A New Direction

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A New Direction

by [RealtaCuardach](#)

Summary

Hunith gets taken to Camelot to see Merlin, but there are big things at store.

In Hunith's mind, there were five cardinal directions: north, south, east, west, and Camelot.

It seemed ages since she had watched Merlin walk out of Ealdor towards the neighboring kingdom, with only his traveling pack slung on his back. Soon afterwards, her heart and mind knew that direction acutely, as though it had been branded into her very being. She had quickly fallen into a routine of looking towards the kingdom at least three times a day.

When she woke up and had a few moments of peaceful laziness before beginning the work of the day, she would look over and wonder if Merlin had slept well. As she sat down for the noontime meal, she would look towards Camelot before saying the blessing and wonder if he was getting enough to eat. He had always been so painfully thin and she hoped that Gaius had become a better cook since the last time she'd seen him. And as she blew out the candle at night before going to bed, she looked over to Camelot and let good wishes waft over to her son with the extinguished candle smoke. She prayed that he would be safe and happy, and that he would think of her too at times.

Of course, she didn't restrict her time of glancing towards Camelot to those three times only. Whenever she thought of Merlin, her eyes naturally swiveled in that direction, regardless of where she was. Sometimes she even wondered if she might actually look just in time to see him coming over the hill to pay her a visit. Hunith knew better than to genuinely expect him to be coming – he was kept so busy in Camelot that she was grateful for the monthly letters he managed to get back to Ealdor – but that didn't keep her heart from hoping.

So it was with almost as much surprise as excitement that she gasped when she looked towards Camelot to see a group of men riding towards the village. The distant clopping of horses' hooves made everyone in the village look towards the sound, and the children dropped the sticks they were playing with and ran to their parents. Hunith took a deep breath and leaned against the side of her hut, wiping the sweat off her brow as she peered out towards the approaching horses.

The gait of the horses was too slow to be threatening or intimidating, and as she looked closer she could see the bright red and golden dragons of the Pendragon crest. Her heart swelled with joy and she began to look even closer at the huddle of men, trying to see past the glint of all the chainmail for a glimpse of her son.

But as they got closer, her face fell into a confused frown. There were five men riding towards her, all of whom seemed to be wearing chainmail. Nowhere did she see the familiar shock of unruly black hair or those blue eyes that glinted with good humor and mischief. Hunith leaned more heavily against the hut wall than she had moments before and her heart began to race. Why would they come if Merlin wasn't among them?

She put it down to nerves and tried to force herself to remain calm as the horses drew closer. She recognized the young, handsome face of the king who had come to defend Ealdor for her son, but still could not see Merlin. Children ran forward and gathered around the horses, now that their parents recognized the visitors as being from Camelot, and Hunith followed slowly with almost shaky steps.

Her eyes widened in surprise and her breath caught in her throat as she looked about the gleaming chainmail one more time in search of the old brown jacket and brightly colored neckerchief, but saw none. Her anxiety was not at all helped by the somber look on the young king's face as he dismounted, and she gripped her apron tightly between her fingers.

Despite living out in the country all of her life, Hunith was well aware of how to greet and behave around those of higher birth. However, no protocol or etiquette could withstand a mother's love and concern for her child and instead of the customary greeting, she asked, "Where is Merlin? Is he all right?"

Arthur looked momentarily taken aback at the urgency of the question but soon recovered, giving the worried woman a small but genuine smile. "He's perfectly fine, Hunith. He's just not here because I didn't tell him we were coming."

One of the knights, who had a certain roguish tilt to his smile that was making several of the nearby adolescent girls giggle appreciatively, dismounted and gave a bark of laughter. "That, and Queenie here doubled his chores to keep him from finding out about it."

Arthur somehow managed to look irritated (at the knight) and apologetic (at Hunith) at the same time, but Hunith simply chuckled, her eyes twinkling remarkably like her son's. "You must be Sir Gwaine."

Gwaine swept into an elegant bow. "At your service, milady," he grinned, before stepping forward to kiss her hand. Hunith only just managed to keep from giggling like a young girl – this friend of Merlin's was a character.

"What does bring you here?" she asked, switching back to the expected etiquette easily now that she was assured of her son's well-being, "Would you care for something to eat? Do your horses need care?"

The king looked around at his men before turning to face Hunith again. "The horses do need tending to, but then we should be heading back."

"Got a lot to do before tomorrow!" Gwaine barked with laughter, only to get punched in the shoulder by the tallest of the knights, whose muscles rippling from the action made the previously affected girls squeal and giggle more.

"Don't ruin it," the knight admonished in a deep tone.

"Me?" Gwaine looked affronted, "My lips are sealed."

"That'll be the day," the oldest knight remarked drily as he dismounted and took his horse's reins, while the rest of the men burst into roars of laughter.

"Why am I always the butt?" Gwaine muttered.

"Can't think," the final knight, who looked very much like Merlin's friend Gwen, remarked as he joined his friends on the ground.

Hunith smiled. It was nice to meet all the friends Merlin mentioned in his letters. "If you would follow me," she began, gesturing with her hand to the other side of the village, "I can show you where to tend to the horses."

The men began following her as one unit, although she could hear Gwaine grumbling loudly and the two she guessed to be Percival and Elyan laughing at him. Arthur fell into step beside her and she looked up at him. "So why are you here, sire?" she asked.

"Oh, I thought we'd said…" Arthur trailed off, looking sheepish and much more like a young man rather than a king. "We're here to bring you to Camelot."

"Why, your highness?"

Arthur looked a little sheepish again, so Leon stepped in to explain. "It's a surprise for Merlin, my lady, since we know he doesn't see you as much as he'd like."

Arthur looked more grateful than Hunith had expected, but then she knew that the young man didn't express his emotions easily. So she just assumed that the young man was grateful for the knight taking the emotional delivery for him.

Later on, she would discover she was only partially right.

Once all the horses were fed and watered, Camelot's king and finest knights led their mounts back into the village square to wait for Hunith to get her horse. There they found a problem.

The one horse that the villagers used for travel had been taken out by the village's resident lovebirds early that morning. The two were not expected back until late that evening…at best. So that left Hunith with no horse to ride to Camelot. Knightly chivalry hit all the men at the same time, and suddenly all of these considerably attractive men were competing to have her ride with them. Hunith had to work hard on suppressing her laughter upon seeing the openly jealous looks on the younger women's faces as the knights essentially fought over her.

Eventually, Arthur put his foot down, playing the "I'm your king and my word is final" card before leading her to his horse and helping her before climbing on himself.

The ride back to Camelot was uneventful. The knights poked fun and jabbered at each other and Hunith, who was completely focused on the excitement of seeing her son again, simply listened and smiled. Eventually, she turned around to look at Arthur. "Thank you, your highness. It will be so good to see Merlin again – without any disaster happening."

Arthur smiled at her almost shyly. "Yes. I'm sorry he hasn't been able to come back more – he's been kept quite busy."

Hunith shook her head reassuringly. "That's all right. His life is in Camelot now, I understand that he can't often drop everything and visit. "She frowned thoughtfully, her eyebrows knitting in thought, "Why are you bringing me now? He's worked for you for years and you never thought of this before."

"Don't tell your son this," Arthur's voice lowered conspiratorially, "but I want to thank him for all he's done for Camelot – and for me. Everyone else who has stuck with me has been knighted or honored in some way, but not Merlin. And he doesn't really want any glory or recognition…"

Hunith smiled secretly to herself. While it was true that her Merlin had become more humble as he'd gotten older, she knew that he would have loved a little recognition, at least of who he really was. But even with Arthur as king instead of his father, it appeared he wouldn't be getting any of that any time soon.

"So this seemed the best way to thank him," Arthur finished, "you can stay as long as you like."

"Thank you," Hunith smiled at her son's best friend before shifting into a more comfortable position on the horse and training her eyes on the turrets of Camelot that were slowly emerging above the treetops. Her breath caught at the sheer beauty of the stone turrets against the bright blue sky, but also at the excitement at knowing she would see Merlin soon.

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By the time that Hunith had been escorted to the court physician's chambers, Gaius and the queen were there waiting for her.

Gwen looked well, Hunith thought to herself as she looked at the young woman, who looked much more carefree and happy than she had the last time she was in Ealdor. But then, the young woman had been banished, her wedding broken up, and been transformed into a deer before being shot with an arrow. It would hardly to be expected that the young woman would have been in the best of spirits. The queen looked regal and beautiful, but the excited gleam of recognition in her eyes and the enthusiastic hug that she gave Hunith were all the young girl who had come to Ealdor all those years ago.

Hunith smiled and hugged Gwen back. "It's good to see you, your highness."

"Gwen," the young queen asserted, beaming, as she stepped back from the embrace, "no need to call me anything else – not after you put up with me for so long."

"Nonsense," Hunith said, putting her hands on the younger woman's shoulders, "it was a pleasure having you, given the circumstances." It had been nice having someone to share her home with again, and to have someone who had stories to share about Merlin had been wonderful. Hunith turned to Gaius. "It's good to see you – are you well?"

Gaius walked over to her, his gait a bit more hobbling than she'd remembered, and embraced her before warmly kissing her on the cheek. "Better than I've been in a long time."

"Really?" Hunith quirked an eyebrow, "And why is that?"

Gaius had just opened his mouth to answer when the door banged unceremoniously open and Merlin rushed in, closely flanked by Arthur and the knights. Slightly out of breath and his hair flopping onto his forehead, Merlin looked around quickly before his eyes found his mother. "Mother?"

Hunith smiled through the sudden tears in her eyes. "Hello, Merlin."

Merlin closed the gap rapidly between them and wrapped his mother in a tight hug. "I've missed you."

"And I you, Merlin," Hunith hugged him as tightly as she could, the feeling of her son in her arms soothing and warm.

Merlin stiffened suddenly and pulled back from the embrace, and looked down at her seriously. "Are you all right? Has anything happened?" A fire began burning just behind his eyes. "If anyone has harmed you…"

"Merlin," Hunith said calmly, putting both her hands on his face. "I'm perfectly all right. Arthur just brought me here for a visit." And possibly for whatever big thing Gwaine was thinking was happening the following day, but for some reason she decided not to bring it up.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Merlin asked in shock as he looked back at Arthur who was smirking slightly as he stood beside Gwen.

Gwen smiled broadly. "It was a surprise!"

"I should hardly think," Arthur said, crossing his arms, "that you have any right to be mad at me for keeping things secret, Merlin."

Merlin gave a snort of laughter, but Hunith's eyes widened as the implication of the statement hit her. She pulled back from her son to gave him a searching look that grew increasingly nervous as he began to squirm slightly under her gaze. "Merlin," she whispered, "you didn't."

Her son took in a deep breath. "Mother, he knows."

Logic would have dictated that everything was fine, since they were all standing calmly in the room without cries for fire and execution, but logic had nothing on the force of her maternal instinct. Hunith grabbed Merlin's shirt sleeve and pushed herself slightly in front of him, shielding her son with her body. It did little to protect him, as he towered over her, but the look in her eyes was fierce.

"He's not going to do anything, Mother," Merlin assured her, "it's all right."

"How could you tell him, Merlin?" she said, agonized, "that was the one thing that you should not do above anything."

"Well, he didn't tell us exactly," Gwen began nervously, fiddling with the fringe on her sleeve, "he saved Arthur's life."

"Again," Merlin muttered under his breath and Hunith had to fight to keep from laughing. Gwaine didn't even bother trying and he roared with laughter.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "With magic. In front of everyone."

"How else was I supposed to do it?" Merlin groused, "When you get hit with an enchanted sword, there's not much else I can do besides take it out as soon as possible. That and get the enchantment and bleeding stopped." He made a low bow. "Forgive me for not allowing you to die, sire."

The king waved his hand around. "But was giving yourself the wound really the best idea?"

Merlin crossed his arms. "Well, my body can take magical attacks better than yours can, it seemed the best – MOTHER!"

Hunith had spun around and yanked up his tunic with absolutely no warning and was now examining his ribcage for wounds. Merlin flushed a bright red, trying to push away his mother's inquisitive hands while attempting to fix his shirt. He was distinctly unsuccessful until she finally located the healing wound which was already glowing a faint pink as a scar began to form. "Thank God for that," she breathed, and then frowned again. "Have you been eating at ALL, Merlin?" she scolded, prodding the prominent bones of his ribcage.

"Mother!" Merlin yanked down his shirt, looking ruefully at his friends. Gwen looked apologetic; but the others in the room looked highly amused, and Arthur and Gwaine looked positively gleeful. He would not be hearing the end of this for a long time.

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The next day, Hunith turned toward the mirror in the bedroom and smoothed down her hair fretfully as she glanced at her appearance. She wished that the king had mentioned a banquet that he wanted her to attend before they had left Ealdor; she might have been able to pack something far more suitable than what she wore on the trip.

Gwen had quickly taken her into hand – taking her to the royal seamstress and finding some clothes that were elegant but simple enough for Hunith to feel comfortable wearing them. But even in the beautiful dress, Hunith felt nervous about her first exposure to courtly life, and her hands sprang up to her hair once more.

Merlin's friend laughed lightly behind her and put her hands gently away from the hair before picking up a brush and beginning to brush Hunith's hair for her.

Of course, she attempted to tell the queen to stop treating a commoner like someone of a higher station but Gwen shook her head, grinning. "I don't mind it," she replied, "and I know more about caring for hair in the courtly fashion than I would ever care to know. I've had plenty of practice." A shadow passed over Gwen's face for a moment and then it was gone. She continued to brush with firm, steady strokes. "Merlin told us everything," she began, "that he was born with magic and that you sent him to Camelot so Gaius could teach him?" Hunith nodded. "That must have been so scary," Gwen said curiously, "to have all that power and have to hide it."

"'Twas," Hunith answered, nodding, "and especially when he was so small. He couldn't understand why he had to hide – and then when he got older and understood it was almost worse. He thought he was a monster."

The cracking in her voice was enough for the younger woman to put down the brush and hug her across the shoulders. Hunith's shoulders shuddered, although it was difficult to tell whether it was from sadness or relief that her son was safe now, even with his magic revealed. Gwen squeezed the older woman's shoulders. "But he's not. He's a hero. He's our friend." She cleared her voice nervously. "Hunith?"

"Yes?"

Gwen sat down on a chair near where Hunith was sitting and faced her. "Merlin…told us about his father." Hunith winced at the familiar stab of pain in her heart at the mention of Balinor, but continued to listen. "When I was staying in Ealdor after I'd been…before Arthur and the others came, when you talked about how a broken heart takes time to mend…" she looked up into Hunith's face, "were you talking about you, too?"

Hunith didn't answer straight away, but the strong emotion in her eyes answered Gwen's question. She opened her mouth to say something more, but then both were interrupted by a groan near the changing screen. "Do I really have to?"

"Yes, Merlin," Gwen said with a long-suffering but amused tone of voice, "you have to wear it. You know Arthur will throw a fit if you show up with your old neckerchief for this ceremony."

"He always throws fits," Merlin said sullenly, "I should know since he throws things at me when he has them. Besides, nothing's wrong with my neckerchiefs."

Gwen rolled her eyes and Hunith shook her head. "Yes, but you shouldn't wear them for this."

"What makes this banquet so different?" Merlin continued, "we have lots of banquets. That's why your husband's belt needs so much enhancing."

"Merlin!" Gwen tried to sound indignant on Arthur's behalf but she was laughing too much to be convincing. "Just put it on, please."

There was a grumble that was nearly muffled by a flurry of cloth and the muted clink of buttons being buttoned, and then the spot behind the changing screen was silent. Both women leaned expectantly towards the screen, but the man hiding behind it made no effort to extract himself from it. "Come on out then, Merlin,"

Gwen said, grinning.

There was a wearied sigh and then Merlin stepped out from behind the screen with a sour look on his face. Hunith let out a delighted gasp. "Oh, Merlin," she sighed, "you look so handsome."

Handsome and irritated, she mentally amended as she watched her son walk out looking pressed and proper and dignified in his red embroidered coat and utterly annoyed. "I feel like a stuffed bird," he said almost petulantly, as he looked in the mirror. "I look like one too. This is the prat's revenge on me isn't it?" he asked Gwen, "this is his revenge for something he thinks that I did. It's the blo-blasted hat" he shot a nervous glance at Hunith, "all over again."

Gwen once again failed to keep back her laughter. "But you look so handsome, Merlin," she replied, "and you need to look your best anyway."

"Why?" Merlin asked curiously, "All I'm going to be doing is keeping his cup from running dry like always. I can do that wearing my neckerchiefs."

Gwen looked like she was about to say something but stopped herself.

"Merlin, come over here," Hunith said softly, standing up. Merlin walked over and she began to brush one hand through his bangs until they settled onto his forehead in some semblance of order. "There you are." She smiled up at Merlin, and smiled in a sweet but melancholy way. Had he been that tall when he'd left Ealdor? The years had rushed by and she almost regretted not being there to see all that had happened to make him the man he was.

"Mum?" Merlin questioned and looked down into her face, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Hunith assured him, "I've just missed you."

His eyes softened and he pulled her into another hug. There was the quiet closing of a door behind them and they looked to see Arthur coming into the chamber. Gwen sent her husband an undeniable glare, but Merlin simply squeezed Hunith's shoulder and stepped back, awaiting whatever instructions Arthur had for him.

Arthur winced beneath Gwen's glare and said, "It's time for the banquet to start. We need to go."

Hunith looked suddenly nervous and Gwen came over to her, hooking an arm around the older woman's and walking out with her into the hallway. The two men watched them leave for a moment before Merlin turned to the king. "Arthur?"

Arthur looked at him.

"Thank you."

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Hunith frowned thoughtfully as she and Merlin followed Gwen and Arthur up to the balcony overlooking the courtyard, where a veritable throng of people had assembled below. She was unaware of the intricacies of courtly protocol, but it seemed strange to her that a banquet would start on the balcony. She turned to look at Merlin to ask him, but the perplexed expression on her son's face didn't promise much explanation.

Arthur and Gwen walked over to the balcony edge, their crowns both glinting in the later afternoon sun, but Merlin quietly took his place in the slightly shaded corner of the balcony.

He reached out to gently grab his mother's forearm to stop her from following the royals all the way. Gwen looked back at the both of them and gave a dazzling smile before squeezing Arthur's hand and stepping backward.

"Is there to be an announcement?" Hunith asked quietly.

Merlin shrugged. "I don't know," his eyebrows met, "but if they found out that Gwen is expecting and tell the whole kingdom before telling me, I'm going to kill the prat."

The strength of his mother's elbow surprised him as it dug into his ribs and made him grunt. "Merlin!"

A slight twitching upward of the king's lips was the only indication that Arthur had heard what was going on behind him. He looked out over the crowd of people and spoke. "People of Camelot," he said, "you have been called here for a great announcement – one that has been far overdue for far too long."

"Going to kill him," Merlin muttered.

"In these years, I have seen Camelot grow strong and secure – thanks in part to those brave men – and women ," he added with a smile as he looked at his wife, "who have sacrificed so much to make it so. It is beyond my power to reward them as much as they deserve, but all have received their thanks. All but one." He turned around and looked his best friend in the eye. "Merlin."

Merlin had stiffened, his face frozen in surprise and slight anxiety, and made no move to step forward. Arthur rolled his eyes and gave a slight nod to someone behind Merlin and Hunith. Merlin was unceremoniously shoved forward and he glared back at Gwaine, whose arm was outstretched and his face grinning unrepentedly. "Go, Merlin, don't keep the princess waiting."

Hunith watched as her son straightened out his coat and walked forward to join the king, noting the slight trembling about his knees. He always did hate public speaking.

"You all know him," Arthur continued, turning back towards the crowd, "and seen him at my side through all the trials that Camelot has faced. I have often underestimated his bravery, his loyalty, and his shows of wisdom – but he never ceased to give all that he had to protect Camelot. And recently," he said, clapping a hand on Merlin's shoulder as the man's eyes were widening in realization, "I have learned of another way he has defended us. I am speaking," Arthur cleared his throat and spoke the next three words clearly into the sharp, cool air, "of his magic."

The words stoked up a sudden murmuring of voices below them, the sound full of awe and surprise and encouragingly little trepidation. Merlin gave a strange squawk of shock but looked down with surprise at the people who were not revolting below.

"He stayed in Camelot and protected it with his magic, even though he knew that it could lead to his death. And because of his sacrifices," Arthur looked very seriously at Merlin and the next words could have been just for his friend, "I know that magic is not pure evil as my

father had thought. It is a tool like a sword is a tool – it can defend as well as wound, protect as well as harm. And for that reason," he said, clearing his throat once more, "I am repealing the ban on magic."

Merlin nearly staggered backward, and Hunith's hands flew up to her mouth. Gwen smiled a teary smile at Merlin, and Arthur gripped his shoulder reassuringly. "Furthermore, I name Merlin as my court warlock. Together we shall heal the rift between magic and Camelot."

With that, the crowd burst into boisterous applause below. The magic announcement was a bit daunting but most knew and liked Merlin and so trusted him as they always did.

Arthur smiled at Merlin, a genuine, proud smile. "You're free, Merlin."

Merlin turned to face his mother who had slowly walked up behind him. Amidst the roar of applause and approval down below, the two clutched each other tightly, the tears beginning to run down both of their faces. Free. He was finally free.

Hunith held him close, and for the first time since she'd sent him to Camelot, finally felt certain she'd made the right decision. She knew that he was happy, and with Gaius he could learn much more about his power. But she had felt almost as though she had sent her child off to the execution block, and seeing the back of him walk away was like watching his father escape from Ealdor before Uther came. She wasn't completely sure that she would ever see him again.

The two pulled back and even Hunith couldn't read the emotions swirling about in her son's eyes. But the smile he was wearing was genuine. "Mother," he whispered, looking around at the rowdy crowd below, Arthur and Gwen looking at them, and Gwaine and the other knights yelling boisterously, "I did it."

Hunith looked her son straight in the face, taking in the worry lines around his eyes, the stance of a man who has borne the weight of the world but continued on, the eyes that glowed with wisdom and awareness. He had been but a boy when she'd sent him to Camelot. Now he was a man, and he was free. If only his father could be here, she thought as she reached up to touch Merlin's cheek.

"Yes," she said proudly, as she looked at the remarkable person her son had become, "you did it."

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