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To the girls who dream out loud,
want too much, and refuse to give up.

PROLOGUE

The Crooked Spire isn't remembered in any history books. No important documents were signed at its tables, no heroes rode into battle fortified by its ale, and no revolutions began in its back room. The drinks were watered down, the barkeep turned a blind eye to gambling (how he'd lost it was a constant source of speculation), and the barmaids made no secret that they were willing, for a price. And yet, the Spire does have a place in history—by the pure coincidence of its location—which is, perhaps, why it goes unmentioned.

If you stood with your back to the Thames, just north of St. Paul's Cathedral, you'd need only walk down the narrowest alleyway that borders the churchyard to arrive at the steps of the tavern. The sheer nerve of such a place to set up shop alongside the greatest cathedral in London raised more than a few eyebrows. But the Spire endured, largely because no one could remember which had come first. The only part everyone agreed on was that the magic sword in the courtyard between them had been there since, well, *forever*.

It stuck there, buried to the hilt in a block of veined marble, waiting. Occasionally, a knight riding through on his way to Castle Camelot would stop to try his luck. Or a dockworker might stumble out of the tavern, flexing his muscles and calling to his friends, *Hey, come and watch this!* But the sword stuck fast, and the words chiseled into the stone wore smooth over time.

Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone is rightwise king born of all England.

Now there was an idea. Anyone could tell you that, ever since the Saxons invaded and mucked things up, there had been half a dozen kingdoms of England. Sure, the borders shifted on occasion, whenever a restless royal rode off and conquered a neighboring castle. But a *united* kingdom? The thought, although far-fetched, was intriguing.

Yet no knight came who could pull the sword from the stone, and no great hero arose to unite the Britons. The sword had been waiting for hundreds of years, and, to be honest, it was bored.

CHAPTER 1

Arthur Pendragon was drunk. Enormously, blissfully drunk. He slouched down in the booth of the Crooked Spire, enjoying the gentle way the tavern had begun to spin.

Everything about the place fascinated him: The arched stone ceiling that gave the impression of an underground cellar. The iron chains that served as handrails to the back staircase. The fat purple candles that dripped wax indiscriminately over floor and table. And then there was that odd sword in the courtyard. If the rumors were true, the last knight who'd attempted to pull it free had strained so hard that he'd actually soiled himself.

Arthur would have laughed if he'd been there to see it. But then, he hadn't seen much of anything lately. Tonight, however, he was free of the castle's oppressive gloom, if only for a few hours. And he intended to savor his freedom.

He drained his mug of ale and glanced across the table, where his friend was fiddling with a deck of cards. Lancelot shuffled them with a practiced snap, sifting them into a bridge. He did it a second time, and then a third.

"Please tell me you're going to do a magic trick." Arthur smirked, and Lance shot him a look.

"I was *going* to make the ale disappear," Lance retorted, "but you already did that yourself."

"Well, we *are* in a tavern."

"Stop looking so pleased with yourself. *I'm* the one who snuck us out."

That part was true: Lance had conjured some absurd excuse that sent Arthur's guards back to quarters, tossed him a shabby cloak, and announced they were going for a drink. It was bold and reckless, but it had worked.

And for that, Arthur was immensely grateful. He hadn't realized how badly he needed to be somewhere else until they were hurrying through the maze of London streets, the night thick with the promise that they could spend it as they pleased.

"I guess I owe you one," he said.

"You owe me six hundred and twenty-three," said Lance, "but who's counting?"

Arthur reached for his ale, finding his mug empty. He glanced hopefully toward the bar. "Another round?"

"Bad idea."

"Terrible," Arthur agreed.

"But how will we learn from our mistakes if we don't make any?" Lance's eyes danced with mischief as he climbed to his feet.

"My thoughts exactly." Arthur offered up some pennies, but Lance waved them off, scooping some petty coins from his vast pile of winnings and sauntering over to the bar.

Lance had left the cards faceup on the table, and the King of Cups stared back at Arthur, bearing more than a passing resemblance to his father. He sighed and pushed the cards away. Of course the great Uther Pendragon would commission his likeness on something so trivial. The king wasn't even the highest card in the deck. And worse, there were *four* of them. Arthur would have laughed, if it wasn't so depressing.

He glanced toward the bar, where Lance was leaning forward, a flirtatious smile on his lips, turning his charms on the barmaid. The girl blushed from the attention, and Arthur snorted, knowing Lance would just as happily flirt with the barkeep, or, probably, the barstool.

It was nights like this he wished he could make a girl smile and laugh, and know it was for real. These days, too much of his father's court treated him like a prize to be won, or a piece of clay they intended to mold. He

wasn't sure he'd ever get used to it. Especially when, for most of his life, they couldn't dismiss him fast enough.

It was the end of September, and he was supposed to be at university, dividing his time between the library, the laboratory, and whatever dark watering hole everyone crammed into, just another scholar in the crowd. But that dream was long gone, replaced by a future that was never supposed to be his.

He tried to put it out of mind as Lance sauntered back to the table with two frothing mugs of ale, sending one in his direction with a practiced slide.

"These ones aren't stale," Lance bragged, nodding his chin in the direction of the barmaid. "I think she likes me."

"She likes your purse," Arthur said. "Anyone can see you've won half my coin."

"Consider it charity." Lance swallowed a mouthful of ale. "Guard's pay is a joke." He paused, calculating. "Hold on, was that only half?"

Arthur shrugged, pushing the cards the rest of the way across the table. In truth, Lance had almost cleaned him out, but he wasn't about to admit defeat. He just needed to bluff a hand or two, let his friend get cocky, and wait for his moment. Or else get so drunk that he didn't mind staggering home with an empty purse. Honestly, both were solid options.

Lance gave the deck an elaborate shuffle and started to deal, just as the bells over the door jingled. A blast of cool night air rushed into the tavern—along with a rumpled, nervous squire whom Arthur recognized immediately.

"Everyone, come quick!" the squire urged. "Sir Kay is about to pull the sword from the stone!"

Arthur stiffened. This was bad—very bad. He shot a panicked look across at Lance, who'd slid low in his seat, his hood shadowing his face. Arthur did the same, just as a stout man at the bar let out a booming laugh.

"Sure he is," said the man. "Just like the sop last night, and the night before that."

Suddenly half the tavern was laughing, and the other half shouting insults.

The squire blanched. And then he held up a heavy purse that clearly belonged to his master. "S-see for yourselves," he stuttered. "For those who b-bear witness, the next round is on S-Sir Kay."

"Why didn't ye say that in the first place?" someone called.

The tavern emptied in an instant, its patrons stampeding eagerly toward the door. Arthur slid lower in his seat, but no one paid his table any attention. Games of cards and dice sat abandoned, the tavern empty of all but Arthur and Lance, and one old drunkard snoring contentedly by the hearth.

"*Sard.*" Arthur groaned. "It had to be Sir Kay."

The knight was Lance's uncle, and would enjoy nothing more than dragging the two of them back to the castle and throwing Lance under the horse for their unsanctioned adventure.

"I'm dead," Lance murmured, rubbing a hand over his face. "Speak kindly at my funeral."

"There's still a chance he won't spot us," said Arthur. "Come on. We'll slip through the crowd. Just keep your head down."

"It's not *my* head I'm worried about," Lance grumbled.

Arthur adjusted his hood. His cloak was old and far too short for him, revealing boots of polished calfskin. Even worse was Lance's sword, the unmistakable blade of the royal guard, which he'd refused to leave behind.

Sloppy. They wouldn't make the same mistake next time, if there even *was* a next time.

Arthur yanked open the door, and his last scrap of confidence fell away.

The courtyard was packed. Sir Kay had obviously sent his squire to the cathedral first, gathering a sizable audience there. It was impossible to push

past the steps of the tavern, much less through the tightly pressed crowd.

They were stuck.

Lance swore under his breath.

"At least we'll get to watch," Arthur whispered, trying to make the best of it. They had a decent view, and no one would spot them all the way back here.

"I guess." Lance bit his lip as he surveyed the crowd.

"Maybe he'll shit his armor." Arthur was mostly joking, but Lance brightened considerably at the suggestion.

The crowd, growing thicker by the moment, buzzed with whispers, and coins changed hands as hasty bets were placed. The well-heeled churchgoers huddled together, shooting apprehensive looks at the unsavory tavern folk who had joined them, most with drinks still in hand.

And at the front stood Sir Kay, with his ice-blue eyes and pointed beard the same honeyed color as Lance's curls. The knight's crimson cloak flowed behind him, and his armor, although dusty, was gold-plated—designed for tournaments rather than combat. The young, fumbling squire saw to his master's horse and equipment. From the amount of it, Arthur surmised that Sir Kay had ridden directly from the tournament in Cameliard. Where no doubt he had triumphed again in the joust.

Sir Kay preened, motioning for cheers from those pressed against the gate, and then the onlookers in the alley, letting the excitement build.

If they had any chance of sneaking away, this was it. Lance jerked his chin toward the alley, and Arthur nodded grimly. They shoved into the crowd, keeping their hoods low. They just needed to get to the gate, and then they could make for the Strand.

Deeper in the crowd, a man bellowed for more beer, waving an empty flagon in the air.

"Comin' through!" a barmaid shrilled, shoving past Arthur with a pitcher filled to the brim.

She slammed into him—hard. Beer slopped down the front of his cloak, and he tented his soaking tunic with a grimace. She must have spilled half the pitcher.

“Don’t stop,” Lance urged, his expression tense. He kept a hand on his sword as he wrenched his way between two thick-necked dockworkers.

Arthur followed grimly, beer dripping onto his boots. Coming to this tavern had been their worst idea in a long time. And that was saying something.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the barmaid shrielled.

With every step and push, the crowd protested and glared. And then Lance stopped short, and Arthur bumped into him. They were stuck.

“You! In the cloak! You better pay for that,” the barmaid snapped, laying a rough hand on his shoulder.

Arthur whirled around in disbelief. “You’re the one who spilled on *me*,” he accused.

He expected at least a mumbled apology, but none came. Instead, she shot him a fierce glare. And then her eyes went wide.

“No, please—” Arthur begged, but it was too late.

“I didn’t r-recognize you,” she stammered, and he held his breath, as though that would prevent her from ruining everything. “Your R-Royal Highness.”

Goddamn it, Arthur thought. *This evening was just determined to go terribly.*

The barmaid sunk into a panicked curtsy, and Lance shot Arthur a horrified look. This was the *opposite* of sneaking away quietly.

“Get up,” Arthur whispered urgently. “It’s all right.”

It wasn’t all right. Already, a ripple was going through the courtyard, and heads were turning in their direction.

“My friends, what distracts you?” Sir Kay boomed.

“It’s the sardin’ prince of Camelot,” someone called, making the churchgoers gasp at both the news and at such a coarse swear.

Arthur wanted to disappear. But that wasn’t happening, so damage

control would have to do. He painted on a smile and pushed back his hood.

“Your Highness,” said Sir Kay, with a small bow in Arthur’s direction. “Lance,” he added, barely hiding his disappointment. “I didn’t realize you’d been at church.”

Lance grimaced, but Arthur’s shoulders stiffened at the barb.

If Sir Kay wanted a verbal sparring match, then so be it. Lance wasn’t getting in trouble for this. Not if he could help it. So Arthur lifted his chin, squared his shoulders, and tried to summon a semblance of his father’s stern command.

“And I didn’t realize you wished to be High King of England,” Arthur returned.

The knight’s smile faltered. “You misunderstand me, Your Highness,” said Sir Kay. “I aim only to prove a point.”

“That winning is your greatest ambition?” Arthur suggested, earning some snickers from the crowd.

“That it’s impossible for *any* man to pull this sword from the stone,” said Sir Kay.

“So you’ve assembled us here to watch you fail?” Arthur asked with a frown.

“I—well—no,” said Sir Kay.

“I see,” said Arthur, surprised he’d managed to gain the upper hand. “By all means, continue.”

No one was cheering now. Still, Sir Kay stepped forward, dramatically wrapping both hands around the hilt of the sword.

The courtyard was silent as Sir Kay pulled. And pulled. Sweat dripped from his brow, and he groaned from the effort. But the sword didn’t budge.

Of course not, Arthur thought. *It takes more than brute strength to overpower magic.*

Sir Kay let go, and a disappointed murmur rang out.

“Knew he couldn’t do it,” someone complained.

"As I said, impossible," the knight repeated, trying to save face. It was obvious he'd believed he would succeed.

"What a waste!" someone called.

"Oi! Make the prince try!" someone else yelled.

Arthur stiffened.

"Let's see *him* pull the sword from the stone!"

More people shouted in agreement.

"Well, Your Highness?" Sir Kay challenged.

Arthur desperately wanted to refuse. But of course he couldn't. Because this was what it meant, being heir to the kingdom. He was supposed to lead the people. To listen to them. And they were calling for him to pull the sword from the stone.

"Why not?" he said with a shrug, as though he hadn't just agreed to humiliate himself.

He could feel the press of everyone's stares as he made his way through the churchyard. They weren't stares of encouragement. He was the boy who would be king, and it was clear on their faces: they didn't want him.

But he already knew that. He'd spent his whole life as the embarrassment of the realm: King Uther and Queen Igraine's bastard son. Even though he wasn't, technically, a bastard. Born five months after his parents' wedding, he was merely a scandal. And there was no law against putting a scandal on the throne.

Still, the courtiers had whispered. And King Uther had hastily made it clear that, although firstborn, Arthur would be raised as a spare. When the queen produced a rightful heir, the Royal House of Pendragon would have its crown prince. Except their next two children were stillborn. Then there was a daughter so weak that she had lived only a few hours. The queen had grown frail, but still Uther held out hope. A few months ago, it had seemed a grand celebration was in order. But neither mother nor child had survived the birth. Which meant Arthur was, well, *it*.

The funeral was barely finished before Arthur was summoned before his father's advisors, who declared him utterly lacking. He was, they accused, deficient in every subject that a royal heir of eighteen should have long since mastered. No matter that his French was fluent, his Latin excellent, and his knowledge of medicinal herbs first-rate. He knew nothing of hunting, hawking, or combat. And even more troubling, he preferred the company of Sir Ector's bastard, Lancelot, a lad so questionable that his own uncle had refused to take him on as squire.

And now he was going to embarrass himself over a magic sword. Perfect.

He stumbled a little, unsteady from the drink, but his gaze stayed fixed on the sword. It was buried to the hilt in a block of stone, just like in the stories. If he squinted, he could make out the engraving: *Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone is rightwise king born of all England.*

Fair chance. He wasn't even rightwise prince born of Camelot.

The crowd was keen for his defeat, and Sir Kay was eager for Arthur's failure to eclipse his own.

He could sense everyone's scorn bubbling up around him. They didn't think he could do it. They just wanted to have a laugh at his expense. He was never going to be enough. For his father, or for Camelot.

"Get on with it!" someone shouted.

Arthur closed his hands around the sword's cool iron hilt, feeling foolish.

Here goes nothing, he thought, as he squared his shoulders and pulled.

The sword came loose as easily as if it had been resting in a well-oiled sheath.

He stumbled backward in surprise, gripping the blade in both hands.

The crowd stood frozen and silent, their eyes wide with shock. For a long, shuddering moment, no one reacted. And then a tremendous cheer rippled through the courtyard, and the alleyway beyond.

He'd done it! He'd pulled the sword from the stone! But—but how? His head spun, and he realized belatedly that Sir Kay wasn't cheering.

“You all saw that I loosened it,” the knight claimed. “It’s only fair that we try again.”

Before Arthur could protest, Sir Kay had fitted the sword back into the stone, his smile wide. The knight eagerly clasped his hands around the hilt and pulled. And pulled again, harder this time, grunting loudly from the effort.

But the sword stuck fast once again.

Sir Kay finally stepped away, bidding Arthur try with a mocking sweep of his hand.

The courtyard fell silent. No one dared to jeer after what they had just seen: the king’s bastard, all of eighteen, skinny and bookish and so drunk he could barely stand, had pulled the sword from the stone like it was nothing. While the famous Sir Kay, tournament champion, had failed—twice.

Arthur’s heart hammered, and he wondered if he really *could* do it again. The whole thing felt like a dream—surreal and dizzying—or maybe that was the pitcher of ale he’d downed.

He once again stepped up to the sword, grasping it with a single fist. This time, when he pulled it free, he didn’t stumble. Instead, he held the gleaming blade high.

The crowd went to their knees.

Here was their one true king, a leader who would unite the Britons, the king to defeat all kings.

“Hail, Prince Arthur! Rightwise King of England!” someone cried.

Arthur grimaced. He didn’t want to be King of England—to be honest, he didn’t even want to be King of Camelot. And he certainly didn’t want any of this.

All he’d wanted was to slip away from the castle for one night. To kick back and down a few drinks with a friend, shedding his troubles and his responsibilities—not gaining *more* of them.

But it was too late. The crowd took up the cheer, and as Arthur surveyed them, he felt sick.

He'd set something in motion, something he didn't know how to take back. He looked for Lance, expecting to find him leaning against the side of the tavern with a smirk, but his friend had taken a knee along with the rest of the courtyard.

Arthur stared out at the sea of bowed heads and deferential faces, at the people who, for the first time, truly wanted him as their leader, and his stomach heaved with alarming force.

Oh no, he thought, as he turned and vomited all over Sir Kay's gleaming armor.

CHAPTER 2

Everything was going to be fine.

Emry Merlin staggered out the back door of the theater and gulped down the warm summer air. It wasn't much cooler outside than backstage, but at least it didn't stink of unwashed armpits. She hunched forward, hands on her knees, willing her heart to stop pounding.

There was no reason to be nervous. She'd filled in for a missing player plenty of times before. Besides, Pell's was a small part. A few lines, a skirmish of swords, a quick death halfway through the first act. And it was only the town theater—it wasn't as though they were performing for their patron, the Earl of Brocelande, at his manor.

And yet, it *was* dangerous. There was nothing wrong with employing a girl to help with the special effects—so long as Emry stayed backstage. But the theater troupe would be in trouble if anyone discovered she was also their understudy.

At eighteen, she was tall and skinny enough to play a boy's part, provided she flattened her chest and tucked her long black hair under a cap. Thankfully, most people assumed it was her twin brother onstage, a mistake Emmett was all too willing to encourage—especially when the mistaken party was a pretty girl.

A bead of sweat ran down her temple, and Emry wiped it away with the back of her hand. It was a scorching afternoon in June, and any sensible person would be indoors, wearing as few layers of clothing as possible.

Unfortunately, Emry wasn't sensible.

"Smart as spades, but foolish as hearts," her father used to say. When-

ever he'd turn up, which wasn't often, he'd give Emry a pretty ribbon for her hair and take Emmett out to the woods to learn magic. Emry found this arrangement enormously unfair, and campaigned to be included.

When Father refused, Emry made her twin teach her everything he'd learned. The next time their father had shown up, Emry had tucked her hair under a cap and switched places with her brother. Their father quickly realized he had the wrong twin, because Emry learned twice as fast.

She was included in the lessons from then on, although Father never failed to remind her that she was learning things she could never use, which was both impractical and foolish.

Emry didn't care. She just wanted a chance to prove herself before being told no. She couldn't help being a girl any more than she could help having magic, but she'd be damned if she sat home with a box of hair ribbons, letting boys have all the adventures.

It was the same with the theater. At sixteen, she'd bullied the property master into letting her handle their special effects. Flammable powders and pig's blood were expensive, messy, and no longer necessary. Not if he hired her to conjure illusions of fire and blood. Even better, illusions wouldn't need to be scrubbed out of the costumes between performances. Marion, the dresser, had insisted her father hire Emry immediately, and the two girls had become fast friends. When one of the players was struck ill, it was Marion who had pointed out that Emry would fit into his costume, and Emry who had promptly lowered her voice and reeled off his dialogue with a devilish grin.

Screw being sensible, Emry thought. *Being trouble is so much more fun.*

Still, she could have done without Pell's coat, which was not only far too warm, but stunk of flop sweat.

That, at least, was something she could fix.

Emry closed her eyes and focused. Rosemary, she decided. With a

hint of lemon. She didn't have her wand, but no matter. She pictured the wretched coat, mentally issuing the command that would fix it: *Extergio*.

Emry gave the coat a tentative sniff. Much better. Everything was very nearly perfect—except for the play itself, which stunk even worse than the backstage.

Ronda and the Elf King. It was supposed to be a comedy, but really, the whole thing was a tragedy. Perhaps one day the troupe would have license to perform in the city, where the latest playwrights supplied better fare. But until then, the earl demanded comedy, and so long as he footed the bill, comedy he would get.

She muttered Pell's lines, which didn't take long, and walked through the choreography for the sword fight. She was going over the lines again when a royal messenger rode up the lane.

Knights and their squires passed through Brocelande more and more these days, and a messenger was nothing *too* out of the ordinary. The town was half a day's ride from London, with a bust-ling market and a farrier who knew his way around a horseshoe.

The king's messenger was sunburnt and dusty, and his horse was lathered with sweat, but his crimson livery blazed in the hot sun. The golden wyvern on his chest shone so brightly that it had to be made from the precious metal itself.

Emry stared down at her own costume, threadbare with a sloppy yellow stencil of a rising sun. It would look impressive enough onstage. The theater held its own sort of magic, which was, perhaps, why she was so drawn to it.

She glanced back at the royal messenger, expecting him to urge his horse down the hill to the inn, or up the lane to Brocelande Hall. Instead, he slowed outside the bakery, leaning down to ask a question of the baker's boy. With only a moment's hesitation, the boy pointed a plump and sticky

finger toward the theater—no, not toward the theater, toward *Emry*.

Well, this isn't good.

She pulled the brim of her cap low across her face, trying to quell her nerves as the royal messenger approached.

"Afternoon, good sir," he called, sliding down from his horse.

Emry inclined her head in response.

"I'm looking for Master Merlin," said the messenger.

"My father?" Emry frowned. "You're about eight years too late."

Seven years, ten months, and three days, actually. Father had left exactly as he always did, slipping away in the middle of the night without so much as a goodbye. Except he'd never returned. Not to Brocelande, or to Castle Camelot, or to anywhere else.

"Then it's a good thing I'm looking for his son." The messenger removed a scroll from his belt and held it toward Emry. "Master *Emmett* Merlin, His Majesty King Uther Pendragon of Camelot requires your presence at court."

Oh no.

Emry stared at the scroll, trying not to panic. The messenger thought she was her brother! And she didn't dare confess the truth now. Not while she stood outside the theater in a *costume*, for god's sake. She couldn't betray the performance troupe, especially to an agent of the king.

With a trembling hand, Emry reached out and accepted the parchment, bowing deeply. "Thank you, sir," she murmured, pitching her voice low. "It's an honor to receive a summons from the king."

"His Majesty will expect you two days hence." The messenger wheeled his horse around and clattered across the courtyard before Emry could say another word.

"Why would a royal messenger give this to *you*?" Emmett asked, frowning suspiciously at the scroll.

He was sprawled at the kitchen table, boots up, jerkin loose, and a goblet of wine at his elbow. With his black hair and pirate's grin, he was devastatingly handsome, and what's worse, he knew it.

"He got mixed up," said Emry, taking down some bowls for their supper. "I was at the theater, and I didn't look particularly, well, *ladylike*."

"One day you'll get in trouble for that."

"Tell me something I don't know." Emry sighed, ladling out their stew. She passed a bowl to Gran, who was knitting by the hearth, and set theirs on the table.

"King Yurien invaded Northumbria again," Emmett said, draining his wine goblet. "Bet you didn't know that. Overheard it at the Prancing Stag."

"What were you doing at the Prancing Stag?" Like she even needed to ask.

"Kissing the innkeeper's daughters and betting at merils," Emmett said innocently. "The usual."

Emry shook her head. Not over her brother's rakish ways, which she'd accepted long ago, but over the news about King Yurien. "Northumbria's pretty far away," she said.

"It's not *that* far," Emmett insisted. "And it's just as before. He took control of an unfortified castle along their border and burned the neighboring village. If he goes for Cameliard next, they'll call for Camelot to intervene."

He swallowed a mouthful of stew and started coughing.

Emry cautiously licked her spoon, making a face.

Not *again*.

"Gran?" she asked. "Did you add salt to the stew?"

"Yes, dear," Gran murmured dreamily, knitting another stitch into a long grayish thing with a glove on one end and a sock on the other. "The weather *is* very nice."

“Salt,” Emry insisted. “*How much?*”

“All of it, from the taste,” Emmett muttered, pushing away his bowl. “If you fix the stew, I’ll tell you what King Uther wants.”

“It’s a simple spell,” Emry grumbled, reaching for her wand. “I don’t know why you refuse to learn it.”

“My father was the greatest wizard who ever lived. Why should I bother with basic household spells?”

Because they’re useful, Emry thought, *unlike you.*

She aimed her wand at their supper.

Abdere.

She took a cautious taste. Spicy, which tended to happen when you magicked your meal. But no longer inedible.

“Ha!” Emmett cried triumphantly, flinging the scroll to the floor. “I’m going to be knighted!”

Emry let out a sharp laugh. “I didn’t realize sarding the innkeeper’s daughter counted as a noble deed,” she retorted.

“Well, I’m *practically* going to be knighted,” Emmett amended, shoveling a spoonful of stew into his mouth. “Ugh. Why does magic ruin the flavor of *everything*? Anyway, King Uther wants me to live at the castle and train to be the next court wizard.”

Emry’s spoon clattered into her bowl. She’d imagined a handful of reasons the king had summoned her brother to Castle Camelot, but nothing like *this*.

“That’s—that’s wonderful,” Emry said, wishing she truly meant it.

“It’s about time Father’s legacy came in useful,” Emmett went on. “I bet half the ladies at court will take one look at me and drop to their knees.” He grinned wickedly. “Openmouthed.”

Emry blushed. “Don’t *say* things like that in front of Gran,” she scolded.

Or me, she almost added, even though, between Emmett’s miscreant friends and the theater troupe, she’d heard far worse.

"Well, it's true," Emmett shrugged. "Probably. I've heard Prince Arthur's nothing special. And we all know King Uther's bald as my arse."

"Keep talking like that, and you'll find yourself in the castle dungeons," Emry warned. "Or worse, the gallows."

"Three days," Emmett muttered, ignoring her. He scanned the scroll again, making a face. "I should probably brush up on some magic. What'd you do with Father's books?"

"Next to my bed," Emry said. "Help yourself."

Emmett yawned, leaning back in his chair. "Maybe later. The innkeeper's daughter wore me out."

Of course she did, thought Emry.

It was all so enormously unfair. *This* was why their father hadn't wanted to teach her. Why he'd brought her dolls and ribbons and had frowned when she'd mastered spells faster than her brother. He'd known this would happen.

Their father had served at the royal court. When he was alive, kings had trembled in fear of the great kingdom of Camelot, ruled by the powerful Uther Pendragon, and protected by the formidable Wizard Merlin. And now Uther wanted to continue that legacy, with Merlin's son standing alongside his own.

Well, good luck with him.

Emmett drained his second glass of wine and rambled on about his day, but Emry had stopped listening. All she could think was, *Emmett's going to London, to live in a castle and learn magic. And not because he's smarter than me, or older, or more talented. Because he's Merlin's son, and I'm just his daughter.*

CHAPTER 3

Emry sat up in bed, her heart pounding. Someone was hammering on their front door. It was the middle of the night, a completely unreasonable hour. She fumbled for her bedside candle, wondering what on earth was going on.

Ignium, she thought, and the wick burst into flame.

The knock sounded again, hard and impatient.

“OPEN UP!” a gruff male voice insisted.

Emry pushed aside the curtain around her sleeping quarters. Her brother stood by their old wooden table, awake and fully dressed.

“Don’t answer it,” he instructed as Emry reached for her shawl, wrapping it around her shoulders.

“Why not?” She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Just stay out of it,” Emmett warned, taking out his wand. His eyes were wide and scared, and his pirate’s grin was nowhere to be found.

“Whose daughter was it this time?” Emry asked tiredly.

Emmett’s face scrunched the way it used to when they were little and he’d done something truly terrible.

The knock sounded again, rattling the windowpanes.

“MERLIN!” their would-be visitor roared.

“It’s a gambling debt,” Emmett confessed, slumping into a chair and putting his head in his hands. “I—I made a huge mistake. I thought I’d be gone by the time they came to collect.”

Out of everything her brother could have done, that was the last thing Emry wanted to hear.

"You're unbelievable!" she fumed. "We're barely scraping by as it is."

Another powerful hammering shook their cottage.

"OPEN UP OR WE'LL BREAK DOWN THE SARDING DOOR!"

Emry didn't doubt it.

"Help me," Emmett begged. He looked terrified.

"How?"

"Remember what Father taught us about Corperus magic?"

Of course she remembered. It hadn't been a lesson so much as a warning of what *not* to do. No matter how dire the circumstances.

"We could make them forget why they're here," Emmett went on.

"You mean mind control," she said flatly.

"More like memory manipulation."

"Absolutely not!" Emry bristled. "You *know* how dangerous that is! The last time you tried it—"

"I got knocked unconscious for a week. I know." Emmett eyed the door nervously, talking fast and low. "But I have much better control now. And if you have another idea, I'm all ears."

"Murder?" Emry suggested.

Emmett's jaw dropped. "There's *three* of them," he spluttered.

"I meant you."

That was when the door crashed open with a tremendous bang.

Emmett had been wrong; there were only two of them. Two enormous, dangerous-looking brutes, with muscles like boulders and knives that glittered in the candlelight.

"*Merlin!* You sarding *snake!*" the bald one thundered.

The other was too busy leering at Emry in her linen shift. She scowled, folding her arms across her chest.

Emmett raised his wand.

"Don't!" Emry cried, but she was too late.

“Damnatio memoriae! Damnatio memoriae!” Emmett bellowed, desperately sweeping his wand between them.

The spell dropped from his wand like rancid fruit, polluting the air with its wrongness. Emmett slid to the floor. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his body convulsed in violent waves.

Emry screamed his name and crouched down beside her brother, trying to hold him steady. In a few moments, the convulsions stopped, and his body went limp. His eyes closed, and his heartbeat slowed from its frantic pounding to a faint but steady thump.

“Wake up!” Emry pleaded, her throat tight. “Please!”

But she knew he wouldn’t. Magic couldn’t be cured with magic. At least, not *this* kind of magic. There was nothing she could do, which was almost worse than seeing her brother laid out on the floor, catatonic from the blowback of his own misfired spell.

She looked up, surprised to find that the thugs were still there, gaping at the scene before them.

“Get out!” Emry howled.

“Well, now, miss, we can’t do that,” the bald one said, rotating his neck with a sinister crack. “We came to get payment, and we ’ent leavin’ empty-handed.”

“Sorry,” the other one added. His back was pressed against the wall, and his eyes were fixed on Emmett’s wand as though it might come alive and attack him.

“How much?” Emry asked warily.

“Two pounds,” said the bald one.

Emry sucked in her breath.

A fortune.

It was more than she earned in a year. They didn’t have it. Not even close. What had Emmett been thinking, racking up so large a debt and

hoping to get away with it? Or, rather, she realized, to *run* away from it.

"I could pay you in magic," she offered hopefully.

Baldy shook his head. "The debt 'ent to us. We've only come to collect. And like I said, we 'ent leavin' empty-handed."

Emry took a deep breath, trying to think. If she magicked some pennies to look like gold . . . no, they'd only come back once they realized what had happened. And then they'd be after her as well as her brother.

A hand pressed against Emry's shoulder, giving her a fright.

But it was only Gran.

"Go back to sleep," Emry said.

But Gran shook her head. Her eyes were sharp, and her chin jutted stubbornly. "No, child," she said. "Let me help."

"Gran—" Emry began, wondering how the old woman could possibly help. But Gran shot Emry a severe look and, with shaking hands, twisted off her wedding ring.

"Take this and leave us in peace," Gran snapped, holding out the gold band, its small ruby winking in the candlelight.

Baldy was so surprised that he stared at the ring for a moment before realizing she meant him. "Y-yes, ma'am," he said.

After the men left, Emry turned to Gran, her eyes still brimming with tears. She threw her arms around the frail older woman.

"Oh, Gran," she breathed. "Thank you."

"Thank me all you want," said Gran, "after you get this enormous oaf into bed."

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Emry hoped for a miracle, but the covers were tucked up to Emmett's chin just the way she'd left them. He hadn't so much as rolled over in his sleep. His pallor was frightening, and his breathing wasn't the easy rise and fall of slumber, but a shallow hitch.

Oh, Emmett. Why did you have to go and do something so tremendously stupid?

They'd been fourteen the last time he'd tried a similar spell. He'd slept like the dead for a week, and had very nearly convinced Emry that he was. At the end of seven days, she'd expected to find a corpse, but had instead found her brother sitting up in bed, rosy cheeked and ravenous.

He'd promised never to work magic like that again—spells that twisted someone's mind to your will could snap back as easily as they could bend forward. And Emry had foolishly believed he meant it. The gambling was bad, but the way he'd tried to deal with it was worse.

Especially when he was expected at court *tomorrow*.

Failing to answer a royal summons would land him in prison. Emmett had known that, and he'd *still* cast that stupid spell.

Even if she could send word to the castle that her brother was indisposed, who knew if the king would receive it, or if he'd extend another invitation?

Magic was uncommon, like green eyes or red hair, but it still ran deep in the old families. Surely, between the Ninianes and the Dulacs, there was another boy eager to take her brother's place . . .

"Chamomile, dear? Or lavender?" Gran called over the whistle of the kettle.

At least Gran was herself again, which was a relief.

"Trying to calm me down?" Emry asked suspiciously.

"Chamomile it is," Gran sang. "You'll need it."

Emry shook her head, but accepted the mug, breathing in the fragrant herbs. She picked up the royal scroll, scanning the parchment as she sipped her drink.

An apprentice position at the castle under Master Ambrosius, the now-ancient court wizard who had trained their father. Room and board. Payment of three pounds per month—Emry let out a gasp at the sum. No wonder Emmett had joked that he was going to be knighted.

So that's where Emmett expected to get the money to pay his debts.

"Don't worry, your father tripped over his own spells more than once in his day," said Gran, patting her on the shoulder. "He'll sleep it off."

"He'd better sleep fast," said Emry. "He's expected at Castle Camelot tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Gran frowned. "I could brew some vervain tea . . ."

"That *never* helps!" Emry didn't mean to be shouting, but suddenly, she was. "You can't cure magic with *tea*! All of this"—Emry thrust the scroll at Gran—"just *banded* to him because of Father! I don't know which is worse, that he didn't realize how lucky he is, or that he was stupid enough to ruin it! If King Uther had summoned *me* . . ."

Emry trailed off, because of course that was impossible. And dwelling on it only made her more infuriated.

"Are you done, dear?" Gran asked calmly. "One can never tell."

Miserably, Emry nodded.

"Let's hope your little tantrum didn't knock anything out of place," Gran said, plucking the teacup from Emry's hand and peering down at the dregs.

"Don't you dare predict I'll marry the blacksmith's son," Emry warned. But Gran merely pursed her lips, studying the cup.

Emry was used to Gran's fortunes, which always sounded like vague

nonsense. Gran peddled them in the market for extra coin, but her predictions weren't magic. They were just educated guesses.

"You look so much like your brother," Gran mused. "A stranger would be hard pressed to tell the difference."

"Wait, what?" Emry asked. The old woman couldn't be saying what Emry thought she was saying.

"The leaves predict a journey ahead."

"A journey?" Emry echoed with disbelief. "Am I supposed to show up at the castle claiming to be my brother?"

But as she said it aloud, she realized that, actually, she *could*.

Emry bit her lip, considering. Emmett would likely be up and about in a week's time. She could keep her head down in court for that long. After he woke up, he'd set off for London, and they'd trade places before anyone realized a thing.

Being the court wizard was Father's legacy, and they had so little of him left. And there was no denying they needed money. The roof was half made of spells and charms as it was, and Emry doubted it would last through another winter.

Emmett may have inherited their father's estate, but without income to run it, they were quickly sliding toward ruin. They had already sold off the silver and rented the land to tenant farmers to make ends meet, and it still wasn't enough.

Three pounds a month. They couldn't lose this. Not if she could help it.

"We'd switch back in a week," she mused, and then stopped, shaking her head. "No, I can't just leave you here."

At this, Gran scoffed. "Child, I'll be *fine*." She arched an eyebrow. "It's high time the women in this family did something more than get left behind while the *men* leave their mark on history."

Emry rather agreed. She *would* like to see London. And to study magic

again, properly. All she had to do was take on the role of an understudy. Except this wasn't the theater. It was the royal court. And she'd be playing a living, breathing person, which wasn't at all the same as reciting someone else's lines in a play.

Not to mention, her magic wouldn't help make the masquerade any more believable. Spells could only be cast outward, not inward. And while there were potions she could brew to change her appearance, she didn't have enough time.

She stared down at her brother, weighing their similarities and their differences. He was broader through the shoulders, but some padded clothing could mimic that. His height was close enough. They both had the same wide mouths and strong chins, the same dark eyes and raven hair.

And if they could fool their father, surely a doddering old wizard could be deceived. It wasn't as though she'd have any reason to interact with the royal courtiers.

But if she *was* found out, she shuddered to think of the consequences. Of the king's legendary temper, and what he'd do to a girl who had deceived her way into a position at his court.

She could do this. She *had* to do this. Or else she'd spend the rest of her life trapped in this too-small town, scrambling to keep a roof over their heads, cursing Emmett's foolishness and her own lack of nerve.

She was going to Castle Camelot as her brother. And when he came to his senses and learned what she'd done, he'd thank her for it.

She realized she had been silent for too long, and Gran was frowning at her.

"Well," Gran prompted. "Were my tea leaves wrong?"

Emry shook her head. "I'll be careful," she promised. "No one will suspect a thing."

"I should hope not," warned Gran. "The king has ordered men executed for less."

Emry swallowed nervously, knowing her grandmother was right. But what other choice did she have?

"I'll ask Marion to stop by often," Emry promised.

She bent down to kiss Gran on the cheek, and then straightened, trying to look brave. Gran was watching her again, with a sharp eye. Emry wondered what was the matter now, when her grandmother tsked.

"You'd better cut your hair," the old woman said decisively. "This isn't the theater, dear. A hat won't fool anyone."

* * *

"If it isn't the fairest maiden in Brocelande!"

Marion blushed furiously as she saw her friend's handsome brother sweep into the theater, flashing his pirate's grin.

"Evenin', Emmett," she said. "Your sister 'ent here."

He made a face at the news and slouched against the wall. "You're sure?" he asked. "I was hoping to say goodbye."

"I—" Marion began, but then she narrowed her eyes, realizing. "*Emry?*!"

"Good, isn't it?" Emry beamed, pushing off from the wall. She looked every inch her brother, from the unruly mop of black hair to the unbearably smug expression of an eighteen-year-old boy who had never in his life been told no.

"Very." Marion gave her a closer inspection. "How'd you make your shoulders that wide?"

"Padded the doublet," Emry explained. "Lifted the insides of my boots, too. I had to try three different spells until it worked."

"I'm almost afraid to ask," said Marion, "but *why* exactly are you dressed as your brother?"

"I'm going to Castle Camelot in his place," Emry admitted, recounting the entire story.

When she'd finished, Marion blinked in shock. This was far beyond whatever silly amusement she'd been expecting. There was no question Emmett had gone and thrown himself arse over elbow, the way he'd been threatening to do for a long time, but Emry's plan was a lot to take in.

"Say something," Emry begged.

"The royal court," Marion spluttered. "Dressed as your brother."

"It's only for a week," said Emry. "Besides, I'm hoping the food will more than make up for having to magic a bulge into the front of my hose."

Suddenly, the two girls couldn't stop giggling.

"Is *that* what you did?" Marion asked. "I'd thought it indelicate to ask."

"Stage tricks," Emry assured her. "I didn't have much time."

"I can tell," Marion said, reaching for the scissors on her sewing table. "Your hair's uneven in the back. Sit."

Emry flashed her friend a grateful smile and climbed onto a stool, straddling it in a most unladylike manner. "Just practicing," she said innocently.

Marion shook her head and began to snip.

"Do you think you'll meet the prince?" she asked.

"Arthur?" Emry made a face. "I suppose so."

"You could at least *try* to sound more excited. He pulled the sword from the stone!"

"Almost a year ago!" Emry returned. "And I still don't see why it's so impressive. He hasn't done a thing since."

Marion rolled her eyes. What did Emry expect? For a nineteen-year-old boy to ride off and unite England in a fortnight? "Doesn't matter," she insisted. "Crown prince. Magic sword. And I bet he's gorgeous."

"Not according to Emmett. Besides, I'll be dressed as a lad," Emry reminded her.

"Good. Then you can tell him all about your beautiful friend Marion." She ruffled the back of Emry's hair. "Done."

“How do I look?” Emry asked, leaning forward to peer into the ancient looking glass. “Devastating? Emmett-ish?”

“You’re practically his twin.”

Emry shook her head over her friend’s terrible joke. But Marion bit her lip, suddenly serious. This entire plan wasn’t just foolish—it was dangerous. But danger came with the territory when you had a wizard for a best friend. And Marion had learned long ago that once Emry set her mind to something, there was no talking her out of it.

Marion leaned forward, throwing her arms around Emry. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Of course you are,” Emry agreed. “You’re going to be so tired of washing pig’s blood from the costumes that you’ll weep tears of joy upon my return.”

Marion groaned. The costumes! How had she forgotten?

CHAPTER 5

The sun was melting toward the rooftops by the time Emry reached the city gates. She was exhausted and stiff, and she definitely smelled like the back of the tanner's wagon she'd hitched a ride on, but London made her forget all of that.

Wherry boats glittered with lantern light as they cut across the Thames. Market stalls snaked along the river's edge, merchants called out their wares in rough London accents, selling everything from fortunes to fresh-caught fish. Timbered buildings rose four stories high, pressed so close together that Emry could hardly tell where one ended and another began, and the spire of St. Paul's soared high above it all.

She craned her neck, staring up at it. Prince Arthur had pulled the sword from the stone in that very churchyard, she knew. When news of it had reached Brocelande, she'd waited for everything to change, for Arthur's action to *mean something*. But nothing had happened, other than the townsfolk suddenly singing the praises of the prince they'd grumbled over only a day before.

Maybe it was like Gran's tea leaves. A prediction of what might happen, rather than a prophesy of what would. Well, fate better hurry up, because even predictions have an expiration date.

In a week's time, she'd meet her brother in the tavern next door to switch back. But she pushed the thought from her mind, because there was so much to get through before she could even think of her adventure's end.

She kept going, following the river so she wouldn't get lost. London was both larger and smaller than she'd imagined, the kind of place you

could easily cross on foot, but which could still swallow you whole without warning.

“’Ent you a handsome lad?” A woman in a low-cut dress purred from a dark alleyway.

Emry blushed, hurrying past.

The buildings grew shabbier, and the merchants’ wares became more suspicious. She spotted more than one dubious seller of cure-all tonics, and a man in a soot-stained cloak with a sharp dagger in each hand selling, well, Emry wasn’t exactly sure.

Maybe following the river wasn’t the best idea.

She took the next turn, following a narrower road that seemed to wind and twist for an eternity, through a rough neighborhood that smelled like the city ditch. Dirt-smeared faces peered out from unglazed windows, and a racking cough echoed from an open doorway.

Emry clutched her belongings tighter. Just as she was about to turn back, the road spilled open into a large and colorful market square.

Jugglers, buskers, musicians, and merchants jostled for space around an ancient stone column. Roads shot off in all directions, most looking far more agreeable than the one she had stumbled down. And beyond the column, at the end of a long lane lined with stately townhouses, sat Castle Camelot.

As she got closer, she could feel the hum of old magic swirling through its walls. The castle wall was forged from ancient spell craft: impenetrable to conquering armies, and enchanted to prevent siege. Thanks to the wall, the castle was no remote military fortress. Instead, it was an impressive collection of buildings, some made from decorative brick and others from smooth stone, with paned glass windows and gothic spires, all arranged in neat squares around a series of courtyards. There were more chimneys than she could count, turrets with weathervanes, turrets with gargoyles, and atop it all, a single crimson flag, its golden wyvern catching the sun.

Emry approached the timbered gatehouse, her heart pounding.

This is it, she thought, taking a deep breath to quell her nerves. *Act I, Scene I: Enter Emmett Merlin, an overconfident country lad with a talent for magic.*

Two guards slouched outside, sweating under their metal helmets in the summer heat. When they spotted Emry, they snapped to attention, banging their halberds in acknowledgment.

"I'm Master Ambrosius's new apprentice." She held out the scroll for inspection, and one of the guards snickered.

"*You're* a wizard?" he asked, not very nicely.

"What else would I be?" Emry raised an eyebrow.

"A stable boy? You're certainly dressed like one," the guard said, making his friend laugh.

"At least I'm not strong as a mule but only half as clever," Emry retorted, taking back her scroll and glaring until the guards stepped aside to let her pass. "Now if you'll excuse me, I hate to keep the king waiting."

* * *

Emry had arrived later than she'd hoped. The receiving courtyard was empty, and she didn't know what to do. She finally managed to track down an annoyed-looking page, who couldn't have been older than twelve. He led her through an opulent hallway, and bade her wait as he vanished into the Great Hall, closing the doors behind him.

As the seconds ticked painfully by, Emry glanced around the ante-room, jittery and filled with dread. The castle was far grander than she'd imagined—the wood-paneled walls were not only carved, but hung with elaborate tapestries, and the ceiling beams were painted with delicate swirls of gold. It made Brocelande Hall seem plain by comparison.

She stared at the doors, swallowing nervously. Any minute now, she

would stand before Uther Pendragon, the King of Camelot, disguised as her brother.

Please, she hoped, let this work.

Finally, the doors opened, and the page emerged, looking even more put-upon.

“King Uther will see you now,” he reported sourly, as though he’d hoped the king would refuse.

The Great Hall was the most lavish room Emry had ever seen. Her stomach clenched as she took in the size of the crowd that filled it. And she could feel every one of them staring curiously at her.

This is a performance, Emry told herself. They’re just the audience.

It didn’t help.

The timbered room was stifling. *No wonder*, she thought, noting the fire that blazed in an enormous fireplace, and the dozens of candelabra that lined the walls.

At the far end of the hall, on a raised dais, sat King Uther. He canted languidly across a wooden throne, chin propped in his hand, his expression inscrutable.

He looked older than she’d imagined, and weathered, as though there had once been a lot more of him. Like Emmett had said, he was bald, but his black eyebrows were surprisingly thick, and his expression was stern and disapproving. A heavy golden crown encircled his brow, and despite the heat, he wore an embroidered velvet robe trimmed with white fur that was the finest thing she’d ever seen.

Here was the king at whose side her father had ridden into battle. A ruler who kept peace with neighboring kingdoms that he could easily conquer, even as King Yurien flexed his might in the north. A king whose laws were so strict and unyielding that she often wondered if everyone felt as stuck as she did.

Emry took a deep breath and walked forward, stopping in the open space before the throne.

Don't curtsey, don't curtsey, she thought as she sunk clumsily to one knee, doffed her cap, and stayed there.

"Emmett Merlin, Your Majesty," announced the herald.

"Stand up straight, boy," ordered the king.

Emry rose awkwardly, all too aware of the king's scrutiny. She held her breath, waiting for him to declare her unsuitable, or worse, to see through her hastily cobbled disguise.

She'd been so focused on helping her brother that it hadn't occurred to her to wonder what to do if she was caught.

Well, it was certainly occurring to her *now*.

Why wasn't the king saying anything? Emry's heart felt like it was in her throat. She stood as still as she could manage, not daring to meet the king's gaze, instead staring at a courtier's jeweled shoe clip.

"The very image of your father," the king pronounced, and Emry let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she said, making her voice low.

"But that doesn't qualify you to become our next court wizard."

Emry's mouth went dry.

"I require a demonstration of your magic," demanded the king.

"A demonstration, Your Majesty?" she echoed, horrified.

"When you're ready," the king said, making it clear he meant her to give this demonstration *now*.

She hadn't prepared a thing. And yet the courtiers' faces all turned eagerly in her direction, and the King sat up straighter on his throne.

She couldn't think. Every spell she knew had emptied from her head.

It was far too warm. Even the ladies in low-cut gowns were fanning themselves. Between the blazing fire and the candelabra and the endless

wood paneling, the heat was oppressive. Sure enough, the king, in his heavy ermine-trimmed robe, had beads of sweat on his brow.

Why not? she thought. She closed her eyes, concentrating. Pride kept her from reaching for her wand. It was much more impressive without—if she could pull it off.

“*Nivis,*” she whispered.

For a moment, nothing happened. And then snow drifted down from the ceiling. It fell in soft, fat flakes that vanished as they landed. It was just an illusion, one she’d performed at the theater many times, but the courtiers still gasped in amazement.

The crowd fell to murmurs, then silence as King Uther slanted her a look of approval.

“Most impressive,” he declared, reaching out to catch a falling snowflake. The illusion stopped on contact, and his mouth twisted in disappointment. “Pity it isn’t real. Or cold.”

The courtiers giggled.

“I still have much to learn, Your Majesty,” Emry said, casting off the spell with a wave of her hand.

“And Master Ambrosius has much to teach,” said the king. “Mark him well, so that you may serve my son as your father did me, Apprentice Wizard Merlin.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Emry murmured with a bow.

The king motioned for a serving girl to come forward and show her to her room, and Emry practically sagged with relief.

* * *

This room had to be a mistake.

There was a four-poster bed hung with silks and bolstered with a small

battalion of pillows, a washbasin that looked to be made of real silver, a wooden desk, and a chair. A grand fireplace took up an entire wall, and a tapestry depicting a unicorn in the forest occupied another.

Emry frowned, confused. She'd been expecting servants' quarters, not a lavish bedroom with a private garderobe attached.

"It was your father's," the serving girl explained, bobbing a curtsy. "No one was using it and—"

"It's perfect," Emry interrupted, hardly daring to believe her luck.

"Is that my new apprentice?" a gruff voice called from what sounded like the top of a stairwell.

The serving girl blanched.

"Best go and see what he wants," she said, eyes wide. "You wouldn't want to keep Master Ambrosius waiting."

Her words seemed ominous, but the girl escaped before Emry could ask what she'd meant.

Emry's heart hammered as she climbed the narrow stone stairs to the wizard's workshop. There were so many ways this could go wrong, she thought. Just because she'd fooled the king didn't mean she could deceive his wizard. What if he was disappointed in her abilities? Or saw through the spells that enhanced her disguise? Still, up she climbed, until she was dizzy from the spiraling staircase.

The top of the tower was an odd, pungent space, with herbs drying from the ceiling, cages full of twittering birds, and shelves bursting with glass apparatus. It reminded Emry of a cross between an apothecary and her father's disorganized study, and instead of finding it strange, the room felt unexpectedly like home.

Emry paused in the arched doorway, taking it all in, and waiting for the walls to stop spinning.

"Come closer, boy." Master Ambrosius reached for an elaborate pince-nez, settling it on his nose. "Let me get a look at you."

Practically blind. Excellent.

“Hmmm,” Master Ambrosius said, his eyes hugely magnified as he peered at Emry through his thick lenses. “I taught your father a very long time ago.”

“Yes, sir, I know,” said Emry.

“I was old even then,” the wizard said with a cough that might have been a laugh.

Emry believed it. Master Ambrosius was tall and thin, with white hair that puffed wildly around his wrinkled face. His eyes were bright green, and his nose was very red, and he wore an unfashionably long tunic in a faded shade of yellow.

Father had favored expensive court fashions, worn a flashy gold earring, and been almost as much of a rake as Emmett. But Master Ambrosius was like a wizard from a storybook, or perhaps an absentminded scholar, the kind who was forever misplacing his inkpot. And Emry desperately wanted to impress him. Being here, in her father’s old workshop, with his former teacher, was everything she’d dreamed of.

And yet, it was only hers by deception.

“I assume you have a basic foundation in Mechanical magic,” Master Ambrosius continued, removing his pince-nez, which dangled from a gold chain around his neck.

Emry nodded, recognizing the term, which referred to the casting of spells and charms on inanimate objects.

“Good,” Master Ambrosius said. “What is your limit?”

Emry frowned, confused by the question. “I don’t know, sir,” she replied.

His expression sharpened. “And why not? Do you practice magic that infrequently?”

“I wasn’t aware wizards had limits,” she admitted truthfully.

“Of course we do. I myself can cast a dozen spells in a day before I begin to misfire, half that if I’m also maintaining any long-term

enchantments. Your father could produce significantly more than I, although—”

Behind him, a thick-bottomed kettle began to bubble ominously, emitting a worrying stench.

“Sir, the potion!” Emry interrupted.

“Sard it all!” Master Ambrosius whipped his wand out of his sleeve. “*Refrigescant!*”

He squinted, pointing his wand in the general direction of the kettle. Emry winced as the old man’s spell missed its mark.

“Blast,” he murmured, fumbling to untangle his pince-nez.

The concoction was still bubbling over, and Emry reacted without thinking. *Extinguo*, she thought, aiming her magic toward the fire. The flames went out, and the liquid calmed immediately.

Master Ambrosius blinked at her through his glasses. “What did you just do, boy?” he demanded.

“I—um—” Emry said nervously. “I figured removing the heat wouldn’t affect the potion, so . . .”

She trailed off. It was a poor excuse, and she knew it. She shouldn’t have intervened with someone else’s spellwork. Especially when she was unfamiliar with the potion. She stared at her boots, waiting for the reprimand.

“You didn’t use a wand,” the old wizard accused. “You didn’t cast a spell.”

“I did, sir,” she said. “I just didn’t say it aloud.”

“Hmm.” Master Ambrosius tilted his head to the side, inspecting her more sharply this time. Just when she thought it might go on forever, he nodded, as though having found the answer to an unasked question.

“Did your father teach you to do that?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” Emry admitted. She’d discovered the skill by accident, when she’d stayed up late practicing and hadn’t wanted to wake anyone. She’d figured out she could *spell* the words in her head. While she explained, the old wizard peered at her with fascination.

“Useful,” he pronounced. “But foolish. As long as you’re under my tutelage, see that you cast your spells aloud. I can’t instruct what I can neither see nor hear.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Silent spells, and evidently no limit to how many of them you can rattle off.” The old wizard heaved a sigh. “Heaven help me. Your father wasn’t exaggerating when he boasted of his son’s great talent with magic.”

Emry offered up a weak smile, even though she was furious that her father had never boasted of his *daughter’s* great talent.

“What’s that?” she asked instead, noticing a lumpy cot in the corner, half hidden behind a screen.

Surely the old wizard didn’t sleep here, not when her own chambers were so lavish.

“The infirmary,” he explained.

Emry frowned. “I thought there was a royal physician,” she said.

“There is,” Master Ambrosius replied gravely. “And he is quite skilled with both leeches and bloodletting. He is also a terrible gossip.” Emry couldn’t tell whether the old man was joking or not, and before she could make up her mind, he added, “Not everyone wishes their maladies to become common knowledge. Sometimes it’s an ill-gotten black eye, but others, it’s a matter of the utmost discretion. Sir Kay once got himself into quite a lot of trouble with a gerbil.” The wizard shuddered. “Retrieving the poor fellow wasn’t pleasant.”

Emry hoped she’d misunderstood where, exactly, the gerbil had gotten stuck.

“But you’re talking about Corperus magic,” she protested. “My father always warned not to work spells on people unless you’re willing to risk the blowback.”

Emmett’s accident had been an extreme example, but Emry still couldn’t forget the time she’d tried to mend Marion’s sprained ankle and

had blacked out from the effort, earning herself a splitting headache that had lasted for days.

Master Ambrosius gave her a look. “And how old were you when your father issued this warning?” he inquired.

“Ten, sir,” Emry admitted.

“I wouldn’t trust a ten-year-old boy with a blunted practice sword, much less a real blade.” Master Ambrosius raised a bushy eyebrow. “There is, of course, a technique to it. One that takes finesse, knowledge, and strength.”

“I’d be interested to learn that,” Emry said.

“Even despite your father’s warnings?”

“I’m not a child anymore,” she replied, lifting her chin. “Besides, I came here to learn.”

The old wizard went to a shelf, plucking down a bundle of dried herbs. “Belladonna. What would you use this for?”

“Insomnia?” Emry suggested. “My gran brews it into a tea.”

“If you’d answered poison, I would have said your father was right not to teach you. A corrupt mind breeds corrupt magic.”

Emry thought of Emmett’s misfired spell, and of what he’d been trying to do when he’d cast it. Had Father scared them away from such spells because he’d suspected what Emmett would use them for? Or had he truly thought them too young to learn?

Whichever it was, Emry’s heart sped up with excitement at the thought of learning an entirely new discipline of magic. One that went far beyond household spells and illusions.

It’s only for a week, she reminded herself. But a week was better than nothing.

The old wizard reached for a quill and a scrap of parchment, scribbling down a few lines. “Come back here first thing tomorrow. You’ll need the *Corperus Magicarum* and *A Practical Herbalist’s Guide*, third edition. Fortunately, there are copies of both in the castle library.”

CHAPTER 6

Emry's jaw dropped as she pushed open the double doors of the library. Not from the chessboard marble floor, although that *was* impressive, nor the long wooden tables and velvet-upholstered chairs. Not even from the crests of the noble houses that bordered the ceiling, painted in what had to be real gold. She'd never seen so many books. They stretched two stories high, the second level bordered by a slim balcony with an iron railing and narrow spiral stair. It was a library in the same sense that a cathedral was a church.

And while it was undeniably wonderful, it was also a little bit of a disaster. She had no idea how she was going to track down Master Ambrosius's books before supper. And then she spotted the librarian slouched behind a stack of books, a quill and inkpot at his elbow.

He was tall and lean, with wavy brown hair, dark, intelligent eyes, and high cheekbones. He couldn't have been older than twenty, and he was dressed plainly, in a blue tunic with the sleeves rolled, brown hose, and worn leather boots. He was, overall, an outstandingly handsome young man.

Not that she noticed. Much.

He tapped his quill against the table, thinking. And then, with a satisfied smirk, bent his head over a piece of parchment and began to write.

Emry waited for him to look up, but he kept scribbling. "Excuse me," she finally broke in.

"Did you need something?" he asked, eyes still on his parchment. "Or do you just enjoy disturbing those who are otherwise occupied?"

Emry bristled. He had no call to be so rude. She wished she could march right out of the library, giving the door a satisfying slam behind

her, but she knew better than to fail her first errand as Master Ambrosius's apprentice.

"I'm looking for some books," she persevered.

"Whatever for?" he mused, dipping his quill into his inkpot.

"Baking into a pie," Emry snapped, losing her patience.

The young man finally glanced up, regarding her coolly. "I believe you're supposed to eat your own words, not someone else's."

He made as though to go back to his writing, but Emry leaned forward, sliding the slip of paper across the table.

"I need these," she said. "Tonight."

"And what do you expect me to do about it?"

"You're the librarian," Emry said, exasperated. "Either help me or don't. But I'll be gone faster if you do."

"An excellent point." He took the slip of paper and set down his quill. "In that case, I suppose I had better assist you."

She'd thought him handsome slouched over his books, but standing up, he was so much more than that. There was an unstudied elegance to the way he moved, and she realized belatedly that she was staring. Thankfully, he hadn't noticed.

"So Master Ambrosius finally has a new apprentice," he deduced, striding over to a shelf on the far wall and plucking down a volume without even checking the spine.

"This is the fourth edition," Emry protested, showing him the title. "He said the third."

"You'll want the fourth. Someone's ripped whole chapters out of the third, and it's the only copy. You should remind him about that, by the way."

"Can I have the third as well?" Emry asked. "Just in case."

"Whoever tore out the pages also did some truly ghastly drawings."

"You're mocking me," she accused.

The librarian shrugged. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

He pulled down another volume and flung it in her direction. Emry hastily caught the book. The whole thing was warped, and the first few chapters were completely missing. As she flipped through, her mouth fell open at the pornographic doodles.

“Wow.” She grimaced at a detailed sketch of a lusty man chasing a horrified sheep. “You weren’t joking.”

“Like I said, the fourth edition.” The librarian sounded smug.

“What’s going on in here?” boomed a cheerful male voice.

A tall, strapping blond boy sauntered into the library, his hand resting absently on the pommel of a gleaming sword. His short scarlet cloak and livery marked him as a member of the Royal Guard. Emry thought nervously of the coarse, rude guards she’d encountered at the castle gates, and steeled herself for ridicule. But he merely tossed her a polite nod, his attention on the librarian.

“I thought you’d be done by now,” the guard said, making a face.

“Just helping the new wizard’s apprentice find some books,” the librarian explained with a lopsided grin.

The boys exchanged what was clearly some sort of silent communication, and Emry narrowed her eyes, wondering what was going on.

“You know, I’ve never been that desperate,” said the guard, nodding toward a rather large drawing in Emry’s book.

“Maybe you’ve just never seen a sheep that attractive,” Emry suggested before she could help herself.

The guard laughed and picked up the book, flipping through it.

“We should commission a painting,” he suggested. “His Excellency the King, tending to his flock.”

“Good luck finding the artist,” Emry said.

“You mean this isn’t your work? I’m disappointed.”

“Even if it were,” said Emry, “I’d never admit to defacing a book in front of the royal librarian.”

The guard stared at his friend, who shrugged with considerable elegance.

"As well you shouldn't," the guard continued, looking entirely too amused.

Emry's stomach grumbled, loudly. For a moment she was horribly embarrassed, but then she remembered that everyone thought she was a boy. "I'm starved," she complained. "And I still need one more book."

"The *Corperus Magicarum*," said the librarian. "It's on the upper level."

He sauntered off to retrieve it, and the guard slouched against a shelf, making it clear he meant to wait.

"Do you have a name?" Emry asked.

"Oh, sorry." He offered a large, calloused hand. "Lancelot Debenoic."

"Emmett Merlin," she said.

She tried to make their handshake as brief as possible, since his hand was nearly twice the size of hers.

"Ah, Merlin," he said, brightening in recognition. "You'll serve the prince. What do you think of him?"

"I haven't met him yet," Emry confessed.

Lancelot grinned, as though hoping she'd say that. "Watch out. He's spoiled rotten."

Emry's stomach sank. "Is he really?" she asked, disheartened.

"Oh, beyond repair," Lancelot went on. "Insufferable company. I pity his guards."

"As do I," said the librarian, handing over a slim volume bound in green leather. "Lance is right. The prince is a pompous, sniveling fool."

"His head is so far up his own arse that his royal decrees are farts," said Lance.

"He has no friends, only acquaintances who wish they were better strangers."

"The only throne he's fit to sit on is a privy," Lance returned.

Emry laughed, delighted over the boys' clever insults. And then she realized it was her turn. "It's a shame acting like a cock won't make his any bigger," she suggested.

She grimaced, worrying the joke had crossed a line. To her relief, Lance laughed so hard that he nearly fell over.

"Well," he gasped, clapping a hand to his friend's shoulder. "Better get changed before supper. See you around, boy who claims he didn't draw those very attractive sheep."

"I didn't!" Emry called, as the boys strolled off without her.

* * *

The banquet hall was not nearly as resplendent as the Great Hall or the library, and for that Emry was thankful. Instead, it was merely functional, designed to seat everyone at court.

Emry froze in the doorway, staring at the long tables that lined each wall, realizing she had no idea where she was meant to sit. She tried to spot the boys from the library, but no luck. Finally, a page put her out of her misery, directing her toward a table in the back.

"Thank you," she muttered, hurrying toward the table.

"Excuse me!" another page called, when she unwittingly walked past what turned out to be a hand-washing station, where young nobles training to be knights held linen cloths and bowls of perfumed water.

"Sorry," she mumbled, hastily copying the man who stepped next to her, and hoping her cheeks weren't as pink as they felt.

She had no idea what she was doing when it came to court etiquette. Thankfully, the real Emmett wouldn't have fared any better. Still, she had better stop drawing unnecessary attention.

"You're late, boy," scolded Master Ambrosius as Emry hastily joined him.

Actually, she was just in time. She had no sooner sat down than the

musicians began to play. “I got held up in the library—” Emry started to explain.

“The library will still be there in the morning,” the old wizard assured her. “But unlike books, supper has a tendency to disappear.”

Emry grinned at his joke. And then supper arrived, and she stared openmouthed.

There were heaping platters of pheasant with toasted almonds, roast and stuffed chickens, fine white rolls, mushroom pie, and bottles of French wine. This wasn’t supper—it was a feast.

Emry happily dug in, remembering the joke she’d made to Marion about the food. It really did look delicious. She took a bite—dear god, had the pheasant been drizzled in *honey*?

“This is only the first course,” Master Ambrosius warned, as though he’d guessed she was considering another slice of pie.

“The first course? But it’s already more than enough.”

“The platters go next to the servants’ tables, and after that, to the deserving poor,” said the old wizard. He paused before adding, “Queen Igraine insisted on the last part. She said she never wanted to feast in ignorance while her people starved.”

Queen Igraine had been beloved for her kindness, even though much of Camelot had disapproved when the king chose her as his bride. The widowed Duchess of Tintagel was a rare beauty, but she’d been well into her twenties at the time, and barely out of mourning for her late husband. It had been both a relief and a scandal when Prince Arthur came along five months later.

“My father spoke well of her,” Emry said.

“And of the king too, I hope,” the old wizard said.

“Of course,” Emry assured him, biting off a big mouthful of bread. More often than not, her father had complained loudly about the king,

whose fearsome temper was as well-known as his wife's kind heart.

A few seats down, a group of bearded men in fine tunics laughed uproariously at a coarse joke, and Emry startled, having forgotten about them entirely.

"... better lock up your codpiece, then!" the loudest advised as he merrily poured another round of wine.

"Oh, she's already done it for me," said his friend, raising his goblet in mock salute to a scowling brunette in a crimson gown.

Even though they sat at the same banquet table, Emry couldn't have felt further apart from this drunk and bawdy crowd. She was relieved they hadn't tried to include her in their merriment.

Everyone here, it seemed, gave the old wizard a wide berth. True, his robes were shabby and stained, and he smelled of herbs from his workshop and, faintly, of magic. Emry wasn't sure anyone else picked up the scent, but they definitely sensed something. She knew from experience that magic made many people uneasy.

This could work to her advantage. If the other courtiers avoided her as they avoided Master Ambrosius, she'd make it through the next week in a snap.

"Who's that?" Emry asked as a lovely young woman with a cascade of blonde curls entered the dining hall, her lateness clearly calculated to garner attention. The girl's gown was exquisite, pale pink silk trimmed with gold lace that shimmered in the candlelight. Her hair was twisted with pearls and jewels. Emry slouched down in her seat to better hide her own drab doublet. The soldiers at the gate had been right: even in Emmett's best clothing, compared to everyone else at court, she *was* dressed like a stable boy.

"Ah, Lady Elaine. I think you'll find her a most pungent flower," said Master Ambrosius. "You'll have heard of her father, Lord Howell, the Baron of Gorlais."

Emry nodded. Lord Howell held one of the highest positions on the king's council. She watched as Lady Elaine sailed toward the royal banquet table, chin lifted high.

"Which one is he?" Emry asked.

"At the right hand of the king," Master Ambrosius nodded toward a short, plump, sour-looking man with white-blond hair and a pointed goatee, who was deep in conversation with King Uther. It was clear Elaine didn't get her looks from her father's side of the family. "And beside him is his wife, Lady Howell," Master Ambrosius went on.

Lady Howell was still very beautiful, despite the gray that streaked her chestnut hair, and she looked as though she knew it—and so did the king.

Emry snuck another glance at Lady Elaine, feeling sorry for the girl.

"There's the Countess of Agravaine, the king's cousin," Master Ambrosius said of an elegantly dressed older woman with auburn hair and an aquiline nose. She wore an expression of polite interest as she watched the trio of musicians.

"And her husband, Lord Agravaine," Master Ambrosius nodded toward a tall, imposing man with dark brown skin and close-shorn black hair. "One of the king's most trusted advisors."

There was a shrewdness to the man's expression, as though he missed nothing, and Emry decided she'd prefer not to catch his attention if she could help it.

"They have two sons around your age, though both are away at school," said the old wizard. "And of course, to the king's other side is Prince Arthur."

Emry glanced over.

And nearly choked.

He wore the same rumpled tunic and hose, hastily topped with a fine red jacket that he hadn't bothered to button. A slim golden circlet glinted against his dark hair, and Emry realized that she'd made a terrible mistake.

He wasn't a librarian at all.

How had she been so stupid?

The clever insults the boys had traded, daring her to join in—they hadn't been making fun of the prince, they'd been making fun of *her*.

Emry boiled with fury. At that moment, Arthur looked in her direction and caught her staring. He raised his goblet with a wide grin, as if to toast her humiliation.

Emry didn't toast back.

Oh, this was a disaster. She'd meant to lay low, not torment the crown prince and his guard.

Emry ate the rest of her meal without noticing. She was too busy sneaking glances toward the royal banquet table, where King Uther bent Arthur's ear for the rest of supper.

Whatever they were discussing must have been serious, because the prince's grin was gone, replaced by a deep frown. He didn't even glance over as the Lady Elaine deliberately upset her goblet of wine and dabbed at the front of her low-necked gown with a borrowed handkerchief, even though a few men old enough to be the girl's father certainly looked interested.

After supper, Emry loitered in the hallway. A gaggle of court ladies lingered as well, obviously keen to throw themselves at the prince. One of them caught Emry staring and giggled.

That was the last thing she needed.

Suddenly, she had an idea. "I do hope you're not waiting for the prince," Emry said, inspired. "He left with the Lady Elaine."

The blonde looked positively scandalized. "That *witch!*" she declared, and clapped her hand over her mouth. "Excuse me."

Emry tried not to grin as the girls hastened away, skirts rustling. So her guess had been right about Elaine, who hadn't been able to take her eyes off the prince for most of supper.

Finally, Arthur strolled around the corner, hands thrust in his pockets. He frowned, confused, as though he'd been expecting the court ladies. Then his expression brightened.

"Ah, Merlin," he said. "So we meet again."

"So we do, Your Royal Highness," Emry murmured with a bow.

"What's this?" Arthur asked, bemused. "Only an hour ago, you demanded I drop everything to help with your apprentice duties. I wonder what's changed?"

Emry glared. "You should have said something," she accused, unable to help herself.

"And ruin such a delightful misunderstanding?" The prince's eyes glittered with amusement, and his golden circlet glinted in the torchlight.

"You mocked me," said Emry.

"I would never," Arthur protested, putting a hand to his chest. "I assisted you. Very selflessly, I might add. If memory serves, *you* were the one who mocked *me*."

Emry's jaw dropped.

"You may apologize, if it would make you feel better," Arthur went on. "For insulting my personality, and my cock."

Emry spluttered, wishing more than anything that she'd never made the joke in the first place. Arthur raised an eyebrow, as though daring her to make it worse, or else atone for what she'd said. She wasn't sure which was the better option, but she had best choose one, and fast.

Thankfully, Lord Howell stepped into their path with a practiced bow, sparing her. "Excuse me, Your Highness," he cut in with an oily smile. "I was hoping to have a word."

The prince sighed, his amusement gone. "My father has already had several," he said, "and my opinion hasn't changed."

"Of course not," the man persisted. "I only hoped that—"

"—I'll be in attendance at tomorrow's high council meeting?" Arthur

interrupted. "So that I may further elaborate the reasons for my refusal?"

"Um," said Lord Howell, who clearly had not been hoping anything of the sort. And then, realizing he was outmaneuvered, "Indeed?"

"You may look forward to it," Arthur confirmed. "Please forgive me, I won't keep you any longer."

The man tried to resist the dismissal, and Emry bit her lip to keep from smiling at the indignity. So it wasn't just her. It seemed the prince had a habit of treating conversations as though they were fencing bouts. She had to admit, it was a neat trick, and a useful one.

Arthur flagged down an attendant, asking for two glasses and a carafe of water to be brought up to his rooms immediately. The man bowed deeply before hurrying away. When Arthur turned back to Lord Howell, he looked entirely too pleased with himself.

"As you can see, I'm unfortunately quite busy this evening."

"Then I'll leave you to your . . . company. I'm sure the matter will come up tomorrow."

"I'm sure it will," Arthur said with a sigh.

Lord Howell delivered an insincere bow before hastening away.

Arthur raised an eyebrow at Emry. "Still here?" he asked.

"You haven't yet dismissed me," Emry pointed out. "Although I assume you're about to, seeing as how you're expecting company in your chambers."

The prince cocked his head, as though surprised to find his own maneuver used against him.

"Not bad," he acknowledged, rooting his hands back into his pockets and striding down the corridor with that infuriating grin.

* * *

Emry sat in the window of her bedchamber, staring up at the night sky.

She wore her brother's nightshirt, the unfamiliar fabric a reminder that she couldn't even be herself here, alone in her room.

But it was worth it. The deception, the risk, the gamble she was taking that she'd get away with it. Because beyond the castle walls, she could just make out the dim peaks of London's rooftops, the serpentine stretch of the Thames, the far-off shadow of the cathedral's spire.

It was all here, just like she'd dreamed. And she was here at the center of it—somewhere the history books wrote about—finally. Not helping Marion mend threadbare costumes so they wouldn't have to beg their patron for more coin. Not cooped up in her run-down cottage, terrified of living a life she hadn't chosen in a town she was afraid she'd never leave.

She was the apprentice wizard at the royal court. Just like her father.

Well, *Emmett* was the apprentice wizard. But she was here now, and that was enough. It had to be.

No matter that the king had been terrifying and the prince had been obnoxious—she doubted they'd cross paths many more times before the week was through—between the books and her supper, she'd never been anywhere so wonderful.

And yet, it was all so bittersweet. Because it was borrowed. Temporary. A lie that could come crashing down at any moment. Which meant she couldn't truly enjoy it. Especially not while Emmett was recovering from his miscast spell, and Gran was left alone to look after him. She didn't know how to stop worrying, about either of them.

This was Emry's first time away from her family, and she hadn't realized it would be so lonely. She'd believed for a while that she'd outgrown Brocelande and her life there, but now, at the castle, she didn't feel nearly so brave about having left.

So she gazed out at the rooftops, summoning happy memories of home. Of Gran teaching her to bake honey cakes and twisting her hair into braids while it was just the right amount of damp. Of her father, with his

tired smile and elegant clothes, swinging her into the air and threatening to let go and see if she could fly. Of Emmett, climbing trees and boasting he'd be able to see all the way to London, to Father, if he just went high enough.

But those memories were old. Stale reminders of the way things had once been, not of what she'd truly left behind. These days, Gran was forgetful, Father was gone, and the only things Emmett boasted about were women and gambling.

She was the only constant, the one piece of the family that had stayed the same while everything else changed with the years and the seasons: a girl who wanted to learn magic, and who felt there had to be more written in her stars than she could see from her narrow bed in her small village.

But now that she was miles from that bed, and from everything she knew, the sky was no more clear on what she was supposed to do with her life, or how she was supposed to do it. Because the stars still looked the same from London, and her questions were all still there, and all just as unanswered.