever any doubt, it's a painting of *me*," she added jokingly.

"I'm afraid our gift will not be able to trump that of your sister's," their father said, interrupting their hug. "But I do think you'll like it." Vivian pulled back and faced her parents, who handed over a gilded box. It was strangely familiar to Merlynn, but she couldn't quite place it. "This was your mother's, and my mother's before her," their father said.

Merlynn frowned. She didn't think her mother had anything like that. But when Vivian opened the box, and Merlynn saw the necklace, she suddenly realized it had been Rebecca's, her father's first wife. It was beautiful, silver and amethyst, like the colours of Galdara, and Vivian immediately fawned over it. Merlynn smiled, despite the small stab she felt in her heart. It was never fun to be reminded that Vivian wasn't really her sister.

Soon, though, Merlynn forgot all about it as they sat down for a hearty breakfast. Lord Rowan seemed a bit subdued, but she supposed it couldn't have been very comfortable for him. Merlynn let her family's happiness wash over her, listening to her father's booming laugh, her mother's subtle jabs, and Vivian's dry wit. She offered a few sarcastic comments herself, but mostly she just enjoyed being with her family again. For some reason, she felt like the feeling wouldn't last.

Breakfast was soon over, and Merlynn headed back to her chambers, she still needed to prepare. Helga would have cleaned up her room by now, so she would be alone in her room. Perhaps she could write a letter to Morgana?

Before Merlynn turned the corner in the hallway outside her parents' rooms, though, something caught her eye. Vivian was leaning against the wall right outside the royal chambers, smiling up at Lord Rowan, who was blushing madly. Rowan said something Merlynn couldn't hear, bowed, and stalked off in the opposite direction. Vivian slumped, looking a lot less cheerful. Merlynn wasn't entirely sure what she'd just seen, but she made herself scarce before her sister decided to look up.

Her confusion was probably what made her run into him. She'd been so focussed on what she'd seen and trying to wrap her head around it – had her sister been *flirting* with Lord Rowan? – that she hadn't been paying attention as she turned the corner into the hallway that held her own bedroom.

Two strong hands wrapped around her upper arms before she could lose her balance, and Merlynn found herself staring up into familiar, icy blue eyes.

"You should really watch where you're going, Merlynn," Arthur said, smirking at her. "I believe this is the second time you've run into me like this."

Irritation replaced the confusion she'd been feeling. "I could say the same thing about you, you prat. What are you doing here anyway, your chambers are on the other side of the castle," she said, frowning at him.

Arthur ran a hand through his hair. "I was looking for you," he said, surprising Merlynn. "I was wondering if you could explain this tournament to me."

Arthur, asking for help? Arthur, asking for *her* help? Something had to be wrong. "Why? It's just a tournament, you've been in plenty of those," she replied, crossing her arms somewhat suspiciously.

Was that a blush? If it was, it was feint, but it was definitely there. "I have, but only in Camelot."

Merlynn raised an eyebrow. She was going to wait until he said please. Making him squirm was far too amusing to let the opportunity slide by.

Arthur shot her a look that said *I'm not going to say it, so just get on with it.*

Merlynn's other eyebrow joined her first. She kept looking at him, waiting for him to break. It gave her an opportunity to really look at him. He was wearing his brown leather jacket over a red shirt, looking a lot more casual than a man of his status usually did. At least he wasn't vain as well as arrogant. Although... he only acted arrogant. He didn't think he was better than his people, he just sometimes forgot to treat people with the respect they deserved. But he also wasn't averse to learning.

Merlynn suddenly realized they'd been staring into each other's eyes for a while, and couldn't help the blush that spread over her cheeks. Arthur smirked. "Oh alright," she said grudgingly, throwing up her hands. She walked around him and made her way to her chambers. "It's really not that different from what you're familiar with," she said.

As Arthur closed the door behind them, it occurred to her that this was the second time they'd been alone in her chambers. It wasn't very proper, as Helga had hinted at a week ago. Once again, she felt herself blush, and sat down at her table, hoping to create some distance between them. But Arthur – whether by design or just at random – sat down on the chair next to her, instead of the one opposite to her.

"So... the tournament is stretched over 3 days. After every day there will be a small banquet, and on the last day, there will be a ball. Today there will be a competition with the quarter staffs," she explained excitedly. It was always a very exciting competition, and it was unlikely anyone would get gravely wounded.

"I've trained with quarterstaffs, but I've never seen a competition before," Arthur said, frowning.

"You're in for quite a show, then," Merlynn replied. It was also Vivian's preferred weapon, and she had no doubt her sister would be competing. But no need to tell Arthur that.

“Tomorrow will be more in your league, I believe. It’s a simple combat by sword tournament. Anyone who owns a sword can enter, and whoever wins the most matches wins.”

Arthur grinned, and Merlynn couldn’t help but answer it. “And what about the third day?” he asked.

Merlynn’s grin widened. “Oh, that’s archery. It’s the most popular event, and there are usually a lot more competitors than in the other two events. And before you ask, no, crossbows are not allowed. Only long bows and recurve bows.”

Leaning back in his chair, Arthur shot her a look. “I wasn’t going to ask.”

“Sure you weren’t. At any rate, each day’s winner will receive a price in gold, and will get a seat of honour at the ball. That’s partly why it attracts so much attention, all the men want to be seated close to Vivian, hoping to catch her eye.”

Arthur grimaced. “Really?”

“Yeah, Vivian loves the attention, but she’d never give them the time of day. At most she’ll flirt with them, but that’s all,” she explained, leaning back in her chair. “And of course, the ball itself is one of the most sought-after social events of the year. There will be dancing, a feast and of course, political manoeuvring.” She rolled her eyes.

“And here I thought you liked politics,” Arthur joked.

Making a face, Merlynn shoved him lightly. “Are you kidding? Always having to pretend like you’re something else, minding what you say because if you don’t you might spark a war... And that’s only amongst the women,” she said, sending him a teasing smile.

This time, Arthur rolled his eyes. “When is the tournament supposed to start?” he asked.

“In two hours. Though we’re supposed to be there early,” she said, and then bit her lip. Her father had told her the previous night that Arthur was to escort her, and she wasn’t sure how to bring it up. “I, uhm... that is, father told me that you...” Why was she so tongue-tied all of a sudden? It wasn’t a hard question!

Arthur raised his eyebrows in askance, but the smirk on his lips told her that he knew exactly what she was trying to ask. It was a strange mirror of what they’d done in the hallway earlier, and that thought was almost enough to make Merlynn blush again. Almost.

She stood up abruptly. “You’d better not be late. I’ll wait for you in the entrance hall. And find a cloak, you’ll freeze to death in what you’re wearing now,” she said, and went to her antechamber. She didn’t need anything from her, but she could hardly leave her room altogether while Arthur was still in it. She closed the door behind her, and pressed her ear against it. She could hear Arthur chuckle, and then heard his footsteps lead to the other door.

Merlynn stepped back. Dear gods, she was acting like a child! And for what? Because some prattish prince thought he could push her off balance? Well, she’d show him! Arthur was in for a nasty surprise if he thought she was going to act like some blushing child!

## Chapter End Notes

Leave a comment!

# Quarter Staffs

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late update! But it's my longest chapter yet, so enjoy!

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

### **Chapter 23: Quarter Staffs**

Merlynn had elected to wear a grey, wool-lined dress for the tournament and subsequent banquet. Vivian wouldn't have been caught dead in a dress so commonplace, and even their mother would probably frown at it, but Merlynn loved it. It didn't elevate her above her people, and it was a great deal warmer than most of the dresses her sister preferred.

She quickly descended the stairs towards the entrance hall. She wasn't late, per se, but she wanted to be early, if only to rub it in Arthur's face. And no, she didn't want to examine exactly why she felt that need.

Hearing her father's voice, Merlynn slowed down before she went down the last stairwell. No doubt her mother would be there, too, and she wouldn't mind scolding her daughter for running – it was very unladylike, after all. Once composed, she picked up her dress and started going down, only to stop halfway.

Her father was indeed in the entrance hall, accompanied by the queen, but there was another person standing with them. Arthur was engaged in a serious conversation with the king, and he looked... noble. He stood as tall as her father, and with the wolf fur cloak around his shoulders, he looked just as broad. His hand rested on his sword, but Merlynn suspected that was more an unconscious act. Otherwise, he was dressed similar to her; sturdy clothes that were more for function than fashion. Arthur looked very much like a northern lord.

Suddenly, she noticed her mother staring at her, looking amused. Merlynn blushed and resumed her trek down the stairs. "You're early," she said to Arthur.

"As are you," he replied with a smirk, offering his arm. She *might* have elbowed him lightly in the ribs while her parents weren't looking.

The king and queen preceded them out of the castle and to the tournament fields. "Where's your sister?" Arthur asked, looking around at the colourful flags hanging everywhere and the merchants trying to sell their goods.

Merlynn smirked. "Oh, she'll join us shortly." She couldn't help studying his profile again. "Where did you get the cloak?" she asked curiously.



Glancing at her, Arthur raised an eyebrow. “Your father was kind enough to lend it to me. You did warn me to dress accordingly.”

“I did, I just didn’t expect you to look so...”

“Dashing, handsome?” he suggested, grinning mischievously. Then he added, “Drowning in furs?”

Merlynn laughed. “I was going to say northern.”

Arthur didn’t reply immediately. “Is that a compliment?” he asked, looking dubiously at a huge man who was looking at one of the stalls. The man was dressed in a stained tunic, and his beard was unkempt.

“It is,” she assured Arthur, looking over to some knights standing by the blacksmith’s stall. They looked as northern men should: big and burly, but with a somewhat regal quality to their stance, properly attired and courteous to the passers-by. They bowed as the royal family passed.

“Ah,” Arthur said, following her gaze. She wondered if he was measuring their skills, or comparing them to his own knights.

“Don’t worry, I do believe you’ll still be able to beat at least some of them tomorrow,” she said with a grin.

Arthur looked at her strangely. “I’m not competing,” he informed her.

What? “Why?” she asked, incredulously. Arthur was one of the most competitive people she knew, and his renown as a swordsman was heard of even here. She’d have thought he would be the first in line to enrol in the tournament.

“I’m here as a guest, and your father asked me to escort you, so that’s what I’ll do,” Arthur said.

Merlynn was still frowning at him in confusion when they arrived at the royal’s box at the arena. Her parents sat down in their respective seats, and Arthur led her to their seats on the queen’s left. In the arena, a heavy rope was laid down in a circle for the quarter staff competition. But Merlynn barely noticed those things. She couldn’t believe that Arthur wasn’t competing. Perhaps he was afraid her father would start to distrust him again if he reneged on his duty towards her?

Merlynn was startled from her thoughts suddenly as Arthur leaned in close. “Why the circle?” he asked. His breath tickled her ear, and Merlynn felt herself shiver. What was going on with her?

“Uhm... the opponents have to fight until one of them surrenders, or is thrown out of the circle,” she explained, glad for the neutral topic. “The finale is even more exciting,” she said, shaking off the strange feeling and grinning at him.

“How so?” he whispered.

“You’ll see, I don’t want to spoil it.”

Arthur looked like he wanted to protest, but they were interrupted by Lord Rowan. He bowed to the king and queen, offered Merlynn a respectful nod of the head and took his seat on the far right of the royals box. “I thought he was escorting Vivian? Where is she?” Arthur asked, looking at the lord.

Merlynn hid a grin, but refused to answer.

Soon enough, Arthur had to stop prodding Merlynn for an answer, as the heralds announced the start of the tournament. The stands were bursting at the seams, and they all cheered as the king stepped forward.

“Twenty-one years ago, the Gods granted me with the most beautiful gift imaginable. While I gained a daughter, our people gained a princess. And in the tradition of our family, such a momentous anniversary must be celebrated with a tournament. I shall not bore you any longer with long-winded speeches, but I shall say; may the best contestant win!” He said, throwing up his arms to loud applause.

The first two contestants walked into the arena, and Merlynn heard Arthur gasp, which in turn made her laugh. Vivian walked in, smiling confidently at the crowd, her head held high. She was wearing a dress that reached mid-calf, with a split up the front to allow for easier movement. It would have been far too revealing if not for the leggings she wore underneath.

Her opponent was a slight man, but Merlynn knew not to underestimate him. In a fight with quarterstaffs, speed was more important than strength.

Vivian and her opponent bowed to the king and faced each other in the circle. “She’s not going to fight,” Arthur said uncertainly, looking to Merlynn for confirmation.

“Of course she is. All women are allowed to join in the tournaments,” she said, enjoying the incredulous look on his face.

“And they all do?” he asked, looking back to where Vivian parried a low blow from her attacker.

Merlynn shook her head. “Not a lot do, unfortunately. I think there are only about 4 other women in the quarterstaff competition, Vivian included. The swordfights have even less, but the archery competition is fairly evenly divided,” she explained, keeping her eyes on her sister. Vivian was just a little too late to sidestep, and received a glancing blow to her upper arm. It was sure to bruise in the morning.

“Do any of them win?” Arthur asked, wincing as the Crown Princess got her opponent back by smashing his nose with the end of her staff. The man stumbled and fell, and Vivian took full advantage, kicking him out of the circle. She’d won the first match.

Merlynn stood up, cheering along with the rest of the crowd. Vivian held up her staff, accepting the win, and smiled at the crowd. Aside from the bruise forming on her arm, she

was unscathed. Elated with her sister's victory, Merlynn leaned over to Arthur. "Some of them do," she said smugly.

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Vivian fought four more matches before she got to the finals. Each of them was more exciting than the last, and Merlynn was on the edge of her seat by the time the finals started. Arthur, on the other hand, still had trouble accepting that women were allowed to compete. But, even though only one woman aside from Vivian made it past the first batch of fights, he was starting to get used to it.

There was a short break before the finals, while servants were setting up for the last fight of the day. The sun was getting low in the sky, and Merlynn hoped Vivian wouldn't be facing it. She made her way to her sister's tent, wanting to wish her luck. Vivian would be facing a strong fighter, and she'd need all the luck she could get.

As she entered the tent, though, she almost ran into Lord Rowan. "Princess, my apologies," he said, looking slightly flustered.

Merlynn couldn't help but grin. "Did my sister tease you again? You know you shouldn't take it to heart," she replied, stepping aside so he could pass.

"I'll keep that in mind, milady," he said with a small smile, before marching off. For someone so disciplined, Rowan was easy to tease, and Vivian had always taken delight in putting him off balance.

Merlynn shook her head and entered the tent, expecting to see Vivian still smirking or stretching before the match. Instead, her sister was sitting at a table, staring off into the distance. "Vivian?" Merlynn asked, putting a hand on her sister's shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Vivian looked up, smiling, albeit a tad less enthusiastically than usual. "I'm fine, just tired. Are you enjoying the tournament?" she asked.

Merlynn grinned, sitting down in an empty chair. "I am. It's close final."

"It is, my opponent is definitely skilled," she replied. Then her smile became more mischievous. "And how did our favourite prince find today's entertainment?"

Rolling her eyes, Merlynn leaned back. "He was so shocked, you should have seen his face. But he's getting used to it, I think. He's been asking a lot of questions."

Vivian raised a brow. "You've been talking all day?"

"About the tournament and Galdaran traditions, yes," Merlynn replied, narrowing her eyes suspiciously at her sister. What was she implying with that question?

"Good. I'm glad." That smug smile was really starting to annoy Merlynn.

She was about to ask her sister why she was acting so strangely, when the trumpets sounded, announcing the start of the finals. "I'll see you in the arena," she said, getting up. "Knock him to the ground, sister, I want you all to myself during the feast." Merlynn gave Vivian one last hug, before stepping out of the tent. But as soon as the canvas separated them, she paused. "*láidreacht agus misneach*," she whispered, lowering her eyes to hide the golden glow.

It wasn't cheating. Honest, it wasn't. It was just a little spell to remove Vivian's weariness and give her courage during the coming fight. Since Vivian had fought one match more than her opponent, Merlynn figured it was only fair.

Or, at least, that was what she told herself as she walked back to the royal's box.

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It was a tense match, and with every blow Vivian received, Merlynn flinched. She was sitting on the edge of her seat, her hands gripping the arm rests.

"Merlynn, she'll be fine," Arthur said, leaning in. "Much as I loathe to admit it, she's a capable warrior. Even if she fell, I've no doubt she'll be alright."

Merlynn was about to snap something back at him, when Vivian's opponent managed to kick her feet out from under her. Merlynn gasped as Vivian only just managed to hold on to the edge of the platform she was on. But with a fluent movement, the blonde princess managed to swing back up and kick her attacker in the jaw, making him stumble off his own platform.

Releasing a sigh of relief, Merlynn leaned back in her chair. "Merlynn, you can let me go now," Arthur said, another smug grin on his face. Merlynn looked down and realized she'd grabbed his hand in a reflex, and hadn't let go yet. She blushed and pulled back her hand quickly. Why had she done that? Not only had she embarrassed herself, Arthur was also never going to let her live that down.

"Relax, princess," he said, laughing. "Your sister's fine. In fact, I'll escort you to her right away," he said, offering his arm.

Merlynn was a little hesitant to take his arm after her rather pathetic reflex, but relented when he raised an eyebrow. Her parents were standing, applauding the contestants – who had all gathered in the arena again – while Lord Rowan had wasted no time in marching down to congratulate the princess.

Merlynn smiled but resisted the urge to drop Arthur's arm and just run – either to her sister or just far, far away, she wasn't sure yet – and walked down into the arena in a demure pace. Vivian still stood on her platform, grinning despite her many bruises, and pride shining in her eyes. Last year she'd barely lost to a superior adversary, but this year she'd won. As soon as their eyes locked, Merlynn gave up on decorum and dropped Arthur's arm, sprinted to the steps leading up to the platform and hugged her sister tightly. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Would you do the honours?" Vivian asked quietly as she pulled away.

Merlynn beamed and nodded. She went back down the steps and walked to the podium. “She’s asked me to do it,” she informed her father. He seemed reluctant, but her mother gave him a look and he relented. The king motioned for a servant to bring forth the victor’s spoils. Merlynn preceded the servant back to the platform, which was a little harder to do now, because a lot of the spectators had flooded into the arena to cheer on their princess. Eventually, though, Merlynn made it, and the crowd fell silent as she ascended the steps.

Suppressing the nervousness as best she could, Merlynn cleared her throat. “I’m not very good with speeches, and I don’t want to keep you from your celebration, so I’ll be brief. Galdaran law states that every woman who so wishes may learn to fight. But we all know that, often, it isn’t that easy. Which makes a victory such as my sister accomplished today even more impressive. Every single one of her opponents were fierce and skilled warriors. I’ve rarely seen a tournament with so many talented combatants. And though it was by a narrow margin, Princess Vivian was triumphant, proving to one and all that she is worthy of leading our great country. So, without further ado, Princess Vivian, it is my great honour to crown you the victor of the first tournament, and to award you the 500 gold pieces as a winner’s purse.”

The people cheered, and Merlynn felt she could breathe again. Goddess, she hated speaking in front of a crowd like this. She took the delicate silver circlet that signified a win in the tournament and placed it on her sister’s head, before handing over a small chest that contained the 500 gold pieces. “Congratulations.”

Vivian beamed at her. “See to it those coins go to the poor, will you?” she said quietly.

Merlynn would never understand why Vivian let everyone believe she was this arrogant, selfish princess, when the opposite was true. Whenever the Crown Princess won any gold, she always made sure it went to people who needed it more than she did. And she never breathed a word about it to anyone. “Of course,” Merlynn replied, handing the chest back to the waiting servant.

As she stepped down, she saw that Arthur was still waiting for her, smirking as usual. “What?” she asked, a little self-consciously.

“Nothing,” he replied, and offered his arm again, still smirking.

“You’re such an ass,” she said, but there was no real venom in her voice. Instead, she looked down to hide a smile. She hated to admit it, but Arthur really *was* growing on her.

Maybe the banquet tonight wouldn’t be so boring after all...

## Chapter End Notes

I will write out Vivian's finale fight in a separate one-shot and post it in the series. I'll try to put it up as soon as possible, but I can't promise anything!



# A Spark

## Chapter Notes

Yay! I'm posting on time this time! Leave me a review and tell me what you think!

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

### **Chapter 24: A Spark**

The banquet had passed more quickly than Merlynn had thought it would. She spent the night talking to her mother and Arthur, who were seated on either side of her. It was strange, how easy it had become to talk to Arthur, and even to tease him. He really had changed since she'd saved his life from that old crone over a month ago.

What was even stranger, though, was how well Arthur got along with her dad. A week ago, when Merlynn had only just been cured, mum had only just been able to convince him not to kill or banish Arthur. But the two men had talked a lot in the ensuing days, and they'd bonded. Merlynn wasn't sure she wanted to know over what, but she was happy that they had. It was Arthur who had convinced dad not to go to war with Camelot. She hoped this meant that the treaty still stood, despite Uther's treatment of her. After all, Merlynn still had to go back to Camelot at some point.

"Are you alright, darling?" mum asked.

"Just tired, I think I'll retire to my chambers," Merlynn replied tiredly, smiling at her mum. The queen looked lovely, though none of them had dressed up for the banquet. They'd get every opportunity to do so at Vivian's ball.

"Alright, sleep well."

"You're going?" Arthur asked, looking up from his conversation with Lord Rowan, who was seated on his other side. Before Merlynn could answer, however, he'd excused himself to Rowan, and was getting up.

"Arthur, you don't have to escort me, I know the way to my own room," she protested half-heartedly.

Arthur ignored her, however, and offered his arm. Rolling her eyes, she took his arm and allowed him to lead her outside.

"So, are you excited for tomorrow?" Merlynn asked distractedly. It was a beautiful night, and she took a deep breath. The banquet hall had been full of smoke and had been getting a little oppressive. The mulled wine she'd drunk hadn't helped either.

“Are you?” he shot back good-naturedly. “Wait, *you’re* not competing, are you?” he asked, looking horrified at the prospect.

Merlynn laughed. She was feeling a little lightheaded, and it made everything seem a little funnier than it probably was. “No, I’m horrible with a sword. I’m probably more of a danger to myself than anyone else,” she replied. Letting go of his arm, she darted out a side door, and into the cold night. The moon wasn’t quite full, but it provided more than enough light to see by.

“Merlynn, what are you doing?” Arthur called after her.

“Living a little, you should try it,” she teased, grabbing his hand and pulling him further into the garden. It was one of three private gardens, the smallest one, in fact, and it had always been one of Merlynn’s favourite places.

“You’re going to catch your death in this cold,” he said, pulling the thick fur off his shoulders, and draping it around hers.

“You southerners are all the same, terrified of a little cold,” she teased, stepping closer into his warmth. Her nose bumped into his chest. Huh. She must’ve stepped closer than she’d intended. He smelled nice. Like leather and wine and something distinctly *Arthur*.

“Merlynn, are you sure you’re alright?” Arthur asked. His voice was sort of nice, too.

“Tired,” she muttered, nestling against his chest. She was vaguely aware that this wasn’t really normal for her, but she wasn’t alarmed. Arthur was with her, and he’d never let anything happen to her.

His chest rose and fell, and his arms came around her. “Come on, I’ll take you to your room,” he said softly. But Merlynn didn’t want to move, she was comfortable, and her eyes were drooping.

There was a swooping feeling, and suddenly, Merlynn realized she was in Arthur’s arms. “Can walk ‘self,” she mumbled, pushing against his chest, but her strength was gone. She was *so* tired.

“Sure you can,” Arthur said, sounding far too amused. He said something else, but Merlynn couldn’t quite catch it. She could hardly keep her eyes open, so she stopped struggling. Arthur wouldn’t let anything happen to her.

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It was the day of the second competition, and Arthur was already in a good mood. He wasn’t competing, but for the first time since he’d started to compete in tournaments, he was happy about it. There were no expectations, no pressure to succeed. He could simply watch, and perhaps place a bet. King Olaf had seemed interested in the idea at the banquet the previous day.



The banquet. He had to smile at the memory, or at least, at what came after. Merlynn had drunk a little too much wine – though she hadn't seemed to notice – and had been a little unsteady on her feet, so he'd offered to escort her to her rooms. He couldn't wait to tease her about falling asleep on the way, though, especially since he'd had to carry her. And of course, she'd remarked that he smelled good, which was prime teasing material.

With a grin, he put on the wolf fur cloak Olaf had lent him, and made his way to the entrance hall. Lady Vivian and her parents were waiting there, talking quietly.

"Good morning," Queen Hunith offered when she saw him descending the stairs. He hadn't spent a lot of time talking to her, but she had always been perfectly kind, and warm. Of everyone in this kingdom, she had every right to hate him for what his father had done to her, but she had never seemed interested in being anything but polite.

"Morning, your highness," he replied with a bow. He was determined to be just as kind, if for no other reason than that she was Merlynn's mother. "Is Lady Merlynn not up yet?" he asked, glancing at Vivian.

The older princess seemed preoccupied, but offered a smirk when she saw him look over. "She's gone on ahead. I believe she wanted to get something from the market first. Honestly, I was surprised she was able to get up at all this morning."

"Vivian," her mother scolded.

Olaf just laughed. "It is true, darling, our little bird drank quite a few goblets. I do believe she's forgotten how potent our wine is."

Arthur suppressed a smile. It seemed he wouldn't be the only one to tease Merlynn about that. "Are we waiting for Lord Rowan?" Arthur asked, looking around the entrance hall. Servants were scurrying about, but he couldn't see anyone else.

"No, he's competing," Queen Hunith replied as Vivian looked away. Arthur frowned. He'd noticed the looks the lord had thrown the princess, but he hadn't believed the feeling was mutual. He wondered why Rowan didn't just ask Olaf for permission to court Vivian. Knowing the king, he would most likely approve, as long as his daughter was happy. Though, he also knew politics, and maybe there was a previous arrangement, or a treaty that needed strengthening. He felt sorry for her, but was glad that his own father hadn't tried to arrange a marriage yet.

"Well then, shall we?" he said, offering his arm to the princess.

She smirked again, but took his arm and allowed him to lead her outside. He took his time looking at the vendors they had to pass, but he couldn't see Merlynn amongst them. Where was she? "Wishing someone else was on your arm?" Vivian's voice pulled his attention back.

"What? Why would you say that?"

She ignored his question. "I do believe this is the first time I've been upstaged by my little sister, though it was high time. For someone as kind and selfless as her, she doesn't get nearly

enough credit.”

Arthur was confused. “I’m sorry?” he asked, hoping she’d elaborate.

She raised her brow at him. It was such a Merlynn-like gesture, that he could definitely see that they had grown up together. “I’ve seen the way you act around her, Arthur, there’s no fooling me.”

Really, really confused. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re referring to, milady,” he said, frowning at her.

She shot him a calculating look. “No... Perhaps not. But you will, in time.” She grinned again. “And I’m sure it’s going to be very entertaining.”

Arthur wisely decided not to reply to that. He’d thought Merlynn could be odd, but now he saw who had taught her. He was just glad that he didn’t have to escort Vivian at all times, it would probably only give him a headache.

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Merlynn walked through the forest, enjoying the light morning sun. She was glad she was wearing her fur lined cloak, otherwise she might have frozen to death.

Helga had forgotten to draw the curtains the previous evening, so Merlynn had woken up with the sun, and a splitting headache. She vaguely remembered Arthur offering to escort her to her room, but that was it. Goddess, she hoped she hadn’t said anything embarrassing. But, once she was up, it was impossible to go back to sleep, so she’d leafed through a book on healing she’d received from the druids a long time ago. It didn’t hold any advanced magic like her magic book back in Camelot, though. She still mourned the fact that Gaius hadn’t managed to smuggle it to Galdara, along with her horse, perhaps. She missed Cian...

Shaking her head, she focussed on the book again. She wanted to try to make a healing poultice. She’d been lucky the one she’d used on Morgana had worked at all, and she didn’t want to be in that situation again. Besides, healing magic was something she wasn’t very good at, but she was sure she could improve.

But, for poultices, one needs ingredients, which was why Merlynn was traipsing through the forest, instead of getting ready for the tournament. She just needed one more root, but it was proving harder to find than she’d thought. And she was late.

Just as she was about to give up, her dress caught on a thorny bush. Great, this was just what she needed. But when she knelt down to untangle her skirts, she saw a familiar white flower growing underneath the bush. “Asphodel, finally!” she whispered to herself, and quickly dug up the plant.

Merlynn stood up and immediately felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She glanced around, feeling herself tense up. The birds were quiet, but she heard something move. Leaves rustled, twigs snapped. And it was coming closer.

Suddenly, a man burst into the clearing, and Merlynn was too surprised to react. “Run!” the man shouted. Still, she didn’t move, and looked in horror as a griffin ran after the man, screeching horribly as it saw the two of them standing there.

Merlynn had seen griffins before – after all, they lived in the mountains just beyond the city limits – but to see one so close, and attacking a human was unheard of! She was so shocked, she didn’t react as the creature slashed a talon through the air. But just as it would have hit her, the man tackled her to the ground. “Run!” he repeated, dragging her up. She let him take her hand, and followed as fast as she could, her ingredients long forgotten. She wracked her memories for a spell that could repel a griffin, but couldn’t think of anything. Those creatures were almost as purely magical as unicorns, they were reputed to be impossible to kill!

They were running towards the city, when the man suddenly stumbled. Merlynn stopped and saw the griffin advance, and knew that it would kill him. She couldn’t let that happen. She positioned herself in front of the man and faced the advancing creature. *‘Goddess, don’t let this kill me , ’* she thought desperately, and flung her hands out, shouting, “*Chruthú bacainn !*”

The griffin slowed to a stop a few feet in front of her. The creature was huge, and if she hadn’t been so scared, Merlynn might have thought it beautiful or majestic. As it was, she was still praying she wouldn’t die. But the griffin seemed either unable or unwilling to pass the magical barrier she’d thrown up. Merlynn knew it wouldn’t hold, but she was hoping the griffin didn’t know that.

It gave one last defiant screech, before turning and flying off.

“I did it...” she whispered to herself, unbelieving. Her barrier hadn’t even been that strong, but it had held! A groan from behind her brought her back to the present. As Merlynn knelt next to the man, she noticed that he was hurt. There was a long gash on his arm, and his hand was slick with blood. “We need to get you to the city,” she said, already pulling his uninjured arm around her shoulders.

“You’re... you’re magic,” he said, his words slightly slurred.

“I...” Was there really any point in lying now? He’d seen what she could do. “I am. But I’ve never hurt anyone with it, I swear.”

The man didn’t answer as they slowly made their way through the forest. “What’s your name?” she asked, trying to keep him awake.

“My name?” he asked. He was obviously losing too much blood. “It’s Lancelot.”

“Nice to meet you, Lancelot, my name’s Merlynn. And I promise you’ll be alright.”

Chruthú bacainn = "Create a barrier"

# Guest

## Chapter Notes

I'm soooooo sorry! It's been ages since I updated, and I feel really bad about it... I've been struggling with these past few chapters and I really don't know why. I do have exams for another 3 weeks, but as of June 15, I'll be free to write as much as I want, hopefully, I'll get over this block and be able to update sooner. Enjoy! And leave a comment!

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

### **Chapter 25:**

Lancelot lasted only a few more moments before unconsciousness claimed him. Luckily, they weren't far from the castle gates. Two guards helped her carry him to the physician's office, where Elric wasted no time in examining the unconscious man.

"Tell the king I can't join him for the tournament, but I'll be at the banquet. He should be in the royals' box," she told one of the guards. He nodded curtly and sped away.

"What happened, child?" Elric asked in his usual gruff voice, while the other guard took up position outside the door.

"I was out collecting..." She probably shouldn't say she was looking for herbs, he'd ask her why she needed them. "Flowers," she said instead. "A griffin attacked out of nowhere, this man saved my life," she explained. As she looked down at Lancelot's face, she briefly worried that he would reveal her secret. But what else could she have done? Leave him to die? She would just have to make sure she was there when he woke up and make sure he didn't say anything. If worst came to worst, she could always say that his injury made him see things.

"A griffin?" Elric said sceptically, looking up from the salve he was now making. "That seems unlikely, we've lived in peace with them for almost a century."

Merlynn was well aware of that, as it was part of Galdara's history. It had been one of her favourite stories as a girl, how her father's ancestor had defeated the griffin king and had made peace with them, affording them the whole mountain range to live in. There was a reason the Galdaran crest showed a silver griffin, after all.

"Well, this one must've been in a bad mood. It backed off rather quickly, though. Griffins are notoriously hard to harm, but this one flew away after..." She trailed off, cursing to herself. Why couldn't she just keep her mouth shut sometimes? "After Lancelot swung at it with a sword," she said quickly. Elric shot her a look, but didn't say anything.

The physician finished the salve and made his way back to his patient, slathering the concoction on the wound. "He'll be alright, he just lost a lot of blood. He should wake up in the morning. But, princess, if I may offer some advice?"

Merlynn looked up, surprised. "Uhm. Yes?"

"Next time you go 'picking flowers', try to do it within the city walls? And if you need moon tea, I can give you the herbs," he said, looking unimpressed. The quotation marks were almost audible.

"What? No! That's not – We didn't... Look, I've never met this man before today!" she protested. "We're not... *lovers*," she said, feeling a little queasy at the thought. Did he really think she'd bed just any man? Not even her sister was that bad.

Elric held up his hands. "Alright, princess, I didn't mean anything by it."

Merlynn wasn't sure about that, but at least Elric wasn't a gossip. Whatever he thought of her, it wouldn't be spread all over the castle. "I'm going for a walk, I'll be right back," she said, and strode out the door.

The guard there looked mildly uncomfortable, and she narrowed her eyes at him. "How much of that did you hear?" she asked.

"Hear, milady? I didn't hear anything," he replied promptly, and perhaps a littler nervously. Good.

"What's your name?" she asked, putting on her best intimidating princess-face. She'd learned that one from Vivian.

"Vincent, milady," he said uncertainly.

"Alright, Vincent. You look like a smart man, so you understand the delicacy of the situation. I'd really rather not have any rumours flying around the castle," she said with a slight grimace.

The man visible relaxed. "Of course not, Princess."

She smiled at him. "Good. Thank you." As she turned to walk away, however, he called her back.

"Princess? If you're looking for prince Arthur, he was here a moment ago," he said.

Merlynn frowned. "I wasn't, but... what was he doing here? Why didn't he come in?" she asked.

"I don't know, milady, he didn't say..."

Frowning to herself, Merlynn turned back around and headed to the arena. She'd worry about Arthur later. First, she had to inform her father of what had happened before he came looking for her.

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Arthur wasn't exactly known for his patience, so when Merlynn didn't show up when the tournament began, he excused himself to go look for her. Hunith nodded at him, but Olaf and Vivian barely spared him a glance, too focussed on the opening match between Lord Rowan and his opponent.

Knowing not to take offence, Arthur made his way to the market. Most likely, Merlynn had gotten distracted by some bauble and had lost track of time. He scanned the market, but didn't see her familiar, messily braided hair. He turned on his heel to head towards the castle to search for her there, only to bump into someone. He half expected it to be the wayward princess, with how often they ran into each other in Camelot, but it was only a guard.

"A thousand apologies, my lord," the man said, slightly out of breath.

"It's no problem. Where are you heading with such haste?" Arthur asked curiously.

"It's Princess Merlynn, sire, she's at the physician's hut with a wounded stranger. She wanted me to tell the king that she wouldn't be at the tournament."

The man seemed anxious to complete his task, so Arthur stepped aside and motioned for him to go on his way. But privately, Camelot's prince was resignedly exasperated. It seemed that Merlynn could find trouble wherever she was...

He made his way quickly to the physician's hut at the central courtyard, and spotted the guard left at the door. He nodded to the man, and held up his hand to knock, but he hesitated when he heard voices inside.

"... go 'picking flowers', try to do it within the city walls? And if you need moon tea, I can give you the herbs." That was Elric's voice. Was he implying...?

"What? No! That's not – We didn't..." Merlynn protested. Arthur backed away from the door quickly, unwilling to hear more. She was safe, and that was all that really mattered. He could find out the details of what happened later.

As he walked away, though, an uncomfortable feeling pulled at his stomach. Did Merlynn have a secret lover?

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The rest of the day passed in a blur for Merlynn. She went to her father and told him what had happened in the forest. He seemed concerned about the griffin, and she got the feeling he wasn't telling her everything, but he told her not to worry. Arthur hadn't been there, which surprised Merlynn, considering that the guard, Vincent, had seen him leave the central courtyard before she had.

She'd wanted to go back to sit with Lancelot until he woke up, but her father had insisted that she stay. So she sat through the rest of the tournament. Arthur came back about halfway through, but every time she tried to talk to him, he seemed distant.

Vivian, on the other hand, was completely invested in the tournament. Lord Rowan was winning all his bouts, but Merlynn wasn't too surprised. Despite his silent and reserved nature, he was an amazing swordsman.

Deciding to try one more time to talk to Arthur, Merlynn leaned over. "So, Lord Rowan is doing well. It's a good thing you didn't want to compete, you might have lost," she teased, hoping that his ego wouldn't let him give her a one word answer.

He snorted. "He's good, but he wouldn't have beaten me," he replied.

"Oh really? I don't know..." She was actually fairly certain that Arthur would win in a fight, but he was finally talking again, so she couldn't resist.

He sent her a half-hearted glare. "You only doubt me because you haven't really seen me fight," he protested.

"Haven't I? What about when you killed the Afanc?"

"Not in a tournament, anyway," Arthur mumbled, looking away.

Merlynn hid a grin. Aggravating Arthur was one of her favourite pastimes. Suddenly, the arena erupted in to cheers, and she realized that Rowan had won his bout, and had advanced to the finale. Once again, Arthur had managed to distract her.

But when she glanced over at the prince, something else caught her eye. The guard from earlier – Vincent? – was waving urgently at her from the arena's entrance. Without excusing herself, she rushed over. "Has his condition changed?" Merlynn asked sharply.

"He's awake."

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The first thing Merlynn saw when she entered the physician's hut was Elric, standing with his back facing the door. She couldn't see Lancelot until he'd moved.

"You're okay," she said, relieved, she took the seat next to his cot, and glanced at his bandaged wound. It hadn't bled through, and the surrounding skin didn't look red or irritated, so that was good.

She couldn't help but glance at Elric, though. If Lancelot had said something about her magic... but he looked the same as always. "He'll be perfectly fine, princess, one more week, and he'll barely feel his arm anymore."

Before Merlynn could respond, Lancelot sputtered. "Princess?"

Sheepishly, she shrugged. "I supposed I forgot to mention that..." She looked up at the physician. "Elric, could you give us a moment?"

The man bowed. "As you wish, my lady." And then he went through the door that connected to the palace.



Merlynn sighed and returned her attention to Lancelot. He was looking at her with a strange light in his eyes. "What?"

"Nothing, my lady, just... I never would have guessed you were a princess," he said simply, sitting up straighter.

She waved him away. "I know, I don't dress like it," she said, gesturing to her rather plain grey dress. "It's my sister Vivian who's the regal one." She grinned, relieved when he returned the gesture.

"I should thank you for saving my life," Lancelot said.

"About that," Merlynn started, lowering her voice. "It would probably be best not to mention that to anyone. Magic is... not exactly accepted here. Or anywhere, really. Besides, you saved my life first," she rambled, wringing her hands.

"No need to worry, your majesty, your secret is safe with me."

His smile was very infectious, and Merlynn really couldn't help but return it. He made her feel comfortable, despite the situation.

"I—" Merlynn cut herself off as the door opened. And immediately straightened as her mother entered.

"Merlynn, we were all wondering where you'd gone," she said evenly, her eyes as warm as always.

"Sorry, mother," she said, feeling a little guilty for just running off like that again. Mother glanced at Lancelot, and Merlynn suddenly remembered her manners. She jumped up. "Right. Mother, this is Lancelot, he saved my life. Lancelot, this is my mother, Queen Hunith of Galdara," she said quickly.

Lancelot tried to get up, but mother gestured for him to stay where he was. "Please, no need to get up on my account."

"I apologise for my state, your majesty," Lancelot said, still trying to at least sit up properly. But he was still pale from the blood loss, and Merlynn knew he must still feel weak.

"Nonsense, you saved my daughter's life. I should be thanking you. Now we should let you rest. If you feel better, you may join us for dinner tonight. If you require anything, just ask our physician," mother assured him.

Merlynn suppressed a grin at Lancelot's surprised expression. People always expected royals like them to be aloof and arrogant, but mother had grown up as a peasant in a small village, she knew what it was like for commoners. And mother was the most generous soul Merlynn had ever known.

Lancelot did his best to offer a bow from his seated position. "Your majesty is too generous."

“There is no such thing, good sir,” mother replied. “I expect to see you at the banquet tonight, provided your health allows it.” Then she turned to Merlynn. “Now, Merlynn, we should leave our guest to rest.”

Merlynn nodded, and waved to Lancelot. “I’ll come back tonight to see how you are,” she assured him, before following her mother out the door.

The banquet that night would definitely be interesting...

## Chapter End Notes

I just realized that this story arch is going to take forever, so I'm going to be stretching the timeline a little. I'm guessing this arch will be another 5 chapters? I'm not sure.

Either way, you'll see.

Please leave a comment!

# Lancelot

## Chapter Notes

Now that my exams are finally over, I'll be able to write a little more, and hopefully update more regularly.

As you probably noticed, I replaced chapter 24's title with 'a spark' (which will be the start of a theme, so look out for that), and named this chapter 'Lancelot', as I felt that it would fit better. So, obviously, there will be a lot of Lancelot in this chapter.

Enjoy!

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

### **Chapter 26: Lancelot**

After Elric had cleared Lancelot to leave, the king had sent for him. Princess Merlynn hadn't known what he'd wanted either, but she'd accompanied him to the king's study. Lancelot was nervous, though he tried his best to hide it. Glancing at Merlynn, he didn't think she noticed.

She shot him a friendly smile, and he was amazed at the person walking beside him. Here was a princess of a mighty kingdom, and not only was she incredibly kind and brave, she had *magic*. Unlike many others, Lancelot didn't have anything against magic in particular, except that he felt one should be cautious with it. But Merlynn had saved his life with it, and Lancelot felt even less inclined to judge her for it. He briefly wondered where she had learned it, but pushed the thought aside, it didn't matter.

He was led into the throne room, and brought before the King. He was a tall and imposing man, who was frowning lightly at Lancelot, so the swordsman lowered his head and bowed. He could hardly believe that this was the princess' father, they looked nothing alike. Next to the king, however, the queen was perched on her throne, and she looked exactly like her daughter, with raven tresses and deep blue eyes, as he had noticed when she had visited the physician's hut earlier.

The only other people in the room were a beautiful blonde woman in an exquisite dress, a blonde man who was just shy of scowling at the room, a knight of some kind who stood at the door, and a dark haired man with a sword strapped to his side. They all looked royal, but none of them bore any resemblance to Princess Merlynn in any way, so he didn't think they were family.

"Mother, father, may I present Lancelot, the brave man who saved my life earlier today," the princess announced. Lancelot kept his head down, a little overwhelmed at the situation.

"Rise, Lancelot," the Queen said, and he was pleased to note the gentle tone in her voice. "It seems you've have quite a day."

Lancelot stood up straight and hesitantly returned the Queen's smile. "I have, my lady, but the service I did for your daughter was my duty and my honour, nothing more," he said.

The King's frown turned into a smile at that. "You're quite the puzzle, lad. You've no noble blood, yet your bearing and manners are better than those of many noblemen of my acquaintance."

Lancelot wasn't sure what to say to that, so he briefly glanced at the princess beside him. She was grinning, and nodded encouragingly at him. "My family raised me well, my lord," he replied, for lack of anything better to say. What did one say to a compliment like that?

The King let out a bark of laughter. "No doubt, they did. Tell me, lad, where does your family reside?"

At this, Lancelot hesitated. The familiar ache laced through his heart at the innocent question, and he had to clear his throat before he could speak again. "Nowhere, my lord. They were killed by raiders some years ago."

"Oh, Lancelot, I'm so sorry," Merlynn said, her eyes shining with compassion. Usually, Lancelot disliked it when people said they were sorry, because they couldn't imagine his loss, or because they didn't mean it, but something in the princess' eyes gave him pause. She truly felt sorry for the tragedy that had befallen him, and that realization sent a mild shock through him.

"Thank you, my lady," he said softly, before turning to face the King and Queen again. "It happened many years ago, and since then I've worked to become the best swordsman I can be, so that I may prevent others from going through the same tragedy."

"A noble cause, indeed," the Queen said softly. "You should train with our knights some time. I'm sure Sir Fredrik would be glad to see what you can do."

Lancelot glanced behind him at the knight he'd seen earlier, and then the man inclined his head, a small smile visible even behind the beard. "That I would, my lady," the man said. His voice was gruff, but it was warm, and he seemed friendly enough.

"I wouldn't want to intrude, my lady. I was travelling to Camelot where I'd hoped to join their famed ranks as a knight."

The blonde man sighed. "Our knights are made up solely of noblemen, it's the law," he said.

Lancelot frowned. "*Our* knights, my lord?" he asked, puzzled.

"I'm sorry, I keep forgetting you're not from here," Merlynn said. "This is Prince Arthur Pendragon of Camelot," she said, gesturing to the blonde man. "My sister, the Lady Vivian, and that is Lord Rowan, chief advisor to the King and champion of today's tournament," she went on, gesturing to the beautiful blonde woman, and the dark-haired man.

Lancelot bowed again, even though he wasn't sure he was supposed to. So this was Prince Arthur, rumoured to be the best swordsman in all of Albion. He didn't look quite as imposing

as Lancelot had envisioned, but he did have a regal air about him.

“Yes, Galdara has a similar law, unfortunately,” the King said. “But ours is not as strict as Uther’s.” The way he said the name of the King of Camelot led Lancelot to believe that there was some bad blood there, though he couldn’t guess as to what it was.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Merlynn purse her lips. Perhaps this discord had something to do with the Princess?

“Either way, I’m sure that your quest to better yourself as a swordsman will not be hindered by training with knights of Sir Fredrik’s calibre,” the Queen said, effectively cutting through the tension that had risen in the room.

Bowing again, Lancelot accepted the offer, though he could not help the disappointment he felt at having his lifelong dream shattered.

“Then we shall see you tonight. You are our guest, Lancelot, for as long as you wish it,” the Queen said, and with that, they were dismissed.

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Merlynn led him outside again, though the blonde man – *Prince Arthur* – followed them. “I’m sorry, Lancelot, I had no idea that it was your dream to become a knight,” the Princess said, resting a hand lightly on his arm. The gesture was unexpected, but certainly a welcome one.

“Well, not everyone has what it takes to be a knight,” Prince Arthur said airily.

Merlynn glared at him. “As if you believe that. I’ve heard you complain more than once that the noblemen’s sons are getting less talented every year.”

Prince Arthur shrugged, though a smile had formed on his face. Lancelot was a little surprised at the way these two royals talked to one another, but then, what did he know of royal etiquette? “Don’t mind him, Lancelot. Every law can be overturned by its ruler. Though I doubt Uther will be changing that law any time soon,” Merlynn said.

Prince Arthur was frowning at her. “That law is in place to ensure that we can trust those who protect us.”

“Implying that those of lower birth are inherently less trustworthy?” she snapped. “Or that those of noble blood are more so?” And suddenly, it was like Lancelot wasn’t there at all. He wondered if the two royals realized how intense they looked, standing quite close together, and glaring at each other. If nothing else, there was passion there.

It was another disappointment for Lancelot, but only a slight one. A Princess and a commoner would never been able to be together anyway.

“I never said that!” the Prince shot back.

“But you implied it!” the Princess retorted, never missing a beat. “But you know as well as I do that Valiant wasn’t an isolated case.” As soon as she said that, she blanched and stepped back.

Prince’s Arthur face went from angry to concerned, and he stepped forward, hands extended as if to steady her. Lancelot himself wasn’t sure what to do, nor was he certain exactly what had happened.

“Merlynn?” the Prince said softly. “He isn’t here, he can’t harm you.”

“I know. I know,” she replied, her posture tense, but she seemed to be pulling herself together. “Would you ask a servant to take Lancelot to a room? I think I need to lay down for a moment,” she said, and, without waiting for a reply, turned around and walked away.

Both men kept their eyes on the Princess until she was out of sight. Prince Arthur shot a sideways glance at Lancelot. “Bad memory,” he said curtly.

Lancelot nodded, though he was still not certain what exactly had happened.

Prince Arthur flagged down a servant and had them show Lancelot to a room,

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A knock came to the door, and Merlynn instantly knew who it would be. Arthur had always been more thoughtful than he let on. Quickly, she threw a robe over the shift she was wearing, and opened the door. “Hello, Arthur.”

Arthur offered a tight smile, and came in when she stepped aside. It was sweet of him to see if she was alright, but honestly, she’d just overreacted. She hadn’t thought of Valiant in ages, and she’s forgotten that she was now in the same country. It had been a bit of sudden shock, but she was over it now.

“How are you?” he asked hesitantly.

Merlynn shrugged. “I’m alright. I was just... I’d forgotten. I didn’t think I could, but I’d actually forgotten about him.”

Arthur stepped closer, resting a hand on her arm. “He can’t hurt you, you’re safe.”

“I know that. It was just an overreaction,” she replied. Arthur’s hand was warm on her arm, and she drew comfort from it as she looked into his eyes. For a moment, they just stood there, consoled by each other’s company, before Arthur looked away and cleared his throat. His hand fell away, and Merlynn tried not to notice how cold she suddenly felt.

“I should go. We only have an hour left before the feast,” Arthur said, looking a little uncomfortable.

Merlynn nodded, not trusting her voice. One more small smile, and then he was out the door. Merlynn let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Just one more day. One more day, and the tournament would be over, and Arthur would... he would return home. And she

wasn't sure how she felt about that. Destiny aside, Arthur had become her friend, somehow. He'd gone from arrogant prick to someone she would entrust her life to.

She had to find a way back to Camelot, preferably without alienating her father. For some reason, she doubted he'd let her go back willingly. But before she could worry about that, she had to focus on this banquet, Lancelot was no doubt a novice to royal celebrations, and she wanted to spare him the gossip she always had to suffer through. But she could only do that if she was dressed and ready to play the part of princess again, so she strode purposefully towards her closet and pulled out a dress.

Just one more day and all this drama would be over.

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As it turned out, Merlynn ended up being escorted by Lord Rowan, which left Arthur to make sure Lancelot got to the banquet safely. He still didn't know what to expect from a royal banquet, but Merlynn had assured him that he needn't worry. Lancelot couldn't help it, though. He had a lot of respect for Merlynn and her family, but he also had no illusions about most nobles. They'd see him as an interloper, someone out to secure a favour from the crown, or to prey on the Princess's feelings. So as he and Arthur entered the banquet hall, he was wary.

Prince Arthur had smirked when he'd noticed his nerves, but Lancelot wouldn't let it unbalance him. He had a feeling that there was something between Arthur and Merlynn, and that was why the Prince was a little less polite. Perhaps they were engaged? Or perhaps the Prince intended to ask King Olaf to court Princess Merlynn? Whatever it was, he'd do his best to appear only to be polite, and to make sure the Prince didn't view him as a threat.

The banquet was smaller in scale than Lancelot had imagined. Most of the nobles were still milling about, and he couldn't see either Merlynn or the eldest Princess anywhere, but he saw the King and Queen and Lord Rowan speaking to another Lord and Lady. Sir Fredrik was standing by the main doors, keeping an eye on everything. When the man caught sight of him, he walked over.

Sir Fredrik offered a curt bow to Arthur. "Prince Arthur." And then he turned to Lancelot. "Lancelot, I didn't have an opportunity to speak to you earlier. My company of men start training at dawn, if you're still interested. We will break off training in order to provide security for the royal family during the tournament, but after the winner is crowned, we will resume," he explained.

Lancelot nodded respectfully. "I would be honoured. I have heard many good things of the knights of Galdara," he replied.

Sir Fredrik grinned, and suddenly Lancelot could see a scar pulling at the other man's right eye. It made him look a little lopsided, but no less distinguished. "Good man. Prince Arthur, the invitation extends to you as well, of course. My men enjoyed your expertise the last few times you trained with us."

"I'd be happy to, Fredrik," the Prince replied.

With that, the knight bowed again and returned to his post, having never stopped to scan the crowd around them.

Soon enough, a servant announced dinner, and all the nobles and royals went to their seats. Prince Arthur steered him to the high table. The King and Queen sat in the middle, of course, flanked by Princess Vivian and Merlynn respectively. The Lord Rowan was seated next to the eldest Princess while Arthur took a seat between Merlynn and Lancelot.

The meal itself was grander than Lancelot had ever seen, let alone eaten. Merlynn tried to talk to him a few times, but it wasn't that easy with Prince Arthur sitting between them.

"So tell me, Lancelot, why did you want to become a knight of Camelot," Arthur asked eventually.

Merlynn looked on curiously, and Lancelot took a moment to think about his answer. "As I said before, my lord, my family was killed. I was only a boy at the time, and there was nothing I could do. I vowed that day that I would never stand by and watch others undergo the same fate. I apprenticed under a blacksmith, but used most of my time to wield the swords. After two years, there was nothing more the blacksmith could teach me, and I wasn't a very good apprentice, so he gifted me a sword and sent me on my way. I have trained with mercenaries, competed in some tournaments, and learned as much as I could. But everyone I came across said the same thing. The knights of Camelot are the best in all of Albion, and their Prince is rumoured to be the best swordsman to ever live," he said. He didn't mean it as flattery, it was the truth, and he trusted that Arthur would see it in the way he'd meant it. "All I've ever wanted was to protect people, and the knights not only protect individuals, but a whole country."

Arthur seemed to be considering him. "You've a noble heart, Lancelot. Had you been born under different circumstances I'd let you join my knights instantly. But the King makes no exceptions, no matter how skilled or brave the individual."

Lancelot inclined his head. He knew this, of course, but it was gratifying to hear the Prince say it. When he looked up, he saw that Merlynn had put a hand on the Prince's arm, and that she was smiling softly at him.

Lancelot was still not sure what was going on between the two, but he was certain now that they had feelings for one another. And he would not stand in the way of that.

## Chapter End Notes

Man, this whole tournament thing was only supposed to last 3 chapters, yet here we are, 5 chapters in, and I think there will be 2 more... it got away from me a little, I guess. I hope you don't mind. Just a little while longer and we'll be back to the good stuff. Also, things will start to get moving a little more after this story arch has been dealt with, so



yay for that!

Leave me a comment and tell me what you think!

# Archery

## Chapter Notes

I am so sorry this took me so long! But it's a slightly longer chapter, so I hope you'll enjoy this!

### **Chapter 27: Archery**

The next day, before the tournament started, King Olaf summoned Sir Fredrik. He was curious as to how the training had gone that morning. They were alone in the council chambers, sitting at the table, each with an ale in their hand.

“It was... memorable, my lord,” Fredrick said, a small smile peeking through his beard.

Olaf shot him a deadpan look. “Define memorable.”

Fredrick laughed. “It seems a small rivalry has erupted between the Prince and our new friend.”

Olaf frowned worriedly. He liked the Prince well enough, and didn’t want to alienate him, but Lancelot *had* saved his daughter’s life. If they were at each other’s throats, he’d have to do something.

Fredrick, no doubt seeing the look on his liege’s face, held up a hand. “No need to worry, my lord, they seemed on friendly terms, and I saw them talking after training.”

Olaf relaxed somewhat. “And what of Lancelot’s capabilities with a sword?”

Fredrick paused, taking a sip of his ale. “He is certainly talented. For a commoner with no training, he’s a good swordsman, and he managed to defeat some of my men. He’s no match for either me or the Prince, but with time and training... I’m not certain about the Prince, but he could definitely best me.”

Olaf ran his hand over his beard thoughtfully. The young man had saved his daughter even though he had no idea who she was, which proved his character, but even the most honest men could be corrupted. “What is your opinion on him? Do you trust him?” he asked. Fredrick had always been a good judge of character, which was one of the reasons he had become captain of the King’s guard.

“He’s honest, and humble. He’s willing to learn and accept criticism. He befriended my knights easily, even though he wasn’t trying. He strikes me as a good man, better than some noblemen I know. And he cares not for riches or fame. I believe he was sincere when he said that his only wish was to serve and protect,” Fredrick said.

Olaf nodded. It corresponded with his own thoughts on the young man. “Do you think him capable of passing the test?”

Fredrick frowned at his King suspiciously, but answered the question regardless. “He might be able to pass it now, but with some more training, definitely.”

“Good,” Olaf said, pleased.

“But my lord, he’s not of noble blood, he cannot join our ranks,” Fredrick protested.

“Our law states that an act of extraordinary bravery may be rewarded with service as a knight of the Realm,” Olaf said, somewhat smugly.

Fredrick looked stunned. “And you intend to do this for Lancelot?” he asked, incredulously.

“Do you not believe that he has deserved it?”

Fredrick took a moment to think about his answer. “He is certainly deserving from what I’ve observed so far... but we don’t know him, sire, for all we know, he could mean the Crown harm,” he cautioned.

Olaf considered his captain’s counsel. It was true that Lancelot had not been in Galdara for very long, but Merlynn seemed to trust him, and she generally was a good judge of character. And Fredrick and the King himself thought the man to be honest and trustworthy.

“Let him take the test before the ball tonight, and he’ll be on probation for a month. Should he prove trustworthy in that time, he’ll be knighted,” Olaf decided.

Fredrick bowed. “I’ll have it arranged, my lord,” he said and strode out purposefully.

Olaf turned to his servant. “Is everything ready for the tournament?”

The young man stepped forwards, out of the shadow. “Yes, my lord. Preparations were made last night.”

“Good, good,” Olaf said, nodding. As he got up from his chair, he suddenly remembered how surprised Prince Arthur had been when Vivien had competed, and imagined his face at seeing Merlynn. He let out a chuckle. This was promising to be a good day. “Come along then, we can’t have Prince Arthur waiting for us,” he said cheerfully, and headed towards the entrance hall. He couldn’t wait until his daughter walked out into the arena. Arthur’s face would be priceless.

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Arthur arrived at the entrance hall only moments before the King did. He greeted the other man with a polite nod. “Sire. Do we need to wait for the Queen and Princesses?”

Olaf grinned for some reason, but Arthur didn’t think it too odd. He had found that Olaf was a jovial man when not angered. “No, they’ve gone on ahead. I believe my wife said something about the market.”

Arthur fought not to roll his eyes. One would think that Merlynn had learned her lesson about not wandering off when she was almost attacked by a griffin. He gave a small bow to the King. "Of course, my lord. Shall we proceed to the box, then?"

Olaf inclined his head, still grinning mysteriously. Arthur was really starting to wonder what the women were doing at the market that had the King smiling so. He just hoped Merlynn would be back before the tournament started this time. Archery could be quite boring to watch without a companion to discuss it with. Not that he thought the Princess would have any insight to offer, but her comments could be quite amusing at times. In truth, he enjoyed speaking to her, she was funny, and more intelligent than most people realized.

He glanced warily over at the King, as if he could somehow hear his thoughts, but the other man kept walking. Had he been aware of Arthur's thoughts, the Prince might have found a gauntlet being thrown at his feet. King Olaf was notoriously protective of his daughters' virtues, which was why neither of them were betrothed yet. Privately, Arthur didn't think either really needed the protection, but he wasn't about to mention that to the King.

When they got to the royal's box, Queen Hunith, Vivian and Lord Rowan were already there, and Arthur felt something akin to dread settle in his stomach. "Where's Merlynn?" he asked as he took his seat.

"She'll be along in a moment," Hunith answered, taking her husband's hand. "No need to worry." The glint in her eyes almost made Arthur think that she *had* been aware of his thoughts on the youngest Princess only moments ago.

Resolutely keeping his eyes on the arena, Arthur nodded. "Why would I worry, your highness?"

The Queen didn't answer, but Arthur could practically *feel* her smirking at him. His attention was drawn away from Merlynn's mother, though, when the trumpets sounded the beginning of the tournament, and the archers started filing in.

Arthur felt his face go slack as he watched a very familiar raven-haired woman step out into the arena. "What?" he whispered to himself, leaning forward in his chair. Glancing over at the royal family, they didn't seem surprised at all. In fact, Vivian was looking at him with badly concealed amusement. When she raised an eyebrow in challenge, Arthur sat back, and schooled his features. It wouldn't do to let anyone see his shock.

When he looked back at the arena, more archers had filed in, and about a quarter of them were women. It was still strange to him that Galdara allowed their women to fight – though he was grateful to note that the knights were still exclusively men.

Merlynn looked up at him and smirked; a sarcastic twisting of her lips at which he couldn't help but grin. She was definitely full of surprises.

After King Olaf had announced the start of the third and last tournament, ten archers took their place in front of the targets. Arthur assumed that this was only the first round, and the targets would be moved further back in later rounds.

Each archer shot three arrows in turn. The first archer barely too the time to aim, and hit the outer two circles. The next contestant was a little more patient and managed to get two arrows in the second circle and one close to the bull's eye. It went on like that until Merlynn – who was the seventh contestant – took aim. Once again, Arthur leaned forward in his chair, he was curious to see just how good Merlynn really was.

She took her time to aim, her face tense with concentration, and Arthur found that he couldn't look away. For the space a single breath, all was silent and nothing happened. Then, she released the bowstring, and her arrow flew straight into the bull's eye.

So far, there had been some mild applause whenever an archer hit the centre ring of the target, but this time there no sound, now whisper as everyone was focussed on the youngest princess.

Merlynn drew her second arrow, and repeated her process; take aim, hold, release. This time she hit the target slightly left of her first arrow, and Arthur could see that she wasn't pleased with her performance.

Her last arrow. This time, she paused even longer, and Arthur marvelled that her arms weren't shaking, nor did her concentration ever waver. He was sat on the edge of his chair, completely mesmerized by Merlynn's every move. It seemed like time had stopped for just a second, and then the arrow was released. The crowd erupted in cheers as it hit the target millimetres from the first arrow, almost straight into the centre.

Arthur hadn't even realized that he had jumped up with the rest of the audience, and was cheering just as loudly. Quickly, he stepped back, glancing at the royal family, but their attention was focussed on Merlynn. Vivian and Olaf had jumped up as well, though with slightly more grace than the Prince of Camelot. The Queen had remained seated, but her face was alight with pride and happiness, and she, too, was sitting on the edge of her seat.

As soon as the noise died down somewhat, the last three archers took their turn. None of them came close to Merlynn's accuracy, though. As the contestants marched out of the arena, and ten more filed in, Vivian caught Arthur's attention. "Go tell her she did wonderfully," she said.

Arthur frowned. "What?"

The Princess rolled her eyes. "Get up, go to her tent and congratulate her! None of us can leave while there are still contestants shooting. Go!" she whispered.

Hesitating a moment more, Arthur got up and walked out of the box. Queen Hunith smiled at him on his way out.

It wasn't hard to find Merlynn's tent; it was the only one with a guard outside of it. The knight didn't even blink at him as Arthur passed. Merlynn was standing in front of a table with a basin of water, splashing her face. She was wearing a plain brown dress with tight sleeves; more functional than fashionable, but that was how the Princess normally dressed. The difference was the arm brace that was attached to her left forearm and the hand brace that now lay on the table. Her bow and arrow were safely tucked away in a corner.

“Nice shooting,” he said, to get her attention.

She started and turned around. As soon as she saw him, though, she smirked again. “Admit it, you’re a little impressed.”

He made a face at her. “I’ve seen better,” he teased. “I was surprised to see you, but you did a very impressive job.”

Her smirk turned into a genuine smile. “Thank you. For a moment there, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to hit the centre again, but I suppose luck was on my side.”

“Well. Your sister wanted me to tell you that you did wonderfully, and that she wishes that she could leave to tell you this herself,” he said.

“And miss all the handsome men shooting? I doubt it.” Merlynn turned back to the table and put her hand brace back on. “I should get ready, the next round is about to start.”

“Of course. Good luck.” Arthur nodded and turned to leave.

“Arthur,” she called after him. He paused and turned around.

“Thank you.”

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Merlynn won the next round, as well, though there were two other contestants who got very close to beating her. The last round would be held out on the training field; as the arena wasn’t big enough to provide the needed distance between the archers and their targets. There would be three contestants: Merlynn, a Lord Arthur couldn’t recall the name of, and a farmer with exceptionally big shoulders.

As they lined up, Arthur thought Merlynn looked rather nervous. “She won last year for the first time,” Vivian whispered, coming to stand beside him. “She kept thinking it was a stroke of luck, no matter how much we told her it was skill that won her that title.”

“Sounds like her,” Arthur murmured back.

The unnamed Lord shot first, taking his sweet time, despite the cold. He hit the second ring, which was impressive from that distance. Arthur just hoped Merlynn would be able to stay relaxed enough to shoot her best.

Merlynn was up next. A glance to his left revealed that the King and Queen looked as stoic as ever, while Vivian had moved to stand beside Lord Rowan. It was a little odd that the chief advisor seemed to be with the royal family wherever they went, but... as Arthur watched Vivian discreetly grab the Lord’s hand, perhaps it wasn’t so strange, after all.

His gaze drifted back to the field, where Merlynn had just nocked her arrow. The archers only got one shot this time, so they had to make it count. The royal family - Arthur included - stood close enough that he could see her take a deep breath, and take aim. There weren’t as many spectators watching this time, but that didn’t diminish the heavy silence.

And then Arthur blinked and Merlynn's arrow had lodged itself in the target. It was close to the centre ring, but not quite in it. The difference between her shot and that of the unnamed lord was minimal, and the disappointment showed on Merlynn's face. She went to stand by her sister while the last archer took his shot. He didn't take quite as long to aim as either Merlynn or the Lord did, but he hit the target at almost the exact spot Merlynn had. A judge would have to see who won.

"I lost. I told you it was mere luck," he heard Merlynn whisper.

Hunith put her arm around her daughter's shoulders. "You haven't lost yet, my dear. And even if you do, you got this far, beating many men who have been training for far longer than you have. There is no shame in that."

Merlynn muttered something he couldn't hear.

"Quarter staffs is a very different discipline than archery; you shouldn't compare yourself to your sister."

"I would never have been able to hit the target in the first round, let alone at this distance," Vivian added, throwing her arm around her sister's waist, so that the younger Princess was protected from both sides.

"Merlynn?" Arthur said, pulling the attention of the women to him. "You did wonderfully, better than most of my knights."

She smiled at him, then. "Thank you, Arthur, I-" But she was cut off when a trumpet sounded, announcing that the judge had made a decision.

"The winner of the archery competition, and Champion of Galdara is..." the judge said, pausing to increase the tension, "Princess Merlynn!"

# The Ball

## Chapter Notes

So sorry this is so late! But there's fluff to make up for it! And, like, one sentence of plot ;)  
Enjoy!

### Chapter 28: The Ball

Merlynn stared in horror.

She'd always known her sister could be cunning and sneaky, but this went too far. "I can't wear this!" she exclaimed.

Helga looked up from where she'd been gathering laundry. "Why not, milady?" she asked, coming over to stand beside her. "It's a beautiful dress, and it's a gift from your sister, is it not?"

Merlynn refrained from glaring. Really, it wasn't Helga's fault. "It's red. And gold."

Helga still looked at her uncomprehendingly. "Both colours that suit you wonderfully, my lady."

Sighing, Merlynn turned away from the offending garment. "Wearing those colours while Prince Arthur is here is the equivalent of throwing myself at him, and my sister knows this. In fact, I can't ever wear those colours anymore as Arthur and I are friends now. It would give people the wrong idea," she explained, irritation seeping into her voice. Vivian was trying to play matchmaker, and Merlynn didn't appreciate it.

Arthur was *just* a friend, why couldn't she see that? Sure, Arthur was handsome, and he'd proven himself to be a good man, but that didn't mean anything. Even *if* they had feelings for each other, neither of their fathers would allow it. Uther hated Merlynn and had almost let her die, which was exactly why her own father would never allow the match. She'd have to move to Camelot permanently, and she wouldn't have the protection of her family anymore.

Oh Goddess, *Uther* would be her *father-in-law*! Merlynn made a face and shook her head. It was stupid to think about anyway, Arthur didn't have feelings for her and she definitely didn't have feelings for him. Right?

"Fetch my blue gown, the one with the gold trimming," she told Helga. If Vivian wanted a reaction, she'd give her one, and this dress would be perfect for the task.



Arthur kept fiddling with the clasp on his borrowed cloak.

Because both Princesses had won their respective tournaments, Arthur was allowed a seat at the champion's table with them and Lord Rowan. But neither of the Ladies had arrived yet. Merlynn wasn't a particularly punctual person when it wasn't of national importance, but Vivian was. He had a bad feeling about this.

"No need to look so glum. This *is* a party, after all," Rowan said, grinning at him as he held out a goblet of wine.

Reluctantly, Arthur returned the smile and accepted the goblet. "A party that's missing its guests of honour. You're the only champion who's shown up."

Rowan laughed. "I don't suppose you've had many balls in Camelot while Princess Merlynn was there, did you?"

Arthur frowned. That seemed like an odd thing to say. "We've had banquets, but no balls. My father isn't particularly fond of them," he replied.

Grinning, Rowan took a sip of his wine. "Then you probably don't know this, but the Galdaran Princesses are notorious for taking a long time to get ready." Arthur made a face. He couldn't see Merlynn being *that* girly and spending hours on her hair or picking out a dress or something. "To be fair," Rowan continued, "it's mostly because Vivian is a perfectionist. She always has to look her best. And that's doubly true for a ball."

Glancing over, Arthur noticed the distinct affectionate smile that spread over the Chief Advisor's face. It seemed that the suspicion he'd had earlier considering Rowan and Vivian was true; there was something between them. But why not just announce it? Arthur didn't think Olaf would deny either of his daughters the chance to marry for love.

Rowan's smile faded as he saw Arthur looking. "Is it obvious?" he asked in a soft voice.

Immediately feeling bad for the other man, Arthur looked away. "Is what obvious? That all women are mad? I'd certainly say so, who takes *this long* to do their hair?" he said.

Rowan smiled gratefully. "Women may be mad, but are we men not even more so for loving them regardless?"

He had a point there.

Unbidden, an image of Merlynn sprang to his mind, as she had looked right after she'd stabbed the afanc, almost a month ago now. Gods, had it only been a month? She'd had a bruise and a cut on her forehead from colliding with the wall, her hair was a mess, but... her eyes were fierce and determined, even as she stared down a monster from which most men would flee.

Merlynn was definitely mad, going down into those tunnels with naught but a dagger to protect herself with, but... he'd followed her there, hadn't he? He'd believed her story, no matter how far-fetched it had sounded.

He was pulled back to the present by a commotion happening at the doors, but before he could take a proper look, Rowan had steered him towards the champions' table. And just like that, he was sitting next to Merlynn, at the end of the table.

"When did you get here?" he whispered to her as everyone in the hall took their seats.

"Just a moment ago. Vivian kept finding little things that weren't perfect yet," she said with an eye roll.

Arthur smiled to himself, thinking of what Rowan had said about her. "I can see that," he said. "I'm sure you had absolutely nothing to do with you two being so late," he teased.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Are you mocking me?"

He grinned at her. "I would never," he said in a faux innocent voice.

"If you two don't shut up, I'm having the guards escort you out," Vivian hissed from Merlynn's other side.

Merlynn rolled her eyes. "I love papa, but he gives the same speech every year, it's hardly necessary to listen anymore." But she did lean back in her chair and paid attention to the rest of the speech, and applauded at the end.

Seeing as this was a ball and not a banquet, the meal was kept light, and was soon removed to make room for dancing. As was traditional, Vivian danced the opening dance with her father.

Arthur left Merlynn with Rowan and went to get a goblet of wine for himself. He spotted Lancelot looking mightily uncomfortable at the other end of the ballroom, and smirked to himself. Perhaps he'd go and talk to the other man.

As he was filling his goblet, a conversation being held behind him drew his attention.

"Princess Vivian looks fantastic in her new gown, don't you think?" one woman said. From the looks of it, she was definitely of noble birth, but not very high in status. She was a dull blonde, and her features were quite unattractive. Arthur thought she could have been the same age as Queen Hunith, but with all the wrinkles, she could have been the Queen's senior.

"Absolutely, she's radiant. As opposed to the other Princess," another noblewoman replied. This one was a brunette, and appeared much the same as the first woman. Perhaps they were related.

Arthur frowned, turning his head slightly to listen in. He could see their reflections in a platter in front of him, so he could listen in unobtrusively.

"Very true, my dear, I do believe she wore that gown last year, at the harvest festival. No class, if you ask me," the first woman said.

The other woman hummed. "That's what you get for taking in a child from the streets. At least the Queen has adjusted herself, she has manners."

"Yes, the child has no manners to speak of. I've heard she sneaks out of the castle on a regular basis, just to play in the muck with farmers' children. Imagine!"

"Well, is it any wonder? Who knows who her father is?" the brunette hissed.

The blonde leaned in closer, and Arthur subtly took a small step back, to keep up with the conversation. "I've heard the father was a common criminal who forced himself on the Queen. No wonder the child behaves the way she does. Bad stock is what it is," she whispered.

Arthur found himself getting angrier and angrier the longer he listened. Did these women have no respect for their Princess? Whether by birth or not, Merlynn was their Princess, and if something should happen to Vivian, she was the future ruler of this Kingdom.

"Yes, not at all like the *real* Princess. Oh, Lady Vivian has such grace!" the brunette sighed.

Clenching his hand around his goblet, Arthur calmed himself by imagining just what Vivian would do if she heard anyone talk like that. The thought was almost enough to bring a smile to his face.

"Prince Arthur!"

The Prince looked up to see that Lancelot had joined him at the refreshments table, and was smiling at him somewhat nervously. The ladies he'd been eavesdropping on, had turned around and were looking at him with wide eyes and looked a little pale.

Deciding that he shouldn't cause a scene at Vivian's ball, he ignored them and turned to the young swordsman. "Lancelot, it's good to see you."

"And you, my lord," Lancelot replied, looking somewhat relieved. The poor man probably didn't know anyone else at the ball.

Arthur glanced at the silent noblewomen one more time, before figuring that a few subtle jabs wouldn't be out of place. "Tell me, Lancelot, don't you think Princess Merlynn looks *radiant* today?" he asked, deliberately using the same word as the noblewoman.

Lancelot looked a little unsure, but answered regardless. "Uhm, yes, my lord, she looks stunning," the man said, looking across the dance floor at the Princess in question.

Suddenly, Arthur was annoyed, even though it had been the answer he'd wanted to hear. "Yes, she truly is a Princess, through and through," he replied, then quickly changed the subject. "Tell me, have you decided what to do next?" he asked, eyeing the other man's garb. He was dressed in the Galdaran colours, and wore a chainmail vest. Everything pointed towards Lancelot being...

Lancelot beamed. "I was allowed to take the test to become a knight of Galdara. I passed."

Arthur looked at him incredulously. "A knight?"

Shrugging, Lancelot grabbed a goblet of his own. "Apparently, in Galdara, one can also become a knight if one performs an extraordinary act of bravery."

Arthur was both amazed and happy for the dark-haired man. He'd started to view him as a friend, and could now happily call him a fellow knight. "Congratulations," he said sincerely.

Lancelot nodded in acceptance. "I'll be on probation for a month, but after that I'll undergo the knighting ceremony and officially join their ranks." It was obvious he couldn't be prouder.

Glancing around the hall, Arthur saw that the two ladies were still standing quite close, and both of them were smiling at him. It made him more than uncomfortable, so he excused himself from Lancelot's company and sought out Merlynn. The women's gossip had angered him, and made him feel rather protective, so when he reached her side, he put a hand on her lower back and leaned in close. "Want to dance?" he whispered in her ear.

She shivered, but smiled and nodded.

He took her hand, and as he led her onto the dance floor, the noblewomen's words kept going through his mind. Was that really how people thought about her? He pulled Merlynn into the proper stance and joined the rest of the dancers. Looking at her now, smiling and dancing, he just couldn't believe that other people couldn't see what he saw. "You're beautiful," he whispered.

Immediately, Merlynn's eyes were on his and a deep blush spread across her cheeks, which only served to increase her beauty. "What?" she asked.

"You look absolutely beautiful," he repeated, a little louder.

Her blush deepened, and she lowered her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. "But it was all Vivian, she's much better at-"

But Arthur shook his head. "I'm not talking about Vivian, Merlynn. *You* are stunning. Always, not just tonight."

Apparently, Merlynn didn't know what to say to that, so she looked at the other dancers as they spun around the dancefloor. But Arthur's thoughts were elsewhere. Why was he so adamant to defend her? Yes, she was his friend, but... it was more than that. He thought she was beautiful, and he sought her company as often as he could. He appreciated her opinion, and he cared about what she thought about him... And as the music swelled and Arthur twirled Merlynn around, he realized something.

He had feelings for Merlynn.

He wasn't sure just how deep they ran, or when it had started, but somehow, at some point, he'd fallen for the brash Princess. The realization brought a smile to his face that Merlynn immediately answered, even though there was a question in her eyes.

And then all hell broke loose.

# The Griffin Sanctuary

## Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry it took me this long to update! I swear I didn't mean to leave you with that cliffhanger for that long!

That said, some of you guessed what the reason of 'all hell broke loose' was. Kudos to you!

### **Chapter 29: The Griffin Sanctuary.**

*Previously:*

*He had feelings for Merlynn.*

*He wasn't sure just how deep they ran, or when it had started, but somehow, at some point, he'd fallen for the brash Princess. The realization brought a smile to his face that Merlynn immediately answered, even though there was a question in her eyes.*

*And then all hell broke loose.*

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Her dress was beyond saving, Merlynn noted vaguely. With a shrug, she grabbed a knife off a nearby table and cut the skirts off. Luckily, she was wearing breeches underneath, so she wasn't too indecent.

“Merlynn!” Elric shouted. The Princess looked up to see the physician pointing towards the doors.

All night, the injured had been brought into the ballroom where Elric, Merlynn and a few others had seen to their wounds as best they could. As Merlynn guided the new arrivals to a clear spot, she glanced up at one of the small windows, and amended her thought; it was morning now.

When she set about bandaging a knight's head wound, though, another pair of hands took over her task. “You need rest, Merlynn,” Lancelot said, winding a piece of cloth around the dazed knight's head. “I may not be a physician, but even I can see that you won't be of any use if you push yourself to keep going until you drop. I can finish this. Sit down and eat something.”

Merlynn was grateful he didn't suggest she get some sleep, so she just nodded, found some bread, and sat down in a chair.

It was hard to believe that mere hours ago, she'd been dancing with Arthur. They'd been interrupted by a guard running in, screaming about an attack. Like all the knights and her father, she'd run outside, and had her blood run cold at the piercing shriek of a Griffin.

She was startled from her thoughts as a similar cry tore through the air. Her heart constricted as she thought of all the people who hadn't made it to the safety of the castle. There had to be *something* she could do...

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Lancelot finished up bandaging the knight and suggested he rest, though the man didn't look like he'd be going anywhere any time soon.

He glanced up to see if Merlynn had taken his advice, and saw her disappear through a side door. Concerned, he followed. The side door led to a hallway that, in turn, led to the central courtyard. Lancelot was starting to get really worried now. Where would Merlynn be going at a time like this? He might not have known her for very long, but he knew that she wasn't the type of person who would abandon her people in their time of need.

When he saw her go into the stables, he hurried to catch up to her. If she was leaving the castle, he'd be damned if he let her go alone.

She started when he entered, and tried to hide the saddle she'd been about to pick up. "Lancelot! What are you doing here?" she asked, sounding a little breathless.

Instead of answering her, Lancelot got a saddle of his own and walked over to another horse.

"What are you doing?" Merlynn asked, sounding more suspicious now. "You can't come with me!"

"I was sworn to protect Galdara and its royal family, Merlynn, that includes you," he replied without looking at her as he lowered the stirrups to the correct length.

"Lancelot, I'm serious, you can't!"

Finally, he looked at her. "I won't say you can't stop me, because you can probably stop me in my tracks with a single word, but how will you explain that? And for that matter, how will you justify leaving without a guard?"

The Princess had no answer to this, and, after a moment of consideration, started saddling up her horse again. "I'd forgotten," she whispered.

"Sorry?" Lancelot asked, confused. He'd finished with his horse and busied himself with stuffing a few waterskins in the saddlebags.

"I'd forgotten that you know about my... secret."

Lancelot regarded her curiously. "Doesn't no one else know?"

“My mother does, and my uncle Gaius. He’d the court physician in Camelot. And there’s a dragon, but other than that, no.”

“A dragon?” Lancelot asked, incredulous.

Merlynn rolled her eyes as she led her horse outside, trusting the new knight to follow. “He’s more of a giant, cryptic lizard if you ask me, but yes. Uther has one trapped underneath the castle. It’s been there since the end of the Purge.”

Lancelot didn’t really know how to respond to that, so he didn’t. They mounted up and rode out the city. The guards didn’t pay them any mind, and before long, they were surrounded by the forest. “Where are we going?” Lancelot asked eventually.

“The foot of the mountains,” Merlynn replied. She hesitated before continuing. “There’s a legend in Galdara about the Griffins. Long ago, when our people first settled here, they didn’t know that the land had already been claimed by the Griffins. The creatures, being proud and thinking themselves invincible, attacked the people. From among them, a woman stood up, who showed the Griffins their weakness and drove them back, but spared their lives. Humbled and grateful, the creatures sought a truce; the humans could live in the valley, safe from any magical creatures, while the Griffins inhabited the mountains. The woman and her husband became Galdara’s first King and Queen, and they ruled peacefully for many years. They built a sanctuary at the base of the mountains, where a member of the royal family could always come to confer with the Griffins. It was an alliance that has held for years, though the practise of speaking to the Griffins was lost in time. That’s why the sigil of the royal family is the Griffin,” Merlynn explained.

Lancelot had listened to her story, entranced. “You think there is truth in these legends? That the Griffins really have a weakness?”

Merlynn paused. “I’m not sure. I mean, obviously, there is some truth to it, since there really is a sanctuary in the mountains. As for a weakness... I don’t know. I’m not sure what to expect, I just know that I have to try,” she said determinately.

“What exactly are you planning to do when we get there?” Lancelot asked, feeling a little apprehensive.

Merlynn simply looked ahead, a determined look on her face. “I’m going to talk to the Griffins.”

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It took just over two hours to reach the foot of the mountains. Merlynn led them as close to the sanctuary as she dared, and then left the horses tethered to a tree. She just hoped they wouldn’t be too spooked by the Griffins.

The sanctuary was actually a clearing in the forest. The surrounding trees’ branches formed a leafy, dome-like ceiling, and in the middle stood an altar. It was a huge rectangular marble stone, with symbols and shapes etched into the sides. As soon as she cleared the threshold of the clearing, Merlynn felt the magic wash over her. It was like she could finally breathe

again, like she'd been drowning, but just hadn't noticed. She knew that not using her magic for long stretches of time was uncomfortable, but she'd been pushing it to the back of her mind. What with everything else that had been going on, she just hadn't had the time to focus on it, and she'd been too afraid to let too much of it out. Standing in the clearing now, she couldn't help but let her magic flow to the surface, creating little pinpricks of light. They lit up the whole place.

Lancelot was staring at them in wonder, apparently speechless.

Feeling a bit self-conscious at the unintended show of magic, Merlynn re-focussed on the task at hand. She drew her dagger and cleanly sliced her hand.

"Princess!" Lancelot exclaimed, no longer looking at the lights. He dashed over and grabbed her wrist, though his grip was gentle. "What are you doing?"

"It's necessary for the ritual, Lance, and it's just a small cut, I'll be fine," she reassured him, offering a small smile. It did sting, but it wasn't anything Merlynn couldn't handle.

She gently pulled her hand from his, and turned to face the altar. Angling her hand downward, she let a few drops of blood drip from her fingers, onto a symbol she knew to mean 'connection', in the Old Language.

The carving glowed briefly, before dimming, as if nothing had happened. Confusion and disappointment warred within her, why wasn't anything happening?

"What now?" Lancelot asked.

"I don't know, all I know is that blood is needed to make a connection with the Griffins. All the texts I read implied that it was only a small amount, but perhaps..." She trailed off as another thought occurred to her. "No," she whispered. She'd been so focussed on what to do that it hadn't even occurred to her that they might not even come. Royal blood was necessary to summon the Griffins, and Merlynn was technically not of royal blood.

"What's wrong?" Lancelot asked tensely, his hand resting on his sword.

"I can't summon them. I'm not royal," she explained feebly. "I'm... I forgot. I actually forgot..."

Lancelot looked as disappointed as she felt as he looked around the clearing. "I'm sorry, Princess," he murmured, stepping closer to her. Another moment passed and Merlynn couldn't keep her eyes off the blood that lined the carving on the altar. "We should go back, Princess, it's not-" Lancelot abruptly stopped speaking as leaves rustled ahead.

They both tensed, freezing in place. Lancelot reached for his sword, but Merlynn held up a hand, stalling his movement. Whatever it was, she was somehow sure that they shouldn't startle it.

For a moment, they held their breaths, and then... a Griffin stepped through the undergrowth. It was much larger than the one they'd seen in the woods, and it was a greyish white. Age and



power radiated off the creature, and Merlynn was sure this was a leader of some kind.

*“Speak, Young One, and I shall listen.”* The voice reverberated through Merlynn’s mind, a deep sound without substance, but powerful nonetheless.

Merlynn was momentarily speechless, before she shook herself. The Griffin had actually come! “Why did you come? I’m not of royal blood,” she asked, slightly breathless.

The creature inclined its head. *“You may not be of the Galdaran royal line, but that does not mean that your blood isn’t royal,”* it replied sagely.

“What does that mean?” Merlynn asked curiously.

*“Have you come to ask me of your lineage, Emryss, or have another question?”* The voice was completely neutral, but Merlynn had a sneaking suspicion that this was its form of sarcasm.

“Right,” she said sheepishly, before pushing the feeling aside. “One of your kind has been attacking the kingdom. It’s killed several of my people. I need to know why, and how to stop it.”

The Griffin blinked at her, and she felt like it could see straight into her soul. *“The one you speak of is called Alya. She attacks because something was taken from her, something most precious to her.”*

So they identified with genders, that was good to know, though she still had no idea if the Griffin in front of her was male or female. “What did she lose?” Merlynn asked. Perhaps if she could replace it or find it, she could appease the Griffin enough to make it stop attacking.

*“Her child.”*

Merlynn was shocked. “Her child?” That wasn’t something she could replace. She turned away from the Griffin to stare at Lancelot, more to gather her thoughts than to ask for his opinion. He looked lost anyway, and Merlynn realized that he couldn’t hear the Griffin’s thoughts in his mind like she could.

What were they to do now? Perhaps if she could talk to... Alya, was it? Perhaps then, she offer to help, to solve this without violence. “Can you call her here?” she asked.

The Griffin seemed to consider this for a moment. *“I can, but it is doubtful that she would come.”*

“But if I could talk to her, perhaps I can show her that this isn’t the answer to her grief.”

Once again, the Griffin cocked its head. *“Alya isn’t grieving. She is enraged.”*

Merlynn frowned, not really understanding.

*“You haven’t listened, Young One. Alya’s child isn’t dead, it was taken from her by humans.”*

“By whom?” Merlynn asked. Who would be stupid enough to take a Griffin child? And why?

*“That, I cannot tell you. But a little one could fulfil many purposes. He is not yet as impervious as an adult, and thus his body can be used in many powerful potions. As I understand it, he would also fetch a great amount of gold,”* the Griffin said. Briefly, Merlynn wondered whether the creature had read her mind, but she dismissed it; it was logical next question.

“So what do I do?” she asked resolutely.

*“Find the thieves, find the child. His cries will draw his mother.”*

“What if the child is dead?”

The ancient Griffin’s black eyes bored into hers. *“Then you shall all perish,”* he said coldly.

Merlynn repressed a shudder. “Why did you come speak to me?” she asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

The Griffin’s eyes now shone with amusement. *“A genealogy lesson after all? Very well... There are many forms of nobility. The same can be said for royalty. The blood of the King’s forbears may not flow through your veins, but you are a Queen among your kind. Over time, you will find many of your subjects will realize this as well. They will bow for you and swear fealty.”*

“My kind... you don’t mean humans, do you?” Merlynn asked, though she already knew the answer.

Though the creature in front of her had a beak, she was somehow sure that it was smiling at her. *“Until next time, Young One,”* he said, and retreated back into the forest, making almost no sound.

For a few seconds, absolute silence reigned as Merlynn mulled over the Griffins words. Then, she turned to Lancelot, a determined grin on her face. “Come on, Lance, let’s go save a baby.” And with that, she turned back to the way they came, and started running.

She had a Kingdom to save.

# "Where life will lead you"

## Chapter Notes

I can't believe it's been since September that I last updated. I suck, I know! So, NaNoWriMo is over, so I'll be focussing on this fic more, and I've decided to have another little contest with myself this month. My goal is to write 20k words before the end of the month. What with Christmas and New Year's Eve and family parties, I've set my goal a little lower than NaNo does (also because I didn't make the 50k goal in November), so expect more updates!

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

### Chapter 30:

"Where have you been?!"

The shout was the first thing Merlynn heard as she rode back through the gates of the Galdaran castle with Lancelot, and she winced at the anger behind it. "Mother is worried sick, and Father's already sent out a search party!" Vivian continued, heedless of her little sister's cringing.

"I had Lancelot with me, I was fine."

The furious blonde now aimed her glare at the new knight. "And you! How could you allow her to leave? You could have been attacked or killed!"

"Vivian!" Merlynn shouted, her own temper rising. "I can take care of myself, and I needed to find out why the Griffin was attacking us!" Taking a breath to calm herself, she continued. "If you want to be angry with someone, do so with me. Lancelot was only following my orders, which, as a knight of this realm, he is obligated to do."

Vivian seemed to calm down a little bit after that, and stepped forward to pull her sister into a hug. "We thought you'd been killed." If her voice was a little shaky, Merlynn ignored it.

"I'm sorry. I knew Father wouldn't have let me go if he'd known where I was going," Merlynn said quietly.

Vivian stepped back. "He'll want to see you. Both of you."

The two friends exchanged a slightly worried glance, before following the older Princess into the castle to face the King's wrath.

As soon as they entered the council chambers, the King ordered everyone out. Vivian remained put, but Lancelot headed straight for the doors. "Stop. Lancelot, stay. Vivian, go

find your mother and stay with her.”

Vivian opened her mouth to protest, but Olaf held up his hand. “Now, Vivian!” he snapped.

She glared. “Of course, *Sire*,” she said, a little angrily. Then, she turned on her heel and strode out.

Now only Lancelot and the younger Princess remained. This was going to be... *interesting* ...

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Arthur headed straight for the council chambers. According to the most recent reports, the Griffin seemed to be heading south, straight towards Camelot. He’d stayed in Galdara too long already, his father had sent no less than 5 angry letters demanding his return. As he was about to open the doors, however, two guards stopped him. He shot them a questioning look.

“Sorry, Sire, the King has asked that no one disturb him,” the guard said, sounding somewhat apologetic. He seemed familiar, and suddenly, Arthur remembered him as the guard who’d stood outside the physician’s hut when Lancelot had been hurt.

“Vincent, was it?” he asked, putting on a vaguely charming face.

“Yes, Sire,” the man replied, sounding surprised.

“I really need to speak to the King, it’s important. Can you not make an exception?” he asked as earnestly as he could.

The guardsman looked uncomfortable. “I’m sorry, Sire, I can’t. The King asked specifically to keep anyone but the Queen out.”

Arthur sighed in frustration. He needed to leave Galdara, but to just take off without informing the King was bad form. Turning away, he figured he might as well try to find Merlynn again, even though he hadn’t been able to for the past few hours. Perhaps she could relay the message to her father...?

He didn’t get more than a few steps away, though, when the doors opened. Lancelot strode out, looking more than a little bemused, followed by a frustrated-looking Merlynn and her father.

Lancelot offered a nod in passing, but didn’t say a word as he made his way down the corridor, but Merlynn and the King stopped by Arthur’s side.

“Arthur, my boy, was there anything you needed?” Olaf asked.

Looking from the King to the Princess, Arthur almost forgot what he was going to say. He hadn’t seen Merlynn since his revelation about what he felt for her, which was making it a little difficult to concentrate.

“Uh...” he managed.

Merlynn stepped forward and put a hand on his arm. That was definitely not helping. “Arthur, are you alright?” she asked softly, her frown melting off her face.

Snapping out of it, Arthur took a step back. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m heading back to Camelot. The Griffin seems to be heading south, and I need to be home in case it strikes there.”

Olaf nodded gravely. “I see. You’re a good man, Arthur, you’ll be missed here,” he said sincerely, putting a hand on Arthur’s shoulders. “I have a feeling you’ll be a very different king than your father. And I look forward to seeing what you’ll accomplish.” And with that, Olaf strode on, leaving the two young royals alone.

Arthur looked after the King, not knowing what to think. He’d always thought that if he could be half the King his father was, he’d be good enough, but lately his faith had been shaken. His father had made rash decisions based on his dislike towards Merlynn. He’d risked a war with an allied kingdom... And Arthur didn’t understand why. His father could be single-minded and stubborn, but why would he dislike Merlynn so much just because her father was a criminal? There was something more going on here.

“Arthur?” Merlynn’s voice broke through his reverie. “I asked when you’d be leaving,” she said, looking a little concerned.

“Oh, uhm... right now. I’ve been away from home long enough. My father won’t be happy I’ve been ignoring his letters,” he said, a little sheepishly.

Merlynn winced sympathetically. “He probably won’t be. But I’m sure Morgana will be glad to have you back. And Sir Leon will be relieved that you’ll be taking over the training sessions again.”

He wasn’t so sure Morgana would be happy to see him if he came back without her best friend, but he wasn’t going to say that to Merlynn. Instead, he changed the subject. “Lancelot seemed a little... out of sorts,” he commented, glancing back into the direction the other knight had disappeared in.

Merlynn grinned. “He’s been promoted. Father made him my personal guard. He’s moving his things to the royals’ wing now,” she explained.

“Really? Already? He’s barely a week into his probation,” Arthur said, confused. Why would Olaf promote such an untried man? And to protect his youngest daughter, no less.

“And? He’s a great knight and a good friend. He’ll do perfectly,” Merlynn replied a little defensively.

“You barely know the man,” Arthur countered. He liked Lancelot well enough, but a week was hardly enough time to really know anyone.

Narrowing her eyes at him, Merlynn crossed her arms. “Some men show their true self to the world, Arthur. It’s only stubborn prats you can’t even begin to understand, even after a decade of acquaintance.”

Arthur fought the urge to grin. This was the feisty Merlynn he knew. She'd been so much more reserved here in Galdara that he was beginning to despair ever seeing that side of her again. "What can I say? I'm a mystery," he said with a grin.

She shot him a look. "Who said I was talking about you?" But the insult was lost when she couldn't suppress her grin.

"Har har," he replied sarcastically. "But I really should be going now."

Merlynn's smile melted away. "Right, of course, yes. I, uhm... Have a safe trip," she said.

"Right." Arthur didn't really want to leave. Considering the circumstances under which Merlynn last left Camelot, it was fairly certain he wouldn't see much more of her, and... he didn't want that.

"My father won't let me come back to Camelot," she whispered, as if in answer to his thoughts. She looked sad about that, and - though the news saddened him - he liked to believe that was partly because of him.

"Oh. Yes. I... I didn't think he would," Arthur managed to say. Apparently, Merlynn's penchant for stumbling over words was infectious.

"I managed to convince him not to go to war, though he wanted to. However, he's stopped all trade, and said that if your father comes within a hundred miles of me or my sister, he will kill him," she said, brutally honest. "On the bright side, he likes *you*. You and Morgana are welcome here at any time." A small smile graced her lips. Not that he was paying attention to that.

Arthur grimaced. "I doubt my father will let either of us come anywhere near Galdara again, after I stayed away for so long."

Once again, Merlynn's face fell, and Arthur felt awful. "Does that mean we won't see each other again?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know."

Silence fell between them, neither sure what to say to that.

"I... I wish it was different," Merlynn said softly.

"Me too," Arthur replied, matching her volume. Just when he'd realized that perhaps his feelings for the enigmatic princess weren't as platonic as he'd thought... he wasn't given the chance to explore them. And there was nothing he could do about it.

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Merlynn couldn't name the feelings running amok inside her. She didn't know how to feel, or what to think of the situation. Except that she wished that she could do something to change it. "I... I wish it was different," she whispered. Unexpectedly, she found she needed to fight a

burning behind her eyes. Evidently, one of the feelings she hadn't been able to place was sadness.

"Me too." Arthur seemed as dejected as she felt, which only made her feel worse. They had become friends, even though he could still be a prat sometimes, and she didn't want to say goodbye.

Forcing a smile, the princess squared her shoulders. "Well, you never know where life will lead you. And our fathers won't always be in charge of our lives," she said, hoping to sound optimistic. "Don't write me off just yet, Arthur Pendragon, you can't get rid of me that easily."

That brought out a smile, and Merlynn immediately felt better. She really should follow her own advice; her destiny was tied to Arthur's, she refused to believe that this was the end.

"Yeah, you're like weed, you keep coming back," he said, but the grin on his face told her he was just teasing her.

She still slapped his shoulder, though. "You prat. Go on, you should go before you lose the light."

Arthur grew more solemn and offered a nod. "Whatever you say, Princess." Hearing him use her title gave her a little thrill she couldn't quite explain, and she smiled a little wider.

As Arthur walked off, however, her cheery thought gave way to more serious ones. Her father had forbidden her from leaving the country for the time being, though he'd taken her story about the Griffins into account. But she couldn't just leave it alone.

So, she headed towards her chambers and started packing a bag. She only had a few more hours left before sundown, and she needed to be ready to leave. She just hoped that her father hadn't increased the guard since she's snuck out the last time...

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Cursing the absence of her beloved Cian under her breath, Merlynn saddled another horse, a brown mare that she was unfamiliar with. Just as she was about to mount up, however, she was interrupted.

"We have got to stop meeting like this," an amused voice said.

Turning around, Merlynn saw Lancelot sit astride a horse, a tiny grin on his face. "Lancelot! You can't be here."

"I thought we went over this the last time you snuck out of the castle? I'm your personal guard now, Merlynn, I'm not leaving your side," Lancelot argued.

The Princess scowled. "It's different this time, I'm leaving Galdara and getting that Griffin its child back. It's dangerous, and you could get killed."

He shrugged. "So could you."

“Well, I have a bit of an advantage in that field, now don’t I?” she said smugly. Surely he’d see reason now.

“Do you? Because I was under the impression that you wanted to keep that... *advantage* a secret. So unless you’re willing to kill anyone who witnesses you using your particular talents, you could use someone who can actually swing a sword.”

Damn him, but his argument made sense. Merlynn grimaced.

Lancelot grinned triumphantly. “Now come on, we’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

Sighing, Merlynn mounted her mare and pulled up her hood. Getting out of the city would be easy, finding a baby Griffin... Well, they had their work cut out for them...

## Chapter End Notes

So, Merlynn and Arthur will be spending some more time apart from now on, but you know what they say: absence makes the heart grow fonder! There will be some overlap, and some fun nods towards one another, so don't despair, there will be plenty of Merthur to go around!

Please review!



# Different Paths

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **C31: Different paths**

When the white walls of Camelot came into view, Arthur realized how much he'd missed his home. Galdara was a beautiful country, and he had liked being there, but it wasn't home. And he was also glad not to have to wear furs anymore.

It had been two days since he left the northern country, and he was glad to be at its end. The only thing he dreaded was seeing his father. But putting it off wouldn't solve the problem, so Arthur spurred on his horse and made for the gates. It was just past dawn, so there wouldn't be too many people around.

The guards called out cheerful greetings, happy to have their Prince back, no doubt, so Arthur simply handed over his horse to a stable boy and informed him to take his saddlebags up to his rooms.

Now to get the unpleasantness out of the way.

Arthur made his way to the throne room. No doubt his father had been notified of his return immediately, and would be waiting for him.

When he entered, his father's scowl found him immediately. There were a few guards in the room, who all looked uncomfortable as they kept their hands on their swords. Aside from them, Sir Leon and Gaius stood behind the throne, the former offering his Prince a tiny nod. "Father, before you have me arrested, please listen to me," Arthur pleaded, bending down on one knee respectfully.

For a moment, Uther didn't say anything, and Arthur was genuinely worried that his father would just throw him in prison to teach him a lesson and not listen to him.

"What?" the King spat.

Arthur winced a bit at the tone, but got up and faced his father squarely. "There is a Griffin rampaging across the land. It's caused havoc in Galdara already, and it was last seen headed for Camelot. Our people are in danger, father. We must prepare."

The shock was evident on the guards' faces, but Uther remained stoic.

"Please, Sire, I've no reason to lie about this. The creature could attack the outlying villages at any time, we must prepare to receive the refugees and perhaps even evacuate some villages once we're sure where the Griffin is headed."

"It can't hurt to send a patrol, Sire," Gaius spoke up. Arthur was relieved for the physician's support. His father would listen to his oldest friend, surely.

Uther considered him for a moment, his glare never wavering, before waving Sir Leon forward. "Assemble a patrol and scout the northern border," he said tersely, and Leon nodded and left the throne room. "As for you, Arthur," the King said, turning his angry gaze on his son again, "you will personally oversee the preparation for the refugees. Once they get here, you will assist Gaius in any way you can. *Personally*."

"Father!" Arthur protested. "I should be out there, looking for-"

"Enough!" Uther shouted, surprising Arthur into silence. "You will *not* leave these walls until I tell you to!" The King took a breath, and then spoke at a more reasonable volume, though with the same amount of anger; "We will speak about your punishment after this crisis has been averted. Dismissed."

Bowing his head in reluctant acceptance, Arthur swept out of the room. He had preparations to see to.

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When Lancelot had followed Merlynn out of the castle, he had thought she'd had at least an inkling of where to go. But apparently not.

"So, if you don't know where the Griffin is heading, where are we going?" he asked, confused.

Merlynn grimaced. "You're not going to like it..." she said. "To find the Griffin or its baby, I'll need a powerful tracking spell. One that can be found in my magic book... which is with my uncle in Camelot."

Lancelot shot her an incredulous look. "So we're headed to the kingdom your father expressly forbade you from ever going near? The one whose King let you drink poison?"

Merlynn shrugged sheepishly. "Well, sort of. I'll be waiting outside the walls. *You* are going to go inside and find my uncle so he can give you the book."

"Oh, am I?"

The Princess grinned. "Yes, you are. I'd use an illusion charm, but I need my spellbook for that," she said cheekily.

Lancelot rolled his eyes good-naturedly. He didn't really mind, of course, but he'd found himself relaxing around the Princess more than he'd thought he could around a Royal. Prince Arthur, likewise, was a very easy person to be around, when the topic didn't concern a certain Princess.

They were close to the Camelot border now, and Lancelot just hoped they wouldn't come across too many patrols. While they weren't technically doing anything wrong, he dreaded having to explain the presence of a Princess on foreign soil without the knowledge of the King.

Luckily, they didn't have to worry about that. Lancelot didn't know if Merlynn was actively using magic, or if they were just lucky, but they never ran across a patrol, only the occasional traveller, who paid them no mind.

Soon enough, they found themselves outside the walls of Camelot, at the edge of the forest. "Do you remember where to go?" Merlynn asked.

Lancelot had made sure to remove all signs of his allegiance to Galdara the moment they stepped across the border, so all he had to do now was make sure his saddlebags were secure and that the knife he carried in his boot was still there. He felt a little uncomfortable going into an unfamiliar city without any weapons, but it wasn't like it was enemy grounds. "I do, Princess. Through the lower town, over the drawbridge, across the central courtyard and up the steps towards the physician's tower," he rattled off, securing his cloak around his shoulders.

"Right. If he isn't there, he's probably on his rounds and you should wait for him. If anyone questions you, you're new to the city and you're not feeling well, so you need to consult the physician," Merlynn said, and it suddenly dawned on Lancelot that she was nervous. He was touched that she would be so concerned on his behalf.

"I'll be fine, Your Highness," he assured her, boldly resting a hand on her shoulder. She replied with a weak smile, and Lancelot took that to mean that she would be alright. He wasn't concerned for her safety - she could probably take on an entire band of bandits by herself - but he didn't want to worry her. "I'll be back by nightfall," he said. It was a little before noon now and he was confident that he could accomplish his task in no time.

As he set off for the castle, though, he couldn't help but be awed by the magnificent city. The gleaming white stone stood tall and proud, and Lancelot could practically *feel* the magnificent history of the place. He wished he had more time to dawdle, so he could properly look around the city and get a feel for the people who lived there... but he had a mission, and he was not about to let the Princess down.

Unfortunately, he was still distracted by the sights, and ran straight into someone. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry!" he said quickly.

It was a woman - a very pretty woman, actually - and she waved him off. "It's alright, I'm not hurt," she said kindly.

Lancelot was vaguely aware that he should probably say something, but he seemed to lost control of his mouth, and couldn't do anything other than smile awkwardly.

"Are you new here?" the woman asked, probably taking pity on him. Her curly hair had mostly escaped from the tie she'd kept it in, and blew across her face. As she tucked it behind her ear, his attention was drawn to her eyes; they were a lovely, deep brown.

"Sorry, what?" he asked, once he realized that she was expecting an answer.

She just smiled, amused. "I asked if you were new here, you just seem lost, is all."

“Oh, yes, I’m... visiting a friend,” he said quickly. He’d always been bad at lying, and he hoped it wouldn’t show now. “Uhm, he’s the court physician, Gaius.”

“Oh, Gaius's chambers are in the castle, I can show you the way. I was headed there anyway, I’m the Lady Morgana’s maid,” she said. “Oh, Gwen. Is my name, I mean. I’m sorry, I forgot my manners, you must think I’m so rude,” she babbled, turning towards the castle.

It was endearing, and the blush that rose on her cheeks only served to accentuate her beauty. “Not at all. You’re the kindest person I’ve met all day,” he said, falling into step beside her.

Her blush deepened, but she didn’t say anything anymore. “I’m Lancelot, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Lancelot,” she replied. “How do you know Gaius?”

Lancelot flustered. “Uhm... It’s a long story.” It wasn’t technically a lie; it really *was* a long story. “He’s more of an acquaintance than a friend, really.”

The girl, Gwen, nodded, a little confused, perhaps, but too polite to point out the flaws in his story. “Well, his chambers are just up those stairs, you can’t miss it,” she said, pointing to an open door, off the central courtyard. He hadn’t even noticed that they’d passed the castle gates.

“Right. Thank you, I probably would have wandered all over the city if not for you,” he said sincerely. Merlynn was many things, but good at giving directions was not one of them.

“You’re welcome. I’d tell you to come find me if you’re ever lost again, but...” she trailed off, grinning.

Lancelot couldn’t help the answering grin. “You’ll just have to come to my rescue again, then.”

Once again, Gwen blushed, but her grin remained undiminished. “I supposed I’ll have to,” she said. “Have a good day, Lancelot,” she said, turned on her heel, and walked off towards the main part of the castle.

Lancelot stayed where he was for a few more minutes, looking after Gwen. She was... different.

He shook himself, he had a mission to complete, and knowing Merlynn, the Princess would no doubt be worried every minute he was inside the city walls.

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Luckily for him, Gaius had been in his chambers, preparing some odious potion or other for one of his patients. He’d questioned Lancelot for a few minutes before handing over a cloth-wrapped book. Apparently, Merlynn had sent a message ahead, warning the man of his coming.

So now, Lancelot found himself outside the gates again. Before he went looking for Merlynn, though, he cast one more look on the white walls of Camelot. It saddened him that he would

most likely never set foot in the place again, seeing as Merlynn was forbidden from coming here. Unbidden, his thoughts returned to the pretty woman he'd met - Gwen - and he found himself doubly dispirited that he would never see her again.

Lancelot shook his head, pushing the thought to the back of his mind. He was charged with protecting the Princess of Galdara, an honourable task he took up gladly, if only because he thought of the Princess as his friend.

"Lancelot?" Merlynn's voice pulled him from his reverie. He turned and saw her standing a few yards away, holding the horses' reigns. "I got worried," she said sheepishly.

Grinning, the knight walked over. "I think I can handle smuggling out one little book, Merlynn," he teased, pulling the item in question from his satchel.

She snatched it up immediately. She smiled and held the book to her chest, as though she'd missed it terribly. "Thank you, Lancelot, you don't know what this means to me," she said softly.

He couldn't help but compare the Princess to the maid he'd met in the city. Both were beautiful in their own way, but Merlynn had a certain quality to her that both attracted people and kept them at a distance, like she wanted to connect with you but was hiding something. Not to mention that her status and abilities were a little intimidating. Gwen, on the other hand, seemed all warmth and kindness, with inviting eyes that held no secrets. As he realized what he was doing, though, Lancelot blushed. It was a disservice to both women to compare them like this, and he should have better manners than that, even in his own head.

Merlynn looked at him strangely. "Did you meet someone when you were in the city?" she asked, half amused and half suspicious.

Lancelot could feel his blush deepen.

"You did!" Merlynn exclaimed, looking both curious and highly amused now. "What was her name? Perhaps I know her."

Now Lancelot wished that he was a better liar. "It was nothing, milady, hardly a conversation at all."

Merlynn grinned. "I bet she blushed, dashing man like you showing up," she teased, even as she turned away to mount her horse.

Lancelot stored his now-empty satchel in his saddlebags and got onto his horse. But Merlynn didn't direct her horse back towards Galdara, as he'd thought she would, instead, she headed for Camelot's main gates.

"Where are you going?" he asked, confused.

Merlynn sent him a look. "I need one more thing from inside the city, something only I can get," she replied.

"What is it?"

Turning around again, she grinned. “My horse.”

## Chapter End Notes

Bit of a filler chapter, but it needed to happen. Sorry about that!

# A Thundering Waterfall

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **C32: A Thundering Waterfall**

Sneaking into the city was easy. It was starting to get dark, and one more hooded person in the street made little difference, even to the guards. Merlynn still wasn't sure what she was going to do once she actually reached the stables, though. Cian was put up in the royal stables, and only a select few were allowed in there.

Still, she tried to focus on actually getting there first, and what with the number of guards - were there more than usual? - there was a chance she'd be discovered. Technically, she wasn't banished from Camelot, so it's not like she could get in trouble, but if her father heard about this... And besides, she had no desire to come face-to-face with Uther again.

Finally, she reached the back entrance to the stables, the one she'd used to get in all that time ago, when she'd first arrived in Camelot. Just like last time, there were two men guarding the entrance. Merlynn supposed she could just walk up there, show them her royal seal and demand her horse back, but that would surely get back to Uther, and therefore, her father.

What she needed was a distraction. Looking around, she saw a stack of barrels outside a tavern. A drunk was swaying on the doorstep, seemingly not knowing whether he was headed in or out. Perfect. A little nudge from her magic, and the barrels were knocked over, which drew the attention of the owner. An argument started, and the two guards went over to investigate. Not the smartest tactic when you're guarding something, but Merlynn was glad for it now. She snuck inside and quickly located Cian. He immediately started trampling in anticipation, which made her wonder if anyone had given him his daily exercise lately.

"He won't let anyone else come close," a voice said.

Merlynn jumped and turned to the shadows on her left, where she could now see a man sitting. He got up and stepped closer, and Merlynn recognised him as Eames, Camelot's Marshall. "He was trained that way," she replied gingerly. He already knew who she was anyway.

"Good thing, too. Makes him a very difficult horse to steal," Eames said, walking over to the stallion. "He's a beautiful beast. I'm the only one he'd let close enough to give him his exercise and a brushing now and then. We've become quite close friends."

Merlynn grinned, joining the older man and petting her Cian's nose. "You're lucky, he's very picky about his friends."

Eames smiled, and it transformed his normally stern face. "I take it you've come to bring him home?"

“I have. But as you probably know, my departure here was... less than ideal, so I’d rather the King doesn’t find out I was here,” she said, hoping he would understand the hint.

Nodding, Eames walked over to the wall that held the saddles, and picked out Cian’s.  
“Naturally, Princess. I’ll not breathe a word, unless-”

“Unless the King asks, I know. I wouldn’t expect anything less from you, Eames.” She smiled at him as he saddled her horse for her. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Take good care of him now.” He handed her the reins and stepped away.

Not knowing what else to say, Merlyn got on her horse. She shot him one more grateful look before urging Cian onwards, out of the stables. The two guards were still trying to break up the fight, so she rode past them as quickly as she could.

Lancelot was waiting impatiently for her outside the gates. The guards there sent her a curious look, but she didn’t think they recognised her.

“Let’s go,” she said to Lancelot. “We still have a Griffin to stop.”

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It didn’t take long for the first refugees to start arriving in the city. Arthur had prepared all he could, but, frankly, he had no experience with this sort of thing, and he’d found himself needing to ask for advice more often than he liked.

“Sire, there’s no more room here, where should I send the newest arrivals?” a guard asked.

Arthur turned around and faced the man. It was Timothy, the guard who had accompanied him when he’d gone to rescue Merlynn. “Timothy, wasn’t it?” he asked.

The man looked surprised, and Arthur felt a tiny stab of guilt. While he made sure to know as much as he could about his knights, he’d hardly ever bothered to get to know the guards around Camelot. “It is, sire,” Timothy replied.

“Set them up in the council chambers. Take a few servants to prepare the place, and station a guard there. I know the councilmen would lose their heads if any of their scrolls were touched,” he ordered.

Timothy nodded and turned on his heel to fulfil that order. He seemed like a good man, someone who could follow an order, and Arthur made a mental note to ask for him if he needed something.

Looking around the makeshift infirmary, the Prince couldn’t help but feel a little overwhelmed. He’d mostly left Gaius in charge of setting this up, only doing some heavy lifting when necessary. But now, he was a little lost. He didn’t know what to do, as he had no knowledge of medicine and couldn’t help the people around him.

“Sir?” Once again, his attention was drawn by a voice, but this time it was no guard. It was one of the villagers. The boy was about 10 years old and had a bandage around his head.



“Please, sir,” the said. “My mother, I can’t find her.”

Seizing on the opportunity to do something useful - even if it was something any guard could perform - he smiled at the man. “Then I suppose we should look for her, shouldn’t we?” he said kindly. He’d seen Merlynn interact with the children from the lower town in Galdara and tried to channel her as much as he could.

As he took the boy to the various rooms that were being used to house the refugees, his thoughts were drawn to the enigmatic Princess. She would have known far better than he did what needed to happen and where he should send people. He remembered her angry speech when she’d first come to Camelot... two months ago? It couldn’t have been that recent, could it?

She’d ranted at him about treating his people better, and, subconsciously, he’d started to try. Merlynn made him want to be better. When he looked back on how he’d treated Morris back then, he had to fight the urge to wince. Gods, he really had been a spoiled prat, hadn’t he?

“She’s not here, sir,” the boy said, sounding morose.

“Where did you last see her?” Arthur asked, kneeling down to be at eye-level.

The boy bit his lip. “It was in the forest outside the city, sir.”

“Marlan!” Someone shouted. The boy cringed, but duly turned to face the voice. It was a man a little older than Arthur himself, looking mildly irritated. As he approached, Arthur got up, and the man’s gaze finally rested on the Prince, and his face went pale. “Sire!” he exclaimed. Turning back to the boy, he roughly grabbed his arm and pulled him towards himself. Arthur frowned at the aggressive treatment, but held his peace, it wasn’t for him to say anything. “Excuse m’ boy, Yer Highness, ‘e didna mean anyfink by ‘t.”

The man was still holding tightly to the boy’s arm, and the child looked a little frightened, or worried at the least. “No harm done. Is he your son?”

“Yeah, ‘e is,” the man said, letting go of the boy - Marlan’s - wrist and slinging an arm over his shoulders.

Marlan seemed uncomfortable, but didn’t say anything, so Arthur didn’t really know how to respond. But he wanted to help. “Marlan, was it?” The boy nodded. “If you ever need help, don’t hesitate to come find me, or one of my knights, they’ll take you to me.”

Once again, the boy nodded, but the father’s face tightened in anger. “Now, Marlan ‘ere won’ be botherin’ no one, ‘specially no’ the Prince,” he said, digging his hand into the boy’s shoulder. Marlan shook his head in a negative.

There really was nothing else Arthur could do, so he stepped back and let the boy and his father leave. He felt like he’d failed in some way, and he was sure Merlynn would have done something else. *Stop it, not everything Merlynn does is the right thing*, he scolded himself mentally. *Besides, the boy belongs to his father, and just because he looked uncomfortable, doesn’t mean anything untoward is going on*. But it did nothing to make him feel better.

Once again, Arthur was left looking around for something to do, and he hated feeling like this, like he was floundering around uselessly. As he glanced at the people sitting on cots or walking around, he couldn't help but feel out of place. These were his people, yet he knew almost nothing about them. He didn't know how they normally lived, he didn't know their wants and dreams, what bothered them, what they did every day...

*So get to know them*, a voice in his head whispered. It sounded suspiciously like a certain Princess. So much so, in fact, that Arthur shoved the voice to the back of his mind. This was confusing enough without her voice distracting him. And it was *very* distracting.

Not for the first time, he wished she was here, giving him advice, and teasing him and rolling her eyes at him. Gods, they'd only been apart for two days, and he already missed her. It was pathetic really.

Forcibly shoving any thoughts on the foreign Princess from his mind, Arthur returned his attention to the people around him. He wondered what they would do after this was over. He knew from experience that a few people always stayed in the city after a catastrophe like this, but he had no idea what they would do. Would they find jobs? Or return to their villages at a later time? And would the people returning to their homes be able to rebuild? He'd never known his father to send any kind of aid for those matters after disaster struck, but... didn't they have to duty to their people to make sure that everything was alright, and that they had a roof over their heads.

It dawned on Arthur that he really didn't know his people very well; their dreams and hopes, their plans for the future. He was used to leading his knights, and thus knew everything there was to know about them, but *these* people? They were mysteries to him.

A woman holding a sleeping toddler smiled at him, seeming relieved and bowed her head. Arthur nodded back, and made sure that she had water and a blanket.

Perhaps he didn't know them yet, but as he looked around at his people - *his* people - he vowed to change that.

No matter what it took.

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The problem with a locator spell was that without a personal item or piece of the thing or person you were looking for, it wasn't very accurate. And Merlynn wasn't even sure if Griffins *had* personal items, and she hadn't thought to ask the Griffin at the sanctuary.

So, now she knew that the Griffin was somewhere north of the city of Camelot, in the forest, but that was it. She had no approximate location, and no way of tracking the creature.

Unbidden, she wished Arthur was here. He was a superb hunter and the best tracker she'd ever seen, even among the knights in Galdara - men who were used to trekking through inhospitable terrain to look for food and supplies. And he'd probably lecture her on something or other with that smug smirk of his, and she'd say something witty that would leave him either speechless or rolling his eyes at her.

Merlynn smiled at the mental image. It had been two days since she last spoke to Arthur, and she was surprised to find that she *missed* him.

But when she caught Lancelot throwing her a curious glance, she schooled her features. She really shouldn't be thinking of Arthur at a moment like this. No matter how much she wished he were here. Trying to focus on something else, Merlynn recast the spell. "She keeps moving, it's making her hard to pin down," she said, partly to fill the silence.

"Can you not try to find the child, then?" Lancelot suggested.

Abruptly, Merlynn stopped her horse. Cian was so used to her movements, he responded immediately. It was so obvious, Merlynn could hit herself. She'd been so stupid! "Lancelot, you're a genius!" she called, and recast the spell, focussing on the young chick instead of the mother this time. She got a strong signal - possibly because the chick wanted to be found - and turned Cian to the left. "They're not that far!"

She'd barely gotten the words out when she was knocked off her horse, a bandit struggling to pin her down. She heard Lancelot call out her name, but had to focus on holding off the man's knife. Pinned as she was, she had no leverage to push him off, and she couldn't risk using magic and being discovered.

Suddenly, the man stopped struggling, and fell limply forward. Merlynn pushed the man off and looked up at Lancelot concerned face. "My lady, are you alright?" he asked, holding out a hand to help her up.

"A little shaken, but I'm alright." She glanced around. Lancelot had disposed of 3 men by himself. "I see training with Fredrik has been useful," she said, trying to break the tension.

"Why didn't you use your magic?" he asked, and Merlynn looked guiltily at the ground.

"I didn't want them to discover my magic," she replied, walking stiffly over at Cian, who was pawing the ground restlessly.

Lancelot shot her a curious look. "They would have been dead, milady, they wouldn't have told anyone."

Merlynn paused in her petting of Cian's nose. "I... I've never..." she trailed off, unable to voice her thoughts. She'd never taken a life, and to use magic like that... it seemed wrong.

"Well, if it's any consolation, your horse helped," he said, grinning as he gestured to one of the downed men. The bandit in question had a suspiciously hoof-shaped head wound, though it had probably not killed him. Lancelot's blade had taken care of that.

"Do you think this was a coincidence?" Merlynn asked.

"I get the feeling that coincidences don't happen very often around you, Your Highness," he replied dryly as he stepped up to his spooked mount.

"No," Merlynn muttered to herself. "I suppose they don't."

It took them less than twenty minutes to find the bandits holding the baby Griffin. Merlynn and Lancelot were a few yards out, crouching behind some shrubbery, and the Princess was very happy she's chosen to wear breeches.

"These are no ordinary bandits," Merlynn whispered, surveying the 6 men she could see sitting around the campfire. They were more subdued than she'd expect of a band of bandits who had gotten their quarry all the way across almost two countries.

"They seem ordinary enough to me," Lancelot replied grimly.

"That's not what I meant. See that line drawn in the dirt around their camp?" she said, nodding to the edge of their encampment. Lancelot frowned, but nodded. "And there, up in the trees, on the lowest branches, those amulets? They're hexes. I suspect that's why they don't anyone guarding the camp. And possibly why the Griffin hasn't found her baby yet."

The Knight frowned deeper. "I don't understand, how could they get a hold of such enchantments? And how are we to overcome them?" he asked, now studying the gold coin-shaped necklaces hanging on the lowest branches around the camp.

Smirking, Merlynn shifted, getting ready to get up. "You forget, my friend. I'm no mere hedgewizard, and I trained with the druids," she said, pride slipping into her tone. Then she sobered. "I can break the enchantments, but I'll need time. They'll likely come after me, so I'll need you to draw them away until I'm finished."

"Won't they have magic? How would I best fight them?" he asked. He looked a little nervous, and it warmed Merlynn's heart that he'd do this for her, even though he believed they were more powerful than he.

"These men are no magic-users, I'd be able to sense them. And their work with the hexes - while effective - is sloppy, they've obviously been taught how to set it up, but it was rushed, most likely. You'll be alright. Just don't step over the barrier until I say so."

And with that, she stood up, closed her eyes and focussed on the magic inside her. The image it brought forth in her mind's eye was always that of a waterfall. The thundering of the water harmonizing with the sounds of the forest around it. It was an imaginary place that one of the druids had taught her how to utilize when she struggled with the power behind her spells. She imagined filling a bucket, not at the foot of the waterfall, where she'd be dragged down, but further down, where the water was slightly calmer. The magic answered her call readily, and Merlynn opened her eyes, knowing her eyes would be bright gold.

The bandits never really stood a chance.

I felt like this chapter was a little all over the place, but I couldn't figure out what exactly it was that didn't fit, so I just left everything in. I promise the Griffin story arch will be resolved in the next chapter, and we might even get a tiny moment between our favourite couple! (whether that's Arthur and Merlynn or Lancelot and Gwen, I'll leave up to you to decide).

That said, I really want to know what you think! I've been getting a lot of questions about whether or not Olaf and Vivian know about Merlynn's magic, but I can't reveal anything just yet, spoilers and all that ;) But I do promise that I'll get to that soon. If not in the next chapter, then definitely in the one after that.

Review!

# Resolve

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **C33: Resolve**

*Previously:*

The magic answered her call readily, and Merlynn opened her eyes, knowing her eyes would be bright gold.

The bandits never really stood a chance.

Merlynn let her magic flow as she incanted a spell. She wasn't entirely sure as to the proper counter-spell for these hexes, but she'd learned long ago that a barrier was not so different from a lock. In essence, it kept things out, or in, the only difference was that it did so without a physical manifestation. She used an unlocking spell, and poured as much magic in as she dared. Hexes were still magic in and of themselves, while locks were not, and thus needed more magic to break through them. Also, locks were *meant* to be opened, while barriers weren't meant to be lifted.

She was vaguely aware of shouting going on and poured more magic into the spell as she repeated it. One of the amulets burst apart, surprising a nearby bandit. The baby Griffin ruffled its feathers against its bonds, and tried to move away, but one of the men grabbed the ropes and pulled it to the ground. Hearing its pitiful squawk angered Merlynn and unconsciously, she unleashed a flood of magic - as if she'd taken water from the thundering waterfall, instead of the calmer river below it - and shattered the barrier. That done, she turned her magic on the man holding the chick down and flung him into a tree.

She wanted to go to the Griffin, but Lancelot was still fighting off 4 men, while another lay dead at his feet. Another wave of magic sent the 3 he was not currently engaged with back as she drew her dagger. She'd never killed a man, and didn't particularly look forward to it now, but her friend needed her. The choice was easy.

Lancelot stabbed the one he was fighting with and got another one as the bandit was climbing to his feet. One of the men Merlynn had flung backwards seemed unconscious, and the other looked like he wanted to run, but Lancelot got him first.

With only two bandits left - and both unconscious - Merlynn rushed to the baby Griffin's side. It started panicking at her rapid approach, though, so she slowed down, sheathing her dagger to show that she meant no harm.

"Don't worry, little one, we're here to help," she said in what she hoped was a soothing tone. She used a spell to undo the bindings holding it down. Whether it was the display of magic or her soothing tone, the chick calmed down, even edging closer to her.

When Merlynn put her hand gently on its beak, she was surprised to sense another spell on it. The magic shielded it somehow, which was probably why the Griffin's mother hadn't found

it yet - or *him* yet, seeing as the chick was the usual brownish black of the males.

“Are you speaking to it?” Lancelot asked, having finished tying up the two remaining bandits.

Shaking her head, Merlynn kept petting the chick, who cooed softly. “No, he’s too young to speak. I’m undoing the last spell, something that’s kept his mother from finding him.”

Lancelot raised his eyebrows. “Too young? He’s almost as tall as my horse. I thought the one at the sanctuary was just abnormally big.”

“No,” Merlynn replied, smiling. “He was big because he’s old and powerful, but this little one’s mother is probably only a little smaller than him.” Now that the spell was gone, the chick’s mother - Alya was her name, Merlynn remembered - could be here any moment.

The chick was still kneeling on the ground, clearly enjoying being petted, but Lancelot was frowning at something on the ground in front of it. “What is it?” Merlynn asked.

Carefully, Lancelot brushed some feathers away, though luckily the chick didn’t react beyond pushing against Merlynn’s hand to keep rubbing his beak and head. Lancelot pointed to the chick’s leg, which had a gash running down it. It had partially healed, but had obviously not been cared for. “That doesn’t look good,” Lancelot whispered.

Grimacing, Merlynn inspected the wound. “We’ll need to open it up again, wash it out and then wrap it with a poultice... But I have no such supplies with me,” she lamented.

“What would happen if you do nothing?” Lancelot asked, practical as always.

Merlynn shrugged. “I suppose it’s possible the Griffins have some way of healing their own, but if they don’t, there’s a chance that he’ll lose the use of this leg.”

“Then you’ll have to improvise,” Lancelot said resolutely. “Tell me what to do.”

Feeling her friend’s resolve bleeding into herself, Merlynn nodded. “Right, here’s what we’ll need...”

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When reports started coming in that the Griffin had abruptly changed course, Arthur knew something was happening. He almost begged his father to let him take his knights out and hunt it down, but Gaius had put an end to that idea. Apparently, a Griffin’s hide was impenetrable by any mortal weapon. Arthur had grumbled, but since the creature was headed for the more forested areas as opposed to the villages, he didn’t protest too much.

What was currently occupying his attention was organizing the refugees. Most of them were settled in the Great Hall and some of the guest rooms - though the nobles had grumbled about that quite a lot - but there were still a few more that needed rooming. He had no choice but to order his men to construct a temporary camp outside the walls for the refugees.

He was currently on his way there to oversee the progress when something caught his eye. Eames was standing in front of the stables, looking as a stablehand led one of the royal horses into a previously empty stall. Except, that stall had been occupied by one specific horse for the past few months.

“Eames!” Arthur called, deciding a detour would be necessary.

The man turned around and bowed shallowly. “My lord, how may I help you?”

“That’s Cian’s stall, where’s he gone?” Arthur asked, referring to Merlynn’s stallion. She was inordinately fond of the beast, and Arthur knew she’d kill him if something had happened to him.

“Princess Merlynn came to collect him last night, my lord,” Eames replied calmly.

Arthur frowned. “What do you mean? Merlynn’s in Galdara, she couldn’t possibly have come here last night.”

The man was as steady as always as he replied. “She came in here last night, requested the return of her horse, and left a docile mare in its stead. She then asked me not to say anything and left,” Eames explained.

For a moment, Arthur thought about protesting that it was impossible, but then he considered Merlynn’s personality and realized that it was entirely possible that she thought this was somehow *her* responsibility. And then he remembered the Griffin suddenly changing course and cursed, strode past Eames and started saddling his horse. That idiot was going after the Griffin by herself.

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Lancelot had managed to gather the herbs she needed, and Merlynn had created a shield around the baby Griffin and them. Chances were that the chick’s cries would draw his mother here, and then they’d be in trouble.

“Alright. I’m going to magically bind him, and I’ll need you to cut the wound back open. If there’s pus, you’ll need to clean it out with water first, and then apply this paste,” she said, indicating the herbal paste she was making. “After that, it’ll be harder to keep him still, but I’ll do my best. You’ll need to bandage the wound and put this poultice in between the fabric, preferably over the wound.”

Lancelot nodded grimly. They both knew this wouldn’t be easy, and Merlynn was starting to get tired from all the powerful spells she’d been using. She wasn’t used to this kind of intense magic-use. She didn’t tell Lancelot about that, though, knowing he’d be too worried about her.

“I’m ready,” Lancelot said.

Nodding, Merlynn whispered the spell to keep the Griffin from moving too much. It was a kind of spell that needed constant feeding from her magic, and would thus tire her out,



especially if the chick fought against it. She just hoped that because of his youth, he wouldn't be as impervious to magic just yet.

"Now," she said quietly, and Lancelot quickly opened up the wound again. The chick screamed, an ear-splitting sound that must have carried all the way to Camelot. It started to struggled, and Merlynn had to focus on keeping her binding spell on him intact.

Just as Lancelot was finishing putting the paste in the wound, there was a heavy thud and a screech as Alya, the chick's mother, landed. She looked enraged as the chick kept keening pitifully. The pain must have worn off at that point, due to the paste, but the shock was probably still an issue.

Merlynn stood up, swaying only a tiny bit, as she divided her concentration between the binding spell and the Griffin that was currently inspecting the shield for flaws. Alya reared and slashed her claws at the barrier, making it shake and flicker, before growing strong again. Merlynn felt the magic drain from her, and knew that she couldn't keep this up for long. "Lancelot?" she called, hoping the knight would be done soon.

"Almost!"

Alya slashed the shield again, and this time, the barrier shattered and faded, leaving nothing between Merlynn and a very angry mother Griffin.

"Alya, calm down, we're only healing his leg," Merlynn said cautiously, still keeping a tight hold of the binding spell.

Rearing again, Alya prepared to attack Merlynn, who braced herself and prepared for another drain on her magic.

"Done!" Lancelot shouted, and Merlynn immediately released the magic, letting the chick move again. Alya hesitated, perhaps sensing the magic dissipating.

Daring to glance behind her, Merlynn saw the chick hesitantly getting to his feet, testing his injured leg. Suddenly it started dancing around, obviously happy and surprised that he could use it again without pain.

Alya lowered herself again, watching her child, who was now dashing for her and hiding beneath her legs.

"We freed him from his captors," Merlynn said, gesturing to the dead and unconscious bandits. "Someone was hiding him with magic, do you know who?" she asked.

Alya finally looked at her, and there was sanity in her eyes again. *"I do not know her name, but she is one like you,"* Alya said. Her mental voice was soft, almost whispery and very feminine.

Merlynn nodded, not really having expected an answer. "I can't just let you go, you know that. You've killed dozens of people."

Alya inclined her head and looked at her chick, who was happily snuggling up to her leg. *"I was blinded by rage. But it did give me my child back, so I cannot bring myself to regret it."*

Feeling anger bubble to the surface, Merlynn clenched her hands. "Those were innocent people. And killing them gained you nothing, my friend and I were the ones you retrieved your child. Had you come to my family, as the treaty dictated, we would have helped you!"

Alya cocked her head. *"And what assurances had I that you would have honoured the treaty? You humans live such short lives there is no one left who remembers the treaty. How could I have known that you hadn't attributed it to myth and folklore and tried to exterminate us as you tried before?"* Her tone wasn't accusatory, but inquisitive, which was the only thing that kept Merlynn's temper in check.

"You should still have tried. As evidenced, whatever Galdara's first rulers used to defeat you, we've forgotten what it was, no one wrote it down..." When Alya didn't answer, Merlynn sighed in frustration. "Just remember that without me, your child would still be in the clutches of these men."

To her surprise, Alya bowed then, her head close to the ground. *"You are right, Emryss. It was known to my people that you resided in Galdara, I should have come to you. My people will punish me in accordance with our laws, but I do feel a debt towards you. What is it you require?"*

Taken aback, Merlynn hesitated. What could she possibly ask of a Griffin? She had no idea. "What do you offer?"

*"I can only offer my services, whenever you need them, and the feathers from my body, which are impenetrable, and may protect you from harm."*

Merlynn nodded. "Then I will accept it, though I'm unsure how your services may be useful to me."

*"I am faster than those feeble equestrians you humans ride, and I fly faster than anything save a dragon. My claws and beak are also at your disposal."* Alya lifted up her head again, looking regal and solemn, and Merlynn realised that the Griffin had made a magical oath. She vaguely wondered if the Griffin's language was being translated in her mind, and if the original wording was more official.

Magic hung in the air, and Alya looked at her expectantly. Merlynn hesitated for a moment, before raising her hand and wreathing it in magic as well. "I accept your offer, and will hold you to your word," she said, and felt the magic leave her and mingle with the tension already in the air. For a moment, the magic remained in the air, and Merlynn felt like she couldn't breathe. Then, suddenly, it was gone, but she could feel its residue inside of her.

*"The bond you feel will allow you to call me. I will not be able to resist your call,"* Alya said, and then reached down and plucked feathers from her wings, chest and back. It wasn't enough to leave her with unprotected skin, but it did weaken her. Merlynn recognised it as a sacrifice and bowed respectfully before picking up the feathers. She wasn't sure what she could do with this, but she appreciated the gift nonetheless.

Just as she was about to say her goodbyes, she could hear hoof beats. Someone from Camelot must have seen the Griffin! “Quickly, go!” she shouted. Alya didn’t hesitate and urged her chick to fly. He was a little uncoordinated and needed a push from his mother, but eventually, he made it into the air just as the horseman burst into the clearing.

Whipping around, Merlynn was surprised to know the identity of the knight.

“Arthur?” she said incredulously.

## Chapter End Notes

So, I hope that was enough Badass Merlynn. I wanted to put in more, but the bandits hardly warranted it, and the Griffin didn't attack that long, and Merlynn didn't know how to injure it anyway.

So, next chapter will be the last one in this arc, and will wrap it up nicely. I'm thinking of actually rounding off the story there, since I'm already at chapter 33 and I've only done 5 episodes... What do you guys think? Round it off now or do one or two more episodes before going on to the sequel?

# Set me Free

## Chapter Notes

There, now that didn't take that long, did it? And the Lancelot story arc is finally over! Next up is going to be my version of The Moment of Truth, so I'm messing with the timeline just a bit.  
Enjoy the chapter and let me know what you think!

### **C34: Set me Free**

*Previously:*

*Just as she was about to say her goodbyes, she could hear hoofbeats. Someone from Camelot must have seen the Griffin! “Quickly, go!” she shouted. Alya didn’t hesitate and urged her chick to fly. He was a little uncoordinated and needed a push from his mother, but eventually, he made it into the air just as the horseman burst into the clearing.*

*Whipping around, Merlynn was surprised to know the identity of the knight.*

*“Arthur?” she said incredulously.*

*/\*/*

“Merlynn, what the hell are doing here?” Arthur asked angrily as he slid off his horse and drew his sword, all the while scanning their surroundings. “Don’t you know there’s a Griffin around here?”

Merlynn blinked, her mind racing for an excuse. “Lancelot killed it,” she blurted out.

Both knights froze, Lancelot looking as incredulous as Arthur. “He did?” Arthur asked, sounding surprised, but not overly suspicious – thankfully.

“Exactly,” the raven-haired Princess replied, feeling more confident in her lie now. It was a good alternative, after all.

Halfway turning to the other knight, Arthur looked around speculatively. “He killed it? When no one else could even pierce its hide? And where’s the body?”

For a moment, Merlynn panicked again, before a thought popped into her head. “Griffins are magic. Only magic can kill it,” she said, and Lancelot started looking a little panicky himself, shooting her a questioning look behind Arthur’s back. “But Galdara’s had a very long history with Griffins.” All true, so far. “So we found an old artefact that could kill it, a lance, which Lancelot used to strike a killing blow,” she said, feeling a little proud of her story.

Arthur looked thoughtful. "And the body?"

"It flew off, but it was definitely mortally wounded. If the creatures of the forest don't eat it, I imagine you'll find the carcass at some point," Lancelot said quickly. Merlynn shot him a grateful look. "The lance, too," she added. At Arthur's dry look, she backed up. "Well, obviously it didn't fly off, lances can't generally do that, but it disappeared. Served its purpose, as it were," she explained quickly.

"Then it seems that we owe you a debt of gratitude," Arthur said, smiling at the other knight. "You've saved many lives, Lancelot."

The Galdaran knight smiled, a tad awkwardly, but didn't offer a reply. Cian chose that moment to walk up - having somehow gotten loose - and nuzzled Merlynn's arm. "What are you doing here anyway, Merlynn? I know you're a great archer, but you could've gotten killed."

The Princess grinned. "Is that concern I hear?" she teased, a little flattered that he'd worried about her.

"Caution," he corrected. "I'm fairly sure your father wouldn't hesitate to go to war, regardless of a Griffin attack."

"Caution sprinkled with concern," she shot back, grinning in earnest now.

Arthur rolled his eyes and mounted his horse. "Come on, I need to report to my father, explain why your horse vanished from the stables and why the Princess of Galdara is in Camelot without having announced herself in court."

"Arthur, you know full well that I can't be seen here in Camelot, my father would kill me! Not to mention sack Lancelot for taking me into danger." Alright, so that was a gross exaggeration, since her father had all but given her permission to hunt down the Griffin before Arthur'd left.

"Well then what do you suppose we do? I have to tell father that the Griffin is dead, or he'll be forced to keep the refugees in the castle."

"Sire, if I may?" Lancelot interrupted, leading his horse back into the clearing. Merlynn hadn't even noticed that the other man had left. "Perhaps you can tell your father that you slayed the beast. Merlynn and I can slip quietly back to Galdara with none the wiser," he suggested.

Grimacing, Arthur shook his head. "I can't take the credit, Lancelot, it's not in my nature."

"Nor is it in mine," Lancelot muttered.

Unfortunately, Arthur had heard. "What does that mean?"

"Just that I could never have found the beast, let alone slayed it without Merlynn, sire, she deserves the credit."

“But that brings us back to the fact that I can’t be seen in Camelot,” Merlynn interjected. “Lancelot, you should go back with Arthur, I’ll stay in the lower town with my friend Gwen and won’t let anyone see me.”

Lancelot stiffened a little when she mentioned the name, but Merlynn didn’t want to ask in front of Arthur, so she just filed it away to talk about later.

Since they’d all mounted their horses, they started for Camelot. “And how will you make sure no one sees you?” Arthur asked.

She shot him a dry look. “I managed to sneak out of the city with a horse that belongs to a foreign princess. Do you honestly think I wouldn’t be able to sneak into the lower town until Lancelot’s done getting showered in praises?”

Arthur didn’t have an answer for that.

/\*/

As she’d predicted, sneaking into the lower town wasn’t too difficult, though Cian did object to being left outside the castle gates. Luckily, he was easily swayed by an apple or two. Gwen, though surprised, had no problem hiding Merlynn, and was even glad to see her friend again. She’d also promise to tell Morgana that Merlynn had visited, despite the latter’s protests.

It didn’t take long for Arthur and Lancelot to report to Uther, though Merlynn wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, only that Lancelot looked very uncomfortable when he returned to collect her. Although that might have been because of Gwen.

As soon as the knight and the maid laid eyes on each other, Merlynn was sure that Gwen was the girl Lancelot had met when he’d snuck into Camelot earlier. They were all awkward adorableness, and Merlynn hated that they had to leave so soon. Watching the two of them flounder around one another might just be her new favourite pastime.

But unfortunately, they had to hurry home. Despite her father’s pseudo-permission, she doubted he’d like her being away from home for more than 4 days. But they made good time, and didn’t encounter any more bandits, so on the fourth day since she’d left to find the Griffin, Merlynn and Lancelot rode back into the Galdaran capitol. All signs of the refugees and misery that had permeated the city when they’d left had been cleaned up and taken care of, and the streets once more looked as if nothing had happened. Peace had come back to the Kingdom.

Lancelot and Merlynn handed their horses to the stablehands, and made their way to the council chambers, where they’d been told the King awaited them.

As the guards opened the doors, Merlynn felt dread. How would her father react? Would he ask how they’d gotten rid of the Griffin? Would she have to lie?

But as soon as the King’s eyes landed on her, she knew she had nothing to worry about. He put away the papers he’d been looking through and rushed towards her, sweeping her up into

a bone-crushing hug. “I’m so glad you’re alright,” he whispered into her hair.

“I’m fine, papa,” she whispered back.

When he pulled back, he stepped towards Lancelot and clasped the knight’s forearm. “You protected my daughter admirably, Lancelot, and I am forever grateful. Go rest now, I need to speak to the Princess alone.”

Lancelot glanced at her, unsure, but she nodded. He deferred to her judgement, bowed to the King, and left the room.

The King returned to his seat at the head of the table, and resumed perusing the parchment there.

“Father?” Merlynn said after a moment.

He looked up, affection clear in his eyes. “Yes, my little bird?”

She smiled at the old moniker. “Why did you let me go?” she asked, growing serious. It had bothered her ever since she’d left Galdara and the elation at his permission had faded. She couldn’t think of any reason he had for letting go of his more protective nature.

Her father sighed. “I’ve always known you were meant for greatness, Merlynn. Ever since you were just a babe lying in a crib that had inexplicably been moved to my chambers. Your mother’s always been protective of you, and of her own past, but I’ve always loved you both, regardless of any of that. *Nothing* could ever make me love you less,” he said emphatically, rising up and gently grabbing her chin to make her look him in the eye.

Merlynn was confused, and didn’t know where her father was going with this, but held her peace. Asking questions would not force him to make his point any sooner.

“But when I saw your toys float above your crib, I was shaken.” Merlynn froze, her heart beating in her chest. He’d known? All this time, he’d known about her? Olaf continued as if he couldn’t see the stark fear in her eyes. “Everything Uther had ever said about magic went through my head, and I felt my heart break, knowing that I would have to turn you over to him or kill you myself.” Merlynn was shaking now, and her eyes filled with tears. She’d never been so scared in her life. “But then you looked at me with your molten gold eyes, held out your arms and said ‘dada’. It was your first word, and you looked so trusting, so loving, even for a babe. Which is what you were, so how could you be evil?”

Merlynn’s breaths came in gasps now, and she was vaguely aware of the tears running down her cheeks. But she couldn’t move, couldn’t say a word, couldn’t even comprehend what her father was saying.

“It kills me to see you so afraid. My fearless daughter, frozen in front of me... I need you to hear me, Merlynn: *nothing could make me love you less.*”

And with those words, Merlynn squeezed her eyes shut and fell forwards into her father’s arms. He held her, arms enveloping her, protecting her as they had always done. And for a

while, they stood there like that, father and daughter, holding on to each other like the other was the only thing keeping them afloat.

After a few minutes, Merlynn managed to slow the flood of tears that had overtaken her, and calmed her breathing. “Why? Why didn’t you...?” she managed to say.

“Why didn’t I tell you?” he asked. At her nod, he sighed, gesturing for her to sit in one of the chairs while he reclaimed his own. “Your mother was so worried, and... I know she didn’t love me when we first got married. You weren’t even a year old, I was afraid...” he trailed off, seeming embarrassed. “I was afraid she would leave, that she’d take you and run. I couldn’t bear the thought. And after that, I thought she’d be angry with me for lying to her for so long.”

Merlynn realized that she was a little miffed that her father had made her hide who she was for so long, but it was washed away in comparison to the flood of relief that she felt. “She won’t hate you,” she whispered. “Mother loves you. I’m sure she’ll just be as relieved as I am.”

Olaf shot her a grateful smile. “I’m sorry I made you hide for so long, my little bird. I caged you,” he said, guilt and grief shining clearly in his eyes.

Swallowing the tears that threatened to fall again, Merlynn managed a watery smile. “It’s alright, papa, you’ve set me free now.”

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In a hall, a long distance from the loving father and daughter, a sorceress sat staring into a bowl of clear water. The scene inside the scrying bowl showed the two Galdaran royals, and though the sight would warm any other’s heart, the sorceress only felt anger.

Her hands clenching around the stone bowl, she glared into the water. “You may have passed this test, *little bird*,” she sneered. “But I promise you, you won’t survive my next one.”



# Asking for help

## Chapter Notes

My God this chapter was hard! For some reason, that whole Arthur POV bit just did NOT want to work with me. Luckily, I sat down and made myself write today, because I wrote everything from his POV on today. But at least I managed it!

That said, HAPPY EASTER! I hope all of you who celebrate the holiday got lots of chocolate (I know I did! Although it will probably all be gone way too soon :p )

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

### C35: Asking for Help

*Dear Arthur*

Pausing in her letter, Merlynn bit her lips. She'd already written a letter to Morgana, which lay next to her, ready to be handed over to a messenger, but her letter to Arthur was simply not coming along. The last time she'd seen him they'd exchanged awkward goodbyes and promises to keep each other apprised. She simply didn't know what to write.

*Dear Arthur*

*It's been an uneventful week here in Galdara. My father-*

She groaned. She might as well have started talking about the weather. Resting her head on the table, she went over the past week in her head.

After her father had told her that he knew about her magic, he'd asked a lot of questions, and Merlynn had even performed a few tricks for him. He didn't know about the true extent of her powers, and she didn't want to tell him. He'd been shocked enough when she'd created a magical light show, and she didn't want to scare him.

Since then, she'd spent more time with him, not only talking about magic, but also sitting in on meetings, and even coming with him when he inspected the guard. And whenever she wasn't with him, she was usually out in the woods. Before now, her father had rarely permitted her to travel outside the city walls without a retinue of guards, but now he let her roam as she pleased. Provided her trusted shadow, Lancelot, was there, of course.

Vivian had been puzzled, but hadn't said anything. There was a strange new distance between the sisters, now, too. Though Merlynn didn't know how to fix it. Knowing that her father knew made it so much harder to keep lying to Vivian, and the latter's questions about where

Merlynn had gone after the Griffin had attacked made it all the more difficult. She knew her sister was frustrated with her, but there was nothing Merlynn could do to remedy that. So she avoided the problem altogether. But even her father was starting to notice.

"You should tell her," he'd advised a few days after she'd come back from Camelot.

"I can't," she'd replied. "I've been lying to her our whole lives, she'll hate me if I tell her."

"And what do you think will happen when she finds out on her own?" her father asked.

Merlynn had no answer to that. And so life went on.

The younger Princess found herself missing life in Camelot; breakfast with Morgana, bonding with Gwen, her uncle's constant attempts to teach her something of the art of healing. Even the banter with Arthur... especially the banter with Arthur, was something she missed.

Looking back down at the letter, Merlynn pictured the blond Prince as she'd seen him when he looked at his people, or when he trained with his knights. Before she knew it, her quill was tracing lines over the parchment. She was sketching two knights fighting on a field. One with a dragon sigil, the other an unidentified man with a lion on his shield. The knight with the dragon sigil had the upper hand, swinging his sword down towards the kneeling lion-knight, even as the latter raised his blade to counter.

Looking over her drawing, Merlynn smiled and wrote a few lines of text above the drawing. It seemed her letter would take on a more unusual form.

Just as she was signing it, a knock came to the door. She called for them to enter and nodded at the guard who opened the door.

"Milady, your presence is requested in the throne room," the man said.

"I'll be there shortly."

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Most of the refugees had left Camelot the moment Arthur had announced that the Griffin was dead and it was safe to return. But there were a few who had lost their homes or loved ones and couldn't or wouldn't go back. Almost all of the latter had found places around the lower town to settle in, and it looked like they were staying. Since quite a few people had left Camelot when the magical plague had run its course, it was nice to see the empty buildings filling up again. It was market day, and a lot of the new residents were perusing the wares, so the town square was fuller than usual.

Arthur was surveying it all from atop his horse. He'd just come back from a ride to clear his head, and found the unusual amount of people partially blocking his way. He could get the guard to clear a path, but he had nothing pressing to attend to, and was comfortable making his way slowly towards the castle.

A mother was scolding a pair of arguing little girls, two men were talking in animated tones, a group of boys were playing knight... it was the kind of scene he didn't usually get to observe. As he looked over the crowd, a familiar mop of brown curls caught his eye. It was Marlan, the little boy he'd come across inside the castle a week ago. He hadn't known that his family were among the ones who had stayed. Still feeling bad about not helping the boy earlier, Arthur dismounted, handing the reins of his horse to a nearby guard and made his way over.

Marlan hadn't noticed him coming his way. The boy was standing in the shade of one of the stalls, eying the goods, but keeping his hands resolutely behind his back.

"Marlan," Arthur greeted when he came to a stop in front of the boy. The curly-haired child started, half-raising one of his arms to protect his face, as if he expected to be struck. Arthur frowned.

"Sire," the boy breathed, hastily executing a clumsy bow.

The boy stuck to the shadows, however, and that struck Arthur as strange. "Why don't you come out into the light?" he suggested, careful to keep his tone light and kind.

Marlan hesitated, but gingerly shuffled forward. He kept looking down, angling his head so that Arthur could only see the right side. Gently, Arthur reached out and grasped the boy's chin. Marlan resisted for a moment, but then relented.

The moment Arthur saw the bruise, he had to hold back a scowl for fear of scaring the boy. He remembered all too well how the boy's father had acted when he'd last seen them; it was clear who the culprit was.

After a few seconds, Marlan pulled back. "I have to go, my..." he trailed off, his eyes darting across the market. "Marlan," Arthur said softly. "If there's ever anything you need, if you ever feel threatened or need help... you can come find me. Or, failing that, find a guard and tell them..." he trailed off, trying to find a codeword that wouldn't raise any alarm, but wouldn't be said too often by others. His thoughts turned - as they so often did - to Merlynn. Or, more specifically, to the crest of her family. "Tell them 'Griffin', and they'll help you, no questions asked," he told the boy.

Marlan looked at him skeptically, but nodded. Then, he turned and ran off.

Arthur just hoped that this wasn't the last he saw of the boy.

Sighing, he made his way back to his horse and slowly trudged through the crowds. After informing Leon of his newly made promise, and spreading the word among the guards, he set off to the royal's wing. Thinking of Merlynn made him realize one thing; he had to convince his father to reopen communications with Galdara. Besides losing a valuable ally, he had also lost a friend, but he wasn't going to give up on her so easily.

Now he just needed to convince his father.

"We are but simple druids, my lord, nomads. But it seems wherever we go, these men find us."

"How many have you lost?" King Olaf asked.

The woman who had come to seek an audience lowered her gaze to the ground, her whole being radiated sadness. "Seven, my lord, among whom two children," she replied softly.

Olaf leaned back in his throne, rubbing his chin in thought. "This is a difficult matter you've brought before me. Your people roam my kingdom freely, but it is my understanding that you cross borders indiscriminately. Have any of these attacks happened on foreign soil?"

Looking up once more, the woman righted her shoulders. "Quite a few have happened in Uther Pendragon's kingdom, but we could hardly go to him for help." She paused for a moment, before glancing at Merlynn. "We believe in a single, united country, my lord, and many of our people believe that the time for such a union is coming closer. As such, does it matter where we seek help? It should only matter that we need it."

Merlynn bit her lip, but didn't interrupt. The woman was talking about the legend of the Once and Future King. And clearly, she believed that Merlynn had something to do with it.

"Regardless of your beliefs, you must know that druids encampments are only allowed so long as no trace of magic is found. Any soldiers I would send would be obligated to report any instances of magic used."

"There are no magic users among us, your majesty," the woman said. A blatant lie, Merlynn knew. She hadn't recognised the woman, but she knew the druidic tattoo that adorned the woman's forearm. Some of the members of that tribe had trained her how to use her magic.

"Even so, you say a number of these attacks took place in other kingdoms. If the perpetrators cross the border there is nothing I can do. You may not be aware, but there is no longer an alliance between Camelot and Galdara."

A flicker of surprise. "I did not know that, my lord."

Olaf sighed and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "I will need to confer with my council on this matter," he said. "You may wait outside."

The woman - along with everyone not in the royal council - filed out the doors. Merlynn stayed as well.

"Any comments?" her father asked. Vivian and Hunith paused as they headed outside, both throwing Merlynn questioning glances.

"I'll be there shortly," she assured them, before turning to her father.

"I don't think sending soldiers is the right response," she said.

Olaf frowned. "And here I thought you'd be advocating on the druids' behalf."

"I am, I just think a more... diplomatic solution can be found. As you said, the moment the soldiers get close to the border, they'd have to retreat, and amassing any kind of force, however small, near the border might be seen as a hostile act by Uther or our other neighbours," she said.

"Then what do you suggest?"

Merlynn glanced up. The council members were keeping their distance, letting their King and Princess have their privacy, but they *were* looking somewhat impatient. "Let me go. I can take a handful of men, if necessary, and defend the druids. If we wander across the border, I can always say that they're my escort. Uther can't possibly see a group of 5 men as an invasion force. And if not, I can defend myself."

Olaf frowned disapprovingly. "Perhaps, but if Uther or any of his men see your... particular gifts, he won't care that you're a princess. He will hunt you down and kill you, wherever you go."

Frustration bubbled up inside her. "Then let him come! I'm tired of hiding. You have the power to change the law, to make magic legal again. I wouldn't have to hide. Camelot may be powerful, but it is not more so than Galdara, certainly not with magic on our side."

The look her father threw her made her feel like a naughty toddler again. "It is not so simple and you know that."

Merlynn clenched her teeth and looked away.

Sighing, Olaf stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. "So much fire in you. Be careful with those flames, my little bird, others might get burned." His hands sunk down her arms to hold her hands. "But as for your proposal for this particular situation, I believe you might have a point. I'll discuss it with my advisors, but I intend to send you, Lancelot and four more men to help those people."

Merlynn's head shot up, shock evident on her face. "Really?"

Her father grinned. "Go pick your men wisely, my daughter, it seems you're off to defend the innocent."

## Chapter End Notes

So, what did you think? Marlan's story will be stretched out between bits and pieces of this episode (which is a version of The Moment of Truth, by the way), but he'll definitely be back. Not sure if he'll be a permanent addition yet, but we'll see.

Anyway, most of this episode will be focussed on Merlynn, no matter how much I miss writing Arthur. After this arch, we might start to see if Arthur's powers of persuasion worked on his father.

# The Camp and the boy

## Chapter Notes

So, it's been a month and a half since I updated... I am so sorry, you guys! And I can't even blame RL for making you wait so long! (Well, I can, a little, because I did have exams, but still). I've been trying to work on all my active fics (there are... 4? No 5, not to mention all my unpublished stuff...), and it's been crazy. I never know what to write first!

Anyway, thank you so much for all your patience and your lovely reviews, they keep me going!

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

### **C36: The Camp and the boy**

It took a full day's ride to reach the druid encampment. Lancelot stuck by Merlynn's side at all times, while the other 4 knights - each one an accomplished swordsman and admired warrior - surrounded them. While Merlynn thought it was a little too much, her father had insisted on the extra protection.

Still, she was happy when she saw the telltale charms hanging from the trees; spells to keep unwanted visitors out. Merlynn felt the tingle of their magic wash over her as they passed the invisible barrier. For most normal people, it would probably make them forget why they were there, or make them remember something important they had to go and do. It wouldn't have any effect on most magic users, and, of course, their own group had been invited.

While a lot of people peeked out of their tents to catch a glance of them, there were only 3 people waiting for them. And older woman in the middle, a young man to her right and an older man to her left.

Merlynn gave a sign to her guard to stop and dismount. She was about to step forward to speak to the tribe's elders when hoofbeats sounded behind them. Quickly, she turned on her heel, her hand on her bow.

But it was Vivian who stopped just outside the protective circle. The other princess twitched a little as the spell tried to get her to leave, but she was stubborn as a mule, that one.

"Vivian?" Merlynn said, stepping up to the barrier. "What are you doing here?" she demanded. The barrier, having lost its power because Merlynn acknowledged Vivian, shimmered for a moment, allowing the blonde princess to go through.

"This is diplomatic mission, you're not actually authorized to make any kind of agreement or treaty should the need arise," Vivian said, but there was a slight nervous edge to the way she held herself. The fact that she still hadn't dismounted said a lot, too.

Merlynn narrowed her eyes. "You're lying. Father gave me this assignment, he wouldn't send us both. And you're unaccompanied by your guards." Then, Merlynn realized what was going on. "You snuck out!" she hissed, careful to keep her tone low enough that no one else could hear her.

"Well, it seemed the only way to find out what you and papa are up to, since neither of you seem to be speaking to me anymore," Vivian hissed back, losing her composure for the first time.

Shoving the stab of guilt she felt aside, Merlynn glared. "It's too dangerous for both of us to be out here. Two heirs to the throne out in the forest with only a small contingent of guards? If anyone finds out-

Vivian waved a hand impatiently and finally dismounted. "They won't find out, I only shed my cloak a few minutes ago, no one saw me leave, and I encountered no one else. And besides, I'm more competent than any soldier father could have sent with me, save perhaps Sir Fredrik."

"That's beside the point!" Merlynn snapped. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Seeing them interacting right now, one would think that Merlynn was the elder sibling. "And of course I can hardly send you back now. Alright, you can assist me in these negotiations, but when the fighting breaks out, I'm putting two guards on you, and you had better stay out of the fighting. If the odds are against us, I want you to ride home and fetch reinforcements."

Vivian looked like she was about to argue, but Merlynn fixed a withering glare on her. "Don't you dare argue. You're the future Queen of Galdara, you *have* to stay safe, or our father won't have an heir to pass the throne to." At Vivian's petulant look, Merlynn softened, remembering how responsible Vivian usually was. "Much as it pains me to say it, your life is more important than any other, because without you, our country would fall to chaos, and our people would be lost without a leader. I understand your frustrations, Viv, but you *must* think of yourself first."

"Very well," Vivian agreed, looking once more regal and elegant, like the future Queen she was. Merlynn knew Viv only showed her more insecure and child-like side to her and their parents. She'd never show such weakness to anyone else.

The three elders were still waiting patiently, seemingly unbothered by the drama that was unfolding. Lancelot and the other knights tactfully ignored the sudden arrival of their Crown Princess. Turning to the elders, Merlynn bowed respectfully. "My father, the King has decreed that my sister, Crown Princess Vivian will be leading these negotiations." She stepped aside, and Vivian took the lead.

Merlynn tuned her sister out. At this point, it would just be diplomatic nonsense, despite the druids being a rather informal lot. Movement caught her eye behind one of the tents, and she thought for a moment that she recognised someone, but then Vivian's voice broke through her reverie, and her attention was diverted again.

"... and my dear sister Princess Merlynn will oversee the preparations to stop these bandits," Vivian said.



Merlynn looked up, slightly startled, but managed to hold on to her composure. Vivian was looking at her a tad contritely, and Merlynn appreciated her sister's willingness to share the burden with her. "Is there anyone who can describe the situation to me? And someone who knows the surrounding area?" she asked.

The head elder - or so Merlynn assumed - gestured to the younger man to her right. Merlynn smiled and followed him into a tent. This was going to be interesting.

/\*/

Arthur was bored.

He'd sat in on one of his father's council meetings, wrote reports, trained with his knights, and now he was bored. He would wish for something interesting to happen, but if there was one thing he'd learned from Merlynn, it was that interesting usually meant disastrous, so he refrained from it.

But perhaps he could go out on patrol, or maybe even a hunt?

A knock interrupted his train of thought. "Come in," he called from where he stood by the window.

"Sire," a guard greeted. "There's a boy in the central courtyard who said to tell you Griffin. You left instructions that it shouldn't be ignored..." the man trailed off.

It took Arthur a moment to realise what the man was talking about, but then he remembered young Marlan and immediately strode over. "Show me to him," he ordered, and followed the soldier out to the central courtyard.

Much to his surprise, Morgana was already kneeling beside the boy, looking concerned.

"He won't speak to me," she said as Arthur approached.

"That's probably why he was looking for me," he replied, kneeling beside her and looking at Marlan. "This is Morgana, she's like a sister to me, you can trust her," he said gently.

Marlan looked at the Lady with suspicion in his eyes, but he didn't make a move to run.

Though she looked surprised at the title of 'sister', Morgana just smiled. "If you need anything, we will help you," she said.

For a moment, Arthur wondered why she cared, but then his eye caught the fresh bruise on the boy's face. Morgana would always stand up for those who couldn't do so for themselves. "You came here for a reason, Marlan, what was it?" he asked. He suspected, of course, but without the boy's express statement, there was little he could do.

"It's my little sister," he mumbled, his shoulders hunched and face turned towards the ground. He looked ready to curl up into a ball. It broke Arthur's heart.

"What about your sister, is she in danger?" he asked gently.

For a moment, Marlan still resisted. Then, Morgana slowly got up and moved away. The boy relaxed minutely. "It's... he usually only hurts me," he said softly. "I can handle it!" he insisted, a little louder, when he saw the hardness on Arthur's face. "But my sister is only 3 summers, she... she cries too much, he doesn't like it. He's only does that when he's gone to the tavern."

It took all Arthur's self-control not to march to Marlan's house and beat his father to death. "And your mother?" he asked instead.

"She tries to help. But he just hits her and me more if she intervenes," he whispered. There were tears in Marlan's eyes now, anger and shame warring within the little boy.

Arthur sighed. "Would you be willing to keep my sister company? I promise I'll get your mother and sister back here safely. He won't hurt you anymore." He tried to pour as much sincerity into his voice. Judging by Marlan's cautiously hopeful look, he suspected the boy believed him. Standing up, Arthur gestured to Morgana, who was still waiting anxiously nearby. She'd watch over him while he dealt with the heart of the problem.

He took only two men with him. By tonight, Marlan would be safe, and wouldn't have to worry about his father ever again.

/\*/

They had been at the druid camp for half a day. She and Lancelot had spoken at length with Kay - the young man who had stood at the head elder's right during their first meeting - and had started preparations to defend the camp when the time came.

But even with all that to distract her, Merlynn couldn't help but think about Vivian. She just couldn't believe how irresponsible her sister was being. So as soon as Kay decided there was nothing more he could tell them, Merlynn made her way over to what was essentially the village square. "Vivian, I need to speak with you," she said once she'd located her sister.

The blonde schooled her features into the mildly amused smirk she usually wore when she didn't want others to know what she was thinking. It was a mask that had stopped working on Merlynn since she was 8 years old. "What do you want to say, little sister?" she asked innocently.

"Alone," Merlynn said, before turning on her heel and stalking off to the side of the camp. Lancelot stood nearby, but out of earshot. Well, mostly out of earshot. If she started shouting he'd definitely be able to hear. Merlynn sighed. She really didn't want to fight with her sister, but Vivian was leaving her no choice.

The older Princess finally joined her, then, still wearing the mask that hid her anxiousness and worry. "What did you want to talk about?" she asked.

"You shouldn't have come here, Vivian. You'll be Queen soon, you can't just abandon your duties like that.

Vivian rolled her eyes. "You did! You're here, same as me."

“I have father’s permission, and a clear objective. All I can see you doing is spiting papa, you’re acting like a child!” Merlynn hissed, keeping her volume low.

“*I’m* acting like a child? What about you and father? Sending each other looks and whispering together... As if I don’t know there’s something the two of you aren’t telling me. If I’m acting like a child it’s only because neither of you will tell me anything!”

“Vivian-” Merlynn started, but Vivian swiftly interrupted her.

“I am, as you so eloquently said, to be Queen one day, and I’ve been going to father’s council meetings for years, he consults me on decisions to be made in the Kingdom, but for some reason, this is a secret only the two of you share.”

“If father and I aren’t telling you something, it’s because it has no bearing on your life!” Merlynn protested, her anger surging to the surface. “Contrary to what you may think, not everything is about you!”

“Well contrary to what you seem to think, I’m not that vain!”

Merlynn scoffed. “Says the girl who has spent more time looking at gowns in the last month than she has on political alliances!”

Lancelot glanced over, looking a little distressed, so Merlynn closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I didn’t mean that, I’m sorry. I know you’re not as vain as you often lead people to believe. But you *must* know that coming here was foolish and irresponsible.”

Merlynn could see Vivian’s jaw clenching. “So now I’m foolish and irresponsible as well as childish and vain?” the blonde snapped.

Glaring, Merlynn clenched her fists. “That is *not* what I said!”

“It’s what you implied!” Vivian shouted back. “All I wanted was for you to talk to me, to go back to how things used to be!”

Merlynn fell silent at that. Wasn’t that what she’d wished for herself? So how could she be angry with Vivian for wanting something she also desired? “Oh, Viv. What are we doing? We never used to fight like this.”

The older Princess folded her arms and looked away. She still looked angry - *and with good reason*, Merlynn thought, now that she’d stopped to think about it. She *had* been keeping secrets, after all. “I never meant to make you feel like we didn’t trust you, Viv,” Merlynn said contritely. Because that’s what was truly bothering Vivian, she knew.

“Yes, well, you did,” Vivian snapped, but her volume was down to a normal level now, and some of the anger had seeped out of her voice.

Merlynn sighed and ran a hand through her hair. She’d had it up in her usual braid earlier, but the stress of the situation had driven her to leave it loose. A little inappropriate, but none of the druids would care. And Merlynn just needed to run her hands through her hair sometimes. “There is... something I’ve kept from you, but... I just... I can’t...” she trailed off.

“You’re not ready to tell me yet,” Vivian finished. This time the mask she wore was inscrutable.

Merlynn wanted to tell Vivian, she really did, but every time she thought about opening up about her secret, all she could think about was what would happen if things went wrong. She knew her father would protect her, but... losing Vivian was something Merlynn didn’t think she could live with.

Apparently, her silence was answer enough. “Let me know when you are,” Vivian said, before turning around and walking back to the camp.

This mission just got a lot more complicated...

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter gave me so much trouble! Clearly, I don't like it when Merlynn and Arthur are apart, or when Vivian and Merlynn argue... So that won't last too much longer, thankfully.

Please, leave a review to tell me what you think!

Also, GoT fans, I've started posting a fic with my friend MaryEvH about Jon/Margaery, so go check that out! (yes, I know, it's a shameless plug, but who cares, right?) It's also on FFNet so you can read it there also.

# **Trials and tribulations**

## Chapter Notes

So, it's been almost 3 weeks since I updated... and I feel really terrible about it. On the positive side, though; I promised it wouldn't be a month this time, and it hasn't! Yeah, not a great excuse, I know, but still.

I really do hope you enjoy the chapter!

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

### **C37: Trials and tribulations**

Much as Arthur wanted to take the law into his own hands, the King had to preside over all trials. Uther would be the one to dole out justice, though Arthur did have some sway. When it wasn't a case about magic, anyway.

But Arthur hadn't made it easy on the man. Mark, Marlan's father, stood before the King, looking somewhat worse for wear. He had a black eye, a shallow gash above his left eye and various other bruises. Of course, Arthur himself was sporting a rather nasty cut on his cheekbone from where Mark had hit him with a bucket.

"You stand before the court this day, accused of abusing your children and assaulting the Prince," Geoffrey of Monmouth said severely. "Your accuser is Prince Arthur."

The old man stepped aside, and allowed Arthur to take the floor. Generally speaking these trials were a dull affair, and over quickly, but there was some murmuring among the courtiers today, due to Arthur's involvement. No doubt that was why there were so many here, as well. But Arthur ignored their stares and hushed whispers as he stood in front of his father. "I met young Marlan, Mark's oldest son, as I was overseeing the placement of the refugees who'd come to escape the Griffin. He seemed nervous to me, more so when his father joined him. At the time, I simply took Mark to be a strict father, nothing out of the ordinary." Arthur recounted, thinking of the boy. Marlan was waiting with Morgana and his mother and little sister in an ante-chamber to be presented as evidence.

"When I met the young man again, he was bruised and seemed scared. I offered to help, but the boy refused to admit that anything was amiss, despite the large bruise that covered half his face. I let him go because I had no evidence, but set up a system so that he could reach me if his situation became worse. Earlier today, that was the case. Marlan told me that his father had now also taken to beating his three-year-old sister," he said. He paused for a moment, and for the women of the court to whisper their outrage to one another. Uther sat on his throne, his face a blank slate.

“When I tried to apprehend the accused, Mark resisted,” he said, vaguely gesturing to the wound on his face. He could just imagine Merlynn’s grimace if she could see him now.

For the first time, something tightened in Uther’s face. “I believe you have the boy here? And his mother and sibling?” he asked neutrally.

Arthur nodded to the guard standing next to the entrance to the antechamber, who in turn opened said door. Morgana lead the clearly terrified mother and children out and guided them to stand in front of the King, while Arthur stepped back. Mark tensed and glared at him family, but luckily didn’t say anything.

“Your husband stands accused of physically abusing you and your children, madam, is this true?” Uther asked of the woman.

Marlan’s mother simply looked frightened. Her shoulders were drawn up , her hands gripping her children tightly, even as she stared at a point in front of the King’s boots. She refused to meet anyone’s eye.

“Aye, ‘tis m’lord,” she replied quietly.

“Can you tell the court in your own words what has happened?” he asked, a little more kindly.

Her eyes darted up briefly, before coming to rest on the floor again. “I... A’ firs’, me husband only came af’er me, sur - Sire. But li’le Marlan got to be so big ‘e star’ed standin’ up to ‘is da, an’ ... ‘e don’t like tha’, Sire.”

Uther nodded thoughtfully. “And your daughter?”

The woman gripped her trembling child closer to herself. “She’s only three summers ol’, Sire,” she said, her voice growing tight with unshed tears. “An’ ‘e... ‘e ‘ad been drinkin’ again, an’...” She had to stop for a moment to compose herself, and Arthur admired the woman’s strength; she hadn’t shed one tear.

“Sire, if I may,” Gaius said, stepping forward with a bow.

Uther waved him on, and the old physician walked towards the distraught woman and her children. He looked at Marlan first, who held his chin high and determinately glared at anyone who might comment on the injury on his face. As Gaius prodded the boy’s ribs, though, the child hissed in pain. “May I?” Gaius asked the boy. For a moment, Marlan hesitated, before lifting his shirt. The boy’s chest was covered in deep purple bruises. Arthur knew broken ribs when he saw them, it was a wonder the boy had been able to stand up at all.

Gaius glanced up at the King, who nodded solemnly, though there was clear anger behind Uther’s eyes. The physician then moved on to the little girl, who had hid her face in her mother’s skirts this whole time. With a little push from her brother, though, the girl let go and looked up. Even Arthur couldn’t suppress a wince. The injury itself wasn’t that bad, but to see a dark handprint on such a small child’s face, combined with her red eyes and terrified, trembling look was horrifying. And that was without mentioning the swollen black eye.

Morgana looked like she was physically restraining herself from interfering, while most of the courtiers looked appropriately horrified. Arthur himself was glad that Marlan's father wasn't in his line of vision, because he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop himself from doing something... rather less than legal.

"Guards, escort this man back to his house, he's to leave Camelot by dawn," Uther said. Then, he turned to Mark himself. "You are hereby banished from the Kingdom of Camelot on pain of death."

Mark was surprisingly calm, though he did glare at the King. He never even looked at his family.

As soon as the guards left the room, Marlan's mother - Arthur really needed to learn her name - sank to her knees, hugging her children. The courtiers filed out, whispering gossip among themselves. Now that the 'sensation' was over, they had no more interest in what happened to the family. Morgana, of course, headed straight for the family.

Arthur stayed where he was, watching his adoptive sister fuss over the children. In a way, she reminded him a lot of Merlynn. Both were beautiful, confident women with dark hair and pale skin who cared more for the common people than was the norm among nobles. But there were differences, too. Merlynn had a calm wisdom about her that Morgana lacked, which also made her slightly less rash and emotional than Morgana. And Merlynn's eyes held this almost childlike wonder at times, that caused her to throw society's rules to the wind. Arthur couldn't imagine Morgana ever climbing a tree, but he could perfectly picture the Galdaran princess perched on a branch, simply because it provided a better reading spot than the ground. But while Morgana and Merlynn both cared for the people, Merlynn had a habit of mingling with them in a way that Morgana wasn't suited to. The latter was, as a result, more lady-like and elegant, but it gave Merlynn worldly quality that would make her a great leader one day.

"What will we do?" The voice of Marlan's mother broke through Arthur's thoughts. "My husband was th' one who go' food on th' table..."

"I can ge' a job, mum," Marlan said bravely, and it galled Arthur to know that this was a reality for a lot of families who lost their patriarch.

"Yes, you will," Arthur said, stepping closer. "I'll need a squire to keep my armour clean, lord knows Morris is no help in that department." Marlan actually looked excited at the idea. "And my horse needs to be brushed and his saddle looked after. And I'm sure Morgana can find a position as a maid open somewhere."

Marlan's mother - Arthur thought her name started with an A... had someone mentioned it during the trial? - looked hopeful. "Of course, I'll find a position for you, Agatha," Morgana said, putting a comforting hand on the other woman's shoulder. "Somewhere you can take your daughter with you."

Arthur had to suppress a grin. He knew Morgana wouldn't pass up an opportunity to help someone in need.

Suddenly, something knocked into his side, and Arthur was shocked to see that Marlan had thrown his arms around his waist. "Thank you," the boy whispered.

Looking at the boy in wonder, Arthur hesitantly put an arm around him. "Anytime, Marlan. Anytime."

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Merlynn really should have learned by now that it would happen like this. She'd really hoped to sit her sister down and explain everything, preferably when they were in Galdara and she could minimize the damage her sister would do.

But no.

Of *course*, Vivian found out when the druid camp was under attack from the bandits. Apparently, they'd heard that the druids were getting some help from the Galdaran military, so they'd found some magic users to help them. Merlynn hadn't had a choice but to use magic, especially when one of them was about to stab her sister.

The bandit in question was marginally more skilled than the others. Not that Merlynn would know, because she'd spent most of her time during the battle surreptitiously countering everything the evil magic user was doing. The secrecy was what truly hindered her, since the man was definitely no warlock. After she'd put out a fire that had been started by the man, she'd noticed her sister clashing swords with one of the bandits. That was no remarkable feat, until the man took advantage of Vivian's distraction over the fire, to disarm her. He was about to run her through when Merlynn had shot raw magic at him, flinging him against a tree. Vivian had looked shocked, and had followed the man's dazed gaze to Merlynn.

So now she knew.

But Merlynn couldn't focus on that, she *had* to stop that wizard from using another dirty trick. Shooting one last apologetic look at her sister, she ran off, easily finding the most protected and skinny bandit. He was reading from a magic book - in the middle of a battle! - while holding a crystal. That was probably why he'd been able to hold on so long and cast so many spells without tiring; he was drawing energy from the crystal!

A well-aimed spell shattered the crystal, and the man's concentration. Another spell summoned ropes that instantly bound him from head to toe, leaving only his eyes and nose uncovered. Another tripping jinx was enough to break through the line of bandits that had surrounded the wizard, which allowed the druids to knock them out and end the battle.

All in all, Merlynn thought they'd done well. She knew at least one of her knights had died, and several more druids, as well as 5 or 6 bandits, but most of them were alive, and the battle was over.

As Merlynn cleaned her dagger - there was more dirt and soot on it than any blood - she could see a shadow cast over her. Vivian.



“We need to talk,” she said coldly, before turning on her heel and heading for the edge of the camp.

Lancelot shot Merlynn a look, but didn’t follow. He knew full well that Merlynn could protect both herself and her sister if anything happened. Still, the Princess appreciated the gesture. She followed her sister until they were out of everyone’s earshot and line of sight.

“You have magic,” Vivian stated.

Her face was a blank mask that Merlynn couldn’t read, which disconcerted her because she was usually so good at it. “I do,” she whispered.

“How long?”

Merlynn frowned, confused. “Excuse me?”

“How long have you been...” Vivian trailed off, gesturing to her little sister.

Merlynn took a tiny step forward. “How long have I been... a sorceress?” Vivian nodded. “Since I was born. Mother said that-”

“*Mother* said?” Vivian interrupted. “I knew father was in on your secret, but mother, too?”

Sighing, Merlynn walked over to a nearby tree stump and sat down. “I’ve been able to move things with my mind since I was a few days old. Mother saw, of course, and said that I had to keep it a secret.” She looked at her big sister imploringly. “You have to understand, Vivian, mother barely knew you and papa back then, and magic was - *is* - outlawed in all five Kingdoms. We couldn’t tell you.”

“And what about later? Why didn’t you tell me when we were younger?” Vivian demanded. Her blank mask was cracking, and Merlynn was starting to see how upset her sister was.

“I... I didn’t know how,” Merlynn whispered, her voice barely audible. At Vivian’s incredulous face, she explained further. “I’ve been lying to you for years, but... it never seemed to matter. There was no big distance between us, and I managed to convince myself that you didn’t need to know. But then father told me he’d known all along, and... and I could see how much it mattered to you,” she said, getting more and more upset. Merlynn felt tears burn behind her eyes, but held them back; this was about Vivian, not her. “And I started to see that I was just lying to myself because I was scared. Father hating me would break my heart, but I could survive that. If I told you the truth and you hated me for it...” The thought alone broke through Merlynn’s resolve, and she could feel her tears making their way down her cheeks. “If you hated me... I wouldn’t be able to live with that,” she managed to force out.

Vivian looked at her, the picture of cold elegance. Until she sighed and rolled her eyes. Two quick steps and she was directly in front of Merlynn. “Goddess, Millie, you’re such an idiot,” she said, and promptly gathered her little sister in a hug. “As if anything you did could ever make me hate you.”

Relief and shame rolled over Merlynn in equal measure as she cried in her big sister's arms. Vivian knew. And she didn't hate her.

## Chapter End Notes

There, doesn't that feel so much better now? Merlynn and Vivian have (mostly) made up, Marlan's story arch has (mostly) ended and in a chapter or two, Merlynn and Arthur will finally meet up again, yay!

That said, I know I promised some more action, and I know this was more dialogue-and-character-development-y than I promised, but it did have some action!

Please let me know what you thought!

As an unrelated sidenote, Im\_an\_awkward\_potato totally gets a name win!

# The Question

## Chapter Notes

Uhm... I really can't say much except I'm sorry. I just really hit a wall about halfway through this chapter and... it took some serious help from my bestie MaryEvH (go check out her profile!) to get my ass back in gear. I apologize for the ridiculously long wait. As a little thank you for sticking with me, I made this chapter extra long, hope you like it!

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

### **C38: The Question**

The ride back to Galdara felt like it lasted a second, though it took them two half days. The druids had sent them off with plenty of supplies, and a rather unsettling message for Merlynn.

While everyone else was having fun and celebrating their win against the bandits, Merlynn was pulled aside by the druidic elders. “We must thank you for your help, Emrys,” they’d said. Of course they’d known her True Name. “You’ve proven yourself a leader among our people; trustworthy and caring.” Then, the druid elder had smiled somewhat mischievously, and had knelt on the ground, followed by the other two elders. “We, the Dílseacht tribe, swear allegiance to you, Merlynn Emrys. We shall follow your example, heed your orders and if need be give our lives for your cause. Mar sin beidh sé.”

Merlynn had been too shocked to say anything, and before she knew it, they’d been on their way back to Galdara.

A druidic tribe had sworn allegiance to her.

She just couldn’t wrap her head around it. So, in the spirit of being completely honest with her sister, she’d told both her and Lancelot about the meeting. While Vivian had been a tad annoyed that Lancelot had known about her secret, she was a princess, and knew how to prioritise. Both the Knight and the older Princess had agreed that it was a good thing, and that it couldn’t hurt. The tribe was self-sufficient for the most part, and thus wouldn’t need daily governing. But if Merlynn was ever faced with a problem she couldn’t handle on her own, at least she had magical allies.

But it troubled Merlynn. She knew she had a destiny, but shouldn’t they be swearing their allegiance to Arthur? He was the Once and Future King, after all. And besides that, she was a little overwhelmed. She wasn’t a Crown Princess, she didn’t know how to be responsible for a people, even if it was just a small group. But the druid elder had implied that more tribes would follow their example, and Merlynn just wasn’t ready for that. What if-?

“My lady, we’re nearly there,” Lancelot said, effectively breaking her from her thoughts.

Merlynn looked up. She could see glimpses of the grey stone of Galdara's castle between the trees and sighed. She was nearly home. At least in the presence of her parents, she would always be their 'little bird', no matter how old she grew.

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After they handed their horses off to the stablehands - Cian a little reluctantly - and servants had taken their possessions, Merlynn and Vivian made their way to the royals' wing of the castle. It was late afternoon, and they were exhausted. They would talk to their father the following day. Lancelot was probably already meeting with him to inform him that both his daughters were alive, and that the problem was solved. Details could wait until they had all gotten some rest.

But Merlynn found herself unwilling to part from her sister. They'd been so distant lately, that she wanted to prolong the time spent together. "Do you want to eat dinner together later? I could come--"

Vivian interrupted with a raised hand. "Not tonight, Merlynn. I'm tired and... I still need to think. I'll talk to you tomorrow," she said.

Merlynn was taken aback by her reply. She'd thought that now that Vivian knew the truth, things would go back to how they were before. "Alright. Sleep well, Vivian," she said.

Vivian smiled. "Sleep well, Merlynn." Then, she turned around and headed for her room.

The smile gave Merlyn hope that her sister just needed some time, and that things would be better in the morning. She headed towards her own quarters, feeling cautiously optimistic. Helga was just turning down the bed when she entered.

"Welcome back, milady," the other woman said cheerfully.

"Thank you, Helga. Did I miss anything while I was away?" Merlynn asked absently as she headed towards her dressing screen.

"Actually, yes. Lord Olwin and his son arrived yesterday. I believe they're here to discuss the recent skirmishes on the Western border," Helga replied as she tidied up.

Merlynn paused. "Arrin is here?" she asked, referring to the Lord's son. She'd played with him when they were younger, and she liked him because he never treated her differently because of her birth father.

"Aye, milady, I believe he's still in a meeting with your father," Helga said, coming over to help undo the lacings on her dress.

"Perhaps I should go see him? It would only be polite..." Merlynn mused.

The decision was made for her when a guard knocked on her door. "Pincess, the King requests your presence," he called through the door.

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The guard escorted the Princess to her father's private quarters, where both her parents were waiting for her. Merlynn eyed them strangely. "Why do I feel like this isn't going to be an easy conversation?"

Her father sighed, while her mother got up from where she'd been sitting. "I'm not sure if you've heard, but Lord Olwin and Sir Arrin have arrived here."

Merlynn nodded. "I know, Helga told me," she said, confused. Where was this conversation going?

"There have been... skirmishes on the border where their lands are located. Both bandits and men from Caerleon's kingdom have been testing their defences, often killing a few men."

Fronwing, Merlynn sat down at her parents' table with her mother. "That's terrible. I take it we're sending men and supplies?"

"We are," her father confirmed. "But Caerleon is a smart man, and he knows Lord Olwin's lands are a valuable strategic point. Starhold Castle is the last defence on the border, if they overcome it, they'd have free access to Galdara, with nothing to stop them... He's made an offer to Lord Olwin."

Olaf paused, and Merlynn let that information sink in. In the back of her mind, she wondered why Vivian wasn't here, but then dismissed the thought. There were more important things to worry about. "And is Lord Olwin considering it?"

"Starhold used to be a part of Caerleon's kingdom," mother explained, "until your grandfather overcame the defences and claimed it as Galdaran soil. But there are those who believe that it still belongs to Caerleon. Lord Olwin's confidantes are pushing for a reunion with the other kingdom. They believe the bond with Caerleon is stronger than the one with Galdara. It was, after all Caerleon's ancestor who raised Lord Olwin's family to lordship, and granted them the land," she said, looking worried, but resigned.

"That's terrible, but I don't understand what this has to do with me. Shouldn't you be telling Vivian this?" Merlynn asked.

"We've already told your sister all she needs to know," her father assured her, joining them at the table.

Merlynn sat up straighter. "Then what can we do?"

"There is one solution. It would solidify our bond with Starhold, and allow us to send as many men as we can spare, without fear of treason," her mother said.

Before Merlynn could ask what this solution was, her father was speaking again. "You remember Sir Arrin?" he asked.

Now thoroughly confused as to where this conversation was heading, Merlynn nodded. "Of course, we used to play together, and he still sends me the occasional letter. Why?"

"He's asked me for your hand in marriage."

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When Merlynn blinked open her eyes the next morning, she remained in blissful ignorance for about a minute. Then, she remembered the conversation she'd had with her parents the night before.

"Talk to him, get to know him again. And tell us your decision by tomorrow evening," her mother said.

She lay in bed, just staring up at the ceiling of her chambers. What on earth was she supposed to do now?

On the one hand, Arrin had been her friend for as long as she could remember, even if she hadn't seen him in years. Being married to him couldn't be that bad. On the other hand, if she didn't accept, it was possible Caerleon would launch an invasion.

And there was the small, tiny fact that she might have feelings for a certain blonde Prince.

Merlynn groaned to herself, rolling over onto her side and pulling a pillow over her head, as if to drown out her thoughts. She was not in love with that prat! Her mind was just running amok again.

I've known Arrin since we were children, she reminded herself. He's never laughed at me or called me a fake Princess due to my birth father. He's always been sweet. And he's a second son, I could stay in the capitol if we were wed. I could stay by Viv's side...

But the image of Arthur remained stubbornly at the forefront of her thoughts. The way he held her at Vivian's birthday ball, the way he'd grin at her when he replied with a particularly witty quip...

Goddess, that grin. Perhaps she was a little in love with Arthur, but she was certain it was just a passing fancy. Not very passing if you've been thinking about him since he left... or even since before that, a treacherous part of her mind whispered.

Groaning and sitting up, Merlynn decided to get dressed and do something. Sitting here overthinking the problem wouldn't solve it. Perhaps she'd take her mother's advice and speak to Arrin?

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It was still early when the Princess made her way down to the stables. Arrin wasn't much of a swordsman, but he could handle any horse expertly. Merlynn was fairly certain she'd find him there.

And, as she expected, he was brushing down a brown mare. "She's pretty," Merlynn commented.

Arrin started and turned around. "My lady! I didn't expect to see you here." He seemed as sweet as ever, and the thought made Merlynn smile.

“My lord,” she greeted him with a nod. “Is she yours?” she asked, gesturing to the horse.

“My father’s. She’s a lazy one, if I don’t make sure she moves from time to time, she’d be twice her size,” he replied jovially.

“Nothing like my Cian, then. I can barely keep him cooped up for a night, let alone a day. Come rain or shine, he’ll be in the paddock,” Merlynn said, grinning.

“Sounds like a handfull. Perhaps he needs some exercise?” he suggested, smiling bashfully. Yes, Arrin was terribly sweet - a rare thing among nobles - but it didn’t make her feel anything.

“Are you suggesting a race, my lord?” she said, hoping to bring him out of his shell a little. A race would do her good, and, she suspected, him as well.

Arrin blushed. “Oh... if you wish it, my lady, I’ll gladly oblige!” he said cheerfully. “And please call me Arrin, my lady.”

“Then it’s Merlynn to you. I’ll meet you by the gates in few minutes?”

“Of course, my... Merlynn.” He was blushing again. Merlynn wasn’t sure if it was talking to a woman that brought out his shy side, or if this situation was as strange to him as it was to her.

With a last nod, she set off towards the paddock, where she saddled Cian and directed the eager horse to the city gates. He was pawing the ground restlessly, hoping for some adventure, no doubt. Merlynn just hoped that Arrin would be up to the challenge.

“Where to?” Arrin asked once he’d joined her. He sat astray a gorgeous grey stallion. It was a lighter beast than Cian, though probably quicker to tire.

“Do you know the hunter’s pass in the forest?” she asked. It was a small clearing, well known to locals as the last point hunters could get a good night’s rest. There was a small wooden cottage that travellers could use for shelter, and a small stream to water their horses. It was a decent distance, but not so much as to make the guards nervous.

“I believe I do,” he replied.

She grinned. “Well then I hope you can find it without me!” she said, and quickly urged Cian into a gallop. He carried her over the path at record speed, towards the woods. When she glanced behind her, she saw Arrin had finally gotten into motion. Although it appeared he had a shadow. Lancelot was following at a slightly more sedate pace. Probably knowing where they were headed. Goddess, she did not need a chaperone, let alone a protector on this trip. They’d barely be out of sight of the city walls!

Nevertheless, Merlynn focussed on gathering speed. Cian might have been more sturdily built than Arrin’s steed, he could outrun most other horses if he put his mind to it. “Rith go tapaidh, Cian,” she yelled to her horse, urging him on.

Together, they dashed through the trees, barely having to slow down as they jumped over the undergrowth. Both Merlynn and Cian knew this forest inside and out. Or, at least, the part closest to the castle. It was no wonder they arrived well before either Arrin or Lancelot made an appearance.

Merlynn let Cian cool down in the stream, while she took a seat on a nearby boulder and settled down to wait. It took a few minutes, but eventually Arrin rode into the clearing, followed closely by Lancelot. "You boys have a lot to learn," she commented from her elevated position.

Lancelot just sighed and shook his head in exasperated amusement. Arrin just smiled. "Very well done, my lady. I mean, Merlynn," he said, and Merlynn had a slight suspicion that he'd let her win. Which was irritating, to say the least. She was more than capable enough to win on her own merits, thank you very much.

Shaking the annoyance off, Merlynn hopped down from the boulder and walked over as the two men led their horses to the stream. "So, Lancelot, what brings you here?" she asked, knowing full well why he'd come.

"I'm your personal guard, my lady, I'm to accompany you whenever you leave the city," he replied diplomatically, though he was obviously suppressing a grin. What he wasn't saying was that he was also her chaperone. It wouldn't do to leave the princess alone with her possible future intended, now would it?

"Of course," she said wryly. He shot her a wink, before focussing his attention on his horse.

As she rolled her eyes at her friend, she turned around and saw Arrin coming her way. "Could I speak with you, my lady?" he asked.

Merlynn didn't comment on the return of the title, and just glanced at Lancelot, who nodded that it was alright. "Of course," she told the lord.

They walked to the edge of the clearing. "I suppose you've heard from your father about my offer?" he said. At least he didn't beat around the bush.

"I have," she confirmed, keeping her eyes on the forrest surrounding them.

"I know the situation is not ideal, but... I'd like to explain, if I may?"

Finally, Merlynn looked at him, and all she saw was the same boy who'd asked her to dance at her first ball, when all the other boys sneered. She saw the boy who'd helped her climb trees, even though he knew she wasn't supposed to. She saw her friend. So, she nodded.

"When I was born, I was born in Galdara, as was my mother before me. It's always been my home, and your father my King," he started. This time, he was the one avoiding eye contact, as he looked up to the leafy roof over their heads. "I love my country, but I know there are those in my father's house who do not believe as I do. I just want to serve, always have. Had I been any good with a sword, I'd have become a knight in your father's army, but I've never been so inclined. I know the Kingdom stands at risk is my father is swayed by Caerleon,



and... this seemed like the right decision. My older brother is already married, and keeps his own counsel on the matter, but I... I could do what had to be done, and I do it gladly.”

He paused for a moment, his eyes tracking the movement of sparrow flitting between the branches. Then his eyes found hers again, and there was an intensity there that hadn't been there before. HE smiled a little bashfully. “It helped that as a young man I'd taken quite a shine to you.”

Merlynn wanted to open her mouth to reply, to say, anything, but nothing came to mind. Arrin had fancied her? Did he still?

“I would have gone to you with this solution first, but you were out on a diplomatic mission,” he continued, unaware of her shock. “So, I want to ask you now, Merlynn, if you'll do me the highest honour and agree to be my wife?”

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\*Dílseacht = Loyalty

\*Mar sin beidh sé = So it will be

\*Rith go tapaídh = Run fast

## Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Vivian will definitely be letting everyone in on her opinion on the matter, more Arthur! and some serious conversations, as well as the start of another recognizable episode.

Now, before you all shoot me; Merthur is still very much endgame, and this story arch is just another hurdle they have to get across (which they will). I am not a fan of love triangles, so this won't go on for too long, but it will tie in with Vivian somehow. I'll leave it up to you to speculate how. That said, I think this is a very much needed arch to advance Merlynn as a character, so just stick with me and see where this goes, okay?

Leave me a review and tell me what you think! (Nicely, preferably, I don't want my mood ruined a day before my big brother's wedding!)

# The Answer

## Chapter Notes

Well... This took longer than expected, but on the bright side, it's by *far* my longest chapter yet. It's 3216 words long! Usually my chapters are around 2.5k. So, as Maui from Moana would say; You're Welcome! (you're also welcome for getting that song stuck in your head again ;) )

So, without further ado, here's the chapter; enjoy!

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

### C39: The Answer

A man sat in the corner of an inn, nursing an ale. He didn't visit here often, nor was he travelling through. No, this man was not a local, but the innkeeper knew him well enough. The mystery man came in on the same day every year, for the past 19 years, saying nothing except to order a single ale, which he then nursed for the better part of the evening. After he finished it, he'd tip the innkeeper and leave, not to be seen again until a year later.

And so, Sadon the innkeeper didn't expect this year to be any different. For the past 10 years, the man hadn't even had to say any words to order his drink. When Sadon noticed him entering, he readied the drink and set it at the furthest and darkest table.

"I'm telling you, it's true!"

Sam's attention was diverted when a few other customers entered. These were a bunch of traders on their way to Camelot, and they were well known to him. He nodded to them, took their order, and went to prepare the drinks. Luckily, there was not much else to do on a dreary night like this.

"He's lying!" one of the men said! They joined a few other traders at a larger table in the middle of the room.

"About what?" a younger boy asked. He was travelling with his father to sell fabrics on Camelot's market.

The first man - Urin, Sadon believed his name was - rolled his eyes. "This idiot here claims he saw the princess of Galdara wink at him at her birthday festival," he explained. "I reckon Bill's had a few too many already!"

Some of the other men laughed, eager to poke fun at their. As if a princess would show any interest in a travelling merchant. "I didn't say it was her," Bill protested. "It was the younger one, Princess Merlynn! Now I know her sister's supposed to be the beauty, and I guess that's

true, but this one..." he leered, and the other men laughed. "Give me a dark-haired minx like that any night!"

Urin smacked his friend lightly, but grinned all the same. "I heard she's not even a princess, King Olaf adopted her. Came with the wife, it seems."

"I heard that, too," the young merchant boy claimed, eager to be a part of the conversation. "The Queen'd had the baby before the wedding, and she hadn't been in the country that long, so it can't be the king's!"

"I heard she was a prisoner even. Sent there to work in the salt mines by King Uther himself!" another man added.

Bill was looking a little agitated, probably because his choice in royal beauty was being dragged down. "Doesn't mean she ain't pretty!" he argued.

Urin laughed uproariously. "Look at little Bill, taking a fancy to a princess!" The table's occupants laughed. "Doesn't matter anyway, she ain't going to choose your ugly face now that she's engaged to that poncy pretty boy from Starhaven."

"It's Starhold, you dolt!" one of the men corrected, even as he laughed.

"What's the Queen's name?"

Suddenly, the room fell silent. Unseen, the mystery man had made his way from his own table, and now stood next to the merchants, his face obscured by the shadows of his hood and his beard.

For a moment, no one seemed to know what to do. This man had never spoken, never taken an interest in anything, and now he wanted to know about a bit of royal gossip?

"Huna, or something," the younger merchant boy said softly. "I'm not sure, she stays out of the public's eye for the most part."

"Hunith," the stranger whispered, though it could be heard clearly in the silent room. "And this was in Galdara?" he asked, a little louder.

This time, Sadon was the one who answered. "Aye. It's a good four days ride. Three if you have a good horse," he replied, a little perplexed, but willing to help the generous man out. After all, the mystery man had always given him a gold piece for an ale was barely worth a copper, if that.

The man nodded, turned on his heel, and walked out. Even his footsteps barely made any sound.

It was silent for another heartbeat. "Well that's strange fellow," Bill said slowly.

"He reminds me of this creepy chap I met in Caerleon once," Urin said, already snickering. He went on to tell his story, and the noise level at the inn returned to normal again.

Sadon sighed. He still didn't know the stranger's name, but he hoped no harm would come to him. It wasn't that he held any special affection for the man - after all, he didn't know him - but there was something about him... He always paid too much, never caused trouble, and the mystery surrounding his person intrigued Sadon. But as he stared at the door the other man had just gone through, he had the feeling that next year, the shadowy table at the back of his inn would stay empty.

/\*/

The ballroom was overly crowded, even though her father had promised to keep the engagement feast small. There wouldn't even be any dancing; arguably the best part of the evening, since Merlynn would have been able to decline dances from everyone except her father and betrothed.

Betrothed...

Such a strange word, it was odd to think of it in relation to herself. Arrin, on the other hand, looked far more cheerful. He was good with people, and genuinely enjoyed talking to them. And they liked talking to him in return. It was something Merlynn was a little jealous of. She could hold her own with nobles from other countries, and common people were easy to talk to, but here in Galdara she'd always been an outcast. She never fully relaxed around these vultures.

Sighing, Merlynn looked around the high table. For once, she was sitting in the middle, in the chair her father usually occupied. Arrin sat beside her, in her mother's chair. Quite the pair they made.

"It wouldn't hurt you to smile, my little bird," mother said. She was seated next to Merlynn, while the King flanked the groom to be. Vivian was in the next seat, speaking animatedly to Rowan - an honoured position for the chief advisor.

"Oh I don't know, the muscles in my jaw might seize up," Merlynn said, though she did make a little bit of an effort for her mother.

Merlynn kept looking out over the banquet hall, but she could feel her mother's worried gaze. "I wish..." mother whispered.

The smile melted away, as Merlynn turned to face the Queen. "What's wrong, mother?" she asked, feeling concerned.

"I wish I could have given you a better life," mother said, sadness making her seem older than she was.

Merlynn couldn't help a frown. "What do you mean? Mother, I'm a Princess, I had the best education available, I never went hungry, and I had everything I could want. What better life could I have?"

"A life unburdened by duty and expectation. One where you could be free to..." she trailed off, eyeing the crowd around them. "Be who you truly are," she finished cryptically.

Sighing, Merlynn rested her hand on her mother's arm. She smiled softly. "I can't pretend that this," she gestured to the room as a whole, "doesn't bother me. But I have no regrets," she assured. Well, there was one regret, considering a certain Prince, but she wasn't going to mention that.

Mother managed a smile as she cupped her daughter's cheek. "You're such a good girl. I couldn't have hoped for a better daughter."

Despite the awkward position, Merlynn reached over to hug her mother. She might have been closer to her father lately, but that didn't mean that she didn't still love the woman who had raised her, protected her and loved her more fiercely than anyone else. "I love you, mama," she whispered.

"And I you, my little bird."

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After that emotional moment, Merlynn had been forced to mingle with her guests. Though she was grateful to have Arrin - charming, easy-to-like Arrin - by her side, she couldn't help her thoughts from straying. Arthur probably have been just as annoyed as her at the false smiles of the nobles. No doubt he would have created some kind of diversion so they could have slipped away.

Arrin laughed at something her cousin Ellyn - the King's niece - said, and it drew Merlynn's thoughts back. She couldn't help a guilty blush spreading over her cheeks. She shouldn't be thinking about Arthur when her fiance was right there. Not that she'd ever get used to calling him that. Although it was better than 'husband'...

"I hope you don't mind my saying that, Merlynn", Ellyn said, and Merlynn forcefully dragged her attention back to the conversation at hand. She'd never really got along with her cousin when she was a little girl - possibly because the other girl was 4 years her junior - but she'd never disliked her either. They'd more or less ignored one another as children.

"Saying what?" Merlynn asked politely, even though she'd missed everything Ellyn had said to her.

A wry grin crossed the other woman's face, and Merlynn was relieved to know she wasn't angry. The expression made her cousin look even more attractive, which was hard to do. She and Vivian were very alike - much more so than Merlynn and Vivian, for obvious reasons - in that they were both blond-haired beauties. Honestly, with women like Vivian, Ellyn and Morgana in her life, it was a wonder Merlynn didn't have more insecurities.

"That I'm sad we never truly got to know one another. I know Uncle Olaf expected us to when we were younger," Ellyn went on.

This time, Merlynn was the one with a wry grin. "Mother and father always placed us next to each other at every feast you attended."

“And I always ignored you, even when you tried to make conversation,” Ellyn finished. She looked genuinely sad about it, which surprised Merlynn.

“I never held it against you,” she said, honestly surprised at the turn the conversation had taken.

Ellyn shook her head. “I was a silly girl who listened to far too much gossip for her own good.”

Now that was not very surprising, though Merlynn had never known about it. Ellyn’s mother, Lady Ara - Merlynn was never allowed to call her ‘Aunt’ - had always been very vocal in her disapproval of Merlynn, which was the main reason she and Ellyn rarely visited court after Uncle Wolfram died when Merlynn was 5.

“As I said,” Merlynn responded, “I never held it against you.” Arrin, whom Merlynn had almost forgotten was there as well, smiled at the interaction. He had quite a few cousins as well, so this was most likely a familiar moment for him.

Ellyn smiled as well, but was distracted when a messenger entered the hall and went straight to the King. Merlynn frowned. The guards knew not to let any messengers in unless it was life or death. “If you’ll excuse me,” Merlynn muttered, before quickly making her way over to her parents. Arrin would deal with Ellyn and the other guests.

Mother and father were looking grim as they read the missive the man had brought. He was still there, so obviously, he was waiting for a reply. “What’s going on?” Vivian asked before Merlynn had the chance to. Apparently, she had also noticed the messenger and had hurried over as well.

The King looked up. “News from Camelot,” he said gravely.

Merlynn frowned. “Who in Camelot would have written you?” she asked, knowing both Arthur and Morgana would write to her instead, and Uther wouldn’t dream of contacting anyone in Galdara.

The King and Queen exchanged a glance. “A spy, then,” Vivian said, seemingly not bothered in the least.

The thought did bother Merlynn, but she didn’t have time to argue about this now. “What did they report?”

But father shook his head. “Not here. We’ll retire to my study,” he said.

Mother put a hand on his arm, stopping him. “We cannot leave Arrin here by himself, it wouldn’t look good,” she reminded him.

Nodding, Olaf searched out his future son-in-law in the crowd. “Merlynn, you collect him. Vivian, tell Rowan we received distressing news and must confer as a family. He’ll keep the festivities going.”

The Princesses both nodded and searched out their targets. Merlynn lightly touched Arrin's arm. "Would you excuse us, my Lady?" she asked as kindly as she could of the woman her betrothed had been speaking to.

"What's going on?" he asked as soon as they were out of hearing range. Arrin was no fool, he knew that message had been bad news, and he knew Merlynn wanting to speak to him was connected to him somehow.

"Father wants to speak to all of us privately. I don't know what the message said, only that it came from Camelot," she replied in a whisper as they made their way to the dais where her parents stood.

As soon as Vivian and Rowan joined them, the King stepped forward. "My honoured guests. I trust the festivities have been to your liking?"

There was a general murmur of agreement, so the King smiled. "The time has come for my family and myself to retire and get to know one another in a more private setting. Feel free to enjoy our hospitality for as long as you wish!"

"Or until the ale runs out," Vivian called out, to loud laughter and cheers.

The royal family then made their way out of the banquet hall, as Rowan milled around the guests, making small talk and reaffirming that everything was fine. Not that the drinking guests needed much assurance.

As soon as they left the hall, Olaf's face grew grim again. But still, he didn't speak, not until they reached his study. It was a large room, dominated by an oak desk set in the center. All around, the walls were covered in bookshelves, ancient spines proudly showing their colours. Merlynn loved to come to this room when she was a girl, to sit and read while her father worked. But now it seemed a lot more ominous.

"What does the message say?" Vivian asked, straight to the point as always.

Olaf sighed heavily. Hunith looked at him with a sad smile and gently took the letter from his hand. "There's a famine in Camelot," she started, softly.

Before she could go on, Merlynn interrupted. "A famine? So suddenly?"

The look her mother sent her gently chided her for interrupting, but Olaf didn't seem to mind. "It's speculated that it's either a fast-spreading illness, or..."

"Or magic," Arrin finished. Merlynn had almost forgotten he was in the room and felt another spike of guilt. He didn't have the kind of commanding aura that her father and Arthur - and even Uther - had.

"What magic could do this?" Vivian asked. She made it appear as though it was a question posed to the room, but her furtive glance at her little sister made it clear who it was intended for.

Surprisingly, it was Arrin who replied. “There’s all manner of magic. It could be some form of earth magic, though I believe only High Priestesses of the Old Religion can perform such spells. And I’ve never heard of anything of this magnitude.”

There was a beat of silence as all the women in the room stared at him. Obviously, there was something her father had neglected to tell her when he’d proposed Merlynn marry Arrin.

The man blushed. “I’ve studied the craft intensely, though I don’t practise it,” he explained. Then, he looked around at each of them in turn, a little more uncertain of himself. “The King assured me that his immediate family are all supporters of magic.”

The Queen recovered first. “We are. We’re just a little surprised to find that you are as well,” she said diplomatically.

Vivian shot Merlynn a look that clearly said ‘Did you know about this?’. Merlynn shook her head. Of course she didn’t. Knowing her future husband wasn’t opposed to magic was a fairly big issue. So she shot a slight glare at her father, who’d been sitting back, looking at them all in mild amusement. He simply raised an eyebrow at her as the corners of his mouth curled upwards. That sneaky little-

“Starhold was built by magic. My ancestors used to practise it, but the power has long since vanished from my family’s lineage,” Arrin explained, a touch of sadness in his voice. It endeared him a little more to Merlynn.

She could suddenly imagine a future with him; with a husband she wouldn’t have to hide from, someone she could share anything with. But when she tried to picture it, her husband had blonde hair, not brown as Arrin’s was. How could she still be so conflicted when she was betrothed to a man who was theoretically perfect for her? He supported magic, seemed intrigued by it, even, he was kind and gentle...

He’d let her win any horse races.

And there was the crux of the matter. No matter how perfect he was, he could never capture her heart. He couldn’t challenge her the way Arthur did. The blonde Prince kept her on her toes, ready with a clever quip, and he’d certainly make her fight for every victory.

And he hated magic.

Goddess, would she always be this torn? Or would she eventually learn to let go of her affection for Arthur and learn to love her husband? Because there certainly was no way out now...

When Merlynn tuned back into the conversation, she realized she’d missed a little of the explanation Arrin had given for his fascination with magic, but since she wasn’t really obligated to make a reply, she didn’t think it was that important.

“So you do think magic is behind this?” Vivian asked. Most outside our family weren’t used to seeing her this serious, and it was obvious Arrin hadn’t expected it. Merlynn suppressed a grin.



“Uhm... I don’t know. I just wanted to point out that it’s a possibility,” he replied.

Merlynn sighed. “All this speculation isn’t going to change the situation at hand. People are starving in Camelot,” she said, turning her gaze on her father. “Are we going to let them?”

She could tell her father was going to argue, so she cut him off before he could start. “I understand that Camelot is no longer our ally, and that Uther has betrayed our trust. But does that mean we’ll let his people suffer for his mistakes?” she asked softly. “There are families there, with babes and children. They won’t survive long without food. Is it not our duty as leaders to care for others who cannot care for themselves?”

Olaf closed his eyes and sighed heavily. When he opened them again, resignation was easy to see.

“I am going to Camelot,” Merlynn proclaimed. “And I’m taking some of our food reserves with me.”

## Chapter End Notes

Okay, before anyone flies to the comments to say something; is this really a cliffhanger? I mean, if you think about it, we all know she's just going to go to Camelot and help out with the Unicorn business, right?

Also, I've finally coherently written down how I'm going to solve the Arrin thing, considering this is still an Arthur/Merlynn fic. It'll take some time, but I promise it'll happen, and there will be plenty of fluff in the meantime. I was going to say that I left a clue in this chapter, but it's not so much a clue as it is the start of a setup. If you squint. Or, you know, if I squint, since I doubt any of you will notice it. But oh well, have fun trying to figure it out!

Please leave a review and tell me your thoughts!

# Reuniting

## Chapter Notes

So, I know I'm supposed to be focussing on NaNoWriMo, but I just couldn't help myself. My NaNo story is not cooperating, and I'm currently at odds with it, so I've decided to use Paths as my NaNo story from now on. So prepare for a whoooooole lot of updates!

As a reward for your patience, I'll leave you to one of my longest chapter yet (north of 3k words). Enjoy!

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

### C40:

“Merlynn, can I talk to you?”

Merlynn looked up from the saddle strap she was tightening to see her sister standing just outside the royal stables.

“Sure, just a moment,” she said, finishing with the strap and patting Cian’s neck. Then, she walked out and faced her sister “I’m listening.”

Vivian sighed and led her to a bench on the side of the courtyard. “Things have been going so fast, I feel like I haven’t had a chance to talk to you in ages.”

“I know,” Merlynn agreed, sitting down beside her. “We’ve only just returned from the druid camp and now...” she trailed off, glancing down at her hand. On her right ring finger sat a silver ring with a flat surface in which a seven-pointed star - the symbol of Starhold - had been carved. In the middle sat a small amethyst, as a nod to her own house colours. It was thicker than she liked, and it felt continually cold, like her body heat could never quite warm it up. She was just imagining it, of course, but the feeling of unease never quite left her.

She almost felt branded. Like the whole world could now see that she belonged to someone, that she was *his*.

“I think you got hit on the head during that fight,” Vivian said bluntly. “You can’t be serious about marrying Arrin!”

Feeling her defences going up, Merlynn crossed her arms and glared at her sister. “And why not? He’s kind, funny, patient, a good warrior and it’s what’s right for the kingdom,” she defended.

“But you don’t love him,” Vivian said, equally certain of herself.

She wanted to argue, she did, but Vivian had a point. She didn't love Arrin. But as she toyed with the ring, she realized how final it all was. Betrothals were almost as binding as a marriage contract. "That doesn't matter," she said, deflating. "He'll be kind to me, and the kingdom is more important than--"

"That's horse shit!"

Merlynn's head whipped around. Had Vivian really just...? "What?"

"You were going to say that the kingdom is more important than what you want, but that's simply not true. How am I supposed to rely on your advice when you'll be too busy being miserable?"

Merlynn shook her head. "I wouldn't be miserable, I told you, he'll be kind,"

"Kind my arse. He can be the best man in the world, and it wouldn't matter to you. Because he's not Arthur."

"Well what do you propose I do?" Merlynn shouted, springing up from the bench. "Should I throw caution to the wind and run to Arthur, hoping he feels the same way and leaving *your* kingdom with a political scandal and possible war to deal with?" she hissed.

Vivian's eyes turned sad, and for the first time in this conversation, she looked like the future Queen as opposed to her big sister. "It's all too rare that people like us get to be with the people they love, Mellie," she said softly. "You should take your chance while you still can, before it's too late."

And with that, the blonde princess stood up and walked back into the castle, the picture of demure grace.

Merlynn was left staring after her sister, with no idea where that piece of wisdom had come from. As her eyes slid over the rest of the courtyard, she noticed that she hadn't been the only one watching her sister leave. Rowan was standing on the opposite end of the square, near the gates, staring at the door Vivian had just gone through. His face was blank, which wasn't unusual for the royal advisor, but his stillness was.

Although... now that Merlynn thought about it, she'd seen him act this way before. Merlynn looked back over to the doorway Vivian had disappeared through. Rowan did have a tendency to stare after her sister. Not that this was uncommon; many men stared at her sister, but Rowan... he wasn't the type to lust after a woman. He was honourable and respectful towards women, especially the Princesses.

Now that she thought about it, she wondered how she could have missed it. Rowan was in love with Vivian. And Merlynn had a sneaking suspicion that Vivian felt the same way.

That might also explain why Merlynn hadn't heard of Vivian flirting with anyone for months. Or had it been longer than that? She glanced back to Rowan, but he was busy speaking to one of the knights who was to accompany her.

Why hadn't Vivian said anything? They shared everything, especially now that Merlynn's secret no longer stood between them. Then again, she hadn't told Vivian about her feelings for Arthur. But that was different. Obviously, she didn't need to tell her sister about that.

"Milady?"

Merlynn was shaken from her troubled thoughts when Lancelot came to stand before her. "Yes?"

He looked worried, but it didn't seem like he wanted to ask out in public like this. "The men are ready and the supply wagons are loaded. We're awaiting your signal."

She shook her head. Her contemplations about her sister and possible paramour would have to wait. "Of course. Cian-"

"Is already waiting for you by the gates, milady. I took the liberty of finishing saddling him up," Lancelot answered without missing a beat.

"Right. I supposed we'll go then," she said, leading the way out of the gates. She passed Rowan, who was now standing by the King and Queen as they waited to see her off.

She quickly mounted Cian and glanced over the assembled men. She was only taking the bare minimum; 24 men who were guarding 7 wagons full of provisions, including all of the men who had accompanied her to the druid camp. It was more than she had liked to take with her - more mouths to feed once they were in Camelot - but it was necessary.

Her father stepped forward and said a few generic words that nonetheless made it clear that he was doing this to help the people, and not their monarchy. Merlynn knew there was some unease and confusion about why she was going, and not, say, Sir Fredrik, considering that the last time she was there - officially - she'd been poisoned. Most of the nobles didn't much care, but there was some anger among her many friends in the castle staff. Not wanting her father to be criticised more than necessary, Merlynn decided to say something herself.

"Thank you, father. As you said, helping the people of Camelot is our priority. They have done no wrong, yet their families, their children are starving. I won't deny that Uther has wronged us, especially my family. But I am willing to see beyond that to help the innocents who need it. Many of you met the Prince of Camelot while he was here visiting. I know he gained the respect of many and the admiration of even more. There is no doubt in my mind that he would do the same if Galdara were the one in need. That is the reason I volunteered for this mission, despite my father's concerns for my safety. Luckily, he saw the necessity and wisdom in sending an emissary from the royal family. As well as two dozen of Galdara's best men," she said passionately, gesturing to the men behind her. They all stood a little straighter as she spoke of them. Merlynn grinned slyly. "And let's face it, we all know our men are worth at least two of Camelot's!"

The people cheered. "Three, milady!" someone shouted over the din, causing some chuckles.

"Three indeed," she said softly, before raising her voice again once the laughter had died down. "We will return as we always do; victorious and with a mission successfully completed

behind us!”

Another cheer went up as Merlynn urged Cian into a walk, knowing her men would follow. Her father nodded at her, her mother offered a proud smile, and Vivian - who had been standing in a doorway behind them, unseen - just stared. Her words ran through Merlynn’s head.

*It’s all too rare that people like us get to be with the people they love, Mellie. You should take your chance while you still can, before it’s too late.*

Merlynn hoped to the Goddess that Vivian was wrong; that she hadn’t just made a mistake she’d forever regret.

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It took the group the better part of a day and a half to get to the border. The wagons were slowing them down, but there was no helping it. Merlynn rode alongside Lancelot in the middle of the group, directly behind one of the wagons. Which was how she noticed it.

“Stop!” she shouted, quickly dismounting and going to the cart.

“Merlynn, what’s wrong?” Lancelot asked, quickly coming to stand beside her.

“Look,” she said, gazing at the grain that was spilling out of one of the bags on the cart. It was black and smelled like it had been rotting in a damp cellar for a week.

“A bad batch?” Lancelot asked, but he looked as troubled as Merlynn felt.

To make sure, Merlynn opened up another sack, but found the same. “Captain, where are we?” she asked when she noticed him coming her way.

“Just across the border, my lady,” he answered.

Looking over, Lancelot quirked an eyebrow in askance. “Camelot’s a fertile land, has been for generations. And now suddenly they face a famine? And our grain was fine, but we cross the border and it’s rotten?” she said.

“Magic?” he whispered.

Nodding, Merlynn turned around. “Captain, I’ll need you to take these wagons and turn back. Once you cross the border, check the food. If it’s still rotten, dispose of it, if not, take it back to Galdara and inform my father of what’s happened,” she said decisively as she walked back over to Cian.

“You speak as if you’re not joining us, my lady?” the captain inquired.

“I’ll be going ahead to Camelot with Lancelot. If this is magic, they’ll need to know, and they might need help dealing with the sorcerer,” she replied. She swung into the saddle, patting Cian on the neck as he tossed his mane.

The captain looked uncertain. “What will I tell your father, my lady?”

She paused. “Tell him I’ll save them,” she said simply. And with that, she urged Cian on and sped further into Camelot, towards the city. Whatever was happening there, Merlynn would find out and stop it.

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Arthur sighed as he looked over the line of people queueing up to receive a handful of grain. His people were starving, and there was nothing he could do.

“It isn’t fair,” Morgana said as she walked up to him, frowning down at them. Their position on the castle ramparts gave them a good view, unfortunately.

“There’s nothing we can do, Morgana,” he said, trying to sound strong. He knew his people would look to him now more than ever, but he wasn’t sure what to do.

She turned to look at him. “Have you tried to send word to our allies? Surely Galdara wouldn’t abandon us now,” she asked, a slight pleading tone sneaking into her voice.

Arthur leaned his elbows on the battlements and dropped his head into his hands. “They’ve officially broken ties with us since Merlynn nearly died, remember? Besides, even if they could help, father won’t let me send word out. He thinks our enemies would take advantage and attack.”

Morgana scoffed. “That man would let the people starve to save his pride,” she snapped.

Arthur sighed and straightened up again. He wanted to argue with her, to say that his father would never do that, but... lately, he’d noticed that his father was not quite as close to the perfect King as Arthur had always thought he was. “Even so, he’s the King, and all we can do is try to reason with him and-”

“Arthur, look!” Morgana interrupted him.

While he’d been talking, she’d turned back to look at the city, and had apparently spotted something. He carefully shoved his initial irritation to the back of his mind as he turned to look where she was pointing. Two figures on horseback were approaching on the main road. They’d probably reach the outer gate in a few minutes at that pace.

It only took Arthur a second to identify them. One was clearly a woman, draped in a pale purple riding cloak and long hair that was tied in a braid. The other was a man in chainmail, the Galdaran crest clearly visible on his chest.

“Merlynn,” he breathed. He knew the man had to be Lancelot - the other knight had barely left Merlynn’s side since he’d been appointed her protector - but he could honestly care less.

Before he really realized what he was doing, he took off for the central courtyard, Morgana hot on his heels. All he knew was that Merlynn was actually *back*, and he was going to see her again.

By the time he and - whom Merlynn would call - his sister had reached the courtyard, the two riders had ridden through the gate and were coming to a halt at the foot of the steps. Though people had other things on their minds, they still stopped and stared as the Princess of Galdara dismounted, wearing trousers, no less.

Arthur stood at the top of the stairs, suddenly frozen. Even Morgana - barely half a step behind him - stayed where she was. Merlynn surveyed the crowd with a grim frown. And then her eyes found him.

Her face lit up, and Arthur could feel himself start to grin. He should probably keep his composure, but with Merlynn smiling at him, how could he? He did manage to go down the stairs at a relatively sedate pace, and she was able to keep standing by her horse, even though Arthur could tell she desperately wanted to run. To him or towards whatever problem faced Camelot, he couldn't tell. Perhaps it was both?

Finally, he came to a stop in front of her, and bowed. "Merlynn."

"Prat," she greeted, grinning widely. "I've come to rescue you."

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Yes, you're quite impressive. I'm sure the famine will now decide to stop existing for fear of awakening your wrath."

She shrugged playfully. "I don't know, I can be quite terrifying," she said, winking at Lancelot.

"Lancelot," Arthur said, extending his hand to the man.

"Prince Arthur, good to see you again."

"I just wish it was under better circumstances," Morgana said, glancing over the people still waiting to get their share of grain. "I'm Morgana," she told Lancelot, offering a polite nod.

Merlynn winced. "Where are my manners? This is Sir Lancelot, my personal protector and friend," she explained.

The knight in question bowed low. "It's my pleasure, my lady." He'd been smiling politely, but something behind Morgana drew his attention. Merlynn glanced over and saw Gwen standing with some of the townspeople, talking to them, and likely trying her best to bolster their resolve. Throwing another glance Lancelot's way, she decided she really was going to need to keep an eye on her friends. They probably wouldn't need the help, but she'd be more than happy to provide it.

"Not that we're not grateful to see you, but what are you doing here?" Arthur asked.

As Merlynn turned her gaze back to him, she couldn't help but smile again. Which, in turn made the corners of his mouth pull up a little. So he was glad to see her. Fantastic. "I told you, we're here to rescue you. It appears you have a bit of a magical problem," she said.

Arthur's smile melted away immediately. "We'll talk further inside, come on," he said, gesturing for Lancelot and Merlynn to follow him. Lancelot was able to tear his gaze away

from Gwen and followed Arthur first. Morgana waited to walk beside Merlynn.

“So, Lancelot seems nice,” Morgana said, making sure that they were out of the men’s earshot as she linked their arms. Arthur shot a look over his shoulder, and Merlynn threw him a smile in reassurance. They’d have plenty of time to talk in private.

“He is. He saved me from that Griffin, remember?”

“I vaguely recall Arthur saying something of the sort,” Morgana conceded. “But that’s not what I meant.”

“He’s my friend, Morgana, a very good friend, but nothing more than that. I don’t think you missed that look he sent Gwen,” Merlynn replied, raising an eyebrow cheekily.

“I did not. I just was just making sure,” the taller woman said. “I did, however, see you and Arthur looking at each other. Something I need to know?” she asked slyly.

At that, Merlynn blushed. “Nothing you need concern yourself with for the time being, Morgana,” she managed to say, keeping her eyes resolutely on the ground.

“Not *yet* perhaps, but I have a feeling I’ll get involved before long. After all, I did hear a rumour about an engagement in Galdara...” she trailed off, and Merlynn looked over to see her friend looking at her sympathetically.

Sighing, she realized she’d have to tell Morgana everything. “You heard right. Arrin proposed marriage and I accepted.”

“I don’t know him,” Morgana said gently.

“He’s... a friend. I’ve known him since I was a little girl. He’s kind and he accepts that I’m not your average princess,” Merlynn explained.

Morgana nodded in understanding. “At least he’s not awful. And you know him, that’s more that can be said for most women in our position.”

“Yes, I’m truly blessed,” she replied, perhaps a tad bitterly.

Stopping her with a hand on her arm, Morgana looked at Merlynn soothingly. “But you don’t love him. You love someone else.”

It was a statement, not a question, but Merlynn nodded all the same. “I finally realize how I feel, and... But I have to, Morgana, for my people, my father’s kingdom.”

“You don’t need to explain to me, Merlynn, I understand. I’m just happy that you don’t have to marry some old unknown nobleman.”

“And I’m happy Uther hasn’t forced you into a similar arrangement. You still have the chance to marry for love,” Merlynn said with a smile as they resumed to walk towards Arthur’s chambers.



“You do too, you know. You’re not married yet,” Morgana pointed out.

“No, but turning down this marriage without a suitable replacement would mean war against Caerleon. We can’t afford that now, especially since we still haven’t resumed relations with Camelot. Perhaps together we’d stand a chance, and Caerleon wouldn’t dare attack, but as it stands...”

“When will you tell Arthur?” Morgana asked, glancing her way.

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it. Let’s focus on stopping this famine first.”

## Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think! And tell me if any of you are participating in NaNo and how it's going!

# Looking at things differently

## Chapter Summary

Some Lance/Gwen interaction, a bit of Merlynn/Arthur and some introspective stuff, because I had to ;)

## Chapter Notes

You know, I'm at 41 chapters, and it's not even getting close to the end... I'm starting to think that maybe I need to make my chapters longer, or this'll become a monster with 100+ chapters...

Oh well, we'll cross that bridge when I get to, like chapter 70 :p  
Anyway, enjoy!

### C41:

They all met up again in Arthur's chambers. "So, what do you know about this? You said something about magic?" Arthur asked, looking at Merlynn.

She nodded. "We'd brought supply wagons, but the moment we crossed the border, they started rotting. Magic is the only explanation. I sent my men back with the supplies and to warn my father," she explained.

"I can't believe your father let you come in the first place," Morgana said.

"Convincing him wasn't without its difficulties," Merlynn said, with a conspiratorial grin. "But father has some trouble saying no to me. Besides, it's Uther he has a problem with, not the people of Camelot."

"We'll need Gaius, he knows more about these things than anyone," Arthur said, bringing the conversation back on topic.

"Lancelot and I will find him," Morgana said quickly, giving Merlynn a significant look. Subtle Morgana was not. But luckily, Arthur could be a little obtuse sometimes, and so hadn't noticed. Lancelot, too, gave Merlynn a look, but it was more one of concern. He didn't know much about Camelot, but he knew that it wasn't the safest place for the princess. Merlynn nodded her assurances, and sent the knight and the lady on their way.

Which left her alone with Arthur.

He looked troubled, frowning down at the table they were standing around. "I don't understand what magic could have done this," he muttered.

Merlynn wasn't entirely certain he'd been talking to her, but she answered anyway. "It's very powerful, more powerful than I've ever seen. No normal sorcerer or witch could have done this. Maybe 3 high priestesses, but they've been hunted to extinction. There's a rumour that there's one left, but even that's true, she couldn't have done this, not on her own..."

"Then what?" Arthur asked, looking up at her. He looked so lost, so helpless, that Merlynn couldn't help herself. She stepped around the table and took one of his hands in her own. "There are some curses placed on ancient artifacts that could have done this, but it's unlikely..." She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Picked up anything unusual lately?"

Shaking his head, Arthur returned his gaze back to the table, but left his hand in hers. It was warm and callused, and Merlynn needed both of her smaller hand to wrap around one of his. "We'll fix this, Arthur. I promise."

He glanced up at her briefly and offered a half-hearted smile, before going back to broodily frowning at the woodgrain. "I hope you're right," he said after a while, as he moved his gaze to their joined hands. His frown deepened. "That's new," he said, nodding to the silver ring that sat on the ring finger of her left hand.

Suddenly flustered, Merlynn tried to retract her hands, but Arthur held on, studying the ring earnestly now. "The silver and amethyst represent Galdara, I presume, but I don't recognize the crest," he said.

Merlynn wished dearly that she'd taken the damn thing off now. Ever since leaving home it had been so easy to pretend that nothing had changed, that she wasn't engaged to be married, but now... telling Arthur would make it more real than anything else did. More so than the banquet, and more than Arrin putting that accursed ring on her finger. "I... It's the crest of Starhold," she said gingerly, still trying subtly to pull her hand back.

"Why would you be wearing the crest of another house on your hand?" he asked carefully, but his tone suggested that he already knew the answer.

"Arthur, I meant to tell you, I swear. But being here... it was so easy to pretend it wasn't happening."

"Why?" he snapped.

"Because I am to be one of them. I'm to marry Arrin of Starhold."

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As soon as Lancelot and Morgana had left Arthur's chambers, Morgana turned on the knight. "I'm perfectly capable of finding my own way to Gaius' chambers."

"I didn't doubt it," Lancelot replied diplomatically. The Lady Morgana was anything but a typical noblewoman, though Lancelot really should have known that, given that the woman

was Merlynn's dearest friend.

"What I do need, is for Gwen, my maid, to join us. I saw her in the central courtyard, would you fetch her for me?" she asked, and kept a straight face. But Lancelot had heard enough about the woman to know that she usually had an ulterior motive. Not that he would discern it at the moment, but still.

"Of course, my lady," he said with a shallow bow, and turned on his heel to head back to the courtyard. The sooner he got away from the strange lady, the better.

When he arrived back at the square, he didn't see Gwen right away, so he asked one of the families waiting in line. Apparently both Gwen and Morgana were very well known, so they could point her out to him immediately. She was talking to a family with two small children, a worried frown marring her pretty face. With her delicate features and floral pink dress, it really was hard to believe she was just a servant. Or maybe that was just because Lancelot thought she was far too pretty to be a mere maid.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Gwen looked up and met his eyes. A hesitant smile formed on her lips and she held up a hand in greeting. Lancelot took that as an invitation, and made his way over. Gwen met him halfway.

"Lancelot, right?" she said once they'd reached one another. "I mean, that's your name, isn't it? I'm Gwen, by the way, in case you didn't remember," she rambled, and once again Lancelot had to smile. She really was endearing.

"It is, and I remember. You're Morgana's maid, and Merlynn's friend," he said.

Gwen frowned. "I don't remember mentioning Merlynn the last time we met," she said, looking a little confused.

Lancelot dearly wanted to smooth out the wrinkle that had formed on her forehead, but managed to keep his hands to himself. "You didn't. I'm..."

"Oh, you're from Galdara!" Gwen interrupted as she glanced at the crest proudly displayed on his tunic. "I didn't know!"

"I'm not originally from there, but it is my home now. I was a peasant, but Merlynn gave me the chance to be a knight. Her father made me her personal protector," he explained. He still felt a little uneasy about saying anything about the Griffin, so he left that part out. He felt uncomfortable claiming that victory as his own, when it had been Merlynn who had saved him.

Gwen, however, looked impressed. "Really? In Camelot only nobles may become knights," she said.

"I'm aware. It was my dream to become a knight in Camelot," he said, a little bashfully. "But serving King Olaf and Princess Merlynn is also an honour, and one I value highly."

Smiling, Gwen gestured for him to follow her as she led him into the castle. "It sounds like you've found your place," she said kindly.

"I do love Galdara, but..." he trailed off, grinning.

"But what?" she prodded.

"But I swore an oath to Merlynn. If she decides to live anywhere else, I'll follow her," he said, still smiling. He wondered if Gwen knew the reason for his mirth. Considering how close she was to the Galdaran Princess, he suspected she would.

"Anywhere in particular?" she asked, suppressing an answering grin, even as she narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"Well, I know Merlynn loved Camelot. There's a lot here for her."

"You mean a certain prince?" she asked, grinning widely now.

Nodding, he gestured to the left. "Morgana is with Gaius. And I'd have to be blind not to notice those two."

"I'm glad it's not just me, I was afraid I was making it all up!" Gwen laughed.

Lancelot shook his head. "Not at all. You should have seen them together in Galdara. When they spoke to each other, it's like nothing else in the world existed."

Gwen smiled, but then she sighed. "But knowing Arthur and Merlynn, they'd rather eat glass than admit it."

"Perhaps they need a little push..." Lancelot suggested innocently.

Raising an eyebrow at him, Gwen grinned even wider. "I like how you think, Sir Lancelot."

"The feeling is mutual," he replied. Having Gwen as an ally would make things easier. And if he happened to get to know her better in the process, that would be an added boon.

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After she'd revealed her engagement to him, Arthur had needed to clear his head, so he'd headed to the western parapet.

He'd looked forward to seeing her again for so long, had wanted to get to know her, the way a man might get to know the woman he's interested in, but now... she belonged to another man.

Unbidden, a conversation they'd had came back to him

*"Excuse me, but I'm my own person. I don't need anyone to keep me in check! I don't belong to anyone but myself," she replied heatedly.*

*Arthur frowned. "You belong to your father," he said, like it was obvious. "And once you marry, you'll belong to your husband. It's not a matter of opinion, Merlynn, that's just fact."*

*She searched his face. "Do you really believe that? That women belong to the men in their lives? Can we not make decisions for ourselves? Make our own choices, our own mistakes? Or are you just saying that because it's been told to you your whole life?" She was genuinely curious what he believed. She also hoped he thought as she did, that men and women could be equals.*

*Arthur looked away. "It's not up to me, it's the law."*

*"That's rubbish, and you know it. Women can be just as smart and skilful as men."*

As always, she'd surprised and irritated him, as only Merlynn could. He knew she'd argue that she didn't belong to this Arrin person, but in the eyes of the law, she did. Or, at least, she would once they... Gods, he couldn't believe she was going to get married to another man. An unreasonable desire to challenge her intended to a duel rose up in him, but he pushed it aside. He knew nothing of the man, was barely aware of the reputation of his house, and besides that, he was in another country.

Sighing, Arthur lowered his head into his hands. He needed to focus on something else. Merlynn had said that this famine was the result of magic. He could search the city for signs of sorcery, though he doubted he'd find it. No, in his experience, those who practised magic did it from the shadows, hiding like rats. Maybe he should send some men to comb the forests around Camelot?

"You look terrible."

Arthur started at the voice, and looked up to see Morgana standing a little ways off. When she saw that she had his attention, she came closer. "In fact, you look defeated," she said conversely.

"Did you know?" He'd meant to tell her to go away, but the question came out instead.

"That Merlynn is to be married? I'd heard rumours, but she confirmed them only a little while ago," she explained. "I'd ask why you're so interested, but I think we both know the reason."

Arthur sighed and turned to face the city again. This wasn't a spot he usually visited, not until he'd found Merlynn up here once. The city looked different from the western side. He was sure Merlynn would say something along the lines of 'looking at things differently can make you see them more clearly' or some such nonsense.

"I hear he's a good man," Morgana went on, as if there hadn't been a slightly too-long pause in the conversation. "But as I understand it, the union was more one of necessity than affection. Starhold lies on the border with Caerleon. Without that fortress, Caerleon could just march into Galdara and take over their mines as he pleases."

He hadn't asked for an explanation, but... Arthur had to admit that he'd been so hurt he'd just assumed that it had been a match of affection. Merlynn wasn't the type to be forced into anything. But... she did care for her people a great deal. If she thought a negative answer could put them in danger... After all, wouldn't he have done the same?

"Doesn't matter," he said. He was calmer now, and not quite as confused and hurt as before, but the situation remained unchanged. "A marriage contract isn't so easily broken."

"Tsk, tsk. I've never known you to give up so easily, Arthur," Morgana said, as she turned to leave. "After all, if she doesn't love him, doesn't that mean there's still hope?"

"Hope for what?" he called after her.

She just shot him a look over her shoulder that clearly said 'what do *you* think, idiot?'

After Morgana had vanished from sight again, Arthur turned his gaze back to the city. It really *did* look different from here. It was getting dark, but a lot of people were still milling about the streets. Arthur might not know how to resolve the situation with Merlynn, but perhaps appointing a curfew would help the other issue on his mind. After all, didn't most magic users prefer to use the cover of darkness?

# The Keeper

## Chapter Notes

So, not as long as the last chapter, but considering you guys only had to wait a few days, I think you'll be okay with that.

Also, some fluff in this chapter, though I'm sure you'll all be very angry with me. Keep in mind that I promised a happy ending! :p

Enjoy!

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

### C42:

The thing about showing up in a foreign kingdom when you're a Princess, is that you're obligated to let the King know you're there. And given the strained relationship between not only their respective nations, but their families, Merlynn was not looking forward to it.

A servant answered her knock. The young man took one look at her and then opened the door wider, gesturing for her to come in. He then bowed and took his leave.

Merlynn was a little confused, but decided not to question it, and looked around for the King instead. She found him sitting in his chair in front of the fire, even though it wasn't that cold out. The room was dark, but she had no trouble seeing the bags under Uther's eyes in the light of the fire.

"Sire?" she said softly, taking a step closer.

"This is magic's doing..." he whispered, never looking up from the fire. "Isn't it?"

Merlynn hesitated, but took his talking to her as an invitation and moved to stand closer. She dared not sit down in the other chair, though. "I believe so."

He never even acknowledged her presence, and Merlynn was starting to think that the King was unwell. She glanced at the door, unsure whether she should call for Gaius or not. But before she could make a decision, the King spoke again. "Magic," he spat. "Why must that vile evil endure?"

It was a rhetorical question, obviously, but Merlynn couldn't stop from feeling a spike of anger. "It's not magic that's evil, Sire, it's the people that use it. Humans are fallible, magic just... is."

Uther let out a derogatory snort. "Magic is evil. It corrupts everything it touches." Then, he finally raised his eyes to meet hers, and she wished he hadn't. He looked at her with such unadulterated hatred... How could anyone hold onto such negativity for so long?



“Every type of power can corrupt, whether it’s political, emotional or magical. It’s up to the people who have such power to be strong enough to resist using it for their own gain,” she said, as patiently as she could. Uther may hate her, but at that moment... he looked more fragile than she’d ever seen him. Perhaps this famine was taking its toll on the King, as it was on his people.

Merlynn was vaguely aware of the door opening, but didn’t pay it any mind.

Uther snarled at her comment and jumped up, though he looked ready to fall back down a moment later. “All it’s good for is taking away that which we value the most!” he screamed. “All it does is pretend to help and then steal whatever you hold most dear! I won’t let you do the same!” he yelled, grabbing the first thing within his reach. It was white, and long, and in the flickering light of the fire it was hard to see, but something inside Merlynn identified it for her.

“Is that...?” she asked breathlessly, her eyes fixed on the item in the King’s hand.

He swung it at her, but was so unsteady on his feet, he fell back into his chair instead. “You’re a filthy witch even if I can’t prove it,” he spat, and Merlynn finally realized that she’d been right when she thought he was unwell. He was delirious.

“Is that what I think it is?” she pressed, taking a step forwards and reaching for it.

Uther clutched it to his chest. “It was a gift from my son. I won’t let you take him away from me,” he said, sounding as angry as before, but also exhausted. Behind them, the door opened and hurried footsteps came their way. A moment later, Gaius was standing between Merlynn and the King and was forcing a concoction into the King’s mouth. As she glanced around, she saw the servant from before, standing by the door anxiously.

As soon as the King had swallowed the potion, Gaius turned around and studied his niece. “Are you alright, child?” he asked kindly.

“I’m fine. Does he have a fever?” she asked, her eyes still on the item in Uther’s hands.

Gaius nodded gravely. “He’s been weakened from the lack of food. He’s refused to eat anything since the famine was discovered,” he explained.

It was strange for Merlynn to hear of Uther doing something so selfless. In her eyes, he’d always been the monster of her nightmares. “I should go,” she said absently, but made no move to leave.

Uther, meanwhile, had slumped in his chair. Presumably because the draught Gaius had given him had been a sleeping potion. Gaius, satisfied that she was alright, turned back to the King. “Yes, you should,” he said, gently disentangling the item from the King’s hands. “And take this with you,” he said. “It wouldn’t do for the King to hurt himself with it.”

And with that, Gaius handed it over to Merlynn, who numbly took it. She spared the ailing King one last glance, before leaving the darkened chambers. Her feet carried her

automatically to one of the smaller, inner gardens. It reminded her a lot of one of the gardens in Galdara; one that she visited... with Arthur? That couldn't be right. Or...

She remembered the banquet after Vivian's tournament. She'd drunk a little too much and... Arthur had walked her back to her chambers, but she'd ducked into the garden, wanting to see it in the moonlight. Then, Arthur had given her his furs and had picked her up to carry her back. She remembered the feeling of his arms around her.

She'd said that she could walk by herself, and he'd agreed - though that might have been sarcasm - and... And he'd said something that she hadn't caught at the time, but now, looking back... he'd said she was amazing.

"Merlynn?" As if summoned by her thoughts, the Prince in question stepped into the garden, looking worried. "Gaius said you visited my father. Are you alright? Did he upset you?" he asked.

Merlynn turned to face him.

Arthur... here was this amazing man she'd unwillingly given her heart to, a man who kept surprising her and challenging her at every turn. A man who'd apparently started caring about her long before she'd realized what her feelings for him even meant. And yet...

"Did you kill it?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Arthur frowned at her, clearly lost. "I'm sorry?"

Merlynn held up the horn she hadn't let go of. "Did you kill it?" she asked slowly, the volume of her voice raising as her anger did.

"The unicorn? What does that have to do with-"

"Answer me!" Merlynn interrupted.

"I... yes. But what does this have to do with anything?" he finally said, looking more confused than ever. He didn't even look sorry.

"It's you," she said under her breath. "It's all your fault."

"What?"

"You're the one who brought the curse!" she shouted. A small voice in the back of her head suggested that he probably didn't know the repercussions of what he'd done, but she quickly silenced it. "How could you kill a unicorn?"

"Merlynn, I don't know what you're talking about? What does that unicorn have to do with the curse?" Arthur asked, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

Merlynn jumped back, not wanting him to touch her. "It was a *unicorn*, Arthur. They're beings of pure magic, pure innocence." She took a deep breath. Obviously, Arthur didn't understand. She'd have to *make* him understand. "According to legend, unicorns only show

themselves to those who are pure of heart. Killing one proves the opposite and activates a curse. It'll make the killer suffer their worst nightmare. Don't you see, Arthur? You care about your people, so that's what the curse is taking from you. And you'll have to stand there helpless to do anything as they starve to death."

Her anger was dissipating now. Those past few weeks, she'd been building Arthur up in her mind, like he could do no wrong. She'd forgotten about his flaws, his mistakes. But, as she studied him now, she realized that he was just human. He hadn't known about what the unicorn symbolized, what it meant to harm one. And he probably hadn't been able to sense it, since his aversion for all things magic would have kept him from feeling the magic in the air.

Arthur hadn't said anything, just stared at the ground, looking stricken. To realize that he was the one who'd brought this suffering to his people... that was probably even worse than just having to see them suffer. "You should leave," he whispered.

"What?"

"I brought this curse to Camelot, but you don't belong here. Go home, Merlynn," he said, finally looking at her.

He was trying to protect her. "I can't. The moment I arrived in the city, I became part of the curse. Because you... Because we're friends, and the curse means for you to see what you care most for suffer," she said. She could feel it, the urge to stay. Which is probably why the whole population hadn't been flocking to neighbouring countries. No, instead they all came to the capitol, where their Prince could see exactly what he'd wrought.

"Then how do I stop it?" he asked, his voice smaller than she'd ever heard it. Even though she'd been angry with him - still was on some level - she couldn't help but feel her heart break for him. He so badly wanted to do what was right, to please his father and be a good leader to his people. He didn't deserve this.

"You prove that your heart is pure," she said simply. But even as she spoke the words, she felt compelled to look behind Arthur, and saw a man standing there. He wore a ratty white cloak and leaned on a staff. And he seemed incredibly sad. Merlynn wanted to speak to him, to ask him how they could make this right, but... this was Arthur's test, and she'd have to let him prove his worth alone.

"How do I do that? How do I even know that it's true?"

She looked back at the Prince. "Because I know it is, Arthur. If it wasn't..." Might as well say it now. "I wouldn't care for you as I do," she whispered.

He'd already been looking at her, but at her words, his focus seemed to sharpen, and she could tell that he wanted to ask her what she meant. But she really couldn't answer that now. This wasn't the right time. "You'll be tested, most likely." Behind Arthur, the Keeper nodded gravely.

Arthur frowned. "Tested..." he muttered.

“What is it?”

“Yesterday night, a man stole some grain... I let him go and the water returned to the well...” he explained. He didn’t look sure of himself - something Merlynn wasn’t used to seeing from him.

She nodded. “That was probably a first test. Has anything else happened?”

Shaking his head, Arthur sighed. “No. At least I don’t think so. Is there any way I can make this next test come sooner? The people are hungry.”

“With clean water, they’ll last a little while longer,” Merlynn reasoned. “All you can do is wait.”

He shook his head. “No, the poorer families can’t last long. The children and elderly are already in danger, I can’t wait for them to lose their lives for a mistake I made, it’s not fair.”

“You can’t help where your heart lies, Arthur. Were you a more selfish man, the curse would have targeted whatever you cared for most.”

“Then this curse doesn’t know me very well,” he said, his blue eyes impossibly clear as they locked onto hers. “Because right now all I want to do is kiss you, even though you belong to another man.”

Merlynn felt her mouth open. “What?”

“Then again, maybe the curse brought you here for that very reason,” Arthur went on, as if his previous comment hadn’t just turned her entire world upside down.

“I... what?” she said. How eloquent she was being... She sent a furtive glance over Arthur’s shoulder, but the Keeper was gone. Had he heard what Arthur had said? Did it matter?

“I can’t wait, Merlynn,” he said, stepping even closer and gently taking her hands. They tingled where her skin touched his, and she felt her breath hitch. Was he...? “I need to go find this Keeper and make him undo the curse. I can’t wait for him to decide to give me another test. I’ll find you after,” he said, released her hands, and strode out of the garden, leaving Merlynn more confused than ever.

“What, what?” she called out, even though Arthur had left and couldn’t hear her. Shaking her head to get out of this stupor, she ran after him. “Arthur, wait!”

The light was fading, and though the curfew wouldn’t be in effect for another hour or so, it wasn’t exactly safe to go traipsing through the forest trying to find a magical being like the Keeper of unicorns. And Arthur might need her help.

So, Merlynn ran straight for the stables. Arthur had a head start and knew the castle and the surrounding forest better than her, so she’d need Cian to catch up to him. Eames, the marshall, didn’t even look up as she flew into the stables and saddled her horse in all haste. Her hands were shaking and she couldn’t get this damn strap to latch. “Curfew’s due in an

hour, Princess. Whatever you're doing, be quick," he said as he batted her fingers away from the saddle and did up the strap himself while she put on Cian's bridle.

"I'll be back soon," she assure the marshall as she swung into the saddle, regardless of the way her dress hitched up. A riding dress, this was not.

She urged Cian to run, riding out of the stables and through the gates at a gallop. But she only got to the edge of the forest when Cian suddenly reared up, and she had to hold on for dear life. When the stallion calmed down and stood back upright, Merlynn could see the Keeper standing in front of her horse, looking as calm as ever. "You could have killed me!" she shouted, dismounting quickly and making sure her horse was alright. But Cian looked normal, he wasn't even breathing hard, almost like he hadn't just been frightened. Or perhaps the Keeper of unicorns put him at ease.

"Your companion would not have let you fall. The two of you belong together," the Keeper said.

She ignored that statement for the time being; she had more important things to do. "Where's Arthur?"

"Undergoing his test," the Keeper said serenely. "Whether he passes or fails is entirely up to him. But you mustn't interfere."

"Why not?"

"Because it is not your test."

Merlynn sighed. "And if he fails?"

The Keeper paused, his eyes grave. "Then Camelot is doomed."

## Chapter End Notes

Okay, before you all start screaming at me, you should look at this from the bright side: at least their relationship is *\*finally\** taking a step forwards :p

I promise there will be some actual kissing or something in the next chapter. Not a dream, not an illusion, actual skin-to-skin contact :D And I'll try to update asap!

# The Labyrinth

## Chapter Notes

So... Let's start with positives first, okay? 1) I FINALLY updated! Yay! 2) There's plenty of fluff in this chapter. 3) It's about 50% longer than my average chapters. On the downside... Well, I'll let you read the chapter first. Enjoy!

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

### C43: The Labyrinth

*Previously:*

*She ignored that statement for the time being; she had more important things to do. "Where's Arthur?"*

*"Undergoing his test," the Keeper said serenely. "Whether he passes or fails is entirely up to him. But you mustn't interfere."*

*"Why not?"*

*"Because it is not your test."*

*Merlynn sighed. "And if he fails?"*

*The Keeper paused, his eyes grave. "Then Camelot is doomed."*

*/\*/*

The Keeper refused to let Merlynn pass to find Arthur. She was worried he'd do something idiotic in his haste to get rid of the curse. She'd finally given up and had mounted Cian again, waiting in the saddle for the Keeper to let her pass.

Suddenly, the old man glanced over his shoulder and vanished. Merlynn quickly urged Cian to on, going in the direction the Keeper had looked. It wasn't long before she stumbled onto Arthur speaking to him.

"I am Anhora, Keeper of the unicorns," the old man said.

"*You're* the one who's cursed my people? You must undo it!"

Anhora shook his head, and Merlynn had the feeling he felt as sad as she did. "I cannot."

Merlynn slid out of the saddle and stepped closer, just as Arthur ran a hand through his hair agitatedly. "Why? You put this curse on me, you can take it away!"

Sliding a hand over his shoulder, Merlynn tried to calm him down. “I don’t think he controls the curse, Arthur. He activated it when the unicorn died, but it can only be undone if you prove worthy,” she explained quietly. “Magic has rules, just like everything else.”

Arthur balled his fists, but didn’t say anything, so Merlynn dropped her hand from his shoulder to envelop his clenched hand. After a moment, he loosened it and let her hold it.

Anhora looked on silently, but bowed his head to her. *Wise words, Emrys*, he said mentally. Merlynn tried not to respond, because Arthur would definitely notice that, but it was hard. She still wasn’t used to magic users projecting into her mind like that. She could have sworn she saw Anhora smile at her slight wince, before he vanished.

“No, wait!” Arthur called out, stepping away from her and letting go of her hand. “You have to lift the curse!” he shouted. When Anhora didn’t reappear, he slumped and sat down on a nearby log. “He told me that was my last chance...”

“What happened?” she asked softly, coming to sit beside him, but careful not to touch him again.

Arthur sighed and dropped his head into his hands, resting his elbows on his knees. “I mucked it up. I... the man who’d stolen the grain, he’d told me he needed it for his family, so I let him go, but I saw him again here. He had a whole pile of food, and he taunted me... I didn’t know it was just a vision, I got angry and swung my sword.”

This time, Merlynn couldn’t resist. She lay a hand on his shoulder again, and Arthur immediately rested his over it. She wanted to tell him it wasn’t his fault, but really... he shouldn’t have gotten so angry, shouldn’t have used a weapon against what sounded like an unarmed man, even if that man was taunting him. “This is all my fault,” Arthur whispered, and it broke Merlynn’s heart.

“We should go, there’s nothing we can do here,” he said, gently pulling at his hand.

“Go, I’ll be there in a moment,” he said, and Merlynn squeezed his hand in sympathy. He needed to collect himself before he could go back to Camelot and face his people.

“I’ll wait for you by the gates,” she said. Then, she let go of his hand and remounted Cian again, who’d been waiting patiently for her. As she rode out of the clearing again, she felt her anger rise to the surface once more. It wasn’t fair. Anyone would have lost their temper in a situation like that, especially when others were suffering.

As she rode further away from Arthur, she vowed to make this right. She didn’t care if she had to reveal her magic and regrow every single crop in the kingdom, she’d do it. She wasn’t entirely sure her magic could go against a curse of this strength, but she’d do anything to keep Arthur from looking that lost ever again.

“You really believe he is worth that?” Anhora’s voice drifted over to her.

Merlynn glanced at her right and saw the older man walking alongside Cian. “And more,” she said in response to his question.

“And this doesn’t come only from how you feel for the Prince?”

She shook her head. “If he wasn’t worth sacrificing myself for, I wouldn’t care for him as I do,” she replied. “He’s a good man, and he has a good heart. He didn’t know that harming a unicorn is a bad thing, he can’t feel their energy like we can. But he so desperately wants to gain his father’s approval, he wanted to gift the horn to him. I’m not saying it’s right, and I’m not defending what he did. But he did it out of ignorance, not malice.”

Anhora didn’t say anything, but kept pace with the horse.

“He loves his people, he’d do anything for them. He’d gladly die for them if it meant they’d be alright. Yes, he can be stubborn and somewhat closed-minded sometimes, but that’s not who he is inside. That’s who his father tries to make him into.”

“You think I should give him another chance to prove himself,” Anhora said.

It wasn’t a question, but Merlynn nodded all the same. “I believe he deserves one.”

Anhora looked at her, his eyes boring into her, like he could see straight to her soul. “And you would vouch for him?”

She stared right back. “I promise you that if you test him again, he won’t fail. He won’t allow himself to.”

Anhora nodded. “Then I suppose I have little choice. He shall be tested again at the labyrinth of Gedref when the sun is at its highest point. If he fails... None in Camelot will survive.”

/\*/

Arthur was grimly determined when Merlynn told him about Anhora’s ultimatum.

“I suppose I have no choice,” he said as he grabbed his sword.

Merlynn nodded. “We’ll have to leave by nightfall, or we won’t make it in time. Gedref lies on the border, so we need to hurry,” she said, already going over how many supplies they’d need. She would need her bow, of course, and she could ask one of the kitchen maids to-

She lost her train of thought when she noticed Arthur looking at her strangely. “What?” she asked, getting the distinct impression he’d said something she missed.

“You’re not coming,” he said.

Merlynn raised her eyebrows. “Excuse me? I was the one who convinced Anhora to give you another chance! I vouched for you!”

“Nevertheless, it’s no place for a Princess,” he said, already turning around to start packing.

Merlynn fumed. “May I remind you that I’m a better shot than you?” she ground out.



Arthur didn't even turn around. "Perhaps, but that only helps when your enemy is at a safe distance. In close quarters, you wouldn't stand a chance," he said dismissively.

Clenching her jaw, Merlynn was at a loss for words. She was so angry, she could barely speak! How dare that... that prat! Without another word, Merlynn spun on her heel and marched out. If Arthur wasn't going to let her come, she'd find her own way to Gedref.

/\*/

Arthur heard Merlynn slam the door behind her and sighed in relief. He knew she was more than capable, of course, but... But he was hoping that if she got angry enough, she'd go home, where she was safe. If he couldn't pass this test...

He shook his head, clearing it from such thoughts. He *would* pass the test. He *had* to.

By the time the sun went down, Arthur had packed the necessary weapons and supplies and had saddled his horse. The guards never questioned why their prince would leave the castle at such a crucial time, but then, they were probably more worried about their families.

The ride to Gedref passed in a blur. He crested the hill behind the labyrinth just before the sun rose. The labyrinth itself was a mystery. It had been there for as long as anyone could remember, despite numerous attempts at removing it. Uther had ordered it chopped down, and when that didn't work, they tried to burn it. But the labyrinth just remained as it ever was. It was forbidden to enter it, as few people who did ever made it out. And those who did were not unchanged.

Arthur tried his best to forget about the maze's history, though, and focussed on the thing itself. From his position on top of the hill, he saw that it was flanked on two sides by the tall, cliff sides of the mountains, and on the third, lay the sea. It was impossible to reach by boat, he'd heard, because of the treacherous waters and strong winds.

The whole place reeked of magic, and Arthur felt distinctly uncomfortable. But he urged his horse on until he reached the entrance to the maze. He *would* save his people. He had to.

He drew his sword and walked into the labyrinth, doing his best not to feel as though he was willingly walking towards his doom. As soon as he passed the stone archway, something changed. The air grew thicker, and he couldn't hear anything aside from his own breathing and heartbeat. He couldn't even hear his feet hit the dirt.

Shaking it off as a scare tactic, Arthur soldiered on. He had no idea exactly where he was supposed to go, but he reckoned that the sea and the small beach that lay on the other side were the only possible destination. He decided to take one left and one right at all times, making his path a tad winding, but leading towards the other side, nonetheless.

But as he made his way past hedge after hedge, he got the distinct impression that he was being led in circles. He hit many a dead end and when he doubled back, there'd be an extra path he could have sworn wasn't there before. The lack of noise made the experience all the more disconcerting, but Arthur wasn't about to give up. He'd stay in this maze until he starved if he had to, but he *would* succeed.

And then, suddenly, the path he'd been walking ended. There was another stone archway like at the beginning, but the sunlight streaming through his one seemed... strange, somehow.

He stepped out of it onto a rocky beach. The sound of the waves rolling across the pebbled was more soothing than Arthur would have thought possible.

He walked right up to the water's edge before looking down the beach to his right. A man was sitting at a table while Anhora looked on. Frowning, the Prince stepped closer. "What is this?"

"Your test, evidently," the man said, sounding angry and snide. He was average in looks - brown hair, brown eyes, about an inch or two shorter than Arthur - but he wore fabrics that denoted his position in nobility.

Arthur was hesitant to get too close, but it was obvious that the remaining chair was his, so he took another step forward and sat down. This close, he could tell that the man was definitely a nobleman, though not one Arthur recognized. And then he saw the ring the man wore. It was a squat silver thing with a seven-pointed star surrounding a small amethyst. The sigil of the House of Starhold.

"You're Arrin," Arthur said, feeling even more apprehensive now.

"And you're Arthur. Glad you could join us," the man replied sarcastically. He was obviously not pleased about being here.

"How are you here?" Arthur asked, looking around. He almost expected Merlynn to be sitting somewhere close by, ready with an explanation or snarky comment. But Anhora was the only other living being on the beach.

Arrin followed his gaze. "Looking for someone, prince? My fiancé, perhaps?"

Arthur turned his eyes back to the other man. He felt a little uncomfortable, knowing he was now speaking to the man Merlynn was to marry, when he himself knew he loved her. "I thought she might have followed me here," he admitted. He knew Arrin had known Merlynn since she was a girl - a fact that made him even more uneasy - so perhaps the other man would be able to tell him more.

Rolling his eyes, Arrin sighed. "Always running off, that one. When she was little, it was a rare moment when her mother could keep track of her throughout an entire day," he said, his voice soft and fond.

Fighting to push down his anger - alright, it was jealousy - Arthur finally looked down at the table. "What are these for?" he asked, gesturing to the two silver goblets that stood on the table.

"They are your test," Anhora said, speaking for the first time.

Frowning in confusion, Arthur studied them. They seemed like normal goblets, filled halfway with water.

"I don't think it's as easy as it sounds," Arrin muttered, his eyes on the goblets as well.

"There are two goblets before you. 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," Anhora explained.

"So one of us must die?" Arrin asked, sounding appropriately horrified.

"What kind of ridiculous test is that? What does it prove?" Arthur asked. At least with the last two tests, he could understand how it could prove his worth, but this? Either he, or a man he barely knew would have to die.

"What it proves is for you to decide. If you pass the test, the curse will be lifted," Anhora replied firmly, and Arthur knew he wouldn't be answering any more questions.

"This is ridiculous," Arrin said. "What if we just refuse to drink?"

"Then my kingdom will starve," Arthur replied absently as he studied the goblets. Again, there was nothing noteworthy about them, nothing to differentiate.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not ready to die just yet," Arrin muttered. "What if I drink from my goblet first?"

"If it's poisoned, you'll die," Arthur said. *Would that really be so bad, though?* A small voice at the back of his mind whispered. *If he dies, Merlynn doesn't have to marry him.* Arthur firmly pushed that thought down.

"And if you drink first and your goblet is poisoned, you'll die," Arrin said. "This test is pointless."

Sighing, Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose. "There has to be a way around this, I don't believe this is just random. There *has* to be a way to know which goblet is poisoned."

"And then what? The liquid still needs to be drunk. I hate to put it in terms like this, but you and I are of equal importance. You're the Crown Prince of one of the biggest countries in Albion, and without my marriage to Merlynn, Caerleon will invade and conquer Galdara," Arrin reasoned.

Arthur refused to look at the other man, mainly because he knew he was right. Let's see, if Arthur drank the poison, his father would be distraught, and would most likely start a second Purge. There would be no end to Uther's wrath.

If Arrin died on the other hand... Starhold was a strategically important fortress, and the main line of defence against Caerleon, but... surely Arrin had brothers or cousins who could inherit the title from him. Arthur's knowledge of prominent Galdaran families was somewhat lacking, but he didn't think the other man's family was as small as his own.

So, logically, it would be best if Arrin drank the poison. It would definitely solve quite a few of Arthur's own problems. *But would it be right?* "Let's focus on trying to figure out which goblet is poisoned, first, shall we?" Arthur said, keeping his eyes on the liquid.

*'Oh, come on, Arthur; use that head of yours! The goblets are both half empty!'*

The voice in his head sounded suspiciously like Merlynn, but Arthur wasn't going to dwell on that. It wasn't like he'd never heard her voice in his mind before. But it did have a point. "The cups are both half empty," he whispered, the puzzle pieces falling into place.

"Yes, so?" Arrin asked.

"So, if we pour all the liquid from one cup into the other, we'll know for sure it's poisoned," he said, reaching for both cups and pouring the contents of Arrin's into his own.

"And now what?" Arrin asked, glancing at Anhora. Arthur took that moment to quickly down the cup. "Wait!" Arrin called, reaching for the now-empty cup.

"Arthur!"

Suddenly, Merlynn was kneeling at his side - when had he fallen? - her cheeks wet with tears. "What did you do? You idiot, what did you do?" she sobbed, pulling his head into his lap.

"Merlynn? What..." Arthur panted. Strange, why was he so out of breath? "What are you doing here?"

"As if I was going to let you do this alone. You stupid fool, why did you drink that cup?" she asked, her fingers treating comfortingly through his hair.

"You know why," he whispered. He could feel himself slipping away, but he wanted to hold on longer. He was at peace with his decision, but... how could he leave when Merlynn was not.

"I..." she gasped, unable to speak due to her tears. It moved him, that she cared enough to cry for him. "I love you," she choked out.

Arthur found himself smiling. Honestly, what more could you ask for? He was dying, yes, but at least he'd die knowing the woman he cared for most in the world, loved him back. "I love you too," he whispered.

And then he allowed himself to sink under, to sleep. He knew she'd be alright. How could she not be? Merlynn was the strongest person he'd ever met. And now, she'd be okay.

## Chapter End Notes

So, on the downside; it took me forever to update and... Well, another cliffhanger. Sort of. I mean, you all remember how this episode ended, right? Also, no kiss. I know I said I'd put that in, but come on, it just didn't fit. The next chapter will start with Merlynn's pov of the beach scene, and will answer a few questions (like, what the hell is Arrin

doing there??)

Anyway, leave a comment to tell me what you think!

# The Test

## Chapter Notes

So, this took a bit longer than I anticipated. And it's not quite as long as I'd hoped it would be, but I promise that you'll like where this is going!

Enjoy!

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

### C44: The Test

Arthur had told Merlynn not to come to the labyrinth with him. So, naturally, Merlynn had followed him.

Of course, it was just her luck that she managed to walk straight into a trap Anhora had set - not for Arthur, but for her. Apparently, her affection for the Prince was so obvious even an ancient spirit like Anhora could tell that she wouldn't let him do this alone. He tied her up with vines which were magic resistant. She could possibly force enough magic into them to escape, but that would exhaust her to the point of unconsciousness. Since this wasn't a life-or-death situation, she decided to play along.

Anhora brought her to a beach. It was pretty, in a lonely desolate sort of way. "Why are we here?" she asked, studying the way tiny waves broke on the pebble beach.

"You asked me to give Arthur another test. This is it," he replied cryptically.

She sighed, turning her eyes back to the ancient spirit. "I know a dragon you'd get along with, he's just as vague as you are."

She could have sworn Anhora's lips twitched. Merlynn smiled; getting an ancient keeper of the unicorns to smile - however small - was definitely a win. "So what's test? And does it really require me to be tied up?" The vines were also keeping her upright, so she most likely wouldn't get tired, but it was a point of dignity. She didn't want Arthur to stumble upon her being a damsel in distress.

Anhora studied her for a moment. "I suppose not," he said, and suddenly, the vines snaked away, disappearing back into the labyrinth. "As for the test, that is for Arthur to find out. We are merely observers." Then, Anhora turned to the entrance - exit? - of the labyrinth, almost as though he could hear something Merlynn couldn't, and nodded to himself. "And so it begins," he muttered as he waved his hand over the beach. A low table and two tree stumps appeared, as well as two silver cups and - "Arrin?" Merlynn said before she could stop herself.

Anhora regarded her, almost to see what she would do, but Arrin hadn't appeared to have heard her. A suspicious thought occurred to her, and she took a small step closer and really focussed on him.

Arrin wasn't moving much, only blinking vacantly just a little too slowly. His chest rose and fell as though her were breathing, but something was off about it. Add to that the fact that Merlynn could feel a tingle of magic in the air... "He's an illusion..." she whispered. She directed her senses to the table and goblets, but those felt... solid, almost. Anhora must have conjured them from somewhere.

"What is this?"

Merlynn jumped at the sound of Arthur's voice and quickly turned around. There he stood, clad in his armour, ready to defeat any foe. And his eyes passed right over her.

"He can't see me?" Merlynn asked, coming to stand beside Anhora as not-Arrin said something mildly annoyed.

"He can only see that which pertains to his test," Anhora replied softly.

Sighing, Merlynn turned back to watch Arthur interact with Not-Arrin. He seemed wary, especially after he deduced the illusion's identity.

"Looking for someone, prince? My fiancé, perhaps?" Not-Arrin said snidely. The illusion seemed somewhat more irritable than the Arrin she remembered, but as soon as she thought that, the figure seemed to soften somewhat. So that's where Anhora was getting his information about Arrin. From her head.

Although, as serious as the situation was, Merlynn found herself curious as to how Arthur would react to the man she was supposed to marry. He seemed tense and clearly did not like the situation, but he was calm and level-headed. He really had learned something from Anhora's last test. Perhaps that was the point.

But then Anhora explained what Arthur and Not-Arrin were supposed to do, and it took all her self-control not to break the illusion in a million pieces and snatch those cups off the table, curse be damned. "This isn't fair," she said, clenching her fists to keep herself from acting. "What does this prove?"

"What it proves is for you to decide. If you pass the test, the curse will be lifted," Anhora said, in response to Arthur's question.

Arthur and Not-Arrin started discussing the dilemma, and even Merlynn was a little distracted by the test. At first glance, it seemed to rely completely on chance; whoever drank from their goblet had an equal chance of living or dying. But that couldn't be the point, so there had to be a way to determine which goblet contained the poison.

She studied the silver cups and listed their properties in her head. Silver, relatively unadorned, colourless, odourless liquid inside, half-full... her mind stopped. *Half*-full! If one

were to pour the liquid from one goblet into the other, they'd know for certain which was poisoned!

But Arthur and Arrin were a little slower in their deductions. *'Oh, come on, Arthur, use that head of yours! The goblets are both half empty!'* she thought, a little irritably.

Almost as though he'd heard her speak - which was impossible. Right? - Arthur sat up straight. "The cups are both half empty," he whispered, the puzzle pieces falling into place.

"Yes, so?" Not-Arrin asked.

"So, if we pour all the liquid from one cup into the other, we'll know for sure it's poisoned," Arthur said, reaching for both cups and pouring the contents of Not-Arrin's into his own.

Even before Arthur moved, she knew what he was going to do. Her magic crashed to the surface of its own volition, but it was too late. "Arthur!" she screamed. The Prince drank from his cup and sank out of his chair. Anhora let go of the illusions, leaving Merlynn visible and Not-Arrin to vanish.

She dashed to Arthur's side, gently pulling his head into her lap even as she blinked through her tears. "What did you do? You idiot, what did you do?" she sobbed, caressing his head. He was a little pale, and his breathing was faster than it should be.

"Merlynn? What..." Arthur panted, confused. "What are you doing here?"

"As if I was going to let you do this alone. You stupid fool, why did you drink that cup?" she asked angrily, her fingers treating through his hair. She wished her motions could keep him grounded here. As it was, she'd been pushing some of her magic into him subconsciously. She wasn't much of a healer, but raw magic could slow poison sometimes.

"You know why," he whispered haltingly. His eyes were drooping, almost like he was falling asleep.

But she couldn't let him go before she told him. She couldn't. "I..." she gasped, unable to speak properly through her sobs. "I love you," she choked out, blinking furiously. She wanted to keep looking at him, for as long as possible. She wanted to memorize the look he was giving her now, like she was his entire world.

Arthur was smiling tiredly. "I love you too," he whispered, even as his eyes slipped closed and he became motionless.

It couldn't be true. Arthur couldn't be dead.

Merlynn was vaguely aware that the ground beneath her shook, that pebbles were hovering in the air around her, but none of that mattered. All she could focus on was Arthur, motionless in her arms. "You killed him," she whispered.

Anhora seemed unperturbed as he looked on.



“You killed him!” she screamed, her magic surging, the waves crashing against the rocks, the ground shaking.

“I did no such thing,” Anhora replied calmly.

Her magic faltered, along with her anger. “What?” she asked, even as she truly looked at the man in her arms. He looked pale and through the armour, she couldn’t see if he was breathing. Quickly leaning forwards, she placed the shell of her ear over his mouth. A second later, she could feel a small stirring of breath. He was alive.

“He’s merely consumed a sleeping draught. He will come to soon,” Anhora explained, not in the least unsettled.

Merlynn felt a little ashamed at having lost control of her magic like a novice, but pushed that thought to the back of her mind. “Why?” she asked instead.

“This was Arthur’s test, not yours. You are connected, whether you realize it or not. If you had thought the test to be a ruse, Arthur would have picked up on it,” he explained.

Merlynn thought back to when she’d thought about the cups being *half* empty. She’d noted that Arthur had seemed to respond to the thought. But that was impossible, only magical folk could hear one another speak mentally.

“As for the test,” Anhora went on. “A unicorn is pure of heart. If you kill one, you must prove that you are also pure of heart. Arthur was willing to give up the woman he loves, to give his life, for the greater good,” he explained.

Merlynn glanced down at Arthur. “I don’t understand,” she whispered. “How would his death have been better, objectively speaking, than Arrin’s?” Although... Merlynn imagined if it really had been Arrin sitting at that table, and if *he’d* been the one to drink the poison. Arrin’s father would have been devastated that his son and heir had died because of a situation that Arthur had created. Lord Olwin would have sided with Caerleon without a doubt, which would have given the foreign King the foothold he’d need to invade and take Galdara. With the northern kingdom and its riches, and his own strong military, no doubt Caerleon wouldn’t have stopped his conquest there. He could have taken Mercia, and perhaps even Camelot, though that would have been a challenge.

Arrin’s death would have set in motion a series of events which could have had dire consequences. And Arthur had been willing to give up his life, to give up *her* to stop it from happening. Because if Arrin was dead, she would have been free to love him. No doubt Uther would have had a few choice words to say about that, but in the end... Perhaps they could have been together. And Arthur had been willing to sacrifice that for ‘the greater good’, as Anhora had said.

It only made her love him more.

“So he passed?” she whispered, unable to tear her eyes from Arthur.

“He’s proven what is truly in his heart. The curse will be lifted,” Anhora said. But when Merlynn looked up, he was gone, and she was left with an unconscious Arthur, though... the prince was starting to twitch a little. He was waking up.

Merlynn went back to combing her fingers through his hair. It calmed her down. She just couldn’t forget the sheer terror she’d felt when she’d thought that Arthur had died. She loved him. Well and truly loved him.

She glanced at the place where Not-Arrin had been. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t marry him. Her destiny lay with Arthur, and she *loved* him. As much as she thought of Arrin as a friend, she would be miserable, and she’d blame him for taking her away from the person she really loved.

“Merlynn?” Arthur’s voice pulled her back to the present. “Why am I on the ground?” he asked groggily.

Merlynn couldn’t quite help the teary laugh that escaped her. He shot her an annoyed look, which looked hilarious seeing as he was still on the ground, with his head pillowed on her lap.

She couldn’t help herself. She leaned forwards and kissed him.

Arthur froze for a second, before his hand came up to rest on the back of her head. It was slightly awkward, having to bend over as she did, but it was worth it. His lips were slightly chapped, but firm beneath her own, and she lost herself in the feeling of him. One of her hands came to rest over his heart, though she couldn’t feel it through his chest-plate.

This was right. *This* was where she belonged. And she was content to stay there.

## Chapter End Notes

Like I said; maybe not as long as usual, but definitely worth it, right?

I'm sorry their first kiss isn't more, you know, fireworks and stuff, but honestly, he just nearly (sort of) died, and she's still running on adrenaline. That said, I do hope it was worth the (freaking 44 chapter!) wait. There will be plenty of fluff in the next chapter as the unicorn arch winds down, as well as some realizations on the part of both Merlynn and Arthur.

Honestly, I haven't exactly planned out what will happen after this, but I'm a by-the-seat-of-my-pantser when I write, so basically everything you've gotten from me so far was all spur of the moment thinking. I'm hopeful! I do have a few vague things that I want to do, like something with Olaf, and a story arch focussing on Morgana, but other than that, it's open season.

And with that turn of phrase that I never use, I'll sign off.

Review, please!

# Conversations

## Chapter Notes

Well... That took an inordinately huge amount of time... I am so sorry, you guys! I got seriously stuck on this chapter.

Thank you WaywardWinchesterGirl and Moollie\_De for prompting me to write, I really needed that.

That said, I'll let you get to it! Enjoy!

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

### C45:

Merlynn had never considered herself to be a silly girl, like the simpering ladies of her father's court, but today, it seemed, she was doomed to follow their example.

After their kiss - and another kiss, and another one - Merlynn and Arthur had made their way back through the maze. Arthur had been more than a little apprehensive about going through it again, but his unease proved to be unnecessary. This time, when they stepped through the labyrinth, it took them only a few turns to find the exit. It was definitely magic, but Merlynn wasn't going to comment on it.

Which left them with their horses, on the road back to Camelot. Separately.

All through the maze, Merlynn had kept a hold on Arthur's hand, ostensibly so that they wouldn't lose one another, but mainly just because she wanted to. But now they were seated on two different horses, and contact was impossible.

Goddess, she was such an idiot.

Somehow, though, she managed to survive until the walls of Camelot came into view. "Let's take a break," Arthur suggested, already reigning in his horse.

Merlynn shot him a confused glance. It would take them only a few minutes to reach the city, so why was Arthur so hesitant about reaching it? Then again, it would give her an opportunity to get off Cian and reach for Arthur's hand again she wasn't going to complain.

She nodded eagerly and dismounted, following Arthur off the road a little ways. He sat down in the grass beneath a small copse of trees, and gestured for her to do the same. They sat close, but not quite touching, and Merlynn folded her hands in her lap to keep from reaching out. How was he not having any trouble with this?

But not a moment later, Arthur *did* reach out to take her hand. Merlynn grinned at him, until she saw the serious look on his face as he looked down at their hands. She followed his gaze

and noticed the object that held his attention.

He was looking at her engagement ring.

“Arthur,” she said softly, squeezing the hand that held hers.

“I kept thinking that it was all going to different now,” he admitted in the same low voice. “But it can’t be, can it?”

She sighed, her earlier giddiness forgotten. “I don’t know. I can’t simply break off the engagement, there’s too much at play...” she said, and the look in Arthur’s eyes hardened. “But I can’t marry him either.”

Arthur looked up, a spark of hope clearly visible in him. “But what could you do?”

“For now, nothing. I can try to find a way around it, but I’ll need time.” Merlynn looked off to the side as she mulled things over. “I should write to my father, and tell him I’ll stay in Camelot for the time being.”

Arthur was looking at her with an adorably shocked look on his face. “You’ll stay in Camelot? Will your family accept that? And what about my father?”

She grinned mischievously. “My family won’t have much choice in the matter. Besides, I honestly think Vivian will be overjoyed. As for your father, if he asks, I’ll tell him that my father permitted me to stay here to mend the relationship between our countries.” Her smile dimmed for a moment as she said that. “I know my father is... he misses it. Uther was his closest friend. I’m not saying I trust your father, but I’m not scared either,” she said confidently, looking directly into his eyes.

Arthur stared straight back at her, and after a moment, Merlynn began to feel self-conscious as a blush crept onto her cheeks. “You are so beautiful,” Arthur breathed.

Merlynn looked down, a little embarrassed by his words, and had to suppress the urge to say something stupid, like ‘you too’. He was, though, beautiful. At least, he was to her. Beautiful, just and kind, and he had the makings of a great King. “I... We should... get back,” she said, finally risking a glance at Arthur.

He was smiling softly at her, but there was definitely amusement at her flustered state. “Alright,” he replied, got up, and held out a hand to help her up.

Instead of letting go once she was on her feet, though, Arthur pulled her close. Her body was flush with his, and Merlynn found it hard to concentrate on anything else. She looked up into his eyes and saw a question there. He was asking permission. That surprised her out of her embarrassment enough for her to smile at him, and stand on her toes. She wasn’t quite tall enough to close the gap, but once he’d seen her lean up, he gladly made up the distance, pressing his lips against hers.

It was a different kiss than last time, which had been fueled by raw emotion and relief. This time, there was time to explore, to figure out what worked and what didn’t. It was easy to

lose herself in that kiss, as Arthur's hand gently twisted in her hair, and her own strayed to his chest, resting over his heart.

Far too soon, though, Arthur pulled back, resting his forehead against hers. "We should get back," he said, but made no move.

"Can't we stay here forever?" she whispered, barely audible.

Arthur chuckled, and finally moved back to look in her eyes. "Aren't I supposed to be slacking off and you the responsible one keeping me on track?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're a bad influence," she said, and quickly pecked him on the lips one more time before they both got up and readied the horses again.

It took them less than a quarter of an hour to reach the city gates. All along their path, they could see eager farmers tending their fields, which had flourished again. Merlynn grinned at Arthur. They'd done it; the curse was broken!

Eames met them as they dismounted outside the royal stables and gestured for 2 young stablehands to take the reins. Merlynn took a moment to tell Cian to behave, but allowed them to lead him away.

"Welcome back, Sire," the marshall said, his face as neutral as ever, though Merlynn thought she detected some relief.

"Thank you, Eames. Do you know where Gaius or my father are?" Arthur asked distractedly.

"Last I heard, the physician was tending to the King in his bedchambers," Eames replied.

Merlynn caught the horse master's eyes and smiled. She'd always liked him, and she knew he'd make sure Cian was well taken care of. The man nodded back, but Merlynn swore she saw a hint of a smile.

"Right. Thank you, Eames."

The man bowed. "Your highness. Princess." And with that, he turned on his heel to tend to his duties once more.

Merlynn watched as the man disappeared from view before turning to Arthur. The Prince was staring up at the castle, a frown marring his face.

After a quick glance around to make sure no one was looking, Merlynn took his hand and squeezed it gently. "Are you alright?" she asked quietly.

Arthur looked down at her, worry clouding his eyes. He opened his mouth to answer, when he seemed to realize where they were and shook his head. Towing her by the hand, he lead her into the castle, where the halls were mostly deserted. Everyone must have been outside celebrating.

As they neared the royal's wing, he finally spoke. "I'm worried for my father," he admitted. Given how he'd looked when Merlynn had last seen him, she understood why. "He hadn't eaten since the famine began, and now..."

"You should go see him," she said softly, giving his hand another squeeze.

He stopped walking and turned to face her. "Will you come with me?" he asked.

Shooting him a wry grin, she took a step closer. "Your father and I don't exactly see eye to eye. I'll go see him tomorrow, once he's had a chance to rest and eat to tell him of my plans to stay here." She stood on her tiptoes to press her lips to his for a quick peck. "I'll be with Morgana, come find me after." Then, she stepped back and took the familiar route to her friend's quarters.

Once there, Merlynn knocked, and was quickly let in by Gwen. "Merlynn!" the maid exclaimed.

"Hello, Gwen," the Princess said, grinning as she unfastened her cloak.

Morgana stood from where she'd been sitting at her table and smiled at her friend. "We'd heard you and Arthur had returned. I take it you two had something to do with the food stores being restored this afternoon?" she asked.

Merlynn opened her mouth to reply when she noticed another figure standing by the window. Lancelot had apparently been keeping the ladies company. A sly look at a blushing Gwen told her that the maid had noticed the look and was embarrassed. Hmm, interesting. "Uhm... Yes. Arthur defeated the curse at the labyrinth of Gedref."

"Nice of you to let your guard know," Lancelot said wryly, but his smile let her know that it was said in jest.

"Where would the fun in that be?" Merlynn replied with a cheeky grin. "So, I presume everything has gone back to normal?"

Morgana nodded and gestured for all of them to sit. "More or less. People have been celebrating, though Gaius has made sure to caution everyone on eating too much."

There was a loaf of bread on the table, cut into small pieces. Morgana offered them all a piece, which Merlynn was grateful for. She hadn't eaten since... probably breakfast a day ago, and it was evening now.

"Where's Arthur?" Lancelot asked. He'd refrained from sitting down, choosing instead to stand beside Merlynn's chair.

"With his father. He was worried about him," Merlynn replied.

Instantly, Morgana's eyes darkened. "I don't always agree with the man, but... even I can admit that it's hard to see him like this. He was a damned fool for refusing to eat and weakening himself so. He still has a fever, and Gaius thinks..." she trailed off, looking a little worried.

Gwen, who had also chosen to stand, now stepped up to her friend to put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure he'll be alright. The King is a strong man, he'll get through this."

Morgana grasped her friend's hand like a lifeline. "I hope so, because if he doesn't... I'm not sure if Arthur's ready to be King..."

/\*/

It was a well-known fact that the Crown Princess of Galdara was one of the most beautiful in all of Albion. Yet Rowan couldn't help but scoff whenever he heard someone extol the virtues of the Princess, as if they knew her.

He'd known both Princesses since they were 10 years old, and had always admired both girls for their strength and loyalty. But it wasn't until he'd gone on a diplomatic mission to Mercia for a year and came back to find both girls suddenly grown, that he had started to notice the elder's outward beauty. Vivian had just turned 18 and had earned her place on the council, sitting beside her father and learning about ruling the Kingdom. Rowan, 28 at the time, had been as mesmerized by her as the rest of the Kingdom. But this was easily and quickly ignored. After all, there were more beautiful women in the world, and most of them knew it all too well. Inflating the Princess' head with even more praise would hardly help her.

It wasn't until he was acquainted with her sharp sense of humour, her unrelenting loyalty to her people, and her intelligent and decisive strategies that he started feeling... something other than a brotherly love for her.

However, this was easily suppressed. He was, after all, a man who knew how to keep his composure. But he couldn't help but answer her quick wit with his own from time to time. And when the Princess started smiling at him, he knew he was in trouble.

Rowan was jolted from his musings as he rounded a corner and heard familiar laughter. For a moment, still lost in his thoughts on a certain Princess, he thought it was Vivian. But then his mind engaged again, and he realized that the sound was vaguely different.

A little further down the corridor was a door that led to one of the small inner gardens - a favourite of both the Queen and the younger Princess, Rowan believed. Cautiously, he walked on, not wanting to disturb the persons inside, but curious as to what inspired such mirth.

"Arrin, you're absolutely horrid!"

Rowan froze in his tracks, a mere two steps from the door. He realized why the voice had sounded so familiar to him. It was Ellyn, the King's niece, speaking to the Princess' betrothed.



This was such a crappy chapter to write. It did NOT want to be written and struggled against me every step of the way. Thankfully, I got some lovely reviews during the long wait that really inspired me to wrestle this chapter into some semblance of a story, as mentioned above. Seriously, every review I get makes me want to write more.

Btw, does anyone know of any artist I could commission to make art for this story? I'd love to have a proper cover for this fic. I had one made for me for All That Matter, by the lovely Freedom909, but for this, I'm more looking for someone who could draw something. Any suggestions? I'm also on Tumblr, so if it's an artist on there, I could contact them too.

Anyway, I have a little written for the next chapter, so hopefully, it won't take me this long to update next time. Please leave a review to tell me what you thought of the chapter!

# The Next Step

## Chapter Notes

Hi all!

You can thank the lovely Dossypet over on FFN for this chapter, as they spurred me on when I really needed it.

Anyway, this chapter is mostly one that'll answer a few questions, and though it may feel a little filler, it was desperately needed.

Enjoy!

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

### C46: The Next Step

*Previously:*

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“I was merely jesting, my lady,” Arrin responded, sounding amused.

“I’ve told you a hundred times to call me Ellyn, my lord,” the girl responded. Either Rowan was growing senile or the lady had sounded... flirtatious?

“Only once you start calling me Arrin. Are we not friends, after all?”

There was a pause, and Rowan inched closer. Eavesdropping like this might not be very dignified, but he did not seem to be able to make himself stop.

“Yes, of course we are... Arrin,” Ellyn replied, though her tone had fallen from happy and playful to sadly resigned.

“Don’t. You know we cannot be more...” Rowan had to strain to hear this, as Arrin’s volume had dropped considerably.

Rowan’s ire rose inside him. This man was to wed his Princess, and yet seemed to be on too friendly terms with the King’s niece as well. Perhaps he had misjudged the man when he’d originally thought he was honourable. He was about to step out and confront the pair when Arrin spoke again.

“I am betrothed to Merlynn. And she does not deserve this disloyalty.”

Rowan paused.

“I understand,” Ellyn replied quietly.

“Please, Ellyn... I never meant to hurt you. I’ve grown very fond of you, but...”

“But you love her,” Ellyn sighed. If nothing else, Rowan admired the girl’s composure. Most ladies of the court would have been in tears by now.

“I have since I was a child. She is...” he trailed off and sighed.

“But she does not love you back,” Ellyn said. There was a moment’s pause. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. My cousin is a good person, and she’ll make a... a good wife.”

Another sigh. “Even if she never grows to love me, our match is political. It’s what’s best for the Kingdom,” Arrin responded. Here, Rowan could not help but relate to the pair’s situation. After all, did he not have feelings for someone who was unattainable to him?

Ellyn didn’t reply right away. “I know not everyone at court respects my cousin because of her background, but you know that does not hold true for me. I’ve always looked up to her and respected her both as a member of my family and as my Princess. So please don’t think I am saying this out of any petty jealousy or arrogance.”

“Go on,” Arrin said, sounding as confused as Rowan felt.

“From a strictly political viewpoint, I am a far better match than she; I have a direct blood tie to the King, which, for all that she is the Princess, Merlynn does not possess. Moreover, I have actually spent time at Starhold as a child. I know of the hedge maze your grandfather planted; I played in it as a child, I know to avoid the creaky step on the stairs leading up to the solar, I’ve played in the river and know the best places to cross...” “the girl summed up, her plea more impassioned than Rowan would have expected of the normally quiet girl.

“Ellyn,” Arrin interrupted. “While all that may be true, it does not change the fact that we are betrothed. To break off the engagement now would be to dishonour Merlynn and bring about the ire of the King.”

“Is there nothing that can be done?” Ellyn whispered, her voice finally breaking, though she still did not sound as though she was weeping. Once more, Rowan felt his respect for her rise, despite the topic she was discussing.

“Only Merlynn or the King may break the betrothal contract, and should they do so without finding a suitable, or even better, replacement as groom, that, too, would bring dishonour on her. Not to mention that my father might not agree and out of anger, might turn to Caerleon,” Arrin explained.

There was no immediate reply, and Rowan decided that he had heard enough. He briefly debated letting the pair know he’d heard them, but quickly decided against it. It would not serve any purpose except to disgrace his own character and embarrass the two. No, he needed to figure out what to do with this information. Were the younger Princess here, he might have gone straight to her and told her what he’d heard, but she was not. And this was not something that could be put in a letter.

There was, of course, the other Princess. Vivian’s letters could be sent to Camelot via an escorted messenger, since letters from royalty could contain sensitive information. And that definitely applied to this situation. Decision made, the royal advisor set off to find the Crown Princess.

Now he just hoped that he’d be able to keep said Princess from murdering the man who contemplated breaking off his engagement to her little sister...

/\*/

Over the years, Balinor had found that pubs are the best place to gather information. People were loud, and after a pint or two, not nearly as careful with sensitive information as they should be.

He’d been visiting several bars in Galdara’s capitol over the past few weeks, and had already learned that Hunith was indeed the Queen, and that her daughter Merlynn was not the King’s child. Luckily, it wasn’t hard to get the local populace to talk about the monarchy, as they were much beloved.

“Them high and fancy lords may not like the Princess much, but she’s alright by me!” one farmer had told him. It seemed that the nobility didn’t all appreciate the Princess’ background, though most of the townsfolk liked her. Unusually, for a royal Lady, she liked to spend time with the townspeople, playing with their children, and speaking to the adults like equals.

“Spends a lot of time in the woods, too,” a woman once mused where Balinor could overhear her. “Knows that place as good as any of the hunters ‘round here.”

When he’d heard the news that she’d left for Camelot, though, he’d wanted to follow her straight away. But he knew that she’d be even more out of his reach there, and he couldn’t risk getting recognized by the King. Besides, he’d never be able to speak to her, she’d never believe him if he told her he was her... No, he needed to speak to Hunith first.

Luckily for him, the Queen liked to visit the local market, and was usually only attended by the Princess Vivian and a maid. There would be guards, of course, but Galdara was a far less cautious than Camelot, where he had previously managed to outwit the guards.

Pulling his hood lower over his head, Balinor made his way to a fabric merchant he knew the Queen liked to frequent. As he pretended to inspect the merchandise, he watched from the corner of his eyes as the object of his attention drew closer.

She looked splendid in her royal garb, though perhaps still a little on the lean side. She smiled easily at everyone, and it was clear that she loved her adopted daughter very much. It was the Princess who came to stand at the fabric merchant's booth first. "Mother come see," she said, fingering one of the fabrics. "Wouldn't this look gorgeous on Merlynn?" she asked, though there was some mischief in her smile.

The Queen came over and took the fabric from her daughter's hands, inspecting it for herself. It was a deep red, with a subtle golden hue woven into it. It was fit for a Queen, and would probably only be affordable by royalty.

"An excellent choice, your majesty," he said under his breath.

The Queen looked over at him, a smile already on her lips... which melted away as soon as she laid eyes on him. She really was beautiful, and despite some wrinkles and some frost touching her hair, she didn't look like she'd ages a day.

It took a moment - during which the golden-haired Princess eyed him and her mother suspiciously - but the Queen pulled herself back together. "Thank you," she muttered. "I'll take the lot," she told her merchant. Vivian, dear, will you see to it?"

The Princess still looked suspicious - most of it directed at him - but nodded all the same. "Of course, mother. Do you wish to sit down? You've gone pale."

"Yes... Good sir, would you mind escorting me to that bench there?" Hunith said, turning once more to Balinor.

He bowed and offered his arm. After a moment of hesitation, Hunith took it.

The bench was still well within sight of the market, so no one could accuse them of impropriety, but it was far enough that none would hear any words they exchanged. "Hunith," he whispered.

"What are you doing here?" she asked accusingly. "If Olaf sees you-"

"He doesn't know what I look like. I came to see you," he said, barely stopping himself from calling her 'my love'. For so long that is all he had called her in his mind, but now she was no longer his, though she still held his heart.

"You shouldn't be here. Olaf and Uther may not be on speaking terms at the moment, but I cannot predict what my husband would do if he knew who you were," she replied urgently. She looked tense, and kept fidgeting with her skirts, as she had always done with her apron back before she wore such finery.

"When I heard about you, I couldn't resist... Tell me, your youngest daughter, Merlynn... is she...?" He couldn't bear finishing the sentence, though it was the larger part of his reason

for speaking to Hunith.

She looked down, worry and anguish written on every line in her face. "I did love you, once," she whispered, barely loud enough for him to comprehend. She looked up then, and there was a strength there that he hadn't known she possessed. "But Merlynn is *my* child, and daughter to the King of Galdara, regardless of what blood flows through her veins."

Balinor ignored the pain that caused, and soldiered on. "She does not know then? From whence she comes?"

Once again, Hunith looked away, though this time her eyes landed on her other daughter, who was still pretending to peruse booths while keeping a stealthy eye on them. "She knows her history," Hunith admitted reluctantly. "I could not keep it from her. But in her heart, she has already a father and a sister, and they love her as fiercely as they would love one of their own blood. Olaf has been a good father, and would do anything for Merlynn."

Once more, pain laced through Balinor's heart. "You love him," he stated, seeing the evidence clearly in his love's eyes, and hearing it in her passionate defence.

"I did not at first. But he is a good man, and he offered me his heart freely. He never disparaged my regard for you, nor I his for his first wife. He is kind and generous and just, and he loves my daughters. And yes, he has my love as well," she said, not one whit of embarrassment in her tone or her visage. She truly was a Queen.

This time, Balinor was the one to look down. "Then I am happy for you," he said. Though he did feel some regret and pain, he was glad to note that he was sincere. He hadn't seen Hunith in almost 2 decades, and though his love for her was unchanged, he was a good enough man to let her go. "And that Merlynn had such a happy childhood. She would not have had such one with me."

Looking up again, he saw that the Queen had gained a calculating look in her eyes. "Perhaps not," she said. "But there is one thing you would have been better able to teach her than I."

"What is that?"

She hesitated, looking around as if to check for eavesdroppers. "That which flows through your veins flows also through hers," she said enigmatically. "The thing that caused you to run."

Balinor's eyes widened in comprehension. "She shares my... gifts? Who has taught her?"

"Her gifts are greater than yours, Balinor. I often feared she would be discovered, but the druids helped curb her powers when she was young. And later, she learned to control them herself. But I fear she may need more aid before long," Hunith admitted, once more agitated and worried.

"Where is she now? I saw her ride out."

"She rode to Camelot-"

“What?” he hissed, mindful of his volume. “You know of her talents, and yet you let her go to that viper’s nest? Does she not know what Uther does to our kin?” he demanded.

“She is well aware, and well able to keep herself safe and hidden,” she chided, glaring at him. “She goes for the love of her friends there, Arthur, Morgana and Gwen. And she is accompanied by a most able knight, Lancelot,” she explained. “Though I fear Uther, he would not dare harm her without absolute proof, and even then, she would be easily able to evade him. And Olaf has been subtly changing the laws to keep her safe should such a thing occur. My biggest fear isn’t of Camelot’s King, but of the many dangers it faces. It has already dealt with a Griffin, angry warlocks, and now a famine.”

“Uther’s Purge did much evil,” Balinor said. “It left the world out of balance. There are many forces that would fight to correct it. Truthfully, it does not surprise me that Camelot should be the target of such hostility.”

“Even so, the people there do not deserve it. It is their King who is evil, not they.”

“And yet they stood by as their King committed genocide.”

“Not all of them,” Hunith reminded him sternly. After all, it had been her own brother who had smuggled him out. “Go to her. Teach her what she must know,” she entreated.

“I doubt she would accept any help from me.”

“I am not suggesting you tell her your real name, only that you teach her,” she corrected.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “And never have her know her connection to me?”

“Perhaps in time, yes, but not right away. She would not accept you, and would refuse your help out of loyalty to Olaf.”

Balinor thought about that for a moment. He still didn’t like it, and was about to voice his protestations once again when he noticed the blonde Princess coming their way. Getting up, he bowed. “It was a pleasure keeping you company, your majesty,” he said formally, and strode off before Hunith could say more.

This wasn’t how he had imagined his first meeting with his love in 2 decades, but at least he had gotten what he came for. Confirmation that Merlynn was *his* daughter, and a way to contact her.

Mentally going over what provisions he would need, Balinor started preparing. He had a long journey ahead of him.

There, you all finally got to read what that convo between Allyn and Arrin was, and what the implications are.

And we finally got to catch up with Balinor! Yay! How do you like my plans for him? So sorry that there wasn't more of the Camelot people in this, I wanted there to be, but Balinor just wouldn't shut up during that scene, and Hunith didn't want her scene to be cut shorter either... \*sigh\* divas, every single one of them ;)

Anyway, next chapter will start out in Camelot, and will most likely take place there for the whole length of it. So you'll have that to look forward to.

Just a question, but do any of you have specific stuff you're looking forward to/want to have happen? I'm not saying that I'll put anything in here, but you might have some brilliant ideas that I'm overlooking. Also, requests for one-shots within this universe are always accepted.

Don't forget to review!



# Reprisals

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### C47: Reprisals

Merlynn woke to the slamming of her door.

She was awake instantly, her magic on her fingertips until she realized that it was only Morgana. The Lady stood just inside the chamber, glaring at the room in general. This couldn't be good.

Absently dismissing the wide-eyed servant that stood at the door to see to her, Merlynn swiftly got up and threw a dressing gown on. "What happened?" she asked, putting her hand on her friend's shoulder and leading her towards the table. She looked angry, not worried, so Merlynn knew this was most likely not about their friends. No, the most likely cause of the Lady's ire was either the King or his son.

Morgana clenched her jaw and Merlynn saw that her hands were balled into fists. She seemed too angry to speak.

And then, suddenly, the tension drained out of her, and Morgana slumped forwards, dropping her head into her hands. She wasn't crying, but Merlynn suspected that might not be far off. "Morgana, please tell me what's wrong? Did Uther...?"

"He wants..." Morgana trailed off, swallowing. "He wants me to marry," she managed to force out.

Merlynn felt her eyebrows raise. "Oh... any particular person? And did he give a reason?"

Morgana glared at her through teary eyes. "Does it matter? I thought you would be as outraged as I!"

Sighing, Merlynn rubbed her forehead. "Of course I think people should be allowed to marry for love, Morgana, but... I myself am not even free to do that," she said, ignoring the pain in her heart.

The other woman paused. "Oh, Merlynn, I'm sorry, I'd..."

"Forgotten?" Merlynn finished, nodding. "I wish I could."

"Have you found no way around it?" Morgana asked, calmer now that she was focussing on someone else's problem.

The Princess hesitated.

Morgana's eyes widened. "You have? What is it? Tell me!"

Merlynn got up from the table and started pacing. How to even begin to explain this? “I received a letter from Counselman Rowan of Galdara. It was sealed with my sister’s signet. In it, he told me of some events that had transpired which he believes could help with my... problem.” Merlynn paused, not knowing how to go on. Should she even be saying all of this?

“Well, go on,” Morgana urged.

Stopping by her dresser, Merlynn stared at the patterns some loving carpenter had spent hours carving. “In theory... My rank is higher than that of Arrin’s, so I do have the right to break of the betrothal.”

“But you’d still face reprisals from Arrin’s father.”

The Princess nodded. “Not to mention the ramifications to Arrin and my reputation. The only solution would be to offer a suitable replacement.” Here, Merlynn stopped talking, but kept her eyes on the carving. Morgana was as clever as anyone, she had no doubt the other Lady would figure it out.

“So, in order to break the troth...” Morgana said slowly. “You’d have to find someone more prominent to marry, as would Arrin,” she concluded. “But who...?” Morgana trailed off, and Merlynn looked up to see her friend’s eyes widen in understanding.

“I can’t ask it of him, Morgana. I’ve been in love with him for... I don’t even remember when, and *I* still have misgivings. I can’t ask him to...” She shook her head. “This isn’t about me. I take it Uther doesn’t have a specific candidate in mind?”

Morgana started glaring again at the reminder of her own situation. “Not yet, but he’ll have me betrothed by the end of the month, I’m sure of it.”

“Why now?”

Shrugging, Morgana slumped into her seat, looking quite unladylike. “I don’t know. Perhaps someone approached him, or something reminded him. Perhaps he even has someone specific in mind, and I just don’t know it yet.”

Merlynn bit her lip as she mulled it over. “If he doesn’t have a suitor in mind, that might buy you some time. If he does, there must be a reason he hasn’t mentioned the name. Either way, we’ll find a way out of this.”

Morgana looked at her speculatively. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Had it not been Arrin, would you have agreed to the marriage? Had it been a complete stranger would you have assented to it?”

Merlynn tried to picture it. “I don’t think my father would have ever considered a match had he not thought I could feel some affection for my husband. That said, I only agreed to the match because I knew Arrin to be a good man.”

“And what if you had found that you hated him? That the mere thought made your skin crawl? What would you have done?”

The Princess didn't reply right away. In the week since she and Arthur had confessed their feelings towards one another, she had tried to think of Arrin as little as possible. But it was hard not to feel some resentment towards the man who would take her away from her family. What if, in time, that resentment turned to hate? Regardless of how she felt about Arthur, would she still be able to go through with the wedding? “I... I would like to think that I couldn't be that selfish...” she said quietly, coming to sit beside her friend again. “But I'd be lying. If I truly hated the person I was to marry, I think I'd do everything in my power to find an alternative.”

Morgana nodded. “Then let us hope that we'll be able to find such a compromise.”

/\*/

He resisted pulling his hood up to hide his face.

He'd been in Camelot for a week, but hadn't been recognised. Of course, he'd avoided any contact with the King, who would no doubt know his face. And the only other who could expose him was Gaius, and given that the man was his daughter's uncle, and had helped him escape before, he doubted he would do so.

While still in Galdara, he had intercepted the messenger bound for the palace, and had so managed to get his hands on a letter from the Princess - delivered by Lord Rowan - for her sister, Princess Merlynn. And so he had laid eyes on his daughter up close for the first time two days later, when he arrived in Camelot.

She'd been gracious, kind, and had arranged for him to have a place to sleep and a hot meal. She'd smiled at him, and he'd had to stop himself from gathering her into his arms and telling her who he truly was.

Every time he'd come across her since, she'd had a polite smile for him, and had even wished him good morning. She was truly very different than any other royal he'd ever met.

But now he was unsure how to proceed. He couldn't tell her who he truly was, but he did want to teach her, as Hunith had suggested. But how to broach the subject?

His thoughts were interrupted as the Prince and some of his knights entered the tavern Balinor was staying in. Narrowing his eyes, he followed the noblemen as they claimed a corner and ordered a round of beers. Balinor had no idea why his daughter had chosen to stay in Camelot, though he remembered his love's words: “*She goes for the love of her friends there, Arthur, Morgana and Gwen.*” He didn't know the latter, but the former two...

Morgana, daughter of Gorlois, who had been a staunch supporter of Uther's during and after the Purge, and Arthur, the viper's own son. Balinor couldn't imagine anyone of that bastard's blood to be anything different than his sire. He didn't know how the young Prince had deceived his daughter - perhaps played on her kind nature? - but he would protect her no matter the cost. He would *not* let his child suffer the fate of so many of their kin.

“Such a glare might scare away many, but I doubt it’ll scare the Prince,” an amused voice cut into Balinor’s reverie.

The dragonlord looked up. The man now sitting next to him wore a lazily amused grin on his face, but there was something... *other* about him. Balinor had many years of experience recognizing magic, though he hadn’t used his gifts in some time, and knew this man to be a user of magic himself. And, judging from the grin, the other man had at least an inkling of Balinor’s talents, too. “I meant no offense to the Prince, sir. I was merely lost in thought,” he said cautiously. He hadn’t forgotten Hunith’s warning about the many dangers Camelot faced. Any magic user only entered this city in the utmost of need. Either for revenge, or, ad in Balinor’s case, for a loved one.

“I’m sure that’s true. My name’s Tauren,” the man said, extending his hand.

Balinor glanced down at it, hesitating for a moment. “Aodh,” he replied, hoping the other man wouldn’t recognise the significance of his chosen name.\* But, if he knew, Tauren didn’t react. Balinor wasn’t sure what the other man was up to, but if he had plans in Camelot, chances were that if bode ill for his daughter. So, he forced a smile and took the man’s hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

/\*/

Arthur usually knew better than to listen to the castle gossip, but when it concerned Morgana, he couldn’t help but pay attention. According to some maids who had been talking rather loudly, Morgana had been seen crying while on her way to the royal’s wing, where she was likely visiting with Merlynn.

And so, the Prince decided that Leon could oversee training while he made a little detour.

He was swiftly bade to enter after he knocked on the Princess’ door, but there was no Morgana in sight. Perhaps the rumours were exaggerated?

“Arthur,” Merlynn greeted, she was standing by the table, smiling at him.

“Merlynn,” he replied, smiling back. He wasn’t sure what to say now, since he’d actually been looking for someone else.

Her smile dimmed a little. “Did you expect to find someone else?” she asked, a little confused, though thankfully, not sounding hurt.

He shook his head and went over to her, lightly kissing her cheek. She still blushed when he did that, and he absolutely adored the sight. “I have to admit, I thought Morgana would be here.”

“Ah, you heard, then?” she said, gesturing for him to sit as she poured him a goblet of water.

Frowning, he took the proffered seat. “Heard what?”

She made a face. “Your father means to marry her off.”

Luckily for him, Arthur hadn't yet taken a sip, for he was sure that he would have spit it all out again. "He what? When did this happen?"

She looked at him, considering, as she took a seat beside him. "You didn't know?"

"No! To whom?" he asked urgently.

She took his hand and squeezed it gently in an effort to reassure him. "I don't think he's made a choice yet. Or, at least, he hasn't told Morgana. You really didn't know?" she asked.

Arthur shook his head. He'd always known that Morgana would have to marry, but his father had always been so lenient with her about it. He'd really believed his father would let Morgana marry for love.

Merlynn sighed and shifted closer, resting her head on his shoulder. Arthur immediately brought an arm up to encircle her as he kissed her head. While most of him was still thinking about Morgana's predicament, a part of him revelled in his ability to be so forward with Merlynn. He loved the closeness they now shared.

"Morgana was here earlier. I don't think I've ever seen her cry before. Although I don't blame her..."

They stayed like that for a moment, just taking comfort in one another's presence. "Do you regret it?" Arthur asked quietly. "Agreeing to marry Arrin, I mean."

Merlynn didn't reply right away. Arthur wasn't sure whether he was happy she was thinking the question through, or hurt that she hadn't immediately said yes. "I... regret not having a choice. I regret that it happened so quickly. But I can't bring myself to regret the decision I made, because ultimately, it has, and still is, saving Galdara from an invasion. There have been some reports of garrisons stationed just over the border in Caerleon's land."

Frowning, Arthur tightened his arm around her. "I wish there was something we could do. Not just for us, but for Galdara..." he said.

Merlynn tensed under his arm, which immediately put Arthur on edge. "What is it?" he asked, pulling back to look at her. "Did you find something?"

Burying her face in her hands, Merlynn sighed. "I... Yes and no... I need more time to think about it, Arthur," she said gingerly, lifting her head. Arthur was about to protest, but something in her face made him hesitate. "Please just trust me for now," she pleaded quietly.

He stared into her deep blue eyes for a moment longer, before acquiescing. "Always."

"Why don't we go for a ride? I know Cian is probably getting stir crazy, and I could use a distraction," she said, smiling softly as she got up and offered her hand.

\* Aodh = fire in Old Irish. In my headcanon, he was an old dragonlord, who lived long ago, rumoured to have hatched Kilgarrah

# The Strangers

## Chapter Notes

I know, this is too soon, right? I'm on a roll!

So, I'm back from Croatia (if any Croats are reading this, congrats on the second place in the World Cup, you guys played so well!), and here I am with a new chapter! Hope you enjoy!

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

### C48: The Strangers

Their ride did not go as planned.

Merlynn was just starting to relax as she raced Arthur to the river, when they heard a scream. Arthur, of course, didn't hesitate to charge ahead to help.

Honestly, she loved the man, but he could stop to think things through every once in a while. As it was, she saved his life by magically breaking a branch off a tree and dropping it onto his adversary's head.

As Arthur dispatched the last bandit, Merlynn dismounted to see to the victims; an older gentleman and a woman wearing a yellow cloak of very fine material. "Are you alright?" she asked gently.

The woman turned around and lowered her hood. "I am now," she said with a sweet smile directed over Merlynn's shoulder. When the Princess followed her line of sight, she saw that Arthur had joined her and was looking at the woman in wonder. "Thanks to you. I am Sophia, and this is my father," she continued sweetly, ignoring Merlynn altogether.

"Arthur Pendragon," he replied with a slight smile and a nod of his head.

When it became clear that no one was paying any attention to her whatsoever, Merlynn frowned in annoyance. "And I am Merlynn of Galdara. May I ask what you were doing in the middle of the forest, travelling on foot?" she asked, finally drawing the eyes of the two strangers.

There was a flash of annoyance in Sophia's eyes, like Merlynn was inconveniencing her. "We come from Tír Mòr," Sophia's father said. "Our land was ransacked by raiders and we're travelling to our relatives, west of here."

"You must come to Camelot," Arthur said. "You've travelled long, and I'm sure you'd like to rest."

Sophia's father bowed. "Thank you, sire."

Merlynn had an uneasy feeling, but she could hardly protest. So, she offered Cian to the old man. Unfortunately, the horse wanted nothing to do with either stranger, so - much to Sophia's clear disappointment - Arthur and Merlynn rode together on Cian, while she and her father shared Arthur's steed.

"Who knew our relaxing ride would lead to such heroics?" Arthur joked quietly once they were on their way.

Merlynn wrapped her arms around his waist, not caring about the strangers riding behind them. "I don't trust them, Arthur," she whispered back.

Arthur turned his head to look at her. "This isn't like you. Usually, *you're* the trusting one," he commented.

"I can't explain it, it's just a feeling," she whispered, burying her head against his shoulder and inhaling his scent. It calmed her down considerably.

"Don't worry. If it comes down to it, I'll protect you from the old man and the woman," he teased.

Merlynn pulled back and playfully slapped his arm. "Prat. I'll have you know that I'm perfectly capable of protecting myself. If I'd had my bow, you wouldn't have had to lift a finger to deal with those bandits."

He covered the hand she'd left on his arm and squeezed it gently. "I know. Though I clearly didn't need your help."

She rolled her eyes, but couldn't help grinning. "Oh, *clearly*. You'd *definitely* planned that branch falling on that man."

"Oh, absolutely," he replied easily, and Merlynn could hear the smile in his voice.

Sighing, she rested her head against his back again. "Just promise me you'll be careful with those two," she whispered.

"I promise."

/\*/

Arthur invited Sophia and Aulfric - that was her father's name - to explain their situation to the court. Merlynn, not being a member of the court, and having no desire to hear their plight, excused herself and made her way to the nobles' wing. Perhaps she could get a servant to draw her a bath?

Before she made it to her chambers, however, she ran into Morgana. The other woman was pale, and looked anxious. "Merlynn."

"Morgana, what's wrong? Is it Uther?"



Shaking her head, Morgana grasped Merlynn's hand, her grip surprisingly strong. "It's Arthur. I had a... dream. In it, he was drowning while a woman stood over him, watching him die," she whispered tremulously. "Gaius says it's just a dream, but it felt so real."

Merlynn pulled her friend into a hug. "Nightmares can be very troubling."

Pulling back, Morgana frowned at her. "It wasn't a nightmare! It felt... different. *Real*."

Merlynn looked at her friend, concerned. "Alright," she said after a moment. "Did you see anything else?"

Once again, Morgana shook her head. "No. Gaius had prescribed me another sleeping draft. They're supposed to keep me from dreaming, but..."

"Well, if it happens again, you're always welcome to come to me, no matter the hour. You know that, don't you?" Merlynn said, her concern mounting at Morgana's clearly shaken state.

The other woman nodded. "I should go. Rest."

"I'll escort you. Perhaps I can distract you with a game of chess before you go to sleep," Merlynn replied gently, and led her to the Lady's chambers.

After their game, Morgana insisted that she needed some air, and that she was fine to walk on her own. Merlynn's quarters were on the way, so they walked together. Until they ran across Sophia being shown a room by a servant.

Morgana froze, grabbing Merlynn's wrist tightly as she stared wide-eyed at Sophia. "Morgana?" Merlynn asked. "What's wrong?"

"It was her," she whispered fearfully. "The woman in my dream, the one who was drowning Arthur, it was *her*."

Reflexively, Merlynn glanced back down the corridor where Sophia had disappeared into one of the rooms. "Sophia? Are you sure?"

Morgana nodded. "I dreamt of her *before* I saw her, how is that possible?"

Quickly, Merlynn led Morgana the rest of the way to her chambers, and then swiftly closed the door behind them. "You're absolutely certain that it was Sophia you saw? You didn't just think it was her?" she questioned.

"I'm sure! It was her! She was killing Arthur!"

Merlynn frowned as she sat down at her table. If what Morgana was saying was true... "Has this ever happened before? That you knew something was going to happen before it did?"

The other lady was too distraught to really think about the consequences of Merlynn's query, so she answered truthfully. "Sometimes. I'd dream something would happen, and then it did."

I dreamt of you the night before you first came to Camelot all those years ago. I saw us as adults, as friends, and I knew that you and I would get along.”

Merlynn bit her lip, unsure of how to proceed.

“Do you know something?” Morgana asked. She sounded like she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer.

“There’s a possibility... a *small* one, that you have prophetic powers,” Merlynn admitted.

Morgana backed up a step, her face going carefully blank. “What?”

“Some people are born with the ability to predict the future,” she explained. “It *is* a magical ability, but not one that can be seen from the outside, so you need fear nothing, Morgana. I would never tell Uther, and even if I did, I wouldn’t be able to prove it. Regardless of what you may think, the King *would* require proof when the accusation concerned his own family.”

Morgana still looked fearful, staring at Merlynn with terrified eyes.

Getting up, Merlynn closed the distance between them. “Morgana, please. We’ve been friends since we were little girls, you know you can trust me. Remember that in Galdara, the laws on magic are much more lax, and my father has even taken steps to ensure that magic may become legal again in the future. I don’t have the prejudice most Camelotians have on this subject. Please believe me,” she pleaded.

Little by little, the tensions leaked out of her friend’s shoulders, until the other Lady sank to her knees. Merlynn knelt beside her. “This can’t be real,” Morgana whispered, defeated. “I can’t have magic.”

“It happens to the best of us,” Merlynn joked weakly. “Listen, I don’t know anything about this particular gift, but the druids might be able to help. There’s a tribe that specializes in it, they’re the keepers of the great prophecies.”

“You know them?” Morgana asked, a little bit of hope creeping into her voice.

Grimacing, Merlynn shook her head. “Unfortunately, no, I know know of them by reputation. But I do know some of the druids in Galdara. Let me reach out to them, and perhaps they can help you.”

For a moment, Morgana didn’t reply. “How do you know so much about this?”

Merlynn hesitated. She knew that Morgana would keep her secret, especially now, but... it felt wrong to divulge it so readily, given that even Arthur didn’t even know. “I’m a scholar, like my uncle,” she settled for eventually. “And as I said, Galdara isn’t as prejudiced as Camelot against magic. You *can* trust me.”

It took another moment, but eventually, Morgana nodded. “I trust you,” she whispered. “I trust you.”

Gwen wasn't sure what to think of this Sophia of Tír Mòr, nor her father, but it was obvious that something was amiss. Her eyes found Lancelot's - as they were wont to do - and saw that he was frowning thoughtfully as well. As soon as his gaze met hers, however, she looked down, blushing. They had been talking a lot, and he had made his interest known, but Gwen was... unsure.

The court was dismissed, and Gwen hurried out. Neither Morgana nor Merlynn had been present, though Arthur had told the court that the Princess had been present when he'd rescued the strange Lady and her father. Perhaps Gwen should see if they were alright?

But walking through silent corridors only left her with ample time to dwell on her thoughts.

Lancelot was handsome, there was no doubt about it. And he was of low birth, but... he was a knight of Galdara, and even there, the position came with a title. He was *Sir* Lancelot, and she was... she was just Gwen.

"Guinevere!"

As if summoned by her thoughts, the knight caught up with her, gently taking her hand in his calloused ones. Reflexively, Gwen looked down the corridor to see if anyone could see them. There was another maid a little behind them, but the girl kept her eyes on the basket of laundry she held and never once glanced at the maid and knight holding hands in the middle of the corridor.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his brown eyes shining with concern.

She couldn't help a smile. How could a man like him be so humble, kind and selfless? "I'm alright. Just tired. And..." she trailed off, not sure if she should say anything.

"Lord and Lady Tír Mòr?" he guessed.

Gwen nodded, pulling lightly on his hand to get him to follow her and she continued down the hall. "There was something odd about it all. They came all the way from their home, which had been ransacked, with nothing but the clothes on their back, looking like that? Lady Sophia's cloak wasn't even muddied."

Lancelot nodded. "It was strange," he agreed. "I was going to speak to Merlynn about it, seeing as she was there when Arthur found them."

"I was looking for her as well. Morgana, too, she wasn't there."

For a moment, they simply walked in silence. "Though," Lancelot said, somewhat out of the blue, "I suppose it's not *very* pressing, is it? They'll be here for a few days at least."

"True," Gwen agreed.

She looked up to find Lancelot smiling down at her. "Then may I invite you to walk with me in the gardens? I need some fresh air and I'm afraid I've not familiarized myself with their layout yet," he asked, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

They both knew that the gardens of Camelot were hardly the sort one could get lost in, and Gwen had to smile at his antics again. “I suppose I do have some free time before I must attend to Morgana...”

His grin got infinitely wider as he beamed at her. “Perfect. Right this way, milady!” he said, extending his arm.

She rolled her eyes, but placed her arm in his. “I thought I was supposed to be the guide here?”

“Well, then, by all means, lead on!”

Gwen wouldn’t stop smiling throughout their entire walk.

## Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will have a pretty cool badass!Merlynn moment! So you have that to look forwards to!

Please leave a comment and let me know what you thought!

# The Seer

## Chapter Notes

What's this? Is it \*gasp\* an actual, honest-to-goodness update???

I know, I know, I've been absolutely terrible. And I can give you excuses like real life and writer's block got in the way... the truth is that, while I absolutely love this story, I have no idea where it's going. I mean, I have some ideas (like getting out of this whole Arrin/Merlynn situation), but no definitive "this is what I'm working towards" plan.

Unfortunately, this is an all too common thing in my writing. I'll have a fun idea, and instead of actually working out where I want it to go, I just start writing. And that works just fine for a while. It's worked for 48 chapters, after all, but it's not working anymore. So, until I figure out what I'm going to do beyond 'just keep rewriting episodes', there won't be any more updates after this story arch. I'm thinking it'll take me another 2 chapters to finish this episode, and then I'll do some deep thinking and hopefully that'll let me go back to regular updates.

You all have been amazing, though, commenting on the story, and offering support and encouragement... You are all fantastic, and I love each and every one of you. But you can thank HoldTightAndPretendItIsAPlan for this chapter. Their messages really helped me take another look at the chapter and push through to finishing it.

So sorry for the long and rambling notes. On with the story! (finally)

## C49: The Seer

Despite Merlynn's assurances, Morgana went to visit Gaius for a sleeping draught, hoping it would help keep the dreams at bay.

But as she listened to the old man try to convince her that her dreams were just that, she felt herself getting angry. She believed that Merlynn had been in the right, and that some magic was at play. And she also knew that Gaius would have recognised the signs right away. So why was he trying to convince her that she was just dreaming?

She accepted the draught with a curt 'thank you' and left. But it didn't keep her from dreaming.

Arthur's face haunted her as she watched him drown over and over again in her sleep. Starting awake, a scream threatened to shatter the silence before she swallowed it. Her chest heaved and she was drenched in cold sweat. This couldn't be a coincidence, but what could she do?

Settling down again, Morgana vowed that she would keep an eye on the strange Lady at all times. Perhaps Merlynn and Gwen could be convinced to help as well. Because that wench would touch her family only over Morgana's dead body.

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Merlynn rubbed her eyes. She hadn't slept very well; some uneasiness inside her keeping her from fully drifting away. She'd planned on writing letters home this morning, but obviously, that wasn't going to happen now. "I need some air," she muttered to herself, before grabbing her cloak and doing just that.

She wandered across the courtyard and just let her feet take her where they will. Soon enough, the sound of steel clashing together broke through her foggy mind, and she realized she found herself near the training grounds. She smiled. Arthur was supposed to be training the knights now. Perhaps seeing him would help.

But as she scanned the grounds, she couldn't see him. "Sir Leon," she called when she saw the captain trading blows with another knight nearby.

He quickly stepped back and signalled his opponent to take a break, before turning to her. "Princess Merlynn, how may I help you?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt. Have you seen Arthur? He was supposed to be here, wasn't he?" she asked, once again letting her eyes rove over the various red cloaks.

Leon shook his head, clearly annoyed. "He didn't show up. Morris, his servant, came to tell me that Arthur had 'forgotten' and had gone for a ride instead," he explained.

Merlynn frowned. "Arthur, forgetting about training? Not very likely. Morris didn't happen to say when he'd be back?"

"Sometime this afternoon, I imagine. Arthur has to inspect the castle guard before joining his father for an early supper, I believe."

Merlynn sighed. "I'll talk to him when he gets back. This isn't like him, he always has a good reason..."

Leon's eyes softened. Though he was Arthur's best friend, Merlynn hadn't had many opportunities to get to know the man. But Gwen grew up with him on his father's estates, and she'd always vouched for him. This conversation was just securing her good opinion of him. "Thank you, Princess. I'm sure he had a good reason, though..." he trailed off, looking a little unsure.

"You can speak freely," she assured him. "I doubt Arthur ever asks you to censure yourself in front of him."

"I... I had thought that he was out with *you*, Princess. The marshall told me he set off with a woman," he replied.

For a moment, Merlynn felt a little off balance. Arthur was off neglecting his duties to go on a ride with some unknown woman? If he were anyone else, she would have thought it was a romantic endeavor. But it was Arthur, and there was no doubt in her mind that he loved her. So what was going on?

“As I said, I’ll talk to him,” she repeated, dismissing the knight.

Leon offered a respectful nod before returning to his training. Merlynn wasn't sure what to make of all this, but one thing was clear: Sophia and her father were not to be trusted.

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Merlynn tried to distract herself by helping her uncle reorganize some shelves in his chambers. The fact that this gave her a perfect view of the inner courtyard had absolutely no bearing on her decision to help him.

But as it stood, she *was* able to see Arthur return from his ride. With Sophia.

She stared down at the scene, her eyes narrowed and her fists clenched. The only reason she didn’t rush down there was because Arthur got a guard to help Sophia off her horse instead of doing it himself. Still, she didn’t like the way the other lady was eyeing her Arthur.

“My dear, while I appreciate the help, I don’t think my books will survive if you keep squeezing them like that,” Gaius interrupted.

She looked up at him. “I’m sorry, uncle, but I’m afraid there’s something I have to do now,” she said quickly, sounding not the least bit apologetic.

Gaius smiled at her. “Yes, I believe there is.”

She put the book she’d been holding on the correct shelf, before heading for the door.

“Merlynn,” Gaius called. Merlynn turned around to face him. “Don’t break the poor boy. He’s the Crown Prince, after all,” he joked.

Merlynn rolled her eyes at her uncle and left his chambers, feeling the slightest bit less angry. Perhaps she *was* overreacting a little. It was only a single ride, after all. She’d probably just guilted him into-

Her train of thought was broken off by the subject of her thoughts. “Sophia,” Merlynn said, managing to keep at least a little venom out of her voice.

“Princess Merlynn! How nice to see you,” the lady simpered, but it wasn’t hard to see that Sophia was just trying to heckle her.

“Quite,” was all Merlynn would trust herself to say. Already, her mood was souring even further, and her magic rose to the surface, practically begging her to release it.

But Sophia was not deterred. She just smiled even more sweetly. “Arthur just took me on the most lovely ride through the forest. He was quite the gentleman.”

Merlynn glared and had to press her nails into her hands hard. The pain distracted her enough to keep her magic in check. Not the most elegant solution, but it worked nonetheless.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” Sophia said mockingly. “A little parlor trick to change your eye colour, not exactly threatening, is it?” Alright, so perhaps it hadn’t worked entirely.

Merlynn wasn’t sure what the legal status of magic users was in Tír Mòr, but clearly, it didn’t bother Sophia. “That wasn’t a parlour trick,” she said in a low voice. “That was me keeping from separating that pretty little head of yours from your shoulders,” she said truthfully, though not without a significant amount of venom in her tone.

“All talk and no bite, I say. I could take you apart with a snap of my fingers, rip you limb from limb, like one would the wings of a dragonfly,” Sophia said maliciously.

For a moment, Merlynn studied the sheer hatred and evil that shone brightly in Sophia’s eyes. “Guards,” she called. Sophia stepped back in confusion as two guards immediately stepped up to them. “Restrain the Lady Sophia,” Merlynn ordered.

The men didn’t hesitate to grab the lady’s arms, and held tight, despite her struggling. “Let go of me!” she ordered.

Merlynn stepped closer once again. “The next time you threaten me, you’d do well to remember that I am a Princess of Galdara and a personal guest of Prince Arthur, here on a diplomatic mission. While you,” she said, mimicking the arrogant tone most nobles used against her, “are nothing but a minor noblewoman from a country far away from here, with nothing to your name but that false smile of yours.” Now *that* was a threat. “Release her,” she ordered, and the guards followed her command. They knew her, and knew that she held considerable sway, especially now that Arthur was the de facto ruler of Camelot.

“You’ll pay for that,” Sophia spat, turned on her heel, and stalked down the corridor.

When the other woman had turned a corner, Merlynn sighed and smiled at the guards. “Thank you for your services, sirs. If you’ll tell me your names, I’ll see that you’re rewarded.” It was a little close to bribery, but Merlynn genuinely felt the need to thank them. After all, they were under no obligation to follow her commands.

“There’s no need, milady,” one of them said, before the other elbowed him.

“John,” the second guard hissed. “If the Princess wants to thank us, who are we to say she can’t?”

Grinning at their antics, Merlynn said: “Quite right. So, your names?”

“John the carpenter and Bern, milady,” John replied reluctantly.

“Carpenter?” Merlynn questioned, a little confused.

“My father was one, milady, and there’s more than one John in the guard,” he explained sheepishly.



Merlynn nodded. "I'll see to it. Thank you, sirs." The men both bowed deeply and went back to their posts.

As soon as they were out of sight, though, her smile melted away. Clearly, Sophia was not above making enemies. And she *really* wanted Arthur if she was this desperate to drive a wedge between them. Turning on her heel, Merlynn made her way to Arthur's chamber. She needed to warn him about that woman.

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"I don't trust her," she said.

Arthur shrugged off his jacket and threw it on his bed. "She's just a girl, Merlynn."

"And yet, you felt the need to shirk your duties to take her for a ride," she said snidely, before she could stop herself.

Slowly, Arthur turned around, and he was *grinning* at her. "Princess Merlynn, is that jealousy I hear?"

She glared at him. "It's concern for your wellbeing. I don't trust her," she reiterated, crossing her arms in frustration.

Arthur walked over and put his hands on her arms, gently rubbing them. "She's harmless. She practically begged for a tour, it would have been rude to say no." Merlynn didn't reply, but did unwind her arms to step into his embrace. She rested her head on his chest, the sound of his heartbeat calming her considerably. "What can I do to make it up to you?" Arthur murmured softly.

Sighing, Merlynn tightened her hold on him. "Stay with me?"

"As long as you'll have me," he replied.

Merlynn smiled and moved her head so her chin was resting on his chest and she was looking up at him. "So, forever?"

He grinned and pecked her on the lips. "Forever."

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Forever turned out to be only a few minutes until Gaius came to find his niece, asking to speak with her. What he told her once they were alone in his chambers, was... troubling, to say the least.

"His eyes changed colour?" Merlynn asked, shocked. Were they sorcerers, like her? Or some other form of magical being? Morgana *had* dreamt of Sophia killing Arthur...

"Who do you think they are?" she asked of her uncle, hoping he had some answers.

"It's not *who* they are that worries me. It's what they want with Arthur."

Merlynn sighed in frustration and got up to pace. “It worries me too, but as long as we don’t know who or what they are, that’s going to be difficult to ascertain...” *Unless...* Pushing that thought away, she turned back to her uncle. “Do you think this has something to do with the Purge?” she asked. “Coming for revenge against Uther again?”

Gaius sighed, looking off out the window at the darkening sky. “I’m not sure. It’s possible. Though there are other reasons someone could come after Arthur. Not every magical being agrees with the prophecy about the Once and Future King. Some wish to rule Albion themselves.”

Merlynn rolled her eyes. “Honestly, the arrogance of some people. They think they can do better than the man who was literally destined to rule?” she asked rhetorically.

“Some might look at Arthur and see the person you saw when you first arrived here a few months ago; young, arrogant, and in complete agreement with his father when it comes to magic,” Gaius suggested.

Sighing, the princess went to the window to look out over Camelot. “He’s not that person anymore, though. He might still be a little rough around the edges, but he’s changed so much. Especially now that he’s been essentially running the kingdom,” she said.

“Unlike you, though, most magical folk haven’t seen any evidence to the contrary,” Gaius reasoned. And Merlynn hated that he was right. With all these magical threats coming to Camelot, Arthur had to take a tough stance against it, and Merlynn hadn’t had that many opportunities to change his mind. Though she knew that he wasn’t as hard on magical folk as his father. Uther would burn anyone even suspected of magic at the stake, while Arthur would at least require some proof.

“I suppose I’ll just have to make them see what I see, then,” she replied to her uncle, determination filling her.

She would show them the person Arthur was meant to be. But first, she had a scheming noble to thwart.

# The Consequence

## Chapter Notes

Well... That took a lot longer than I expected...

I am so sorry for the ridiculously long wait, I hadn't even realized that it had taken me this long! I am now on vacation in Austria, and it's given me some time to work on my fics. You'll also be happy to know that I've finally figured out what to do with this story line, and have a vague idea of how the rest of the story will go. I'm thinking another... 10 ish chapters to go? It might be a little more than that (and oh god, this is already my longest fic ever, and it's only going to keep growing!), but probably no more than 15 chapters. Probably.

Anyway, with everything (mostly) figured out, I'm hoping that new updates will become a lot more frequent. I can't promise a chapter every week, but I'll be damned if it'll take me more than a month to finish a single chapter. I'm hoping for biweekly updates, but we all know me by now, and know that I shouldn't make promises I can't keep ;)

Anyway, a little longer of a chapter this time, and we're getting closer to the climax of this story arc! Enjoy!

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

## C50: The Consequence

It had been too late to visit Arthur again after her conversation with Gaius, so Merlynn had decided to go to the prince the next morning.

Only, he wasn't in his chambers. Nor on the training fields, nor with the guards, nor in the throne room.

Frustrated, and more suspicious than she cared to admit, Merlynn turned to her friends. "Lancelot, have you seen Arthur?" she asked when she saw him on the training fields.

"I haven't, milady," he replied with a frown. "Is something the matter?"

Sighing, Merlynn had a hand over her braid. "I'm not sure. I can't find him, and... I have reason to believe that Lady Sophia and her father aren't all they seem."

"Magic?" the knight whispered, already putting away his gear.

"Most likely. Would you mind finding Gwen and searching the lower town? He shouldn't be there, but it's the only place I haven't looked."

Lancelot nodded. "Right away. What do I do if we find him?"

She wasn't even sure what she'd do herself. "Tell him I'm looking for him, and that it's urgent. And keep an eye on him, I'm not sure what Sophia is planning, but I'd prefer that someone I trust is with him."

As Lancelot sped away to carry out her orders, Merlynn went in search of Morgana. If Lancelot and Gwen couldn't find Arthur, there might only be one other way of finding him.

Morgana, for her part, was willing to do whatever it took. Until Merlynn asked.

"I can't!" the other woman insisted, her face ashen.

"I wouldn't ask if I knew any other way, but no one's seen Arthur since late last night, and I don't know what else to do," Merlynn said, keeping her voice as steady and calm as she could.

"But you said yourself, you don't know how this power works! What if-" Morgana started, before she cut herself off, looking even more frightened.

Merlynn led her friend over to the bed in the latter's chamber, and sat down. "I know what I said, and I can't pretend to be an expert, but I do know a little about magic, and its workings. I think I can talk you through purposefully pulling up a vision, especially since your powers already seem to want to warn you of this event."

Still, the other woman was hesitant, and scared. "What if Uther finds out?" she asked in a whisper.

She suddenly seemed so much younger to Merlynn's eyes, even though the Lady was a few years her senior. "He won't. It's only you and me here, and I've sent Gwen with Lancelot," she reassured her friend. "You need to get a handle on your powers, Morgana, or you could lose control, not to mention that if these visions keep coming unprompted, you'll never have a decent night's sleep again. Please let me help."

Morgana paused for a moment more, before nodding.

"Right. Lay down on your bed and try to relax. These visions are coming to you when you sleep because your defenses are lower then. Though I suspect that even when you're awake, you sometimes get a feeling for what's about to happen?"

Shrugging, Morgana went over to her bed and did as she was bid. "Not always. But occasionally, I'll feel like I just... *know* the outcome of something, and then it'll happen."

Merlynn nodded. "That's your powers, sending you messages. Now close your eyes and breathe deeply. I want you to concentrate on Arthur and Sophia. Reach inside yourself, feel that pull that comes when you use your gifts..." Slowly, Merlynn talked Morgana through it. She honestly had little to no idea how Morgana's powers worked, so she was working off the assumption that they were instinctive, much like her own were.

It took some time, but eventually, Morgana was able to tell her that she thought Arthur and Sophia were in the woods south of Camelot. She wasn't able to get a proper vision, but even this much left her exhausted.

"Try to sleep. Hopefully calling your powers to the surface like this will keep the visions at bay and you'll be able to get some rest," Merlynn said. "I'll go find Arthur and Sophia."

"Merlynn," Morgana called before her friend reached the door. "If she's hurt him..."

Merlynn grinned ferally. "I'll leave just enough of her for you to enact your own revenge."

"Good."

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Merlynn was just saddling an impatient Cian, when Lancelot and Gwen entered the stables. "Don't bother," she said, "I know he's in the south woods--"

"He's back," Lancelot interrupted. "We tried to stay with him, but he would have none of it."

"He was in quite a foul mood," Gwen agreed, nervously wringing her hands.

That alone was enough to warn Merlynn that there was more to this story. "What else happened?"

After a hesitant glance passed between the two, Lancelot sighed. "We told him you were looking for him. He reacted... unfavourably."

That was an odd choice of words. "It doesn't matter, I need to find him. Where did he go?"

"He said he was going to convene the court..." Gwen replied nervously.

Merlynn desperately wanted to ask for an explanation, but it would be faster to simply attend the court and hear for herself what Arthur had to say.

As she entered the throne room, followed closely by her two friends, Merlynn immediately felt off balance. Despite how last minute it was arranged, the entire court had already been convened. And, it seemed, they were waiting for her.

Further unnerving her was the sight of the King sitting on the throne, though he still looked pale and thin in his heavy furs.

"I apologise for my tardiness, Sire," Merlynn said formally, dropping down into a curtsy. "I made my way here as soon as I was able."

Uther waved her apology aside irritably and looked back to his son as Merlynn took her place next to Morgana. "Now that we are finally complete, what is this about, Arthur?"

"Unfortunately, I come before you with grave news, father," Arthur started, though his voice was oddly flat. "I have learned of a danger in our midst that has been plotting our downfall."

The King frowned. “What sort of danger?”

“A sorceress bent on the destruction of Camelot,” he replied.

Gasps and whispers echoed through the room. Merlynn stayed silent, even as Morgana grabbed her hand in a death grip. Even if he did know, Arthur would never give away his own sister, would he...?

Uther glared and leaned forward in his seat. “Name this foul creature.”

Arthur's eyes flitted to Sophia's a moment before he spoke. “The Princess Merlynn of Galdara.”

Merlynn felt her eyes go wide as the whispers turned to all out shouts of outrage. Whether because they thought her innocent, or because she had fooled them all along, the Princess could not tell.

For her part, all Merlynn could do was glare at Sophia, before the King called for order.

“What proof have you of this?” he asked. at least *he* had not completely taken leave of his senses.

“She was seen by the Lady Sophia and her father-”

“This is ridiculous!” Merlynn interrupted, stepping forward. “All you have is the word of one woman who has all the reason in the world to lie?”

Arthur turned cold eyes onto her, and Merlynn had to suppress a shiver. This was not Arthur anymore. “You threatened her before, she stepped forward even though she feared for her life.”

“What? I've never...” Merlynn trailed off as Arthur motion for two guards to step forward. John and Bern.

“According to these men, you ordered them to restrain the Lady Sophia though she had done nothing. She later saw you perform a spell, and told me, despite fearing for her life.”

Bern and John looked distinctly uncomfortable, though they didn't dispute the statement.

“The Lady Sophia was the one who threatened *me*, ” Merlynn replied, as calmly as she could. “Until I reminded her that I was a princess and she a noblewoman of a small house and that she should be careful who she made an enemy of. As for the supposed spell, I can tell you that no such thing occurred. It's well known that Prince Arthur has caught the lady's eye. I'm sure she'd love to see herself sitting on that throne.”

Arthur opened his mouth to argue, but Merlynn cut her off. “I will not stand for this slander. I am the daughter of a King, and I *shall* be treated as such,” she snapped. Perhaps a tad petty, but she couldn't help herself.

“You're the daughter of a criminal and a peasant,” Arthur sneered.

This time, the crowd wasn't the only one to gasp. How could this have happened? How could Sophia have twisted the man she loved like this?

“Your father was a man named Balinor, who was convicted of treason and sentenced to death for the malignant practise of magic and conspiring against the crown.”

Pushing down on the hurt, the Princess managed a glare. “What that man did or did not do has no bearing on me. I've never even met him.”

“The corruption of magic flows through the blood. It's stain is unavoidable.”

Silence fell over the throne room as Merlynn stared in horror at the King.

“Guards, arrest the Princess Merlynn. She will be executed in two days time,” Uther announced, to the shocked nobles.

As two guards Merlynn didn't know grabbed her arms, she glared at the king. “You're making a mistake, Uther. My father will not be as forgiving as he has been in the past.”

“Take her away,” Uther ordered coldly. Merlynn followed the guards out of the room, but managed to hear Arthur ask for one more thing, regarding Sophia. She couldn't quite catch what, specifically, was asked, but she could imagine. And with Uther as angry as he was with her, he might not hesitate as much in granting his son the Lady Sophia's hand.

Despite the situation, Merlynn held her head high until she reached her new accomodations in the dungeons. Only then did she allow herself to sink down let her tears escape.

Knowing Arthur was under a spell did not make the betrayal any easier to bear.

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Merlynn was forced to dry her tears quickly, though, as her first visitor came round not 10 minutes later.

“Who has the power now?” Sophia purred softly as she came to stand at the bars. “Poor little princess. There's nothing you can do. Even if you can escape, you can't break the spell on Arthur, nor would you be able to deny your guilt any longer. Arthur's life will be mine before the night is passed. And you will be here, awaiting your execution. I do so love when everything goes my way.”

Merlynn didn't bother replying as the Lady left the dungeon, humming a traditional wedding song.

Her next visitors were more welcome, though still not the people she wanted to see the most. Bern and John, the guards who had testified against her came to her cell, bringing her a sober meal of cheese and bread.

“We're so sorry, Princess. If we'd known what would happen...” Bern started.

John nodded. “But you're a Princess, we never thought...”

Sighing, Merlynn stood and accepted the plate the men offered. "It's alright, sirs. You were only doing your duty, and you did report what you saw. You could do me a favour, though."

"Anything, milady."

"Fetch Lancelot, the knight who accompanied me from Galdara. I need to speak with him urgently. And my uncle Gaius. I'd... I'd like to see them. Before..." she trailed off. Not that she was planning on stepping onto the pyre Uther was no doubt preparing, but any escape she made would no doubt mean the end of her time here in Camelot.

"Of course, Princess. Right away."

Thankfully, it only took another few minutes for the two diligent guards to track down the people in question.

Before either of them could say a word, Merlynn held up a hand. "I have a plan," she whispered, mindful of the guards stationed down the hall. "Lancelot, I'll need you to steal the keys and break me out at dusk. Sophia let slip that whatever she's planning with Arthur will happen tonight, before the night is up. I'll also need something of Sophia's. Anything I can use to track her."

Lancelot nodded resolutely, while Gaius took her hand through the bars. "What do you need from me, child?" he asked.

"I need you to give the King a sleeping draught, preferably something that makes him a little... loopy before he sleeps. I'm hoping that might be enough to convince the court that he is still too ill to make rational decision. Not to mention that if Uther doesn't overthrow his earlier conviction, my father will not hesitate to wage war, and nothing I say would dissuade him," Merlynn explained.

"And once you're out?" Lancelot asked.

"Once I've escaped, I need you to go to a tavern, where plenty of people will see you, so they can't accuse you of helping me. If this doesn't work, or if Uther refuses to undo my imprisonment, I don't want you to be caught as well. I'll be tracking down Sophia and saving Arthur."

"And if you're forced to reveal yourself?" Gaius asked.

"Then what's done is done. And I'll deal with the consequences as they arise. Please, I need you both to do this for me," she pleaded, grasping both their hands through the bars of her cell door.

"We'll see it done, Princess," Lancelot said, and with that, left the dungeons.

"Be careful," Gaius bid her.

"I'll do my best, uncle," Merlynn said, pressing her lips to his hands, before urging him to go.

It was hours before another person visited the cells.



Morgana stood in the shadows, her eyes red, but her composure remarkably cold.

“Morgana?” Merlynn whispered.

“I tried to get another vision,” the other woman said, her voice flat. Merlynn stepped up to the bars, standing as close as she could. “I wanted to see your fate, to know if Uther would succeed in burning you.”

“What did you see?” Merlynn asked, her voice barely audible. Morgana’s powers were unreliable at best, there was no telling what she’d seen.

“I saw you, casting spells, enchanting objects, doing rituals... I saw you sitting by Arthur’s side on the throne of Camelot. And I saw myself, living in the forest, separated from everyone that I love,” Morgana hissed.

Merlynn didn’t know what to say. Unreliable though Morgana’s powers may be, but a vision of this magnitude... it would be hard pressed to be changed. But the crux of the matter wasn’t that Merlynn would be sitting on a throne, or even that it appeared Morgana would be living in squalor. It was something else entirely. “I never meant to lie, Morgana,” she whispered. “But I couldn’t risk anyone knowing. I couldn’t risk causing a war-”

“But you could risk *me* ?” Morgana interrupted. “I’m sure that this is just a minor setback in your plan, isn’t it? Once you’ve gotten out of here, you’ll go back to being the perfect Princess. All to get to a throne you could otherwise never have. What was it, had you gotten bored watching your sister prepare for the throne you could never inherit? So you decided to look elsewhere?”

Merlynn was taken aback by the heat behind her friend’s words. “That’s not true. I’ve never desired a throne. I *love* Arthur, you saw that even before I did.”

“Do you? Or are you just happy to have another toy to manipulate, like you manipulated me!”

“I never-”

“You made me use this... *magic* ,” she spat, “knowing it would corrupt me, knowing it would put my life in danger.”

Somewhere deep inside, Merlynn realized that everything Morgana was saying came from the betrayal, anger and fear she felt, as opposed to any true belief, but it stung nonetheless. “I’m sorry you think that, Morgana. But you’re my friend, and I love you. I hope some day you’ll realize that I never meant to hurt you.”

“Keep your lies to yourself, witch!” Morgana snapped, and stormed out of the dungeons, leaving Merlynn alone again.

This kind of outburst was completely out of character for the normally gentle Lady, and Merlynn vaguely wondered if all the expenditure of magic had something to do with it. But she was too emotionally exhausted to give it much thought.

And, as with the knowledge that Arthur hadn't meant what he'd said, it didn't stop the words from hurting. So Merlynn sat down in her lonely cell and wept for the lost friendships, and the wreckage that her life had become.

## Chapter End Notes

Have I mentioned you guys are all amazing? Because when I mentioned struggling with writer's block, and not knowing where to go with this story anymore, so many of you went out of your way to cheer me up and to assure me that you would be with me every step of the way. I can't tell you all how much that means to me, and how much every single review motivates me to keep going. Seriously, I love all you guys so much.

Thank you so much for your love and support, and I hope you'll stick with me for a little while longer!

# The Outcome

## Chapter Notes

So... hi there! I'm still alive. So, uhm... yeah, I haven't updated in... 8 months. And I feel terrible. I had actually planned on updating in August, and then September, but then I moved out of my parents' house, and there were a lot of changes in my life. The newest one is my new cat, who is adorable, but does tend to keep me up at night, because she's a rescue from Egypt and not entirely house-trained yet. Her name is Inaya.

Anyway, I am really sorry you guys had to wait this long, but I do promise I won't abandon this, and that we're in the home stretch now! As thanks for your patience, here's a chapter that is once again, north of 3k words long. Enjoy!

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

### **C51: The Outcome**

By the time the sun was setting, Merlynn had dried her tears, and sat leaning against the wall of her cell, waiting for Lancelot to bring her the keys.

A clang announced his arrival, and the Princess got up quickly to greet her friend. But it wasn't Lancelot who came out of the shadows.

"Aodh?" she asked incredulously, eyeing the Galdaran messenger. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm getting you out of here, Princess," he replied gruffly, approaching and studying the lock.

"Look, if you're doing this out of loyalty, please don't. I have it handled and I don't want you to-"

But before she could finish her sentence, Aodh's eyes glowed gold and the lock on the prison cell sprung open.

"Goddess..." Merlynn whispered, looking at the man with fresh eyes. He was a warlock!

She wanted to ask him a thousand questions, but there was no time. Lancelot ran into the dungeons, looking confused. Aodh immediately looked on his guard, and his hand was outstretched, ready to blast the other man away. "Stop!" Merlynn said, putting herself between the two men. "Aodh, this is my friend and protector, Lancelot. He was supposed to get me out so that there would be no sign of magic," she explained, a little exasperated.

"Lancelot, this Aodh. He's like me."

Lancelot looked the other man over suspiciously, but nodded. He trusted her judgement. Aodh, on the other hand, didn't seem convinced. "He knows who you are?"

"He does. And I'd ask how *you* know, but we don't have time," Merlynn replied shortly. "Lancelot, do you have it?"

The knight reached into his pocket and pulled out a bracelet. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do. "Come on, she'll have left Camelot for this, and I don't want to risk staying here too long."

Both men silently agreed, though Aodh seemed a little confused. They accompanied her through the passages - Lancelot in front to distract any guards - all the way to a little guarded side-gate. It was impossible to open from the outside, so only 2 guards stood by it. Whispering a spell, Merlynn put them instantly to sleep. She hoped they wouldn't get in trouble, but there wasn't a lot she could do about that.

Merlynn nodded at Lancelot, who would be making his way to the tavern, and then turned to face Aodh. "You should stay here. I don't want anyone linked to my escape."

"I can help," he protested.

"Why?" Merlynn asked, a little annoyed, and more than a little suspicious. "Why would you help me? Getting me out of that cell, I understand. Magical folk should band together these days, but why would you help me beyond that?"

The man clenched his jaw. He looked like he wanted to say something, but was stopping himself from doing so. Merlynn felt a lot more on edge now. "Look, I appreciate the help, but I need to go and save Arthur, and I don't have time to worry about you, too. Goodbye, Aodh."

"You can't trust him," the man hissed, stepping closer.

Merlynn stepped back. "You don't even know him. And it's beside the point," she said resolutely. "I am leaving and you are staying here." Aodh made to protest again, holding out his hand, but Merlynn couldn't afford to waste more time. A whispered word and golden eyes and the man was on the ground, asleep. It wouldn't last long, but it would be plenty of time for her to get to where she was going.

Now all she had to do was cast the locating spell on Sophia's bracelet and that witch would get what was coming to her.

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Balinor opened his eyes and cursed. His daughter was certainly as stubborn as her father. Luckily, her spell hadn't taken full effect due to his own magic protecting him. Scrambling to his feet, he took off after the princess, quickly retracing her path.

It didn't take him long to come across the dark-haired girl, crouching behind a tree. She was looking at a man, chanting on the banks of a lake, while a young woman waded in, staff in hand.

Then, without a word uttered, Merlynn extended her hand and the man's staff flew into her hand. She aimed it at the man - Sidhe, Balinor now realized, as he deciphered the chant - but hesitated.

She'd never killed anyone before, he realized.

With care, he crept forward, and put his hands over hers on the weapon. It thrummed, though not because of his touch, but hers. He would have to analyze this new information later. "Together," he whispered.

Her eyes bored into his, like she could see into the depths of his soul. She hadn't even flinched when he'd approached. Had she sensed him?

She nodded.

A powerful blast shot the staff, incinerating the Sidhe male instantly. The female screamed her outrage, but was met with the same fate moments later.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then, Merlynn shot forward, faster than he would have thought possible. "Arthur!" she screamed, running headlessly into the water. "Arthur!"

"Merlynn! Wait!" Balinor called out, running after her. What was she doing? He grabbed her arm, intending to drag her to safety if he had to, but she pulled back.

"You don't understand, she was drowning him!" She barely spared him a glance before she went in deeper. Definitely as stubborn as he was.

He sighed in frustration and followed her, eventually even diving under to search for the prince he despised. He couldn't see a damn thing until he came back up, and Merlynn growled in frustration and held up her hands to the sky. A blinding light burst to life above them, illuminating even the murky water below. Merlynn's eyes glowed a brighter gold than Balinor had ever seen. She was far more powerful than he'd ever imagined.

Those golden eyes now settled on him. "Find him," she commanded. And Balinor obeyed his queen without question. For there was no doubt in his mind now that this was her title. Something deep inside him, some part he'd scarcely remembered still existed, had responded to her. Emrys.

He dove under the water and searched. He could barely see, but there was a glint of light reflecting off metal. He hauled it up, and up, until they breached the surface, gasping. Except the prince did no such thing. A force not his own pulled both men onto the banks, where a soaked Merlynn held out her arms. But her embrace was not for her father, but for the man who would no doubt kill her if he learned the truth.

"Arthur! Arthur, please, goddess, no," she whispered, one hand on his cheek the other on his heart. The golden light in her eyes flickered back to the surface as her magic reacted to her emotional state. Small waves lapping on the shore became bigger, the wind picked up, and there was a low rumble in the air.

“Merlynn,” Balinor said, hoping to call her attention away. He had no idea how she was able to channel this much power, seemingly without being aware of it, but he did know that it was dangerous. “Merlynn, you need to stop.”

Finally, she looked up, that golden gaze piercing him to his soul. “I am *never* going to give up on him.” And then, as he watched, the hand that rested on the prince’s chest started to glow the same shade of gold as her eyes. A breathless second later, the blond man coughed up water and sucked in air.

Arthur Pendragon was alive.

And Balinor’s daughter was in love with him.

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She wanted nothing more than to wallow in her bedroom. Instead, Morgana pulled her cloak closer as she looked around the forest clearing. she didn't even really know why she was here, other than that she felt betrayed and angry and scared. she was sick of feeling scared.

"I see you received my letter."

The Lady whirled around. A man stood at the edge of the clearing, his face just visible under his hood. "Who are you?" She asked, hoping her voice sounded more steady than she felt.

The man offered a half-bow. "The name is Tauren. I come on behalf of the High Priestess Nimueh and all the magical folk who live in exile."

"Priestess?" She asked, confused.

"The chosen one of the Goddess, Master of life and death," Tauren replied, though it didn't clear anything up.

Morgana took a step back. Perhaps this was a mistake. "I don't-"

"I am someone who can set you free," a feminine voice interrupted.

Morgana looked over to see a beautiful, almost ethereal woman step into the clearing. She was shorter than Morgana, but her presence filled the space around them. *Magic*, something inside her whispered, yearning for it.

"Too long have our people suffered, forced to hide for fear of being slaughtered like animals. Too many children have died screaming atop Uther's pyres... It is time for a new age to begin. The druids have long foretold a golden age, where magic will flourish and our kin will be free once more."

" *Our* kin?" Morgana asked, torn between hope and terror.

Nimueh smiled kindly at her. "I can sense the magic in you, my child. It sings just below the surface, always looking for a way out. I can teach you to hone your skill, to become *powerful*, so you need never be afraid again."

Morgana hesitated. She *hated* being afraid, and yearned to know more about the power within her, but... “You have a plan?” she asked.

“I do. One that will liberate us all,” the woman replied softly. Her voice was so kind, and her magic sang out to Morgana.

“Will anyone get hurt?” She *had* to ask. If anything happened to Gwen, or...

“You mean your friend, the princess? She needn’t be hurt. She has magic, after all, she’s one of us. When I go to her, she’ll listen, and she’ll be on our side.” It sounded almost too perfect.

“What about those without magic?”

Nimueh shrugged elegantly. “If they do not stand in our way, why would I hurt them? This new age will have room for all: a perfect balance.”

Slowly, Morgana allowed herself to smile. She could barely imagine a world where she didn’t have to hide, where she could dazzle Gwen’s future children with magic without fear. A world where perhaps, she and Merlynn could be friends again. “What is it that you need?” she asked resolutely. She could help make this world into a reality.

Nimueh smiled.

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She’d killed them. They were faeries of some kind - Uncle Gaius would know - and she’d killed them. Something inside her had warned of the danger, had rebelled against the portal they were opening, and had acted. She’d grabbed the discarded staff - Sophia’s - and, with Aodh’s help, had blasted Aulfric. She’d expected a body, but he’d just turned to dust. Possibly because of what he truly was.

Sophia’s screams were entirely human, though.

But Arthur was nowhere in sight, and her magic was already protecting her against the rage Merlynn could feel radiating off the other woman - creature? The staff had come to light in her hands almost without thought.

And then Sophia was gone.

Pushing aside the thought of possibly having committed murder, Merlynn ran headlessly into the freezing lake. “Arthur!” she shouted, desperately searching the murky water for any sign of him. “Arthur!”

“Merlynn! Wait!” Aodh called out, running after her. He grabbed her arm, but she pulled back, still desperately scanning the water for any sign of him.

“You don’t understand, she was drowning him!” she screamed, her panic almost tangible. She barely spared him a glance before she waded in deeper.

She was vaguely aware of the other man diving in and helping, but all her focus was on the water in front of her. She searched her mind for a spell, anything, but in the panic, it was impossible to remember if she'd ever known anything of use. She kept diving, searching with her hands and her feet, but all she found was mud and silt. Growling in impatience, she threw up her hands and pushed all her frustration into wordless magic.

A blinding light burst to life above her, illuminating even the murky water below. Could feel her magic coursing under her skin, and knew that the druids would warn her of losing control when she neglected to use a focus like this. But she didn't have *time* to be safe. Finally, she settled her gaze on Aodh. "Find him," she commanded, magic lacing her words. He didn't need to be told twice.

He dove under the water and searched. For a few breathless moments, nothing moved. Then, they breached the surface, gasping. Except that Arthur wasn't moving. Before she knew what she was doing, she'd thrown her arms forwards, and made a pulling motion, bringing both men onto the bank of the river. Merlynn immediately drew Arthur into her arms, but he still wasn't breathing.

"Arthur! Arthur, please, goddess, no," she whispered, one hand on his cheek the other on his heart.

"Merlynn," Aodh said, sounding urgent. She ignored him "Merlynn, you need to stop."

Finally, she looked up, that golden gaze piercing him to his soul. "I am *never* going to give up on him." Her magic reacted to her sheer desperation. Instead of calming it, forcing it back down, she embraced it, letting pure emotion guide her, as opposed to ancient words, crystals or runes. The hand that rested on Arthur's chest was warm, warmer than the rest of her, but she paid it no mind. She pushed her will into her magic, or her magic into her will, it was hard to tell. She wasn't Merlynn any longer. She could feel the ground beneath her, feel the creatures moving in the forest around them, she could even feel the threads of the portal Sophia had been trying to create floating loose. She reached down, further than she thought possible, to the pulsing of the earth itself, used that power to strengthen her own, to make up for the lack of spell or focus. A breathless second later, her senses retreated from the world around her, all at once, as Arthur started coughing and sucking in air.

Merlynn sagged in relief, letting her forehead rest against Arthur's for a moment. She allowed herself only a second to rest, before she set to work. She had to get this armour off him and get a fire going, before he caught his death.

Mercifully, Arthur was only semi-conscious through it all, and barely noticed when she left his side to gather firewood, and to hide the faerie staff. He didn't even notice when she lit the fire with a wave of her hand. Aodh had vanished, but Merlynn couldn't bring it in herself to care too much. She was grateful for his help, and she definitely had some questions for him, but those could wait. Arthur was her priority.

He was still *so* cold. "Come on, Arthur, please wake up," she whispered to him, lifting his head onto her lap and brushing his wet hair from his eyes. It was getting too long. He should cut it soon. The random thought made her chuckle a little. *Goddess*, she was tired...



“What’s... funny?” Arthur croaked, his eyes still struggling to open.

“Arthur!” she exclaimed, her hand cupping his cheek. “Are you alright? How do you feel?”

He groaned, which, she supposed, was an answer unto itself. “What happened?” he asked, finally able to properly open his eyes and focus on her face. “Why are you wet?”

Biting her lip, Merlynn hesitated. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Arthur’s eyes wandered away from her face, to the canopy above them. “You were jealous... of Sophia...” he trailed off uncertainly, eyes fluttering closed. “Nothing to be... jealous of.”

She smiled at him, despite her exhaustion. “I’m not so sure about that. You did just elope with her,” she teased.

Arthur’s eyes shot open. “What?!” He tried to sit up, but a coughing fit had him back on the ground.

“You also had me arrested,” Merlynn went on. Now that it was over and Arthur was safe, she felt it wasn’t too bad to joke about it. The sting was still there in the back of her mind, but she sheer relief and joy at having Arthur back was overwhelming it.

Arthur was looking at her with dread and guilt. “Merlynn-”

She brushed her fingers over his lips to silence him. “You were under a spell. Sophia and Aulftric weren’t who they seemed,” she said, moving her hand to his cheek. “They wanted to kill you,” she added in a whisper, her heart constricting as she remembered how she’d felt when she couldn’t find him under the water, when he wasn’t breathing...

A touch to her own cheek brought her back to the present. “I’m here,” Arthur whispered. “Not going anywhere.”

Merlynn let out a shuddering breath. “Yeah, if you run off with another pretty girl, I might have to rethink our relationship,” she joked weakly.

Arthur chuckled softly, his eyes drifting closed. For a moment, Merlynn feared that he’d drifted back into unconsciousness, but then he spoke again. “If I do... feel free to assume I’m under a spell.” He opened his eyes. “You’re the only one I want to marry.”

“Arthur-” Merlynn started, feeling the now-familiar pain of their situation wash over her again.

“I’m serious, Merlynn. If I could marry you right now, waterlogged as we are, I would. I love you,” he said, and there was no trace of humour in his eyes. Merlynn had no doubt that if a priest were to wander by, Arthur would marry her on the spot, betrothal contract be damned.

“Arthur,” she whispered, pressing her lips to his again. “You know I love you, more than anything. But isn’t it too soon to be talking about this?” Not to mention that he might have a fever or a concussion. And yet, his words sent a thrill through her. She *wanted* to marry Arthur, she wanted his to take her in his arms and make her forget the rest of the world. But

one of them had to be the level-headed one, and Arthur seemed incapable of that at the moment.

“Is it?” he asked. His voice was stronger now, and Merlynn suspected he was throwing off the last vestiges of Sophia’s spell. “We’ve known each other for years, and I’ve loved you for months. How is that too soon?”

That threw her. Months? She’d only come back into his life... Was it really only 3 months ago? So much had happened in the meantime... She smiled at him. “You always know how to put me off balance, Arthur Pendragon. Proposing marriage while still recovering from an attempt on your life, while we’re both soaking wet... not the most romantic of situations, is it?” she teased.

“If you want flowers and a picnic, I’ll give it to you. I want you to be my wife, Merlynn.”

“I want that, too,” she admitted softly. Tears burned behind her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. This was a happy moment, not a sad one.

Finally, Arthur sat up and cupped her face. “Then why not do it? You said you might have a way out of the betrothal contract?”

Now, she grinned at him, and pushed her wet, tangled hair out of her face. “I wasn’t sure at first, but... you just gave it to me.”

Arthur blinked at her. “What?”

“I couldn’t break the marriage contract without finding a suitable replacement for both me and Arrin. Now, it seems Arrin has taken a shine to my cousin, Lady Ellyn. And here you are, offering me your hand in marriage.” She couldn’t seem to stop smiling. Whereas her heart had been breaking just moments ago, it was now bursting with happiness. It was dizzying, and exhausting, but she didn’t care. Loving Arthur was worth it.

The man in question was starting to smile at her, too. “You knew about this? Why didn’t you say anything before?”

Rolling her eyes, Merlynn stood, and offered her hand to help the weakened prince up. “Arthur, we’ve only admitted our feelings to one another a week ago, I didn’t want you to agree to it out of some misplaced sense of duty or obligation. I wanted you to ask me because you love me.”

Arthur pulled her closer, encircling her within his arms. Despite the cold, and both of them still being soaked, Merlynn felt comfortable, safe. “But I do love you, and I do want to marry you. And you still haven’t given me an answer,” he said, a teasing note in his voice.

Merlynn smiled. “Yes, obviously, I’ll marry you, you prat.”

Didn't see that one coming, did ya? But let's face it, these dorks were definitely heading in this direction, and the whole Arrin situation had been going on long enough. And you guys deserved all this fluff for putting up with my horrible updating schedule.

Next chapter might take a while (though hopefully not another 8 months this time), but I'll do my best. I'm in a better place in life right now, so I'm hoping that will help me write more. Anyway, please let me know your thoughts!

# Chapter 52

## Chapter Notes

So, I had planned to post this chapter last weekend, but... I kind of forgot. Sorry about that. But hey, it hasn't been months since my last update, so I still consider it a win!

Anyway, but of a filler chapter, but I hope you'll still enjoy it!

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

### C52: Revelations

Despite the happiness that Merlynn felt, the closer they got back to Camelot, the more she remembered her time in the dungeon. Despite being fully aware that Arthur had been under a spell, his words still hurt, even now. And Morgana... She would have to find some way to talk to Morgana. And she'd have to find a way to send a message to her father and sister quickly. She didn't think she'd be able to stop her father from going to war this time, but he had to know the truth about Arthur, at least. And Arrin, he'd have to be told about everything concerning her and Arthur...

Arthur squeezed her hand and brought her back to the present. "What are you thinking?"

"Too much," she muttered. "What are we going to do about my father? And everything else... I'm feeling so overwhelmed," she went on. "I'm happy, of course," she said, smiling softly at him, "but I'm also worried, and scared, and..." she trailed off. *And guilty*, she added mentally. Guilty for not telling Morgana more, and helping her with her budding magic, but most of all... she felt guilty that she'd accepted Arthur's proposal when he didn't know about a big part of her life. But how could she tell him? Especially now, when he'd once again fallen prey to the machinations of a magic user?

Arthur stopped walking, and pulled her closer. "You're not alone Merlynn, we're together now, and I'll stand by you for the rest of our lives," he whispered. She shivered. Would he, though, when he inevitably discovered the truth?

But for now, she just hugged him tighter, and didn't reply. She'd cross that bridge when she got to it.

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As it turned out, Gaius had followed Merlynn's instructions to the letter, and had given the King a tonic that had made him seem... less than capable. Arthur had no trouble convincing the council to overturn his father's verdict. The man himself was resting in his chambers. Merlynn did feel a little bad about making a fool of the King... but then she remembered that he'd almost gleefully sentenced her to be burned alive, and she felt better. In fact, her

patience with the King had thoroughly run out. So, after letting Gaius convince Arthur to go rest, she went to the King's chambers.

It was dark inside, and stiflingly hot. A fire roared in the fireplace, and Merlynn was tempted to put it out and open the curtains. But she kept her hands to herself. The King was once again seated in an armchair by the fire, looking haggard.

"Sire," she greeted curtly.

The man looked up and glared at her. Unlike when she came here during the famine, his eyes were clear and sharp. "What are you doing here?"

"If you're referring to my lack of shackles, I can assure you, I was let go. Arthur had the council overrule your verdict after it became clear that Sophia had put a spell on him. She never saw me perform any magic," Merlynn said calmly.

"It doesn't matter," Uther spat. "I know what you are: a filthy sorceress."

For a moment, Merlynn considered denying it, but decided against it. Uther had already made up his mind about her, so why not be honest? "Yes." It felt liberating to say it aloud. "I am. But I've never done Camelot harm, nor do I wish to do so in the future."

"Lies," he hissed. "Your kind are all evil!"

"No, we're not, not any more than any who have power are all evil. It's power that corrupts, not magic," she said. Before he could spew more hatred, she went on. "You didn't always believe as you did now. There are records of you having a court sorceress, of laws governing magic in Camelot. What changed?"

"I saw the truth. It was the stain of corruption that is magic. It leaves none untouched," the King spat, but there was something in his eyes, something fearful.

Shaking her head, Merlynn started to pace. "No, there was turmoil, but nothing that would have resulted in this... it had to have been something specific, something tragic, something... personal..." she trailed off. There *had* been something that had happened right before the Purge, something that was deeply tragic and personal to Uther Pendragon, but how did it pertain to magic? Had it been because it hadn't been able to save her? Looking at the man now, she almost pitied him. Had he been any other man, his rage would have burnt itself out. It was the power that he wielded that had allowed that pain to continue to fester.

"You know... you used to be the figure of my nightmares." Uther didn't reply, other than to continue to glare at her. So she went on; "When I was a child, you were the boogeyman who was going to take me away from my family. Even as an adult, you scared me," she said, shrugging. "But then I saw the truth: you were just a man, driven by hatred. Someone of whom to be cautious, but... you don't scare me anymore, because you don't hold any power over me."

It was a revelation that was entirely freeing to her, and one that, judging from the look of pure hatred on Uther's face, was infuriating to the King. That, in and of itself, was a plus in

Merlynn's eyes. She smiled. "Do you know what a magically binding oath is, Sire?" she asked, sitting down on the chaise next to him. He leaned back in disgust. "It's a vow that anyone who possesses magic can make. It's simple, really; you stipulate a goal, and consequences should that goal not be met, and then just pour magic into it. It must be constantly sustained, but it's a minor magical cost."

Uther was starting to look alarmed, so Merlynn cast a quick silencing charm on the door. "Witch! What did you do?" He looked utterly terrified now. Merlynn elected to ignore him.

"I hereby swear, on my magic and my life, that I will never intentionally cause serious harm to Camelot or any of its inhabitants, unless they themselves pose a threat to Camelot. In particular, I swear that I will never intentionally cause serious harm to Arthur. *Mar sin beidh sé.*" She felt her magic rush to the surface, spreading all over, and making her skin tingle. From Uther's horrified expression, she guessed her eyes had glowed gold. "I hope you can rest easier now, Uther," she said. Despite feeling a little smug at having pushed the man so off balance, she was sincere. She had been scared and angry before, but Uther was no threat to her, and if he tried to become one, she would deal with it. He held no power over her.

And with that, she walked out, leaving the King of Camelot both shaken and speechless. Now all she had to do was track down her uncle and get to the bottom of what started the Great Purge, figure out exactly how she felt after the past few days, and talk to Morgana.

After what she'd just done, she thought she might just be able to handle it.

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Luckily for Merlynn, her uncle was not too hard to find. She came across him as he exited Arthur's chambers.

"I've given him a sleeping draught, he'll need all the rest he can get," Gaius said, gesturing for Merlynn to follow him to the physician's quarters. "He'll sleep until morning, it'll be best to leave him be until then."

"I was actually looking for you, uncle," Merlynn said. "There's a matter I need to discuss with you. Privately," she added, eyeing the occasional servants they passed.

Only once he'd closed the door behind them in his chambers, Merlynn felt safe to talk. "I need to know what happened to make Uther start the Great Purge," she said quickly. No need to beat around the bush.

Gaius sighed and sat down wearily at his table. "My child, it is not an easy thing you ask of me. I swore never to speak of it."

"I've already figured out that it's related to the death of the Queen. I just don't see how it relates to magic," she said, a little frustrated that the answer kept evading her.

For a moment, her uncle didn't reply. Then, he sighed and motioned for her to sit at the table opposite him. "It isn't an easy thing to speak of, and I am ashamed of what I did in its aftermath," he started to say, staring off, his mind in the past. "Camelot in those days was a

very different place. In a way, it lay in the eye of a storm: while life was calm and peaceful here, the surrounding lands were fraught with dangers. Many magical folk used their talents for ill. Camelot was a safe haven for both those with magic and without, who wished to live in peace. The King was young, and tried to be tough on all who breached the calm he'd created. He had many enemies, and no heirs."

Gaius focussed his eyes on her again. "Don't misunderstand me, Uther was very much in love with his wife, and for many years, they tried to conceive naturally, using herbs and crystals at the most. But it soon became clear that the Queen could not conceive. Against my advice, and without my knowledge, Uther went to his court sorceress, Nimueh, for help. Even back then, she was powerful, ambitious... and there was something she wanted desperately."

Merlynn frowned. "If she was the court sorceress, you must have known her. What was it she wanted?"

"At the time, she was betrothed... to Balinor, your father," Gaius said hesitantly.

"What?" Merlynn breathed. "How? But, I don't..." She didn't even know what it was she was trying to ask. How had that happened? And had they... had he...?

"It was a match of convenience, arranged by Nimueh's mother Vivaine. Nimueh, however, wanted more."

Merlynn grabbed the end of her braid and nervously played with it. "This is all very... disturbing, but I still don't see how this has to do with the Purge," she sighed.

"It was the boon she wanted from Uther. Magic was not very well governed, but there were laws regarding certain types of magic, like blood magic and some powerful potions. The King, however, could grant someone permission to use it without consequence."

Merlynn frowned. "Nimueh was in love with- with Balinor, but he didn't love her... a love potion?" she surmised, a little disgusted. There was little that was entirely one's own in this world; she had thought that one's thoughts and feelings were firmly in that category. She supposed Sophia had been proof of that, but she'd been an evil fea creature, not a human being wanting to take away the will of another. And for what? No potion could recreate what she felt for Arthur.

Gaius nodded gravely. "Uther granted it, though reluctantly. He and Balinor had never been friends, but they had always respected one another. But this was a deal made by two powerful, yet desperate people. So, Nimueh provided Uther with the means to conceive an heir, and Uther wrote out a pardon for Nimueh."

"Again, disturbing, but I don't... wait, how could Nimueh help Uther conceive a child? I thought he had already tried magic?" she asked, confused.

"Not this magic," Gaius said, and a weight seemed to come down on his shoulders. "There is a power called 'mirroring life and death'. Only the most talented of high priestesses could wield it, and even fewer had ever actually used it."

“You speak as though it’s evil...”

Shaking his head, Gaius reached for her hands. “No. You said it yourself, once. Magic in and of itself is never evil. It is the power it provides that can corrupt, and then it is people who do evil acts. When used correctly, this power can do great things. But in the wrong hands, it can wreak great evil. Furthermore, it, like all magic, requires balance. In order to gain, you must give,” he explained, pulling back his hands.

Merlynn nodded thoughtfully. It had been one of her earliest lessons. “Of course. Every spell requires energy, some need ingredients...”

“But the more powerful the magic, the greater the cost... To give life, another must be taken.”

It did not take long for the implications of this to sink in, and Merlynn gasped. “Arthur,” she breathed. “The cost for his life...”

With tears in his eyes, Gaius nodded. “It was his mother’s life. Uther was desperate to save her, he hadn’t known that the life that needed to be given would be that of his wife. Nimueh offered him to exchange his life for that of his wife, but Uther felt that the Kingdom needed him. He thought that had he died and his wife lived, she and the child would have been hunted and killed, and his sacrifice would have been in vain. I want to deny his logic, but... the Queen was a strong, kind woman, but she had never been prepared to rule.”

“So instead of blaming himself, he blamed magic?” Merlynn whispered, so filled with horror and sadness that she could scarcely make a sound.

“He hunted all who had even the smallest tie to magic to extinction, human, beast and relic alike. He destroyed them.” Gaius’ volume matched hers, though his tears had spilled, where hers had refused to do so.

“And you were here,” she said, for the first time truly understanding what had happened all those years ago. She’d always looked up to her uncle, but... how could she ever look at him again, knowing he had stood by while others of their kin had been slaughtered?

“I tried to help those I could,” he said tremulously, his gaze on the table. “I smuggled your father, and others like him out of the city.”

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Merlynn’s mind was blank as she went over all that she’d heard and done that day. “I wish I could say that it was enough,” she whispered. Her throat felt tight, and she realized that she’d begun crying as well. “Uther drowned babies, burnt innocents to the stake... and you’ve stood by him.” Her uncle didn’t reply. “What would you have done? That day that Uther took me from my mother’s arms, what would you have done if he’d thrown me in that well?”

She wasn’t sure what answer she wanted. That he would have taken a sword to the man who had once been the greatest swordsman in the realm? That he would have left Camelot? That he would have done nothing? “I don’t know,” was what he said.



Taking a deep breath, Merlynn wiped away her tears. She desperately needed sleep, and maybe that was making her a little more emotional, but she wasn't done for the day. "I need to find Morgana. She saw the truth in a vision and I need to apologise to her."

Gaius looked up sharply. "You didn't confirm her fears of magic, did you?" he asked.

"Of course I did. Someone with that amount of power walking around and no clue how to use or direct it? It's no wonder it was acting out unexpectedly." Merlynn rubbed her eyes, wishing she could just go to sleep and not worry about anything else for the time being. "You don't understand what it's like, uncle. What little magic you have, you can suppress easily, it was something you were taught, not something you were born with. Morgana and I are different. The amount of magic we have cannot so easily be contained: it *will* burst out," she explained impatiently. "When I was a child, I tried to keep my magic inside, but it manifested itself anyway. Chandeliers would sway, candles would flicker, and I'd trip over everything, knocking things over... it was hard to control my body when most of my attention had to go towards keeping all that power in."

Her uncle didn't reply. "I know you love her like a daughter, but this is not the way to help," Merlynn said.

"If she reveals you, even accidentally..."

"She's in far more danger of revealing me should she try to keep her magic contained, completely ignoring its existence. She needs an outlet every once in a while. And because her magic can manifest as visions, it's quite safe. More so than me needing to move objects every so often." Merlynn stood up. She had one more conversation to get through before she could finally sleep. "Uncle, I love you, but in these matters, I have more experience than you. I'll keep my own council on this." Perhaps she was a little harsh, but she was exhausted, and at the end of her emotional rope. Tomorrow, she could go over everything that had happened this morning, and perhaps she'd feel differently, but for now...

Goddess, she was so *tired*. She'd only been up for... a good 30 hours, judging by the sun. It was mid-morning by now.

She was so tired, in fact, that she hadn't realized that she'd gone all the way to Morgana's chambers. For a moment, she stared at the door. For all that the conversations she'd had with her uncle and the King had been emotionally taxing, this was the one she was most dreading. Morgana had been her best friend since she was a little girl. She'd been the first noble who hadn't cared about her background, or tomboyish ways. The thought of losing her... it scared her almost as much as when Vivian had found out.

Bracing herself, she raised her hand and knocked.

So, what are your thoughts? Looking forward to the next chapter? Predictions about the conversation with Morgana? Let me know!

# Mending Connections

## Chapter Notes

Why is this story so loooooong??

I can't believe I just posted chapter 53. That's insane. And all of you sticking with me through this crazy adventure is even more insane. Thank you all so much! Enjoy!

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

### C53: Mending Connections

Morgana sat with her back straight at her vanity, every bit the Lady of the court she had been raised to be. Inside, on the other hand, she was in turmoil. Merlynn stood in the doorway, looking more uncertain than Morgana had ever seen her oldest friend.

"May I come in?" Merlynn asked. She might have looked uncertain, but there was still a steel to her posture that Morgana had always envied.

"That depends," Morgana replied, choosing to remain seated. "Have you come to deny the charge against you?"

Merlynn sighed and stepped inside, closing the door behind her. "No, Morgana. I've come for two things: first and foremost, to apologise. And second, to make a vow."

Confused, Morgana stayed silent. She had been sure that Merlynn would only come with excuses or denials. This was unexpected.

"I lied to you," Merlynn went on, oblivious to Morgana's confusion, "and I shouldn't have. I could say that I have a good excuse, but I don't. I was simply scared."

Almost against her will, Merlynn's words resonated with Morgana. After all, how many times had she been frightened, not just of Uther, but of herself, of the reactions of her friends...

"I was scared you'd look at me differently, or that you'd get in trouble if I were to be found out. Stupid, I know... we've known each other since we were children, you're like a sister to me," Merlynn said, her demeanor looking more and more anguished. "Morgana, I am *so* sorry that I didn't tell you. I should have done so the moment I realized your own secret. I was a terrible friend, and I apologise."

Despite her discomposure, Merlynn stood tall. She looked tense, her hands clasped together tightly, and her shoulders pushed back. For a moment, Morgana didn't respond. Merlynn truly was her best friend, and she *understood* her reasons. More than that, seeing Merlynn's regret, her guilt, reflected in unshed tears, made her decision. She believed her.

"And the vow?" Morgana asked, needing to be sure.

"To never lie to you again. Not unless it's life or death, or not my secret to tell."

She believed her, and she could now see that she'd overreacted. But the hurt was still there. She couldn't help herself. Equal parts of her wanted to hug her friend and turn her away forever. It didn't help that her m- magic was now closer to the surface than ever. She had never felt so out of control.

"I believe you," she said finally. "And you're still my friend. But I need time." Merlynn looked both hopeful and saddened. "I need to think, and to put this behind me."

The Princess nodded, and turned to leave, before pausing at the door. "I'd understand if you never want to speak to me again, but if there's anything you want to know, about me, or about magic in general... I did swear never to lie to you again..."

Morgana contemplated this. There were so many things she wanted to know, countless questions at the tip of her tongue. She pushed them down resolutely. "I'd like that. In a few days maybe?"

Merlynn smiled. "You know where to find me. I'll be waiting."

And with that, the other woman went through the door, leaving Morgana once again alone.

Morgana's mind drifted to Nimueh's plan - not that she knew much about it. She had been assured that Arthur and Merlynn would remain unharmed. If they were to succeed, a new golden age could begin, with magic users and those without the gift living together in peace. Merlynn would be able to marry Arthur without fear of prosecution for her talents. And Morgana could finally be free.

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Far away, the sorceress in question stood before her most trusted lieutenant. Tauren was looking over maps and supply lists. But Nimueh herself was more interested in something else.

"It seems our little sorceress is no longer afraid of the King," she commented, as she waved her hand over her scrying bowl to banish the image of the young Princess confronting Uther.

Tauren looked up and grinned. "I've heard that the famine weakened the King, that he is plagued by fevers and delusions. He is weak."

"Your spies have done well, Tauren. But poison is not the way for Uther Pendragon to go." Her hands clenched around the scrying bowl, the surface of the liquid shaking from her unreleased magic. "I want him to suffer as we did."

"That will be difficult with the Prince in charge. I hate to say it of Uther's spawn, but he is capable, and his men follow him loyally," Tauren responded, turning his eyes back to the papers in front of him.

“Then we shall have to get rid of the Prince. Which, in turn, should provide us some breathing room with regards to the Princess.” Though there was no more image, Nimueh kept her eyes on the bowl in front of her. She had hated Uther for decades, but he was only a man. This Princess, this *Merlynn*, invoked far greater hatred in her heart. She had *everything*: powerful magic, a family, a man who loved her... yet she turned away from her kin. Merlynn, if she so chose, could rule Camelot, perhaps even all of Albion, with her magic and political ties. Instead, the little Princess chose to dutifully do what she was told, and live in hiding, fearful of her magic instead of basking in it.

Tauren drew her attention back when he grabbed one of the papers from the table and grinned triumphantly. “I may have a way to rid yourself of the lot of them.”

Interested, Nimueh walked over, holding out her hand for the parchment. On it, a drawing of a horn preceded a rather lengthy letter. She didn’t need to ask what was in the letter, for she recognised the horn. “The horn of Cathbad,” she whispered, her fingers trailing over the detailed sketch. “I thought it had been lost when Uther attacked the Isle of the Blessed.”

“Evidently, one of your young apprentices smuggled it out. She heard of your return and wanted to gift it to its rightful owner.”

“I am overjoyed to see its return. I do not, however, see how this helps me rid myself of either the Princess or Prince. The only one they might be tempted to contact is the whelp-Prince’s mother, and she was not a vengeful woman.” In fact, the late Queen had commanded both love and respect, even from Nimueh herself.

“It is not the horn itself which will be their downfall, my lady,” Tauren said, “but rather the idea it has given me. There is a spell we might use to trick Arthur. So long as the apparition we summon does not speak any untruths, it should prove quite convincing. What better way to enact our revenge than to let the Prince kill his father.”

Nimueh pursed her lips as she considered the plan. “He might not go so far. By all accounts, the Prince loves his tyrant of a father.”

“Even so, it would drive a wedge between them. It is only one of many ways we may take out our adversaries.”

“I had thought of using a wraith, myself,” Nimueh admitted. “Sir Tristan’s vow to avenge his sister would work quite nicely.”

Before he could respond, someone cleared their throat outside the tent they’d been gathered in. It was spelled against eavesdropping, so Nimueh wasn’t concerned they’d heard anything. “Take care of it,” she said, indicating the letter Tauren still held. Then, she nodded for Tauren to open the tent flap.

“My lady, my lord,” the messenger greeted. “A man named Aodh has come to speak to Lord Tauren.”

Tauren turned to Nimueh. “He is a warlock I came across in Camelot. He pretended to be less than he was, but I could sense his power. If he is willing to help, he could be a great asset.”

“Interesting.” Then, she turned to the messenger. “Bring him in.” As they waited, Tauren went over some more papers. “Aodh you said... it means fire in the language of the Old Religion, it was the name of a powerful dragonlord centuries ago. It can’t be...” The only dragonlord still in existence...

The man was led into the tent and, while it had been decades since she’d laid eyes on him, she knew him for who he was. As did he. Balinor’s eyes widened as he noticed her.

Rage fanned up inside her, but she maintained her calm exterior carefully. This man had turned her down for a powerless *peasant*, and had lived in the wilds instead of giving in to her. Even after Uther had hunted him, he had never tried to return to her side. But now she knew his secret. He loved another, and his daughter was the biggest thorn in her side. He would know what it felt like to lose everything. She’d make sure of it.

“I hear you call yourself Aodh now.”

Balinor bowed his head. “It is... safer. There are few now who know the story of my ancestor. I was not expecting you, Nimueh.”

Tauren, probably sensing that this was something that had nothing to do with him, bowed to Nimueh. “I’ll see to your plans, my lady.” Nimueh barely acknowledged when he left. They were alone. She wanted to claw his eyes out.

“I’m only here to do what is necessary, Balinor. To rid the world of the taint that is the Pendragon bloodline. To bring peace to our people,” she said, outwardly perfectly composed.

Still, he did not look convinced. “What exactly are your plans?” he asked.

She smirked at him and sat down in a chair. “If you’re worried about your little bird, Merlynn, rest assured... she has no bearing on my plans,” she lied.

To his credit, he didn’t flinch. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Leaning back, Nimueh studied him. She hated him with a passion, but at the same time... she still wanted him. Perhaps when she’d broken him by taking those he loved, she could rebuild him into something more palatable for herself. “You want to be in my inner circle, Balinor? You want me to trust you?”

“Have I ever given you reason not to? Have I not always been truthful, even when the truth was painful?” he countered.

That, she could not deny. He had broken her heart, but he had never directly lied about it. Carefully keeping her smirk on her face, she nodded in acknowledgement. “Fair enough. For the moment, I’m throwing mere distractions at Camelot, testing their resolve as well as their defences. I need a few more things to fall into place before I can go after that which I truly desire.” Balinor frowned. “Let’s say it’s a matter of *life* and *death*,” she teased, enjoying his confusion.

“You’re after the Cup? But you never had access to it, your aunt placed it under the most powerful protections possible.”

She made a face. “I may not have had access to it, but I knew what the protections entailed,” she admitted. “As I said, I need only a few more things to fall into place. In the meantime, Uther and his son need to be distracted. And King Olaf needs to be... persuaded.”

“To do what?”

“Why, to go to war, of course.”

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“You are, of course, free to go,” Uther said grudgingly.

He sat on his throne, while Merlynn stood by Arthur’s side before him. Gaius was off to the side, ready to offer advice if needed. Morgana stood next to him, her eyes cast down and standing silently.

She knew she was glaring at the King, and that there were tears in her eyes, but she didn’t bother hiding it. He didn’t scare her anymore.

Merlynn raised her eyebrows. “Do you honestly think my father will care? You almost let me die, once, a madman *you* had invited nearly killed me, and now you’ve sentenced me to death. There is a limit to how much insult a father can take, and you crossed that line months ago. Even I cannot stop him from going to war now.”

“There has to be something we can do?” Arthur pleaded, his eyes straying towards the windows. Below, the townsfolk would be preparing for another day, clueless as to the danger they were in.

“I’m not sure there is. I persuaded him away from this course once, but he will not allow me to do it again. I believe he may even have been preparing for war all this time. He knew something would happen and he would not let himself be talked down again. And Camelot is in no shape to respond to such a threat, not with the disasters that have struck the kingdom of late.”

Uther was pale as he sat on his throne, for the first time seeming small to Merlynn’s eyes. She’d always been afraid of him... but he was just a man, nothing more.

Shaking his head, Arthur started to pace. “No, there has to be something. I could go to your father.”

“He would take you prisoner and use you against your own people,” Merlynn said resolutely. “He likes you, so I don’t believe he’d kill you, but he would never let you go. Camelot would lose its ruler.” There was, of course, *one* thing they could do. Something that had held off war many times in the past. But to mention it now...

“Merlynn?” Gaius said, looking at her with narrowed eyes.

Arthur looked up from his pacing. “Merlynn? Have you thought of something?”

She could hardly keep quiet now. “Perhaps. I haven’t mentioned it before, because... there are so many things that can go wrong...”

“It isn’t as though we have other options,” Morgana said quietly, speaking up for the first time.

The two women made eye contact. They hadn’t spoken since that morning, but there was guilt and grief in Morgana’s eyes now, over a friendship now lost. But Merlynn wasn’t one to give up that easily. Perhaps their bond was only damaged, not broken. And broken things could be mended.

She offered a small smile. “I do have a plan, but it is risky, and... not everyone will be as happy with the outcome.”

A tense silence followed her words. “Is it... what you mentioned to me before?” Morgana asked quietly. Merlynn had almost forgotten that she’d mentioned it to her. It had seemed like a lifetime ago.

Arthur took Merlynn’s hand, seemingly unafraid of his father’s gaze. Perhaps he’d shed his fear of his father, too. “What must we do?”

“First, I must send a messenger to Galdara. My cousin Ellyn and Arrin must be brought to Camelot in all secrecy,” Merlynn started, going over her plans in her head.

Realization dawned in Arthur’s eyes. “Which brings me to the next part of my plan.” She glanced around. Uther was fuming on his throne, but there was nothing he could say. He was willing to sacrifice a lot for his pride, but his entire kingdom was not one of them. Merlynn was just grateful that he was lucid enough to realize that he could not win against Galdara’s forces. Still, she would have preferred that he hadn’t been here. “I know you’ve asked me this before, but...” she trailed off, looking at Arthur again, and taking both of his hands in hers. “Arthur, I love you. I think I’ve loved you for years, I was just too stubborn to realize it.”

“I love you, too,” he whispered, seemingly having forgotten about the other people in the room. He smiled at her, probably knowing what she was about to ask. It felt ridiculous to ask this when they had already agreed, but... they needed witnesses.

She smiled broadly at him. “Then I have a question for you,” she said, gripping his hands firmly to stop herself from shaking. “Arthur Pendragon. Would you accept my hand in marriage?”

## Chapter End Notes

Some much needed reconcillation with Morgana, and more of Nimueh's plans! I haven't actually fully formed said plans in my head, but I'm trusting Nimueh to forge ahead :p



I really, *really* hope to finish this story by chapter 62 or 65. But, because I am a seat-of-my-pantser and not a planner, I can't say for sure. Either way, we're in the home stretch! There will be fluff! There will be heartbreak! There will be villainous plans! There will be a happy ending! Because let's face it, I'm a big softie. Anyway, let me know your thoughts!

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