It was only a mere few hours after the babe was born that it was sentenced to death. The child was to be drowned in the Lake of Avalon at dawn with nothing but a promise to be forgotten.

“Please, King Uther, don’t do this, he’s just a baby. I’ll remain in the forest and never mention him. No one will ever know of his true father.”

Uther remained still, coldness emanating towards the woman. She pushed back the strands of hair from her sweaty, flushed face and whispered, her words drifting towards Uther.

“I’ll raise the child as my own. I’ll tell people the father was a passing traveller. I swear to it. Just please, don’t drown my baby!”

Uther spun around, eyes blazing with fury. The mother met his gaze, but with fear in her eyes. She clutched the baby boy closer to her bosom.

“I will never love him; he’s a bastard. He will die.”

“Uther, I beg you, don’t do this. Was not the one night we spent together a night of honesty? You told me you wished you could leave these responsibilities; now is your chance. Leave Camelot, take me with you and we can start a new life,” she held the child up to him, “with our son.”

“If you love him that much,” he paused and as she saw his unloving eyes, she knew of her fate, “you will die too.”

He placed the cape over his head, concealing his identity and without looking back, he left.

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“Arthur, I must confide in you. I cannot tell you why, but there is a new babe in the forest who must die. Find him and drown him in the lake. His body must never be found again. The mother must also die. She can be publicly hung, and we shall announce treason. She will act as a sign to any citizens thinking of doing so.”

“Yes, good King.”

As the chief guard left the room, Uther turned towards his wise magician who had been standing, quietly listening.

“I trust you to not speak of anything you heard in the throne room today. The child and woman will die and no more shall be said.”

“When is the child to die?”

“When Arthur finds him today.”

Merlin paused as he debated within himself the possibility of asking another question.

“Would it be such an issue if the child lived? He could be a guard or my apprentice?”

Uther’s body tensed up. In a slow, isolated movement, his head pivoted towards Merlin, eyes burning with wrath.

“He is a child born out of wedlock. His mother is a peasant, and I am King. He is not worthy enough to be my son or to live. He will die, and you will stop questioning me.”

Merlin nodded, murmuring apologies.

As the council started to enter, Uther turned his attention to the men. Merlin slipped out and strode towards his chambers. *This child, pure and innocent, was to be condemned because of the King’s mistake. The mother too.* Merlin turned into another passageway, nodding at the guards he passed. *Uther never wanted to see the child again, but did it have to mean death? The mother could have left with the child, promising to never return.* He looked up, searching for an answer, but the dark, drab walls of the servants quarters stared back. Merlin frowned as he realised that his mind had been so clouded with other thoughts that he had walked past his chamber.

His thoughts were racing.

Uther could likewise be misled into thinking otherwise.

Merlin’s mouth was pulled into a smile as a plan formed. He had the power to find the mother and child and save them. He could raise the child, the mother could flee Camelot, all while Uther believed they were dead.

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Merlin spurred the horse into action, heart beating wildly. He had never disobeyed the King but hearing the fate of the family had twisted his heart. As he left the castle behind, he felt a qualm of doubt rise within him. Comfortable chamber, payment to buy what’s needed, respect from citizens, all could be thrown away if he was to be found out. He imagined Uther’s face, twisted with rage as he learned of the betrayal committed by his most trusted friend. *I shouldn’t be doing this.* Merlin winced as he tried to block out the voice of tradition in his head. *Uther trusts you. He’ll never forgive you.* He let out a frustrated grunt as he leant forward on the horse, trying to outrun the seeds of doubt. They galloped further into the forest, Uther’s unspoken words bouncing around his mind. He pulled back on the horse as he neared the house and slowed to a steady walk. Upon hearing shrieks and pleas, he urged the horse on further. He stopped, concealed by the trees as he saw the house and the figures thrashing around. Dread rose in him as he realised, he was too late.

“No, please! He’s just a child, spare him his life, I beg of – “

The wailing woman was cut off as Arthur issued a strike to her face and she fell, unconscious. Without a glance behind, Arthur picked up the child, climbed onto his horse, and started to canter towards the lake. As the mother lay motionless on the ground, a steady trickle of red oozing out of her nose, Merlin spurred his horse and they raced towards the figure of Arthur.

The guard’s horse was too fast, Merlin could never catch him. He had to rely on other means; he lifted his hand and started to chant. Arthur’s body convulsed as the sparks hit him and he slumped over, dropping the child. Merlin dismounted the horse and ran to the crying baby. There were no signs of fatal injury, only a few darkened patches of skin. Just as he was remounting his horse, Arthur groaned and sat up. Seeing Merlin with the child, he jumped up and started to chase. Merlin’s horse galloped with great speed, but Arthur’s horse was too fast. Soon they were side by side, Arthur reaching out to the child. Merlin veering away, the baby crying with the wind whistling in his ears. They turned a bend and suddenly were back at the cottage. The child’s mother was sitting on the ground in front of her house, nursing the bleeding nose. Upon witnessing the chase, she jumped to her feet and threw herself in front of the racing horses, desperation written across her face as her baby’s cries pierced her ears. Merlin swerved to the side, but Arthur didn’t hesitate. The woman was knocked to the ground, the horse trampling her, and she emitted an ear-piercing shriek as bones snapped.

Merlin glanced back over his shoulder and realised that he had a decision to make. The child, or the woman. He looked down at the babe in his arms and knew what he had to do. He urged his horse on faster, and with another chant escaping his lips, a fog surrounded Arthur, and he halted, directionless. With a final push, Merlin disappeared into the forest, embracing the child.

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Merlin sat in his tower, letting the aromas of his potions accompany his bittersweet emotions. He had spared the child’s life, but the mother had died that morning. He thought of Uther’s face when he learnt that the child was nowhere to be found and his decree that anyone found to be harbouring the child was to die. It seemed the poor child’s fate was a life of misery. Merlin knew he could change that. With determination, he made his way to his cauldron, and with a splash of liquid and a dash of herbs, he started to chant.

“To look forward

is to look back,

let the past

reveal not the future,

the boy shall be the fears,

greatest of the king”

Sparks flew from the cauldron, and images of the newly determined future started to rise:

Uther lying in his death bed. No king. A sword in a stone. Great knights failing to pull it out.

A young boy.

Success.

**Bibliography:**

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