La Chasse aux Papillons

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La Chasse aux Papillons

by TheMadKatter13

Summary

Although the first meeting of betrothed princelings Arthur and Merlin does not go as planned, nor most of the following meetings, by the time Merlin is kidnapped a year before their wedding, Arthur is left distraught by the loss. For Merlin’s kidnapper, there's only one plan: torture. And it's all going as expected.

Notes

For some reason, I decided to do the Merlin Reverse Big Bang, because the only decisions I apparently make are bad ones. Evident by the fact that this fic was ~3x longer than originally planned. Now, you can either check out the original prompt art prompt by karovie now, or you can wait till it comes up in the fic. Likewise, you can find the original text prompt that accompanied the art at the end of this chapter. Last, the title, 'La Chasse aux Papillons' is taken from the French song by George Brassens, a song that was influenced by the art/hobby
of butterfly collecting/pinning.

- Inspired by the fairy prince ART by karovie
Part One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The full moon hanging large and bright in the sky felt like a mockery to Arthur. It was a stark reminder of his unending failure, of his loss, and it illuminated a land that seemed to have lost all its colour. He was fairly certain that the thought wasn't a romantic exaggeration, but a grim reality that had persisted for the last ten months. No one had quite realized the fae's influence on the human realm until it had waned.

Last winter had been colder than any in living memory, and the summer that just ended was so hot that it felt like the sun itself had floated down from the sky and perched atop the castle. The rainy season flooded several of the smaller villages low in the valleys, and nearly flooded several of the higher-set ones too. Crops of all sort from all over Camelot's lands failed and the harvests were so small that everyone worried whether they'd all survive the winter. Worse of all, magical beasts had been spotted more and more frequently and in greater numbers, carrying off humans and livestock, killing the young, able-bodied men protecting it all. And although Arthur's first and foremost thought must always be for the safety and wellbeing of his own people, he couldn't help but wonder how the Otherworld was faring if his realm was so poorly off.

Morgana found him hours after sunset, perched in the window of the highest tower, one of Merlin's scarves wrapped tight around his fist as he stared out at the night sky. He was never more grateful for her ability to read his moods as he was in that moment, for she sat close without touching, and didn't break the silence. He couldn't be sure how long they sat there together in the dark before he found himself speaking.

"We were to be married tonight." His words were hoarse from hours of silence, his lips and mouth dry. He tried to swallow, but found he couldn't: his throat felt too tight.

"I know," she murmured, her voice soft, adding to the darkness rather than breaking it. Her fingers curled around his empty hand, gently, and he didn't shake off her touch. "You'll find him, Arthur. Don't lose hope."

He scoffed and dropped his head back, relishing the pain when it made contact with the unyielding stone. "You can't know that. No one knows that. None of the magic folk, not the fae or the druids or anyone else, can find him. They keep telling me his powers must be bound, but... It's been nearly a year, Morgana. He has to be dead by now."

Thin but strong fingers gripped his jaw and forcibly turned his head to face his sister. "Arthur, Merlin is the most powerful being in all recorded history. We'd know if he died. The whole world would know."

She meant it as a comfort, but Morgana's words only flamed the sparks of his temper. "If he's so powerful, then why hasn't he freed himself?" he snapped.

Her hand fell away from his face and back to his hand again, and Arthur turned back to the window. "He's just as susceptible to iron as the rest of us, Arthur. His magical strength has no relevance to that weakness all our kind share. In fact, he may be more vulnerable. Merlin is magic. He has never known an existence without it. If he is iron-bound, it may leave him weaker than if he were a simple sorcerer."
When Morgana fell silent, it was almost as if her words hadn't. They rang through Arthur's mind like the castle's bells and weighed heavily on his heart. It wasn't as if he hadn't thought of it before. In fact, Merlin's imprisonment, not just the 'where', but the 'how' and the 'why', were never far from his thoughts. How much iron was he bound with? What was keeping him from escaping? Was he being treated kindly? Was he dead? There was no way of knowing any of it - not until Arthur found Merlin again.

Morgana squeezed his hand firmly for a long moment before leaning in to kiss his cheek. "Don't give up, Arthur. Wherever Merlin is, he's counting on you. You'll find him."

"A prophecy?" he scoffed, turning his back to her.

"Intuition," she replied as the sound of her skirts trailing along the stone faded away.

Arthur sighed and looked down at the blue cloth wrapped around his fist. "I won't give up," he promised it. "I'll find Merlin and bring him home. No matter how long it takes."

"Father, I thought you hated magic?"

The king's head whipped so sharply towards him that Arthur thought it might fall off. Ahead of them, their fae escorts giggled quietly and Arthur had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing with them. He carefully didn't look at his father, keeping his eyes on the snowy road and the brightly-coloured fae in front of him.

"This is a topic we shall save for private, Arthur," his father said quietly, keeping his horse close to Arthur's. For a moment, he wished Morgana had come with him. She always liked it when Arthur asked 'too many questions'.

"But why am I marrying a magic person when you hate them? Are sorcerers and fae different? Are you going to think I'm evil when I marry a magic person?"

One of the fae ahead of them snorted and then tried to cover her laughter with a fake coughing fit. Arthur didn't let himself smile until his father glanced away from him to glare at the woman. The other fae were silent, but Arthur could see the curl to their lips that said they found him equally amusing, rather than offensive.

"You are marrying Prince Merlin because your mother arranged the marriage before your birth," Uther said with a deep frown and tight voice, clearly reluctant to divulge the answers that Arthur sought. He would likely pay for his impertinence later, but he wanted to know now before he met his betrothed. "I would not deny her last wish, no matter my thoughts on the matter."

"Leon said that you didn't break the arrangement because we can't fight an army that can move between worlds."

The giggling fae woman burst into outright laughter and even her quieter companions giggled.

"Did he now," Uther said, positively scowling now.

"You've got a sharp mind for someone so young, Prince Arthur," the laughing fae said as she eased her mount backwards to ride at Arthur's side. Her hazel wings, draped over her back like a cloak, rustled and shifted before falling still again, and Arthur watched the whole process, fascinated, before her words caught up with him.
"I'm not young!" Arthur protested, after he remembered she'd spoken. "I'm eight!"

"That you are, Highness, but not all eight year olds are as smart as you," the woman said with a knowing smile, and Arthur stared at her suspiciously, absently tucking away the fact that her eye colour matched her wing colour. The only other eight year old he knew was Morgana and she was as smart as he was.

"Is Prince Merlin an idiot?" he asked. "I don't want to marry an idiot."

This time, the Camelot guards behind them started to laugh, though not loud enough to drown out the sharp "Arthur!" his father snapped out. The woman just grinned.

"We all have our different talents, Prince Arthur. Would that we could all be so lucky as to have a partner strong where we are weak," she said.

Another fae ahead of them, a brown-winged woman, turned around on her horse with a protesting "Hey!" and a glare that made the fae next to Arthur laugh.

Arthur thought over her words, and wondered where it was that he himself was weak. He'd been told he had a good mind for strategy and weaponry, so where did that put his betrothed? "So... he's an idiot then," he surmised.

She laughed again and then pointed ahead of them. "You're about to find out, your highness."

Ahead of them was a strange sight that Arthur barely knew how to describe. It was like a doorway without a frame, a window without a wall, a tapestry hanging in the air. On the other side of it, the road continued, but it was lined with strange trees covered in smooth, white bark, and the path itself was dappled with sunlight and falling snow whereas their own was overcast and the snow had already fallen. He promptly forgot to continue his interrogation as his horse followed their guides through the not-door into the Otherworld.

Though the trees were all white, they all bore leaves and fruits more colourful than a rainbow and more bright than freshly-polished gemstones. Each tree's boughs were spotted with little glows, like fireflies, and he wondered how brightly they might shine come nightfall. Slowly, he realized that some of the trees were clustered close together, their frames curved into the shapes of houses, their branches and leaves become mosaic roofs. For a moment, he wondered if he'd be able to spot the castle before it was pointed out to him, for how much more beautiful could the castle be when even the peasants homes were works of arts? And then he saw it.

The castle was unmistakable. The trees that made up her corners was so thick that Arthur doubted all of their retinue could hold hands and encircle it, and so tall that he couldn't see the top. Its secondary branches, and tertiary, and all those beyond, were so large that they created new floors to the castle, and gemstone leaves and little lights were sprinkled all among its exterior. It looked like a many layered cake, like the one served on his birthdays, but infinitely more beautiful, and just a bit imposing.

When they finally stopped, his father had to remind him to dismount, and it was only then that he saw the group awaiting them. At the forefront were who Arthur suspected were the king and queen. Their clothes were as simple as their guards', just as exquisitely made but lacking excessive embellishments, and the only thing that set them apart from Camelot's guides were the crowns made of flowers set on their brown hair. Although, Arthur had never seen the flowers before; the king's flowers were bright yellow, their centers shaped like the mouth of a trumpet, and the queen's were made of strange red leaves that looked like they were made of wax.
Standing in front of the king and queen, one of each of their hands on his shoulders, was a boy Arthur's age. His hair was as dark as Arthur's was light and made darker by the the crown of bright, rainbow-coloured and spiky-leaved flowers on his head, and both eyes and wings an almost eye-searing shade of blue. For all that the castle was still the most fascinating thing Arthur had ever seen, he found that he couldn't take his eyes off who he knew was his betrothed.

Distantly, he could hear his father going through formalities, and he knew he was missing the introductions - he didn't know any fae's name except the prince's - but he couldn't break his gaze. Despite the falling snow, the world felt warm and so much brighter than it had been just moments ago, and Arthur couldn't help but smile. Merlin stared back at him for a long moment, large eyes unblinking and soul-piercing, and then he smiled too, something almost feral about the way his lips curled. Arthur's breath caught in his chest, and in that moment, he felt his heart bloom like a flower in the sun of his betrothed's approval.

"I'm Merlin," the other prince said suddenly.

"Arthur," Arthur replied automatically. "Your ears are really big," he blurted out. And they were. Large and pointed, sticking out of the fae prince's black curls, but they stuck outwards too, like they'd been pulled too far away from his head.

"No they're not!" Merlin protested, glaring as he clapped his hands over them. "You have rabbit teeth anyway!"

"Do not!" Arthur snapped back with his own glare, self-consciously covering his mouth with his hand.

"Do too, you clotpole!"

"That's not a word!"

"Is too!"

"Is not!"

"Is too!"

"Is n-"

Suddenly, Arthur felt a shove against his chest, one that came out of thin air, and he glanced down before back up at Merlin. Merlin whose eyes had just flashed gold. Arthur stared at him for a long moment before he let out a war cry and tackled the fae.

By the time their fathers pulled them apart, Arthur had a bloody nose, but Merlin had a black eye.

"I'll never marry a prat like you!" Merlin shouted over his father's shoulder as he was carried away.

"Well I'm not going to marry an idiot like you first!" Arthur shouted back as he was carried out of the Otherworld, fuming all the way back to the castle. It didn't matter how pretty Merlin was, or what his mother agreed to - he would never marry someone like that.

The world around Merlin felt strange, dark and empty, and he felt groggy and tired in a way that was completely foreign. It felt like his head had been wrapped in cloth, but he could feel air over his face. It wasn't until he blinked that he realized that, wherever he was was not only completely dark, but it was absolutely freezing. He shifted where he sat and realized that he was bound by wrists and ankles.
to a chair with coarse rope that rubbed his skin raw with even the slightest movements. Something cold and hard around his wrists clacked against the wood when he moved, and he suddenly remembered the bracelets Arthur had just given him. Despite his situation, the memory of the shy way he'd been handed his gift made him smile and sharpened his mind.

He reached for his magic, intent on burning the rope away, and though he felt it welling up, bright and familiar in his chest, it seemed trapped inside his skin. Scowling into the dark, he shook his head to clear the fuzziness and tried again, harder. This time, something around his wrists burned and he screamed. He released his magic immediately, and the intense pain subsided from a sharp flame to a dull roar, lingering uncomfortably around his wrists. He pulled helplessly at his bound wrists, and the cold metal of his birthday gifts shifted over the pain, but rather than comforting him, the sensation filled his chest with a cold fear. Because he knew this feeling.

Balinor had put him in iron once, just to show him what it was like. Not as a punishment, nothing so cruel as that, but so that the crown prince would understand one of the most dangerous weapons that could possibly be yielded against their kind. So that he'd never underestimate the metal during an attack. All he'd done was shackle Merlin at the wrists, and it had felt like the world had ended. Merlin had been a child, and he'd cried for three days. The feeling of being unable to use his magic had haunted him for weeks after, woke him screaming in the middle of the night, and even years afterwards, he still woke gasping in the dark from a nightmare of lost magic.

Arthur had gifted him shackles. Which made no sense. Not just because they hadn't looked or felt like iron when he'd been presented with the bracelets, but also because they'd been engraved with the runes for health and prosperity and friendship; for love. It was true that they'd fought as children, as angry at one another as a mongoose and a snake, but that dissonance had long since shifted into a harmony, a friendship, a partnership. Even Uther, who had long wished for the destruction of all that was magic, had begun to bless their impending marriage in the months before his death.

No, he knew Arthur well enough to know that, even if they had remained enemies up to and through their wedding, Arthur was fair and honourable, almost to a fault. He always worked to never cause anyone undue stress or discomfort, and on the battlefield, each strike he made was precise and lethal to prevent excessive pain. He would never subject someone to something like this, not even the Merlin he'd hated as children. Which just left Merlin with so many questions: where had Arthur gotten iron bands disguised with magic? Which of Merlin's peoples had betrayed Merlin by making such things? Which one of Arthur's people had betrayed Arthur, betrayed them both, by giving him gifts that would allow the kidnapping of his betrothed?

A sudden burst of flame just ahead him made him cringe and slam his eyes closed against the unexpected light. He blinked rapidly against the sting, and as he tried to adjust to the reprieve from the dark, a familiar voice spoke.

"At last I have you all to myself, Prince Merlin," the man sneered, the voice drifting closer.

Merlin rapidly tried to clear the tears from his eyes, and the sensation of them falling over his cheeks was like an itch. One he couldn't scratch. Finally, his eyes cleared, and he squinted into the darkness.

"Agravaine?" Arthur's uncle was holding a torch and the smile on his face was slimy at best. So... not really that different than the rest of his smiles. Merlin had never liked him or his smiles; he'd always found him suspicious, and apparently he hadn't been wrong. "Agravaine, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Agravaine scoffed and took a step forward, bringing the heat of the torch closer, but not close enough. "Did you people really think I was going to let my nephew marry one of you? Your kind murdered my sister."
"Oh for the love of-" Merlin cut himself off with a roll of his eyes. "You're worse than Uther was! Ygraine knew what she was doing! She knew that only death could pay for life, and she chose Arthur anyway! I'm not saying Nimueh was sanctioned in the ceremony she performed, but she has been punished already for what she did! Uther lit her pyre himself!"

It wasn't much talked about, not in polite circles anyway, and it had happened just before Merlin was born, but it was important to the history of both their lands, and to Arthur, so it had been important to Merlin too. He'd had to extract the story slowly and carefully from tens of the royal guards, his own parents, and scrolls and books from both the Otherworld and Arthur's world dictating each plane's history. It took months, but finally he'd pieced it all together, how Uther wanted a son so bad that he'd pleaded for magical assistance, and Nimueh was the one who'd answered the call. Ygraine had understood the consequences, Uther had not.

Ygraine had also known what the effect of her death would be on her husband and his views of magic folk, and she'd made an unbreakable arrangement with Merlin's parents before she'd given birth in order to prevent the retaliation she rightly foresaw. If his and Arthur's marriage hadn't been Ygraine's final wish, Merlin was sure that Uther would have gone to war. He was fairly sure Uther would have anyway if Balinor hadn't offered him Nimueh, who had been their prisoner for months for performing such forbidden magics. Still, interactions with Uther over the last two decades years had been nothing short of painful, and it was only in the last few years that he'd begun to warm, though that wasn't saying much. Apparently Agravaine was worth, and since he only showed up after Uther died, he hadn't experienced any exposure or thawing of his biased hatred.

Agravaine laughed darkly as he shook his head. "You're all the same. Uther was a fool, and he killed Ygraine. I'm not going to let her son marry her killer. My only regret is my inability to remove you from him sooner."

There was a numbness spreading throughout Merlin's limbs, and he couldn't tell if it was from the cold, or the crazed look in Agravaine eyes. "Arthur will kill you for this," he said quietly.

"For what offense?" he asked, smiling that slimy smile of his. "I'm merely lancing poison from a wound. He and the rest of Camelot should be grateful that I'm doing this favour for him. But they'll never find you. You'll die down here. Arthur will forget about you, and he'll marry someone more appropriate. He'll marry a human. And you're kind will have no choice but to release the contract, to let him go. They'll be too busy looking for their precious prince." He sneered Merlin's title like a mockery, like Merlin was nothing more than a trinket that held more sentimental value than monetary.

"If you think Arthur will let this go, let me go, you don't know your nephew at all," Merlin sneered right back. "So you're going to have to kill me quickly if you want this to go your way at all." His heart was pounding in his chest as he said it, but he knew death was coming for him. He had no means of defense, and having his magic locked away within himself left him weaker than he'd ever been in his life. He would never get to see his mother or father again, or Will or Sophia. Or Arthur. Gods, he was never going to see Arthur again. They were supposed to spend the rest of their lives together, and now Merlin was going to spend the rest of his suddenly very short life in this dank, dark room. His eyes stung and he tilted his head back, trying to hold back tears.

"Kill you quickly?" Agravaine sounded amused, and faux-puzzled. Merlin startled when another man, this one bald with pursed lips, stepped into the light at Agravaine side. There was an uncoiled whip hanging from one hand, and Merlin couldn't tear his eyes from it, even when Agravaine kept speaking. "Oh no, my dear boy. You're not going to die for a long time. You need to be punished, and I'm afraid to say that you have so many punishments. I'm afraid that you'll be here for quite a while yet."
The first snap of the whip blazed fire across his chest and he had to bite his tongue to keep from
screaming at the leather's bite. He tasted blood in his mouth before the second stroke even ripped
open the fabric, and skin, over his thighs. Agravaine just stood there, smiling that sickening smile of
his, as the bald man circled Merlin slowly. When fingers tugged the edges of a wing, he flinched and
tried to clasp the tight to his body. Agravaine tsked and shook his head.

"Oh that won't do at all. Let's get those… pesky things out of the way." Sheer dread washed over
him and he shook his head.

"No no no, leave my wings alone! You don't get to touch them!"

Agravaine chuckled, the sound utterly condescending, as he pulled out a dagger. The filthy traitor's
filthy fingers grabbed the edge of one wing, curling and crumpling the millions of tiny scales and
hundreds of veins and nerve endings. Merlin could almost feel his appendage being stained by the
touch that translated to an odd sensation that he could only describe as a bruising pinch of sorts. A
fae's wings were a private thing, for no one to touch except close family when one was a child, and a
lover when one was of age; Merlin hadn't even found the courage yet to let Arthur touch them, and
now the uncle that had betrayed them both was getting his disgusting hands all over them. And then
Agravaine yanked it forward and drove a dagger through Merlin's wing and into the wood of the
chair.

Merlin screamed.

"Take it out! Take it out! TAKE IT OUT!" He had never experienced anything more painful in his
life than in that moment; having his wings get stepped on didn't even begin to compare. And then
Agravaine, laughing a full-bellied sound, a sound of pure enjoyment, pulled out another blade, and
pinned Merlin's other wing down too. The pain, inconceivably, doubled, and for a moment, Merlin
thought he was going to pass out; he didn't know how he didn't. It was so strong it made him want to
die, and yet, he knew it had only begun.

When he finally opened his eyes again, he found that he couldn't stop sobbing, and that his throat
was sore from screaming. Agravaine was standing in front of him, smiling as pleasant as you please,
血 from Merlin's wings smeared along the sides of his hands.

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it?" he said in that simpering tone he always used to use on Arthur
when he was suggesting something he knew was a bad idea, when he was suggesting something in
direct contradiction to the advice Merlin had already provided. Merlin had always hated that tone, but
now he loathed it. Loathed it… and feared it. Because now he was talking about torturing Merlin,
and if he hated magic so much that he would kidnap the crown prince of the Otherworld, his own
nephew's betrothed, then there was no doubt in Merlin's mind that Agravaine imagination in this
matter far exceeded his own. "But if you thought it was, well… The fun is only beginning, Prince
Merlin."

Without warning, the whip hit his exposed back, and Merlin jerked away from it. Only to find that
the movement jarred his wings, tugged against where the daggers were still piercing him. He bit his
lip against another scream, but he couldn't stop the sob that shook his body. And then the whip fell
again, a line across his spine, and it took everything he had to tense his muscles to keep from jarring
his wings a second time. It quickly became apparent, however, that holding all that tension was
draining to an unfamiliar degree. He was left no time to relax his muscles, no time to catch his breath,
for each hit was randomly placed and erratically spaced.

Merlin was in incomprehensible pain, pain that only rose with every snap of leather through the air.
He was injured in ways he had never thought he could be injured. He'd been unthinkably molested
by someone who was likely willfully ignorant of his people's ways. And now he was at that same
person's mercy - or lack thereof, the same person he now knew to be a mad man.

He stared up at Agravaine through his tears, choking on the whimper caught in his throat, and tried to come to terms with the fact that this, Agravaine taunting and the whip man ripping open his skin, was only the beginning.

"For someone leaving within the hour, you certainly don't look packed, Merlin," Hunith said when she stepped into Merlin's room and glanced around. "Or tidy, for that matter," she continued as she picked up a shirt with her nose wrinkled.

Merlin groaned and rolled over onto his face on his bed. "But muuum!" he protested, the sound muffled even to his own ears.

"No 'but's," Hunith said amidst the sound of cloth moving and wings fluttering.

"But we go every. summer!" he complained and then rolled over onto his back again so she could feel the full force of his glare. "Can't we just stay here for once?"

"You go every summer to strengthen the bonds between our kingdoms, and to become acquainted with its lands and citizens." Merlin mouthed along with his mother, the phrases the same as they had been when he complained last year, and the year before that, and the year before that - "Just as Prince Arthur comes to stay the winter with us every year."

"We already have to visit each other on our birthdays," he pouted, watching as Hunith dumped his dirty clothes in a pile and began to pull clean ones from his chest of drawers.

"One day of celebrations in each kingdom a year is not enough," she scolded as she made a little pile on the corner of the bed.

"You're right," Merlin agreed, which got him a look of clear surprise. "It's too much." Hunith sighed and rolled her eyes. "Mum, I hate him. He's a bully and an arse."

"Merlin!"

"Well, he is."

Hunith started at the sound of Will's voice from the boughs that made up the ceiling corner of Merlin's room, and Merlin dropped his head in his hands. He was both disappointed that Will had given himself away and surprised it had taken this long.

"William, get down from there."

"Yes, m'lady," Will muttered, abashed, and fluttered down with a red face.

"Now, I appreciate your concern," Hunith said as Will pointedly stared at the ground, "but this arrangement doesn't actually concern you."

"But I'm his family just as much as you are!" Will exclaimed, stomping his foot in a fit of pique more suited to a child of six years than a man of sixteen.

"Had you planned on joining Merlin and Arthur in their marriage bed?" she asked, hands propped on her hips.

"Had you?" Will shot back.
"William!" Hunith snapped, and both Merlin and Will flinched. The queen's wings made a subtle and yet shark crack and her form shimmered. Will took a step back as he bowed.

"My apologies, Queen Hunith."

The air was tense for a long moment before it eased, and Hunith turned towards Merlin with another sigh. He was coming to hate that sound.

"Merlin," she paused and looked over her shoulder at Merlin's still-cowering best friend, "Will. I understand the two of you do not get along with Prince Arthur, but it would be best if you were to make an effort. Merlin, you are going to be his king one day, just as he will be yours. Though there have been undoubtedly worse matches and marriages, I can see in the both of you the potential to change each other and the worlds. It would be in everyone's best interests if the two of you-at least made an effort to get along with Merlin's betrothed. Understand?"

Neither Merlin nor Will answered, and Merlin hated the prickling sensation in his eyes that felt like tears. Both his mother and Arthur's had had such faith that this would work, but from the very first moment he'd met Arthur, and Arthur had opened his mouth, he couldn't stand the prat. Each subsequent encounter only made it worse. 'But he treats me like a servant and he calls me an idiot.'

Hunith fluttered over to sit on the edge of the bed and sat down, placing a hand over Merlin's. "Have you ever considered he acts poorly towards you because you and Will constantly call him names and play pranks on him?"

Merlin flushed and didn't answer. "The first thing he ever said to me was that my ears were big," he replied petulantly.

"Merlin, dear, you did have big ears," his mother said, not unkindly. "You still do, and you always will. You cannot continue to blame Prince Arthur for what he said as a child eight years ago."

"Yes I can," he said stubbornly.

"Merlin-

This time, Merlin sighed. "Fine. I'll try."

Hunith leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "Thank you, Merlin. Now, get ready." The sudden switch from gentle to brisk in her tone as she stood startled Merlin and he haphazardly followed her to standing. "William, I know you well enough to know that if Merlin is not packed, neither are you. Come along." And with that, the queen swept out of Merlin's room with a sheepish Will in tow.

Deep down, Merlin knew his mother was right, he just didn't want her to be right. Sure, Arthur was a pretty face (okay, a really pretty face), and he seemed intelligent enough, but he treated Merlin like shit. And sure, Merlin didn't treat him much better, but still… No, no 'but still'. They both treated each other terribly and they both gave as good as they got. They'd probably get along great if they both stopped being idiots about it all, and it had to start with one of them. Well, it probably had to start with one of their parents knocking sense into them, and it sure as hell wasn't going to be Uther. That man hated anything magic and Merlin was surprised he hadn't tried harder to break his and Arthur's engagement by now. So now that Hunith had knocked some sense into Merlin, Merlin was going to have to be the one to make an effort.

He spent the whole ride from the Door to Camelot ignoring Will, his parents, his guards, and his surroundings, trying to wrangle a change in his mind. It was difficult, because he had years of putting
up with his betrothed to get over, but at the same time, it wasn't hard at all. He'd seen the good in Arthur. Well, except for that bully phase, but Merlin had smacked that right out of Camelot's prince once he'd discovered it. That had been a fun winter. Merlin had been half-convinced that both Uther and Arthur had been one wrong breath away from declaring war on the Otherworld, but Arthur had deserved it. He had taken their servants for gratitude, been unforgivably impolite, if not downright rude, and he'd treated them as if they'd been less than human. At least his parents had both been proud, if only behind closed doors where Uther couldn't catch them at it.

Then again, Merlin had seen the good in Arthur too. After that bully phase had passed, and that had only been two winters past, Arthur had taken to speaking to everyone he encountered, adult and child, servant and noble, human and fae, as if they were equals. He took everyone at their word, and held within them a cautious trust. Merlin had seen him with his knights, and in strategy sessions, and he never once demanded anything of his knights that he, as the king's son, wouldn't do himself. If there was fighting to be done, Arthur didn't hang back, but was right in the thick of things, which Merlin, despite himself, honestly wished he'd do a bit less.

Really, all Merlin wanted was the Arthur that everyone else got, and perhaps, in order to get that, he had to first give Arthur the Merlin that everyone else got.

When a sharp slap of Will's hand against his arm pulled him from his thoughts, Merlin found that his musings had lasted him from home all the way to Camelot's doors where the usual welcoming party was waiting on the castle's front steps. Usual except for…

"Where is Prince Arthur?" Merlin asked, likely interrupting the typical greetings. Uther and his parents frowned, but Arthur's manservant, George?, took it all in stride, as he did everything.

"Prince Arthur is in the training fields, your highness. He asked me to inform you that he could not delay his men's training any further this day."

Though George had undoubtedly reworded a more blatant insult from his master, it was still a coyly-phrased slight on their lateness, which was, once again, as it always was, his fault. Gaius often joked that the sun would rise in the west the day Merlin was on time. Normally, Merlin would reply with an equally subtle jab and simply ignore Arthur for at least a week, or purposefully annoy him, depending on how vindictive he was feeling, but he could feel his mother's eyes on him, could hear the echo of this morning's conversation in his head, and he hardened his resolve to actually put an effort into their 'relationship'.

"Thank you, George," Merlin replied with a nod of his head.

Without another word, he turned his horse around and made for the training fields, and he could hear Will trotting after.

"I thought we weren't going to prank Prince Arthur in the training fields anymore," Will said as he pulled up alongside Merlin. "After that time with that double-bladed axe."

Merlin held in a wince at the memory. That had been a terrible day, a terrible idea. He hadn't thought so at the time, not until he almost killed someone with his 'innocent' prank. He'd never seen King Uther or Prince Arthur so furious, nor his parents so disappointed. After that, he hadn't gone near the training fields the rest of that visit, or during any visit since; this would be his first time seeing them in four summers.

"I'm not going to prank him," he said, guiding his horse along a path that was still familiar to him, even if he hadn't used it in years. "Mum was right, Will. All the pranks and teasing we've been doing? That was all to annoy Arthur. It wasn't going to stop the wedding from happening. If we kept
going down this path, eventually, we would have ended up married and loathing one another." Merlin kept his eyes straight ahead, could see the green of the fields getting closer, but out of the corner of his eye, he could see Will gaping at him. "Arthur is a noble, honourable man, more than I would like to admit, at times, but he is nonetheless. It's not too late to turn our relationship around and make it one where we can be friends at the least."

Will was silent for a long time, and when he hadn't spoken by the time they'd reached the fences, Merlin tugged his mare's mane to pull her to a stop, and he turned to face his best friend. Will was still staring at him with his mouth open, and Merlin raised an eyebrow at him. "A bird's going to fly into your mouth if you keep that up." It was an old joke and an old threat. The first time Merlin had said it, Will hadn't believed him, so Merlin used his magic to have a bird fly right into Will's mouth. Neither the bird nor Will had been amused, but the memory still made Merlin laugh and made Will snap his jaw closed.

After another moment of silence, he finally said, "So no more pranks?"

Merlin shook his head. "No more pranks."

"And no more name calling?"

"No more name calling."

Will paused for a moment. "Not even if he's being an incredible prat?"

Merlin snorted and shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe then," he smirked.

"What if-"

"MERLIN!"

Merlin's head snapped 'round at the bellow, and he found a shirtless Arthur jogging towards them.

Merlin blinked. "Oh," he breathed softly.

Camelot's prince had always trained alongside the knights, even when he was a younger boy, and even when Merlin had hated him as a child, he'd still been able to admire his tenacity. Arthur had always stuck with the men, practiced just as hard for just as long, and had sometimes stayed behind long afterwards to train alone. It had apparently all paid off, for the boy of Merlin's youth, of even last year, had grown. Well, Merlin had too, had had his growth spurt during the winter, and oh how Arthur had hated how much taller Merlin had become than him, but now Merlin could see that Arthur had had his too. Not just that, but he was thickly muscled in a way that fae could never achieve, not with their inborn supernatural strength. He was… a sight to behold.

A sight Merlin beheld a tad to long, if the hit on his arm had anything to go by. Will really needed to be broken of that habit. It wouldn't do for Camelot's or the Otherworld's citizens to see someone hit their crown prince like that. Well, Merlin said they couldn't prank Arthur anymore, which meant that he would need to turn his creativeness to another target. Like Will.

"Merlin, what are you doing here?" Arthur called out as he neared the fence and slowed. "Come to try to kill more of my men with an axe again?" he sneered.

Merlin ignored the taunt. "No, I came to see you."

Arthur blinked and nearly tripped over his own feet visibly caught off guard. "You did?"
"Well, you weren't at the steps to greet my family, so I came to see you. I understand you couldn't wait any longer to begin your training session for the day and I apologize for making you wait."

Arthur continued to blink owlishly at him, and then when Merlin raised an eyebrow after several uncomfortable moments of silence, he cleared his throat and shifted in place. He tried to cross his arms over his chest before the sword still in his hand stopped him, and then he propped his fists on his hips.

"Yes, well, um," Arthur stammered through, eyebrows scrunched in confusion. "Training is very important for my knights. We must keep in top form at all times,"

"Well, you certainly appear to be succeeding," Merlin replied with a hint of a smirk and a flickered glance down to Arthur's bare chest. It really was rather nice to look at, all animosity aside. "Top form indeed," he murmured.

It was amusing to see the other prince's face flush beyond what little exertion had given him, and Arthur kept moving to cross his arms before dropping them, again and again, like he wasn't sure what to do them. He didn't once remember he had a sword until each time he almost stabbed himself with it.

"Thank you," he finally said as Merlin watched the red spread down his neck to his shoulders. They were a lot broader than he'd realized. "I have to return to my men's training," Arthur said abruptly, then turned around and walked away at a speed that was just shy of running.

Merlin turned to Will whose mouth was wide open again. "You know, I think this is just as fun as pranking him was. Let's go; I want to unpack."

Merlin was in a good mood for the rest of the day, and when he smiled at Arthur at dinner, Arthur's face was a hilarity of ever-rotating confusion and cautious smiles, the pink on his cheeks fading and darkening in rhythm. Uther and Balinor were oblivious, but Hunith's sharp eyes noticed and she rewarded him with approving smiles. Morgana also noticed, but her smile when she glanced between them was more mischievous and made Arthur flush a bright red when he noticed it. Will couldn't seem to keep his mouth closed.

The rest of the summer progressed in much the same manner. Merlin found plenty of opportunities to flirt and tease, and he did so with great abandon. He'd never had so much fun, and he was starting to see more and more of the Arthur he wanted, and he was as magnificent as Merlin suspected he was. He'd taken to watching Arthur training his knights, sometimes from a tower window as he practiced his magic, sometimes lingering on the outskirts of the fields. He didn't practice his magic then, because he didn't want the knights to get distracted, but he was pretty sure they were distracted by his mere presence anyway; he had spent most of his time in Camelot in past years avoiding the humans that were closest to the court.

He'd also started joining Arthur and his knights on their patrols, and he got to see the human lands in a way that he'd never had the chance to before, and it was beautiful and sad in turns. He saw the majesty of the mountains and lakes and forest that, which, even though they all existed in the Otherworld, were somehow entrancingly different. He also saw the damage bandits did to smaller towns, the injuries and the death. Such things were largely absent in the Otherworld, and Merlin found that his ability to heal was in sore need of work for it hardly worked at all. It had forced him to learn human means of healing, for which Gaius had proudly praised him on his initiative.

In the beginning, Arthur had regarded all attempts at conversation and accompaniment with great suspicion and a deep wariness. He nearly drew a blade every time Merlin brushed his hand against Arthur's arm or shoulder, every attempt at conversation was conducted with frowns and halting,
grudging replies, and when Merlin rode with the knights, Arthur made sure to keep Merlin in his sight. It was adorable, and a bit annoying after a while, but still endearing all the same. It was probably the best summer Merlin had had in years, and by the time the Camelot court was escorting them back to their doors, he was sad to leave for the first time ever.

"I had fun," Merlin said loud enough for Arthur, riding at his side, to hear. His betrothed tilted his head toward Merlin, but didn't take his eyes off the raised edges of land on either side of the road. "You should let me know how the treaty with Mercia goes."

Arthur's eyes flicker to him for a moment before returning to their surroundings, ever vigilant. His response, as every he'd given over the summer, was slow to come, but he eventually nodded. "I will."

Merlin smiled and returned his attention back to the road ahead. The Door was close, another half an hour away at most, and as much as he'd enjoyed his time in Camelot, he was excited to be home. He wondered at the logistics of him and Arthur splitting their time, once married, between their two castles, and made a mental note to sit his parents down when he arrived to discuss it.

Something in the air shifted, and the horses halted, prancing in place and neighing worriedly. Arthur and his knights drew their swords and the fae snapped to attention, withdrawing whatever weapons they preferred from the other side of the Veil between their worlds. Merlin tightened his grip on his horse's mane as he heard the guards behind him telling his parents to stay behind them. Merlin didn't have combat experience, not exactly, but pushing someone with magic was one of the first tricks those with magic learned in the Otherworld, and Merlin had always known how much more power he could put into it than he was allowed.

Something glinted ahead and off to the side, and then something sliced across Merlin's cheek and he cried out in surprise in pain. He only had a second to glance 'round, to see the bolt imbedded in the dirt roaded, before a glove hand grasped the back of his head and shoved his head down, forcing to lay flat along his mare's neck.

"Stay down," Arthur ordered before action erupted around them.

Bandits of all creeds burst from the foliage, attacking Camelot's and the Otherworld's guards with blood-stained weapons. Arthur dismounted from his horse in a smooth, twisting move and waded into the fray, wielding his sword with a confident familiarity and hacking down bandit after bandit. Merlin knew his parents and Arthur both would kill him if he tried to dismount and follow after, but there was plenty he could do from here. A single wave of his hand sent attacker after attacker flying, and he made sure to keep enemies from Arthur's back and, if he could, his flank. He was paying so much attention to Arthur that he had forgotten about his own flank, and the attack came as a complete surprise.

A mace made contact with the front of his shoulder, and he could feel the bone shatter and his skin rip as he fell from his horse. He screamed in pain as he went down, his head hitting the dirt hard enough to nearly knock him out. Or maybe that was the pain. Something crunched down on his wings and he screamed again, eyes snapping open to find a giant of a man smirking and standing over Merlin's hips, boots wrinkling Merlin's wings and Merlin's blood dripping from the bandit's mace. His life flashed before his eyes, and in his last moments, he thought of Arthur: the boy he'd grown up with, the man he may have made friends with, the king he'd never get to marry.

His vision was darkening and he knew he was going to die. He hoped his parents made it out alive. Maybe they'd be able to have a second child and maybe Arthur would be able to marry them instead. He reached out with his magic as the bandit raised his mace, and it was comforting to feel Arthur against his senses; Merlin had never tried before, and it was shocking how brightly Arthur shone.
Even though the gift of Sight had not been granted to him, Merlin could see Arthur's reign as clearly as if he had been. He could see the way Arthur united the lands, and how the people united for him. It was a shame Merlin wouldn't be there to see it.

The mace swung down and Merlin closed his eyes, but the hit never came. Instead, he heard the sound of metal against metal, and though his body called for sleep, even though his eyelids fought him, he forced them back open and found the chain of the mace wrapped around a sword. A sword piercing the giant's body.

"Merlin, stay awake!"

Arthur. Arthur was here. That was nice. Merlin smiled and the bandit's body tipped away, freeing Merlin's wings from underneath his boots. Fresh pain shot through him, but he couldn't find the energy to scream any more. Arthur's face was suddenly right in his, Arthur's mouth moving, but there was only a ringing in his ears. Then Arthur's face started to fade as his vision got fuzzy, and then all Merlin saw was the black.

In his dark room with no heat and no windows and no light save for the torch when Agravaine or his minion came to visit, Merlin lost all track of time. Some days he awoke alone, unbound and laid out on the freezing stone floor, often staying that way until he slept again. Some days, he woke alone but with his wrists bound in rope, hanging from the wall in such away that he wasn't quite sitting on the ground, pulling his arms uncomfortably taught, making it feel like his arms were being slowly pulled from their sockets over hours and hours. Some days he was woken by the whip, hands and feet and wings bound to the chair in another violation. And some days, the whip man showed up out of the dark, hours after Merlin had woken, and forced him into the chair to be whipped until he passed out again. All he knew was that it took days upon days, at the very least, before the whip disappeared, until his shirt had been shredded and his trousers left in tatters up his legs to his thighs, leaving him more vulnerable to the cold.

Every day he tried to use his magic to get free, or at least to just get warm, but each attempt only left him with new burns around his wrists. Every day he tried to work the bracelets over his hands, sure that the meager meals of porridge, few and far between, would net enough weight loss for him to get the iron free, but he just ended up with bruises along the sides of his hands. Every day he tried to feel a way out of his room in the dark, but every inch of every wall, and the floor, felt like solid, immovable stone; he could only conclude the only entrance was in the ceiling, but hadn't been able to so much as brush it with his fingertips when he jumped.

Most of all, Merlin spent long hours staring into the darkness, wondering why he had yet to be found, dreaming of the day he would be. Why hadn't his own people found him with magic? There were tracking spells for magic users of every strength, spells that could be used by fae and human wizards alike. And Arthur was a frighteningly capable tracker himself, like a dog with a scent; how had he not been able to trace Merlin's disappearance to where he was being held?

As time passed, and the questions circled his head like fruit flies, a part of Merlin's mind, one growing darker and larger every day, whispered to him: "Nobody wants to find you." Merlin liked to ignore that voice, mostly because it sounded like Agravaine, but also because he needed hope. He didn't want to die wherever he was. He didn't want to die before he saw his family's faces again, or Arthur's. He was supposed to be married in a just under a year, he didn't want to miss that.

In all the times he'd joined Arthur on patrol, there had been a few skirmishes with bandits that he'd known could result in his or Arthur's death, and he'd accepted that as a known risk inherent in being who they were. The first time Death came to visit him before letting him return to his family, it had been easy to accept his fate because he'd known it had been coming and because he knew that his
family, that Arthur, were all safe. Here and now, with the endless waiting and the torture, being pushed to the brink again and again with that whip, was not just physically painful, but also mentally and emotionally painful as well. He had no way of knowing when Agravaine would tire of his toy and pick up another. Because he had already been told that the whip was just the beginning, and he wholeheartedly believed Arthur's deranged uncle.

The day he woke tied to a wooden X was almost a relief, because the day he'd been waiting for had finally come. But it wasn't really relief, it couldn't be when his wings were pinned to the wood underneath his arms. The crossbow pointed at him wasn't much better either, or the fact that his shirt was completely gone now. Agravaine stood in front of him, fingers caressing the scars on Merlin's shoulder from the mace hit five summers past, the summer he thought he was going to die. As his father told it, he almost had, if not for the skill of their healers. As his mother told it, he would have if Prince Arthur hadn't stayed at his side until he awoke, talking to him all the while.

"Those bandits would have succeeded if it weren't for my nephew," Agravaine said. Merlin's stomach flipped, and he knew with a sudden surety what Agravaine would say next. "I hired them to kill you and they nearly succeeded."

If Merlin could still speak, he would have shot back an "Of course you did," with an exaggerated eye roll. He did the eyeroll anyway and got backhanded for it. His teeth cut his cheek, filling his mouth with blood that he promptly spat into Agravaine face. He'd pay for that, but right now, it was worth it. He wanted to brag that Arthur would never had let him die, not even in the days when they hated each other, if for no other reason than his honour demanded that he protect Merlin, but he could no longer remember how to speak; he'd been screaming for so long that he couldn't do that anymore either.

"My friend here has been aiming for some target practice, Prince Merlin, and you'll oblige him kindly." Agravaine slapped him once more in the face before stepping back, leaving his torturer and their crossbow with clear sight of Merlin. Merlin shook his head, but he couldn't do anything to stop the first bolt from piercing his side. Or the one after that from biting into his thigh. Or the one after that from stabbing through his arm and his wing before coming to a halt in the wood that held him upright. His screams were nothing more than air wheezing from his mouth, and bolt after bolt pierced him again and again, always somewhere without an organ, always somewhere that meant he wasn't going to die any time soon.

When the man stopped, only because he'd run out of bolts, Merlin couldn't keep his head up and his breath only came out in short pants. His body was peppered with arrows, more than his foggy brain could count, and all avoiding anything vital. All he could feel was pain, and he prayed for death. But then the bald man walked up to him and began to yank out the arrows, and the hooked edges tearing open his flesh hurt even more coming out than they did going in. Merlin swayed in and out of consciousness, and when Agravaine grasped his chin and forced his mouth by prying his fingers into the hinges of Merlin's jaw, he couldn't fight the grip. Not even when the despicable man poured a glowing potion down Merlin's throat.

Merlin's body started burning from the inside as Agravaine stepped away, and Merlin screamed silently as each of his injuries burned like he'd been stuck with a fire poker. It made him relive each of his injuries again, made the pain worse, made him feel like he'd been set on fire, but he was still here in the dark, and he would never see proper light again. He would never feel warm again. He would never see Arthur again.

It took a long time for him to realize that the burning was fading, and Merlin had to blink tears from his eyes before he could see again. Although, the sight didn't comfort him as it should have. Instead, looking down at his body, healed of all wounds, he only felt that unending, creeping sensation of
dread. He looked up at a smirking Agravaine and found the man to be holding a satchel full of vials. Vials that glowed.

"Let's begin again."

The entirety of the council jumped when the doors slammed open, and Merlin did a double-take when he realized who was scurrying over to whisper in his mother's ear.

Though they used the Door every summer to travel to and from Camelot, it was a mere formality for King Uther's sake. Every fae had the ability to slip through the Veil between their worlds, and the skill was taught to every child. As such, every summer, several Otherworld guards would remain at Camelot's court so that they could instantly inform Balinor and Hunith of any threats to Camelot or its king and prince. In all Merlin's years, he'd never seen one return before their year was up. Yet, Alator, one of the guards they'd left in Camelot several months ago, was here, speaking in hushed tones that were making his mother's face go pale.

"Thank you, Alator. You may return and inform them that we shall arrive shortly. Please caution them to leave the courtyard center empty - we will not be using the Door in Camelot's time of need."

"Yes, m'lady," Alator said with a bow before stepping sideways through the Veil and out of sight.

Merlin and his father turned towards their queen with identical expressions of impatience.

"King Uther has been poisoned," Hunith informed the council, and the sudden tension was palpable. Merlin felt his own stomach drop and his mind flew to Arthur, and how poorly he was likely to be taking this; Uther was not a kind father, but Arthur respected and loved him dearly. "Ours and Camelot's guards are already investigating the culprit and Gaius is trying to reverse the effects. King Balinor, Prince Merlin, and myself will travel to Camelot at once. Please locate our best healers and send them to Camelot as well to assist Gaius. That is all."

Merlin was almost on his feet before his mother had finished speaking, and he grabbed one of her hands as his father grabbed her other. Hunith looked as pale as Merlin felt, and Balinor's face was drawn tight.

"Quickly, my loves," the queen murmured, and as one, they stepped sideways from the Otherworld's council chambers into Camelot's courtyard.

Prince Arthur was waiting for them on the steps, and he jumped when they appeared. He recovered a split second later and strode forward to bow in greeting to Merlin's parents, and then Merlin himself before darting in to press a trembling kiss to Merlin's cheek. He didn't move away afterwards, rather grabbed one of Merlin's hands and held it just shy of too-tight.

"My lords and lady, thank you for coming on such short notice. Gaius is with my father in his chambers."

"Please lead the way, Prince Arthur."

Arthur set off immediately and Merlin easily kept pace beside him, refusing to let go of his hand. In all their years, Merlin had never seen his betrothed so worried or so pale, and he squeezed Arthur's hand gently. Arthur glanced at him and gave a tense smile, and Merlin hoped the smile he sent back was comforting. They walked into the king's room apparently shortly after the Otherworld healers had arrived, for they were flitting around the room and conversing with Gaius in hushed tones. They didn't pause when Merlin entered with his parents and Arthur, but they did murmur a greeting in passing.
The Otherworld court was much more lax on protocol that Camelot, and Merlin glanced at Arthur, to see if he took offense on the less-than-formal greeting, but his betrothed wasn't paying attention to the healers for anything other than what they were doing for his father. Gaius didn't so much as glance at them until one of the healers relieved him, and when he came over, his shoulders were stooped and wings were drooping.

"I'm afraid it doesn't look good," Gaius started, his frown deep and his wings shuffling in his discontent. "He was poisoned during dinner last night, but whatever was used was slow acting enough that it wasn't detected while he ate, and he did not succumb to the effects until early this morning. We are doing all we can, but I do not think we caught this ailment in time. Prince Arthur, it would be best to say your goodbyes now, just in case."

Arthur's frown deepened and his hand clenched painfully tight around Merlin's, but Merlin didn't say a word. Arthur glance at him and licked his lips, and Merlin nodded. Slowly, Arthur's fingers unwound from around Merlin's and he stepped away to move through the ruckus of moving healers to sit at his father's side. Merlin felt helpless as he watched Arthur wrap his hand around his father's and just… sit there. All the power at Merlin's command but he didn't know how to fix this.

"Go to him," his mother whispered close enough to his ear to make him jump. He hadn't even noticed her leaning in.

Merlin looked at her and then back to his betrothed. "Wouldn't he want to be alone right now?"

"He may think that, but trust me, he'll be thankful for your presence."

Merlin gave her a doubtful look but obligingly skirted all the ruckus to slip up behind Arthur. After a moment of indecision, he finally, gently, laid a hand on Arthur's shoulder. He almost jumped in surprise when Arthur's hand landed on his, but Arthur just tugged Merlin close until he was pressed solidly against Arthur's back. Slowly, giving Arthur time to brush him off if he needed, Merlin wrapped his arms around Arthur's shoulders. But instead of brushing him off, Arthur sunk into his embrace, leaning heavily into him, and Merlin pressed a kiss to Arthur's hair.

"You know our healers can fix anything," he murmured comfortingly. "Remember four summers past? The bandit attack?" Arthur's hand wrapped around his wrist suddenly and painfully tight. Merlin smiled sadly into Arthur's hair; Arthur hated thinking about that attack - he took it as a personal failure. "The healers said they had to persuade death to let me go twice, but they brought me back all the same."

"They brought you back to me," Arthur said, voice quiet.

Merlin nodded. "And if they could bring me back, they can bring King Uther back."

Arthur didn't reply for a long time, just watched Gaius and the others. "Thank you, Merlin."

Merlin pressed another kiss to his hair in acknowledgement.

They didn't speak again for some time. They just stayed as they were, Arthur holding his father's hand and Merlin holding Arthur, and together they watched the fae at work. It took a long time of preparation, of the four healers conversing, consulting, slipping back and forth between the Veil with potion ingredients and texts, before they finally arranged themselves in an arc around the bed. The one closest to them looked to be contemplating, but when Merlin met the man's eye, he ducked his head in a bow and the look disappeared.

As one, the healers reached out their hands for one another and began to chant. Merlin could feel
their magics gathering and rising, palpable as a growing tension in the room. When Arthur's fingers tightened around his arm, Merlin wondered if he could also feel it, or if it was merely in response to his own anxiety and hope. He tightened his own arms to anchor Arthur, and to keep him still. It would not due to disrupt the spell, and despite Arthur spending several months amongst the fae a year, he still did not have much magic knowledge or instinct ingrained.

The spell came to a peak that felt like a clap of thunder to Merlin, and his breath stopped. It held so long that he thought he might faint, and the Uther opened his eyes.

"Arthur?" he croaked, brow furrowing. "Merlin? And... Why are you all in my bedchamber?"

Arthur laughed a sobbing sort of sound, and his head dropped. Merlin could see the way Arthur's knuckles turned white from the strength with which he grasped his father's hand, and the same with Uther's.

"I'm glad to see even a poisoning cannot faze you, father," Arthur chuckled.

"What sort of a king would I be if- if-" Uther stuttered then cut off suddenly and Merlin straightened as a peculiar sensation washed over him.

"Father?" Arthur asked, voice tight with panic.

But Uther was already gasping for air, colour draining from his face. The healers stepped forward as one and placed hands on Uther.

"The poison is taking back control of him." Gaius sounded confused and panicked, and Merlin's head snapped 'round to look at him.

"Stop it then!" he commanded. "Quickly!"

Even as he spoke though, Uther look one long, wheezing inhale, and then collapsed onto the bed, chest still and face frozen.

"Father?"Arthur's trembling voice was weak and small, and he sounded much like the child he hadn't truly been since before Merlin had first met him.

Merlin was watching Gaius though, gaze fixed on the helplessly puzzled look on his old mentor's face. Gaius was still checking for life, but Merlin knew that Gaius knew that Camelot's king was gone. There was no conversations with Death to be had. Slowly, the confusion melted into sorrow, for Gaius had been friends with Uther before he'd ever met Ygraine, and Gaius kneeled on the floor. He took Uther's other hand in the both of his and pressed it to his forehead. His eyes closed, but tears slid from them anyway and dripped onto the sheets.

If Uther's oldest friend was feeling such grief, Merlin could only wonder what his son felt. He himself had never liked the man, or his hatred of all things magic because of the choices he and his wife made at no fault of the magic folk, but they had begun to get along better the last few years. He knew though that there was no one Arthur held in greater esteem, had no greater respect for, and to lose not only his father, but his king, far earlier than anyone would have ever expected him to was no doubt a crushing loss. Yet, he was silent and still in Merlin's arms, his hands now hanging from Merlin's forearms in a loose grip.

When Merlin gently eased out of his hold and stepped around to face him, he found Arthur just sitting there, face blank and eyes glazed. There was no reaction when Merlin waves a hand in front of his face, or when he touched Arthur's cheek, but he did struggle when Merlin tried to guide him from the room. Merlin eased him into a chair instead and took position at his side with a hand on
Arthur's shoulder. His parents joined him after a moment and father leaned in close.

"We need to leave, son," Balinor whispered. "Arthur is in no condition for matters of state and both Camelot and the Otherworld must begin preparations for Uther's funeral and Arthur's coronation. Keep an eye on him?"

Merlin turned his head to give Balinor a sad smile. "Of course, father."

Shortly after Balinor and Hunith left, fae and human servants alike arrived to prepare Uther for his funeral. Merlin averted his eyes as then unclothed and bathed him, but when they were dressing him again, in his finest clothes, a flash of something at Uther's chest caught Merlin's eye. Only, Uther was not fond of jewellery; he only ever wore his wedding ring and, on special occasions, a medallion on a long chain.

"Stop," he commanded as he strode forward, Arthur's fingers catching around his for a split second when he moved away, and the room stood still.

There was a medallion hanging against Uther's skin, on a short enough chain for it to have been hidden beneath his clothes. A simple trinity knot surrounded by a circle filled with intricate knotting. It was a simplistically beautiful thing, but the moment Merlin tried to touch it, dark magic bit at his fingertips and he snapped his hand back with a hiss. Across the room, the blank look on Arthur's face had morphed into a worried alertness, and his eyes darted back and forth between the medallion on his father's chest and Merlin's face. Merlin didn't have time to comfort his betrothed though, because there was a new level to this assassination plot that felt like it could put them all in danger.

"Fetch Gaius at once!"

"You know," Agravaine said conversationally as his minion dropped burning coals on Merlin's back, "that bandit attack wasn't all I was responsible for, but it was my only failure."

Pain blurred Merlin's comprehension of speech and ate at his consciousness, but he knew this was a conversation he knew he needed to pay attention to; even if he never the light of day again, even if he never got to tell Arthur of his uncle's betrayal, Merlin wanted to know that his suspicions about Agravaine had been spot on all along. There wasn't any relief or comfort to be found in his imprisonment, but maybe he could find vindication. He tried to ignore the burning and attempted to keep his mind on the stretch in the joints of his arms and legs, from where Agravaine had chained him to a table with such little leniency in the links that it had hurt. Before he'd been shown something even more painful.

"That little necklace you found with Uther? That was a particularly brilliant strategy of mine," Agravaine bragged as another coal fell on Merlin's shoulder blade and Merlin tried not to scream. "I knew Arthur would run to you freaks as soon as his father's poisoning was discovered - also my doing, by the way - and that your kind would heal him, and I couldn't have that. I had to search for a long time for someone who would place a curse on an gift for an undisclosed recipient for the right price. And what a highly successful curse that one was, too. It reversed the healing done on any wearer and magnified the underlying injury a hundred fold."

He ambled over to the brazier his minion had been using to make the coals, and pulled out a long, thin bit of wood that was so hot at the end that it still glowed. There was only so much Merlin could do to brace himself, and only so much he could do to distance himself from the situation, especially when he could tell there was more to this story that Agravaine was delighting in drawing out.

Which was he was surprised when the first thing Agravaine did was loosen the chains pulling his
hands to the corners of the long table. The relief when Merlin pulled his arms against his chest was instantaneous, but it did nothing to abate the pain and fear when Agravaine brought a torch close enough to Merlin's face that he could almost smell the flesh burning.

"That necklace wasn't all I commissioned. I also had him create these" As he spoke, Agravaine dragged the burning point of his stick across curve of Merlin's wrist, in the space between his bracelet and shackle in a simile of the burning sensation of attempting to use his magic. "Have you ever truly looked at these, Merlin?" Agravaine had stopped sneering when he said Merlin's name sometime between the 'knifeplay' sessions and his 'experiments' with different types of poisonous plants, and he'd finally accepted that Merlin had actually lost the ability to speak after an incident with his minion's own mace. Merlin could no longer remember when either occurred. Either way, Agravaine did not require an answer.

"Well, now you have the chance. Look." The torch jabbed at Merlin's brow for a second, but it was long enough for the brightness to blind Merlin in one eye for a few minutes, as well as sear the eyebrow. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear the spots from his vision, but Agravaine waggled the torch at Merlin again threateningly. "Look." Hating his life, Merlin closed the still-blind eye and squinted with the other at the bracelet.

He could barely make out four symbols spaced evenly across the metal, though they weren't what they had been before. Now the runes before his eyes were the ones for 'block' followed by 'magical forces' and... 'angelic power'? And the fourth one was... was... was that induce madness'? So he still had that to look forward to as well? Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. Maybe it was a good thing, though. Maybe he'd get so overtaken by his madness that he wouldn't even notice the torture anymore. Maybe that's the future that held all his remaining luck.

"I didn't just have these cursed, I had them made. I just couldn't figure out how to get them to you when you already distrusted me so much. And then Arthur asked me for help with your birthday present. What luck." Agravaine was smiling when he dragged the still-burning tip of his stick around the curve of Merlin's other wrist. Then again, he was always smiling these days; he delighted in 'punishing' Merlin, as he still called it, and yet, Merlin's 'punishments', he knew, would never end. Not for the first time, he wondered what form his death would take: would Agravaine kill him intentionally? Or would Agravaine, who liked to space out the healing potions until Merlin thought he was going to die, forget to give him one until it was too late? "And they were made just for you, Merlin. Made just like this, and cursed to look like silver engraved with good fortune runes, not to be revealed until I said the words."

Merlin had actually forgotten about the minion because he'd stopped dropping hot coals on Merlin's back when Agravaine had begun his little game. Now he dumped a collection of them across Merlin's back, and it felt like they left trails of fire where they rolled before coming to a rest, creating a sensation like they were burning straight through his skin. As he gasped through the pain, Agravaine bent low enough to put his mouth too close to Merlin ear. So close Merlin could feel the wash of hot breath across his sweat-dampened skin.

"Do you remember what I said, Merlin?" he asked, his voice that extra-special kind of slimy that he had mostly stopped using after the whip had gone away. "I do. Five words, and you were mine: 'Happy birthday, nephew-to-be.'" 

"Happy Birthday!"

Merlin's face was already red and his eyes sparkling with pleasure when his twentieth birthday performance came to a stunning end with a burst of light blooming like flowers in the air above the performer's heads, their rainbow collection of wings spread wide, overlapping without touching.
Slowly, they shifted into a circle around the centerpiece of the performance: a miniature model of Otherworld's castle, their wings obscuring the construct from view. Then they jumped back suddenly as coloured smoke erupted from their midst, and when it cleared, a magnificent cake stood in its place, more like Arthur's own elaborate birthday cakes than Merlin's usual more simplistic cake.

His betrothed gasped and his eyes went wide, and when he turned to face Arthur, his expression was adorably awestruck. "You always talked about how much you like the way my cakes looked," Arthur said with a forced nonchalance and a shrug, "so I finally had them make one for you."

Merlin lurched over suddenly and pressed a kiss to Arthur's cheek as he threw his arms around Arthur's neck. "You are the best betrothed ever," he gushed, careless of being in full view of not only Merlin's parents and Arthur's uncle and sister, but all of Otherworld's court and a decent selection of Camelot's.

"I quite agree," Arthur said with a grin as Merlin pulled away. Merlin frowned and gestured, and half of Arthur's plate flew into his lap.

"No pratishness on my birthday," he declared haughtily and Arthur laughed as he picked food from his trousers and dropped it back on his plate.

"Of course, My Prince," Arthur replied with a bow of his head.

Merlin pointedly ignored him in favour of giving the slice of cake he'd just been handed his full attention, and Arthur ignored the slice of cake placed before him in order to watch Merlin. Merlin, even at the height of Arthur's disdain for him, had always been a sight to lay eyes on, from the very first time Arthur had seen him. But he had become even more beautiful since they had become friends. Right now, however, with his cheeks flushed from his delight and eyes closed in pleasure as he took his first bite of his cake, his wings and his crown of flowers as vibrant as from the first, he was positively entrancing. If Arthur hadn't been in love with him before, he was now.

The fae prince separated another small bit of his cake and turned to Arthur with a bright, expectant look, his fork raised towards him.

"Arthur, you have to try this."

Arthur raised an eyebrow at the fork hovering far too close to his face. "I don't have to do anything," he corrected. "Besides, I have my own slice to eat."

Merlin's face crumpled and Arthur felt a wave of guilt. He sighed and had to reach out quickly to keep Merlin from retracting the proffered bite entirely. Wrapping his fingers around Merlin's wrist, he took control of his betrothed's limb and guided the fork and the cake resting on it between his lips. He did not break eye contact with Merlin as he took his bite, and when he pursed his lips around the fork as he tugged Merlin's wrist to pull it back out, Merlin's cheeks darkened and his mouth fell open in a soft "oh".

For all that Merlin threw a fit when he wasn't in control, he certainly did appear to have a certain… attraction to being manhandled by Arthur.

Arthur was so caught up in the way Merlin was looking at him, the feel of that soft, pale skin beneath his fingers, that it took a moment for the taste to hit his tongue. When it did, his own mouth fell open in its own soft "oh". The taste on his tongue was so extremely decadent that his mind almost couldn't comprehend it. He was sure he had had Camelot's cooks send the recipe to Otherworld's cooks, and though he could tell it was the same, it was somehow so much better. Even Uther had agreed that Camelot's chefs could never surpass the skill of the Otherworld's chefs.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Merlin gushed, eyes twinkling.
Arthur didn't look away when he said, "Yes, it is." From the darkened flush on Merlin's face, he knew that Merlin had understood that Arthur wasn't just talking about the cake.

For all that Merlin's attention was only on him at the moment (and maybe a little bit on the cake too), they weren't alone enough yet for the actual present Arthur wanted to give Merlin. They felt like the gift was burning him through his pocket, feeding off his anxiety. Something about this present, compared to all the others, felt different, felt more, and Arthur was worried that he had gotten it all wrong, that they would offend Merlin or that Merlin would hate them.

That fear kept him on edge for the rest of the meal and into the evening, but he did his best to hide it. Just watching Merlin enjoying his birthday celebration made it easier to lose himself in his betrothed's joyfulness, to forget his own anxiety. As the night wore on, however, he found himself on the edge of his seat more often than not, tripping over Merlin's feet as they danced, spilling his food and drink when they returned to their seats. Merlin was giving him strange looks as subtly as he could, but they were growing more frequent and more blatant as the afternoon wore into evening. Finally, Arthur couldn't wait any longer to get Merlin alone, and so in the middle of a dance, he danced his betrothed to the side of the room and out a door.

"Well, that's new," Merlin commented lightly, as they spun to a stop, but neither of them pulled away.

Merlin was close and warm in Arthur's arms, and it made him want to pull his fae in closer, but there was something more important to do first. Reluctantly, slowly, he smiled as he pulled away, and without responding, he turned and walked down the hall. He needed to find a room or an alcove that wasn't right off the dining room and therefore susceptible to people walking in on them. Luckily, there was a room nearby, filled with an excessive amount of garments, and Arthur paced in ahead of Merlin, but couldn't find it in himself to turn around.

"Arthur, you've been acting strange all evening. What's wrong?" Merlin, his ever-impatient and painfully blunt Merlin, asked after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence. But there was a wariness to his voice that Arthur didn't like.

"Nothing's wrong," Arthur promised quickly, turning around to give Merlin an earnest look. Merlin raised an eyebrow and Arthur took a step forward. "I promise that nothing is wrong. I just… I have a gift to give you that I did not want to do out there, and I'm worried about how it will be received."

Merlin stared at him for a long moment before he snorted and hit Arthur on the side of his head, tilting his crown, which Arthur fixed with a frown. "You clotpole, don't worry me like that. I thought…" Merlin's face darkened and Arthur's heart gave a sick lurch. "Well, I don't know what I thought." But Arthur knew exactly what Merlin had thought because he had worried the same himself. But they would both likely be insecure about their relationship until the day they were wed.

"Sorry," Arthur said sheepishly. "Besides, you'll never be rid of me now."

Merlin snorted again. "Oh no. Whatever will I do," he said dryly, but his fingers curled in the front of Arthur's tunic as if to keep him from disappearing. As much as Arthur wanted to tangle his fingers in Merlin's clothes, or better yet, his hair, it was the one thing he hadn't found the courage to do, despite all of Merlin's hints that he was more than willing to receive Arthur's affections in any form.

Arthur took a step back and licked his lips nervously as he jammed his hands in his pockets. He could feel Merlin's presents there, and he curled his fingers around them. Merlin was watching him expectantly, so Arthur artlessly yanked them out of his pockets and shoved them at Merlin. Merlin grabbed them from him automatically, but less in an anticipatory sort of way and more of a surprised sort of way.
The fae prince carefully inspected both bangles, though they were identical, a frown pinching his brow before it smoothed in understanding. Then, slowly, his eyebrows rose and his mouth fell open, and Arthur ducked his head.

"I hope I got it right," Arthur couldn't help but confess. "They're supposed to be the runes for health, prosperity, and friendship."

Merlin didn't answer for a long moment, and Arthur glanced up to check his betrothed's expression only to find the fae watching him with a smirk.

"And this fourth rune?" Merlin asked, tapping the engraving, tone sly in a way that blatantly said he already knew exactly what the fourth rune was.

Arthur took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, and looked Merlin dead in the eye. "Love," he said in a solid voice, even as his stomach felt like it fell away from his body and his heart stopped beating.

Merlin looked honestly startled by his reaction, as if he hadn't actually expected Arthur to say it, but then he grinned, wide and bright, and his eyes and wings took on an unearthly glow that Arthur had never seen before. Arthur wondered if that meant Merlin was extremely happy, or if it was a display of Merlin's own love, but he didn't have to wonder for long. Merlin's face was getting closer, and Arthur barely realized it was because he was moving closer to Merlin. Then their lips were pressed together and the world fell away.

Arthur buried both hands into Merlin's thick hair to keep himself from touching Merlin's wings, which he knew was taboo without explicit permission, and it was just as soft as it always looked like it would be. Merlin didn't have any such restrictions, however, and wrapped his arms around Arthur's back, fingernails digging into Arthur's shoulder blades as if to keep him close; Arthur wasn't going anywhere. Merlin's mouth was soft and warm and sweet, like the wine and cake he'd been consuming, and Arthur never wanted to leave. He couldn't understand why he'd never done this before, why he'd held back all these years.

Something jarred them and Arthur pulled away, blinking rapidly, and found that he had walked Merlin backwards into a wall. Or maybe Merlin had walked him forwards into a wall. "You okay?" he asked hoarsely, thinking of how fragile Merlin's wings could be, of how he could always see the veins in the vibrant blue appendages whenever they had a strong enough light on the other side of them.

"I'll be better if you come back," Merlin rasped, and pulled Arthur back into him.

Arthur met his mouth just as eagerly and they kissed like they could only survive by breathing the air from one another's lungs. Their tongues moved over each other's and any time one pulled away to suck in a proper lungful of air, the other would bite at their lips down to their chin and jaw until they came back. The rushed, hot breathing was making Arthur dizzy, and he carefully settled his body over and against Merlin's, using his bulk to pin his betrothed to the wall.

He could feel how Merlin was slowly growing hard against his hip, just as Arthur was against Merlin's hip. Merlin groaned into his mouth and rolled his hips and Arthur rolled his right back. The sensation of fabric rubbing over his hardness, of Merlin's body creating a barrier against which to rub left his skin and groin hot, his spine and legs weak. Merlin gasped into Arthur's mouth and tried to turn his head away, but Arthur just tightened his grip on Merlin's hair and brought their mouths back together, just as much to kiss as to keep Merlin quiet.

Arthur was so, so dizzy, and so hot, the pleasure nearly overwhelming to both his mind and body.
Slitting his eyes open to glance at Merlin showed his betrothed red-faced and panting, hair a mess from Arthur's fingers and flower crown knocked askew; hardly any better than Arthur, if not worse. It was perfect.

As a young man, Arthur had touched himself enough times that he knew where the slow-building pleasure was going, but it was better, more. He wondered if Merlin had touched himself the same way, and just the thought-image of it almost brought Arthur to his peak. He squeezed his eyes clothes, trying to hold it off, even as he found he simply couldn't bear to cease or slow the rolling of his hips as Merlin's rolled into him.

"Merlin," he whispered, "Merlin, I-

"Prince Merlin?"

The call from the hall was like being dumped in a stream when winter was still easing its way to spring, and Arthur and Merlin froze in unison. Then Merlin groaned quietly and dropped his head back against the wall.

"Ugh. What does he want?" Merlin muttered darkly.

Arthur frowned at him and slowly untangled their limbs. "That's my uncle, Merlin," Arthur said disapprovingly as he did his best to fix Merlin’s hair and right his crown. The flowers felt delicate in his fingers, but he knew it was enchanted since it was the same crown Merlin had had since they were eight.

"Uncle or not, I've never liked or trusted him and you know that," Merlin replied, though his tone wasn't as sharp as it normally would have been when speaking about Agravaine. Instead, he was looking at the bracelets, and Arthur took them from his hands, only to slide them onto each wrist.

"Perfect," he whispered. Then he turned Merlin's wrists so the pale insides were facing up, now decorated with silver, and he bent his head over Merlin's forearms to press a kiss to the soft inside of both wrists. There was a short intake of breath above his head, and he smiled as he stood straight again.

Merlin looked at him for a moment before leaning forward to press his lips against Arthur's for a brief second. "I still don't like your uncle but I'll play nice as long as he does."

"Thank you," Arthur said with a bit of relief. Besides Morgana, Merlin and Agravaine were the only family he had left and he didn't want them to fight.

"Yes, yes. Go enjoy my party and I'll see what your uncle wants," Merlin said, waving him away out a connecting door. As Arthur slipped away into the next room, he could hear Merlin greet his uncle as calmly as if they hadn't just been rutting together against the wall like animals.

"Lord Agravaine, how are you this evening?" Merlin's tone was so overly polite that Arthur almost snorted and gave up the game.

He missed Agravaine's response as he rushed across the room and peeked into the hall to check all was clear, but when he moved into the hallway and stealthily tiptoed past the room he and Merlin had just been in, he could hear Agravaine again: "Happy birthday, nephew-to-be."

When he made it back into the dining room, the party was still in full swing, and it seemed like no one had noticed his reemergence until Morgana accosted him and dragged him into a dance. "I take it Merlin liked his gift?" she asked, amused.
Arthur didn’t deign her with an answer, but he didn’t resist that dance or the next and then all the
dances blurred together. It wasn’t until he spotted his uncle chatting with some of Camelot's other
visiting lords that he realized at least an hour had passed, and Merlin hadn't found him yet. He
excused himself from Morgana and looked to the high table first, expecting to find Merlin enjoying
more cake, but the chair next to Queen Hunith was empty. He scanned the room intensely, but there
was no sight of his betrothed, and there was a strangely foreboding feeling in his chest.

He ran out of the room and down the hall, checking each room for a sign of Merlin, but his fae
prince was nowhere in sight. He continued running right to Merlin's room, and then his own, and
then the king and queen’s, and then Will's for good measure, but Merlin was nowhere to be found.
Arthur sprinted all the way back to the dining hall and singled out his uncle.

"Uncle, have you seen Merlin?"

Agravaine frowned in confusion and shook his head. "I said happy birthday to him earlier, about an
hour ago? He was in a room down that hall-" his uncle gestured, but Arthur already knew where
they had been, "-and then we parted ways. I had assumed he'd come back in here."

That sick feeling in his chest was growing stronger. It was unlike Merlin to disappear without a trace,
especially on his birthday. He thanked Agravaine and hurried to the high table and bent down
between the queen and king’s chairs. He could see Morgana looking at him strangely from the other
end of the table.

"My lady, my lord, I don't wish to alarm you unnecessarily, but I cannot find Merlin," he said
quietly. "And it may be nothing, but I have a…" He felt stupid just thinking it now, but Hunith
nodded in encouragement and he pushed on. "I don't know what it is, it's just a strange, bad feeling."
It sounded even stupider out loud, but he couldn't help but rub his chest to try and smooth away the
odd sensation that had settled there.

Both the queen and king's eyes flickered down to where his hand rested over his heart, and all colour
drained from their faces. Queen Hunith's expression suddenly turned hard, and she stood so quickly
that it seemed like she hadn't even moved. She clapped her hands together and the sound was so loud
that it echoed like thunder throughout the room, drawing it to a startled silent stillness. "Prince Merlin
cannot be found and is suspected kidnapped. Locate him immediately!" she demanded, and the room
sprung into action.

Arthur burned to join the search, but he knew he would only be a hindrance. His winters spent in
Otherworld weren't spent exploring, like Merlin's summers in Camelot had been. Instead, before he
and Merlin had become friends, he had spent his time learning from Otherworld's guards, fascinated
by the differences in fighting styles between them and the other humans Arthur had fought. He was
ashamed to say that he hadn't gone out on patrols with Merlin until after that summer when they were
sixteen and had finally become friends. It wasn't as if Merlin hadn't done the same thing himself, but
right now, the lack of knowledge of Otherworlds territories made him feel depressingly adequate. All
he could do was sit in Merlin's chair to the left of the queen and hold her left hand as her husband
held her right, while Morgana sat in his chair and held his other hand in both of hers, and hope that
someone came back soon with good news.

Someone did come back soon, but not with good news.

The hazel-winged fae that had been part of Arthur's escort since his first trip to Otherworld stepped
sideways out of thin air, something bright and familiar in her hands.

"This was found near the Door, my lady, my lords," she said as she held out Merlin's flower crown.
The Door was special. Fae didn't need to use it, not when they could go where they wished through the Veil at any time. It was strictly there for human visitors, and according to Merlin, each visitor had to be somehow 'keyed' to the Door, so that random humans couldn't just wander in. That meant that whoever took Merlin was one of Camelot's authorized visitors, or a fae that made them want to think it was.

Arthur reached out to take it with a hand that shook, and he pressed the petals to his lips, his eyes closed tight. He had touched these very petals only a couple of hours ago, when he had righted its placement on Merlin's head after kissing him for the first time.

"We'll continue looking," the fae woman continued, "but something is blocking our tracking efforts. It's likely that Prince Merlin's kidnappers have bound him with iron." She bowed and then stepped sideways again, this time disappearing into the air.

He turned to look at the king and queen and tried to put on a brave face. "Merlin's strong. And we both have people that can track anything. We'll find him." He said it as much to comfort them as himself, but he didn't really feel it. He didn't feel it at all. He was terrified for Merlin, for all the horrors his mind conjured that could be done to Merlin, and he was terrified he would never see his betrothed again.

Queen Hunith's smile was watery and Arthur matched it. "Quite right. Our prince will be found and brought back to us, and this traitor found and dealt with, in short order."

If only the look in her's and her husband's eyes didn't scream that they didn't believe those words any more than Arthur did. They would be lucky if they ever saw Merlin again, and they had no way of knowing what was being done to him or what condition he'd be in if he returned. They had no way of knowing if what may return to them would be their Merlin at all.

Merlin awoke in the chair like he usually did these days, but the person standing in front of him wasn't Agravaine - it was Arthur. Shock made him go numb from head to toe, and blinked rapidly and shook his head. When he opened his eyes again, it was still Arthur - his Arthur - resplendent in his patrol outfit, hair and chainmail sparkling in the torchlight.

He tried to say his betrothed's name, but nothing but air came out; he still couldn't speak. The numbness was slowly washed away by sheer relief, and he started to sob. Arthur, for some reason, wasn't moving any closer though, and Merlin strained against the ropes restricting his wrists to the arms of the chair, mouthing his king's name. Arthur frowned at him, and then finally walked forward and leaned down towards him.

"Who do you think I am?" he asked, tone puzzled.

Merlin frowned back at him and mouthed his name again. He strained against his bindings but couldn't move any closer.

"Arthur?" Arthur said. And then laughed. The sound was so shockingly ridiculing that it brought Merlin up short. "Oh no, dear boy. I'm rather happy to say that I'm not my nephew."

Merlin gaped. Agravaine was the only one who called him 'dear boy', and always so condescendingly. But the person standing in front of him was undoubtedly his Arthur, down to the way he looked, the way he moved, the way he smelled.

"It looks like that madness rune has finally begun to work," Not-Arthur mused as he walked away. "Interesting. You held out rather long. And the manifestation is rather unexpected too."
Leon, Arthur's lead knight, walked out of the shadows with a vial in his hand, the substance in the glass a bubbling, black mass that didn't bode well for Merlin. Just like Arthur, everything about Leon matched the Leon Merlin knew from Camelot, except this Leon didn't speak. And Leon had never poured acid on him while Arthur sat back, watching and laughing as Merlin's skin boiled and peeled away to reveal white bone beneath.

It was a new experience, being tortured by people he knew. It wasn't always Arthur and Leon, though. His mum and dad made an appearance, as did Will and Freya, a druid friend he'd met while travelling Camelot with Arthur several years past, and so did Morgana and Gwen, Morgana's handmaiden. It hurt, seeing the people he knew and loved hurting him, delighting in seeing him get hurt. He knew that the only people in his room were him, Agravaine, and Agravaine's silent minion, but no matter how hard he looked, no matter how hard he believed, he couldn't make their visages reappear in the place of his friends.

Arthur was who appeared most often though, the person closest to Merlin's heart, closer than even his parents. Sometimes Agravaine had his appearance, other times it was the minion, and that was hardest to bear. It took him back to the years when they had hated each other, when they had treated each other worse than the most terrible noble treated their servants. Sometimes, when Merlin opened his eyes in the dark room, it wasn't his cell that he saw, but his empty room at Camelot, and he could feel the pain of his torture happening to him, even when he couldn't see anyone applying it.

When his arms were pulled so far behind his back that they dislocated, it was Arthur trying a new wrestling move on him. When he was doused in oil and set aflame, he was on watch duty on Camelot's highest tower on the hottest day. When a foot was cut off to see if the healing potion could grow it back (it could), it was Arthur testing his latest bear trap. When Agravaine let beasts into his prison to maul him, Merlin could only see himself at the mercy of Arthur's hunting dogs in Camelot's stables. When his wings were dissected, it was Arthur pinning him down, curiously picking apart the sensitive appendages. When he was stuck with spears, he was on a hunting trip in the forest and gored by a wild boar.

When Merlin had first woken up in his cell, he had hoped that he could survive it, but since his hallucinations started, he wasn't so sure. He didn't see Agravaine or his minion any longer, only his loved ones, and all he could do pretend it wasn't them was throw himself into his memories. But like a disease, the madness started to infect those as well.

Memories of hugs turned into hits, kind words into insults, kisses into cuts. It was getting harder and harder to remember the way his mother and father looked on their thrones in Otherworld, how Will smiled at a prank well pulled off, how Arthur moved through Camelot's halls. He couldn't remember what real food tasted like, or wine or ale. He couldn't remember what the sky looked like anymore, or how the sun and grass felt on his skin. He couldn't remember how to use his wings or his magic.

Merlin was starting to forget how to be alive. He was starting to hope for death.

Though Arthur loved to meet the inhabitants of his kingdom, having them come to him for hours on end to ask for favours or resolutions or mediation with their neighbors was mind-numbingly boring. It always had been, even when his father had been king and he'd sat off to the side. The only time it hadn't been boring was the summers when Merlin sat at his side, first when Arthur was a prince, whispering comments, insults, and suggestions in his ear, and then when Arthur had become king, and Merlin had been able to voice his suggestions directly to their subjects. Now he had to suffer through it all alone, and he felt Merlin's loss keenly.

Originally, there wasn't supposed to be any open door days the week after their wedding, but as the
day approached, and there was no sign of Merlin, Arthur realized he would have to spend that day alone with his thoughts. To avoid that, he moved the open door dates so that he could keep his mind occupied with the problems of his subjects. But instead of distracting him, it only reminded him of the empty seat at his side and the fact that his crown prince was not there to fill it, was not there to reign as he was meant to. Instead, Merlin's crown sat on a pillow on his seat, like a haunting ghost, and Arthur couldn't resist the urge to reach out to touch the strange petals.

When no trace of Merlin had been found on his birthday, or the days after, Arthur had been forced to return to Camelot, and both Queen Hunith and King Balinor had insisted that Arthur be the one to keep Merlin's crown. Arthur kept it with him at all times: tied to his belt when he was moving about, on the seat Merlin would have occupied after their marriage on open door days, and on the pillow next to his when he slept at night. He liked to think that the crown was linked to Merlin's life force, and so as long as the crown was alive, Merlin was as well. When he had first begun this ritual, it drew the eyes of everyone he encountered, but rumours spread quickly, moreso when it involved the king, and soon everyone knew what had occurred. Arthur's tailor had tried to dress him in black when he found out, and Arthur had thrown him out - he refused to wear mourning colours until he had a body in his arms because mourning meant giving up and he would never stop searching.

The searches though, both in the Otherworld and in Camelot, had grown more and more scarce. Not because either peoples were giving up hope, though Arthur was sure many were, or because it used too many resources, because no amount of resource was too much when it came to searching for the Crown Prince and Arthur's betrothed, but because they had looked so far in so many places and there wasn't many stones left unturmed. The prospect of a Merlin lost forever filled Arthur with dread and despair, and not for the first time, he contemplated initiating searches over foreign lands and across the great seas, even as he knew that it was impractical. If Merlin wasn't in Camelot, then he truly was lost forever.

The hot August afternoon crawled on and on, and Arthur's regret only grew as the evening wore on. He made sure to stay alert enough to pay attention to his subjects and respond accordingly, but he felt drowsy and he found himself already wishing for bed; it was hard to remain interested in life when the love of it was gone. Finally, when he got to be too much, and he found his attention wavering too far, he signalled for the doors to be closed. As he rose with Merlin's crown safely in one hand, feeling an ache in his bottom and his back like he was an old man, a commotion arose in the hallway beyond the doors, and then they were bursting open again, a man stumbling through them before dropping to his knees.

"I humbly beg an audience with his Majesty. I understand that he is done for the day, but I have some information that I believe could impact many of his citizens," the man said in a rush, head still bowed. Something about his voice, his hair, seemed familiar…

Arthur waved off the guards prepared to haul the intruder away. "Rise. What information do you have?"

The man stood quickly and raised his head, revealing a familiar face Arthur had not seen in years. "Lancelot?" he said, incredulous. He hadn't hoped to find his friend again after he'd been banished after his secret had been revealed, the lack of nobility that Merlin had helped to conceal from Uther.

"Arthur?" Lancelot said, looking just as surprised as Arthur felt. "You're the king? What happened to your father?" A pain pierced Arthur's heart and he opened his mouth to reply, but Lance's eyes flickered to the crown in Arthur's hand. "And where's Merlin?"

Thinking his betrothed's name was already painful enough, but hearing someone else say it was even more so. It wasn't until that moment that Arthur realized that no one had said his name in months: it
was always 'him' or 'the crown prince', but no one had said 'Merlin' since around the time the kidnapping had occurred.

Arthur swallowed and gestured Lance to follow him. "Let's speak in private."

He could feel the words he'd been keeping inside building in his chest, and they spilled out from his mouth as soon as they were ensconced in Arthur's chambers. What happened with his father and Merlin just… fell out of him, and it wasn't until he was done that he felt almost lighter in some small way, finally able to tell the story in its entirety to someone who hadn't been there from the beginning like everyone else around him had been.

Lancelot took it all in stride, though his expression grew more and more drawn the longer Arthur spoke, and when he'd finally finished, Lancelot strode forward and enveloped Arthur in a hug. The move surprised him so much that, for a moment, Arthur just stood there, and then his arms were raising to return the gesture. He had so few hugs since Merlin had gone, and for a moment, it felt nice to lean on someone, to burden another with his thoughts.

Both of their eyes were damp when they pulled away, and they wiped away their tears without a word. When Arthur's face felt clear, he opened his door to order two meals brought up, and then he sat Lancelot down at his table. He waited until their food was brought up before he spoke again, and used the time to properly compose himself once more.

"As good as it is to see you again, Lancelot, I know you aren't here for social reasons," Arthur said between bites of food. Across from him, Lancelot scarfed down his meal like he hadn't eaten properly in a while, and Arthur called for another plate to be brought up. "What did you come to warn Camelot about?"

"I've been travelling a lot, since your father banished me," he said between bites. "I was on the outskirts of the Forests of Balor when I noticed tracks like a good deal of people had passed through, and recently, but something about the proportions of those on horseback and those on foot seemed odd. When I followed them, I found that they led to the Mountains of Isgaard, but not into a cave. Only an hour into the mountains, there's a castle carved into the very stone."

Arthur's eyebrows rose, practically of their own volition. He had never heard of such a thing, a castle carved into a mountain. Perhaps done by some sort of magic folk ages past and abandoned or forgotten about? It wasn't often that there were just empty castles lying about either. Lancelot nodded in response to his expression and continued.

"I was rather surprised too. There's only one path into the castle, but there's nowhere to hide on it. I couldn't be sure that there weren't guards where I couldn't see them in the parapets, so I retreated a little way and found a nook to camp in. I waited for three days for anyone else to come down the road or to leave the castle, but when they did… Arthur, it was slavers."

Arthur's hand clenched involuntarily around his fork. Slavery was outlawed in Camelot and had been since his father's time, and Arthur did not take kindly to it happening in his kingdom. "After they were gone, I followed the tracks back to the source and it looks like they took an entire village. I can't stop this alone. I need your help."

Arthur stood abruptly, enough so that it startled Lancelot into choking on his food. "Finish your food and I'll have someone take you to a room. Sleep well because we're going to leave in the morning."

Lancelot bowed his head. "Thank you, your Majesty."

Arthur was already too far out of the room to correct him, and perhaps just a bit too focused on the mission ahead. Since Merlin had been taken, there had only been wild beasts and hunger and cold to
fight. He hadn't had a true battle in months, and perhaps it would help in some way that nothing else he'd tried had.

He barely slept that night, despite his instructions to his men, and he was the first of his knights suited and saddled up in the courtyard the next morning. When they departed, after Lancelot had been treated to a royal welcome in the form of a great deal of hugging by his once-fellow knights, he rode at the head of his men, silent and alert, a mood his knights were by now too-familiar with. They didn't seem to begrudge him his moodiness, for which he was thankful, and left him in peace, just as he let them talk amongst themselves. Lancelot roved back and forth between riding with the other knights, jesting with one another as if he'd never left, and riding silently at Arthur's side.

It was half a day's ride to Isgaard, and as they got closer, Arthur could make out traces of the same trails Lancelot had told him about. By the way his knights fell silent, he could tell they spotted the tracks as well. There were signs of scant horses in use, but a great deal more of foot traffic. Slavers. They all stayed quiet as they approached the road entering the mountains, and Arthur called a halt at the opening. He gestured for two of his knights and two of the fae that had been posted at Camelot frequently over the years to join him at the front.

"Owain, Pellinor, scout ahead. Alator, Finna, would you be able to use the Veil to check for any back entrances?"

"Of course, your Majesty," they said in unison with a small bow of their heads. As one, they stepped sideways and disappear.

As Owain and Pellinor crept away on foot, Arthur and his knights surrounded the path's entrance in a loose circle, on alert for the arrival or departure of the slavers. It was a tense half hour before Alator and Finna returned, and Arthur didn't have to ask to know that if there was a backdoor, they hadn't found it. Owain and Pellinor returned with only slightly better news.

"We found the spot Lancelot mentioned, but there's nothing along the passageway that would hide anything more than one, maybe two, people," Owain reported.

Pellinor nodded along. "Better news. Kind of. There doesn't seem to be anyone guarding the front of the castle itself, or the passageway. We saw no sign of archers or watchers in the towers. It's likely they think the castle is too-well hidden for anyone to find, in which case, they were mostly right. Only our Lancelot found them first!" Pellinor clamped a hand on Lancelot's shoulder, beaming with pride, and Lancelot flushed.

"Good." Arthur took a close look at his men, gauging their health. They hadn't rushed their horses to their destination, and they'd done no work thus far in the day. They all looked well-rested and eager to begin. "Alright, men. Let's set our people free."

They rode silently through the passage, every single one of them alert, swords and shields raised. They encountered no opposition through the end of the passage, nor when they dismounted, and the front door opened silently and easily.

"Fan out, search every room, top to bottom," Arthur whispered, and his knights slipped away into the darkness.

As he moved silently from room to room, the sounds of fighting began to reach him, as did the sound of men rushing to join. He could hear shouting and the clang of metal on metal below him, the sounds fading as he took the stairs higher into the castle. He cleared room after room and found each empty; either the slavers had already rushed downstairs via other passages than he had taken, or their quarters were centered on lower floors. Either way, it left Arthur disappointed and on-edge with
nowhere for all his pent-up energy to disperse to.

"Arthur!" He jumped at the muffled shout from below, and then it came again, louder and more urgent, and sent him running for the stairs. "ARTHUR!"

He couldn't keep quiet as he descended, and he made such a clatter that he expected that more slavers would come running, but when he got to the ground floor and found one of his men waiting for him, he found the grand hallway filled with bodies, captured slaves being taken out of chains and men being put into them.

"It's Lancelot, sire," Percival said, pointing the way. "Downstairs."

"AAARTHUUUR!" Lancelot shouted again, sending Arthur's heart, and feet, racing. He could hear several of his knights following him as he raced down a narrow set of stairs towards Lancelot's voice.

"Lancelot?!" he shouted back.

"Here, sire. Quickly!"

He rounded a corner and found Lancelot standing there, face pale and eyes fixed on the wall behind Arthur. Arthur whirled around, and at first, he just saw another slave, sitting in the gloom, dressed in no more than trousers and hands tied together, strung above their head by a long rope hanging from a hook in the ceiling. He turned his head back towards Lancelot, mouth already preparing to inquire into his friend's strange reaction, and then the particulars of the dirty form hit him: the pale skin, the dark hair, the pale blue wings. Arthur had begun to give up hope without giving up hope, had begun to accept the possibility that Merlin was no longer within his reach, and yet here in the dungeons of a forgotten castle hidden in the depths of the Isgaard Mountains, not even a day's ride from Camelot's castle, the missing crown prince of the Otherworld, the betrothed to Camelot's King, had finally been found. His sword and shield fell from numb fingers and clattered to the ground.

Even in the meager light from the sun streaming down the stairs, Arthur could still see the way Merlin's skin was speckled with cuts and bruises and darkened with dirt. He was so unkempt that he actually had beard scruff for the first time in Arthur's memory. His wings appeared unharmed, but Merlin was sitting on them, which Arthur had never seen any fae do - the wing scales, veins, and nerve endings structure were all too sensitive for that kind of pressure. And they were pale, like the summer sky, nothing like the vibrant, unnatural shade Arthur was used to.
Arthur felt like he'd walked into a dream. *Months* of searching, and they had found Merlin completely by accident, hidden away in a slaver's refuge. His mind and his body felt numb, like he was floating outside of himself, and he didn't want to take his eyes off Merlin, but nothing felt real. He turned to Lancelot, feeling like he was moving through mud, and found half of his knights behind him.
"We see him too, Princess," Gwaine said, staring at Merlin with eyes just as wide as the rest of them.

Arthur turned back around and found himself stumbling forward before he quite realized he'd given the order for his numb legs to move. He hadn't taken more than a few steps before his knees gave out on him though, and he landed hard on the stone. He barely noticed the pain, just crawled forward towards Merlin, who was staring at his own legs with a blank expression. He hadn't once moved since Arthur had arrived, hadn't so much as acknowledged the crowd around him. But his chest was moving in and out with each breath he took, and just seeing that was a relief.

"Merlin?" he called softly, his voice croaking in his suddenly dry throat. Merlin sighed and closed his eyes as he turned his head away. Confusion at the reaction pierced through the num haze in Arthur's mind. In all his fantasies of finding Merlin again, none of them had gone like this, but he also had no idea when Merlin had gone through during the month's he'd been missing.

He shuffled closer and called to him again, but this time, he reached out with a hand that he couldn't stop from shaking to cup Merlin's cheek. Merlin jerked and his head turned sharply back to Arthur. His lips formed the familiar shape of Arthur's name, but no sound emerged.

"His ropes, sire," someone said quietly from behind him, and Arthur could have hit himself for forgetting.

When he fumbled his boot knife free, Merlin shrank away from him again, appearing to curl in on himself without really moving. Arthur could feel his brow draw in tighter as his confusion rose even higher.

The rope cut easily beneath his blade without any sign of enchantment, and he lowered Merlin's arms slowly. There was no telling how long he'd been held in that position, or how sore he was. Merlin's teeth were bared in a silent hiss when Arthur looked at his face again, a silent grimace of pain. Arthur could almost feel the chill of Merlin's skin through his gloves, and he nearly ripped off his cloak in his haste to transfer it from his form to Merlin's. Merlin made no effort to cover himself properly, or to pull the cloak tighter around him.

Arthur felt absolutely helpless. After months, his beloved betrothed had been found on complete accident, but was unresponsive except to a perceived threat, and he bore the signs of torture. He also bore no sign of magic containment, not on his person or in the wide room they stood in, and yet, he had made no move to free himself from his bonds.

Feeling tears well up in his eyes, Arthur carefully set his palms on Merlin's shoulders, wary of an adverse reaction. When none came, he smoothed his hands down limbs that had once been slim but health and now felt like nothing more than bone. He gently took Merlin's hands in his and he leaned in to press a kiss to Merlin's hair. "Merlin, I'm so sorry I didn't find you sooner. I'm sorry that this happened to you. I promise you that whoever did this to you will face justice." He closed his eyes in a long blink for a moment, breathing against Merlin's dirty hair. "I'm so sorry. So so sorry."

There was a commotion behind him and Arthur turned quickly, on high alert, but it was only the fae that had joined his knights having fallen to their knees. They looked as close to crying as Arthur felt. "Prince Merlin must be returned to Otherworld immediately," Arthur forced himself to say. The last thing he wanted was to be separated from his love when he'd just found him again, but Merlin's health far took precedence over his own feelings. "I need one of you to alert my sister and my uncle that the Crown Prince has been found. We must take care of the slavers and then I will join you at the Door as soon as I'm able."

The fae all bowed as one until their foreheads touched the ground, and then they stood. Alator
stepped forward to carefully lift Merlin into his arms, taking extra care to avoid touching Merlin's wings. But when he stepped sideways, he was still there. Alator frowned and tried again, only for the same result to occur.

"Can you not take him when he cannot take himself?" Arthur asked, already planning the logistics of having to transport an injured fae from Isgaard to the Door.

"No, that's not it, Your Majesty. Something is binding Prince Merlin from using magic. Something like…" Alator trailed off, frowning down at the bracelets Arthur had gifted Merlin on his birthday all those months ago.

"Those are silver," Arthur said, shaking his head. "I had them commissioned myself."

Finna stepped forward and hooked a finger in one bracelet and immediately snapped her hand back with a hiss. "You may have commissioned silver, but they gave you iron."

Horror swept over Arthur. He knew exactly what iron could do to magic folk, fae especially, and all this time, Merlin had been stuck as a prisoner because of Arthur. He could barely keep his hands from shaking when he reached forward and carefully pulled each bracelet from Merlin's wrists, revealing scar-shiny skin beneath. The second they were free from Merlin's skin, Merlin arched in Alator's arms with a massive inhale of breath, eyes wide and unseeing.

A concussive blast exploded in the room, making everyone in the room go flying to its edges. Arthur's head slammed into the stone wall, and his vision went fuzzy when he stood. Alator and the other fae had been flung back just as the humans had been, and Merlin was lying on the floor, one arm outstretched towards the dim sunlight filtering down the stairs.

Wary of another attack, Arthur walked around the edges of the room and slowly approached Merlin from the front. Merlin seemed to be too busy staring at his hand resting in a patch of sunlight, but when Arthur crouched in front of him, Merlin's other hand reached out to feel at Arthur's face with fingers that trembled. Once again, his lips formed Arthur's name without a sound passing them, and blue eyes that had lost too much of their brightness shimmered with tears.

"It's me, Merlin," Arthur whispered, leaning his cheek into Merlin's touch. "I found you. I'm sorry it took me so long, but I'm here."

Merlin's hand slipped to Arthur's chest and curled in his shirt, and his head fell before splashes of water began to fall from beneath his fringe to the stone below. Arthur moved forward carefully, slowly, and gingerly gathered Merlin into his arms. Merlin's now too-thin body shook with silent sobs and Arthur had to resist crying with him. The knights around them slowly began to filter out of the room and back up the stairs to conclude the business with the slavers, and at last, only Leon, Gwaine, Alator, and Finna remained.

When Merlin finally fell silent and still, and made no response to Arthur's whispered queries, he carefully stood and handed the sleeping prince to Alator. "Get him home." Alator didn't wait for any further instruction before he successfully slipped into the Veil. Arthur turned to Finna. "Alert my uncle and my sister that we have found Prince Merlin, and then inform King Balinor and Queen Hunith that we are making our way to the Door." Finna bowed and disappeared, and Arthur finally turned to his two knights. It had been less than an hour, and yet he felt as if years had passed.

Leon was holding the bracelets out to him, and after taking them, Arthur peered intensely at the symbols. It was hard to be sure, when his knowledge of runes was so limited, but he was certain what was engraved in the metal was not what had been there when he had first gifted the jewellery to his betrothed. Nor was the metal the right colour or weight or feel. And yet, he was certain that these
bracelets were one in the same.

He tucked the bracelets into a pouch and retrieved his sword and shield from Gwaine. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

Fun facts:

- Agravaine's minion was basically Ilyn Payne from 'Game of Thrones'.
- Merlin's flower crown was made with Birds of Paradise (means 'joy, magnificence'), Hunith's with Anthurium (aka Laceleaf; means 'hospitality'), and Balinor's with Daffodils (means 'chivalry').
- Arthur's in-fic birthday is Beltane and Merlin's is Samhain, which are opposing seasonal festivals on the Wheel of the Year.
- Here's a refresher on the necklace that killed Uther.
- If you can open the original drawing that this Reverse Big Bang was written for, you can zoom hella in and check out the runes on the bracelets. If you can't do that, then they look like as follows: the 'induce madness' rune is shaped like |> (a capital 'p' with a hard point); 'block' is like an angled Z; 'magical forces' is the triskele we all know and love; and 'angelic power' is that Shadowhunters symbol like a X but with a pointed bottom.

Original prompt: Merlin, the fairy Prince, had been gone for months. Arthur, who had known the Prince, and considered him a good friend, perhaps even wanted him by his side for the remainder of his life, was distraught. The search had resulted in no evidence and broken hearts. The fairy Kingdom was in mourning, believing their beloved Prince to be dead.

A mission leads Arthur to arrest what they believe to be slavers. A search of the castle they had been in possession of results in Arthur stumbling upon a wounded Prince.
Part Two

Chapter Notes

Despite the years between… the incident and now, Merlin still craved the warmth of touch from his friends and family. The combined hugging power from both his father and his best friend kept him grounded in the moment, and when the three of them pulled apart, the smiles on Balinor and Will's faces seemed to match the way Merlin felt: proud and happy and content. Still, when they took a few steps back, he couldn't help the way the loss of their touch chilled him inside, though he had long practice in keeping that from his face. Instead, he tugged at his clothes a bit self-consciously on his garments, feeling odd in the red and gold when he was so used to his people's earthier browns and greens and blues.

"Nervous?" Will asked as he circled Merlin.

"I shouldn't be," Merlin said with a small laugh, unable to suppress the familiar flair of hatred at the sound of his own voice - it had never been quite the same after he'd started speaking again. "I've been waiting for this day since I was eight. But yes, yes I am. What if I mess up? What if I embarrass him? What if I embarrass our people?" He couldn't help his nervousness. He hated the way his stomach fluttered, the way his fingers trembled, the way his confidence was falling again.

"It's perfectly natural," Balinor said. "I almost had to be carried to your mother. And then when I was standing in front of her, I almost fainted."

Merlin and Will burst out in joint surprised laughter.

"Really, m'lord?" Will asked between choked huffs.

Balinor smiled. " Really. We were an arranged marriage too and I'd never seen her before and I was worried that she would hate me on sight. You at least have the benefit of marrying your best friend."

"Hey!" Will exclaimed, feigning outrage at being demoted.

Balinor waved him off. "You both know what I mean. Merlin, my boy, you have spent a third of your life in Camelot, learning its lands and histories, meeting its people. They love you as much as our people do. You'll do fine."

Merlin nodded and ran his hands over his clothes once more. Then he took a deep breath and nodded again. "Alright, let's go." His father stepped up on one side to hook his arm around Merlin's as Will did the same on the other. Together, they stepped from Merlin's room and into a full clearing aglow in the light of the full moon.

The clearing was large, but it was still full of fae and humans, nobles and peasants alike, all mixed together in a ring around the edges. The moonlight was so bright that no one was carrying torches, but Merlin could see fairy lights sprinkled in the trees behind the gathered crowd. Gaius stood in the very center, decked out in clothes that looked fancier than Merlin's own, but they were also embroidered in runes that made it clear these were Official Robes. And then standing at his side, promptly stealing all of Merlin's attention, was Arthur.

Arthur nearly took Merlin's breath away. He was crownless, as was Merlin, the crowns to be presented to one another later in the ceremony, and just as Merlin was in Arthur's colours, Arthur was in his. Blue sleeves emerged from under his chainmail tunic, and his cloak matched, the dragon
symbol of his mouth in embroidered in black over his shoulder. Merlin couldn't be sure if he flew or walked over, but he was in front of Arthur only a moment later.

Arthur raised his hand as if he were about to slide his fingers down Merlin's bare arm and Merlin's breath caught in his chest before Gaius cleared his throat and they both startled, Arthur's hand falling away. "You look..." Arthur started and then trailed off, staring at Merlin in such a way that it renewed the fluttering in Merlin's stomach. But not for the same reason that had delayed his arrival; this fluttering also sent heat rushing through his skin and dried out his mouth.

Merlin nodded and smiled. "You too," he said breathlessly. He couldn't stop staring at Arthur, a face he knew as well as, or better, than any other. A face that was there for him in hard times and good times. It was just a face, really, but to Merlin, it was a face that embodied everything dear to his heart.

"If I may begin?" Gaius said dryly, snapping Merlin out of it, and he realized that the crowd had grown restless, albeit in an amused sense, and he guessed they had been staring at each other for perhaps a bit longer than was necessary.

Arthur's cheeks were flushed when he nodded and waved his hand. "At your will."

"Thank you, sire," Gaius deadpanned, and Merlin had to suppress a snort.

As the ceremony progressed, Merlin could barely keep his mind focussed on any of the rites Gaius recited, or any of the vows he or Arthur said. He could feel the bond forming in his chest, incited by Gaius' officiating, and when he and Arthur linked hands - Arthur's left to Merlin's right - for Gaius to wrap in ribbon, the bond flared through his limbs, warm and bright. It wouldn't reach its peak until for several hours, but Merlin could tell it would only get stronger as the night wore on. The only thing he couldn't tell was if Arthur felt it too.

Across from him, Arthur looked just as dazed as Merlin felt, but when it came to for his people's traditions to come into play, they snapped out of it easily enough. Together, they waved forward their chosen people - Will for Merlin and Morgana for Arthur - and they handed over what they had both been keeping safe: a crown and a ring each.

The crown Will passed to Merlin unbound left hand was Arthur's, and his father's before him, but white heather had been braided around the spikes in recognition of his consort's people. The fact that it was a plant and not flowers that made up part of his crown was unusual, but all plants had their meanings and nothing suited Arthur better. The ring was a simple gold band, small and easy to wear beneath his gloves. Morgana passed a similar ring into Arthur's right hand, as well as Merlin's usual crown of flowers, though it had been altered to include a slim gold circlet in recognition of his consort's people. Two crowns embracing their own people's traditions while incorporating the other's.

"I watched these both get made and I did not once let them leave my possession until I handed them to Morgana when we arrived," Arthur said, his smile a bit forced and a lot sad. Merlin couldn't help but smile too. It had been four years since he'd been found, but the memories would haunt him for the rest of his days.

"I didn't let anyone else touch them either," Morgana said softly, her smile a bit more forced, but still well-meaning. Merlin would have reached out to her but he was holding a ring and a crown in one hand and his other hand was still tied to Arthur's. He settled for smiling back and nodding his thanks.

Merlin took a deep breath, and then looked up at Arthur. "With this ring," he said, voice loud and clear as he slipped the gold band in his hand down Arthur's ring finger, "I, Merlin of the Fae, bind you, Arthur of Camelot, as my husband. With this crown-" he held up Arthur's crown and then
placed it gently on his head "-I crown you my wedded Prince of Otherworld." The bond in his chest flared brightly as Arthur smiled brightly at him.

"With this ring," Arthur said next, voice just as loud and clear as Merlin's had been as he slipped Merlin's ring over his finger "I, Arthur of Camelot, bind you, Merlin of the Fae, as my husband." He placed Merlin's crown on his head, fingers lingering against Merlin's hair. "With this crown, I crown you my wedded King of Camelot."

The ring of onlookers burst into cheers and Merlin forgot himself and lurched forward to kiss Arthur. Arthur laughed but kissed him back, wrapping his free arm around Merlin's neck and sliding his fingers into Merlin's hair.

"And now you may kiss," Gaius said, the dryness back in his voice. Merlin didn't bother to break away from Arthur's mouth to flutter a wing at Gaius.

Kissing Arthur was as comfortable as it always was, but this was hardly the place for such things to be continued at any kind of length so he dragged himself away. Or tried to. Arthur, apparently not yet done with him, just fistied his hand in Merlin's hair and kept him in place to kiss him a little bit longer, wherein Merlin struggled to remember why he had even tried to end it in the first place. When he finally loosened his grip and let Merlin pull back, Arthur's eyes were hooded and dark, his expression making promises that Merlin knew his new husband would happily be fulfilling come dawn. Merlin could feel the heat in his cheeks as he straightened, and he could hear Gwaine whooping somewhere in the crowd.

Arthur rolled his eyes but otherwise ignored Gwaine, which was the standard response for anything Gwaine ever said or did. Instead, he raised their bound hands high in the air and the cheering got louder. This time, Gwaine said something worthwhile: "Long live the kings! Long live the kings!"

The crowd began to join in, and Arthur and Merlin began to turn in a circle, displaying their bound hands for all gathered to see. "Long live the kings! Long live the kings!"

Merlin couldn't keep the smile of his face and he turned to his husband and found himself graced with a grin just as wide as his own. Staring into Arthur's eyes, he mouthed along with the crowd:

"Long live the kings!"

"Arthur!"

Arthur had barely stepped foot inside Otherworld's castle before he was engulfed in Queen Hunith's arms. Caught off guard, he moved to hug her back and barely stopped himself in time before he touched her wings. King Balinor was standing just a little ways back, watching them with wet, red eyes. Arthur's arms hung in the air for a long moment before she finally stepped back and he finally set both palms on her shoulders. Her eyes were wet and red like her husband's, and guilt flared in his chest.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come immediately," he said, tightening his grip for just a moment before letting his hands fall away. "I had to question and sentence the slavers before I could leave Camelot."

Balinor nodded understandingly, but Hunith shook her head rapidly and reached out to grip Arthur by his arms instead. "No, no. You don't have to apologize for anything, Arthur. You brought Merlin back to us."

It was Arthur's turn to shake his head. "Finding him was a complete accident. I didn't do anything. I couldn't find anything where he was being kept, or get any answers from the slavers. I couldn't do
Hunith's grip became claw-like against his shoulders as she leaned in close, and he could see tears building in her eyes. "It doesn't matter, Arthur. You found him, no matter the circumstances. You made sure he was safe. You brought him back to us. You brought him home."

Arthur bowed his head and nodded. No matter what anyone else said, no matter their conviction, he knew the truth of it in his heart, and only he could reconcile that with himself. He stared at the ground for a long moment before his eyes fell on his pouch and he remembered the bracelets.

"For Merlin's birthday, right before he disappeared, I gave him a pair of bracelets I had commissioned," he said, looking back up and setting his hand over his pouch. "What I gave was two silver bracelets, engraved with runes for health and prosperity and friendship; he put them on said, he loved them, and that was that. But when we found him… He was still wearing the bracelets, but Alator said they were iron. And engraved with runes for binding and madness. I don't know what can be done with them, if there is some way to find out who cast magic on them or…"

Balinor stepped forward up to his queen's side. "Do you have them with you?"

"Yes." Arthur had put the bracelets in a separate little pouch and he pulled it out and handed it to the king who nodded and then stepped sideways and disappeared.

Arthur stared at the empty space for a long moment, feeling a bit empty at the sudden stillness he found himself in. He had been moving nonstop for days, dealing with slaves and slavers and the bracelets, wanting nothing more than to be at Merlin's side all while knowing that he couldn't until he was done. Now that he was done though, that emptiness left him off-kilter, that need to see to his betrothed at odds with his inability to comprehend that he was finally free to do so.

"He's in his room," Hunith said suddenly, reminding Arthur that she was there. He turned to look at her and found her already looking back. "I'll walk with you." She didn't wait for an answer before taking his arm and starting off. "Merlin's been resting, since he came back. Our healers took care of his injuries the moment he arrived, but he hasn't spoken once and for the most part, he just sleeps. When his father or I or Will sit with him, it takes him a long time before he seems to recognize us, but he doesn't attempt to interact with us."

"When we found him, he didn't speak then either," Arthur confessed. "It seemed like he was trying to say my name, but he didn't make a sound. Even when he…" Arthur's eyes pricked and his throat grew tight, and he coughed to clear it. "Even when he cried, he didn't make a sound."

Hunith slowed to a stop and pulled him into another hug. Arthur wished he could return it but he never quite figured out how to hug a fae properly. After she pulled away, it took him a moment to realize they were at Merlin's bedroom door.

"I'll give you some time with him. If you need anything, just let us know. Okay?"

He nodded at her as she moved away, and he watched her until she disappeared into her own room. He turned to face Merlin's door with a deep breath before he pushed in.

Merlin was lying on his bed, tucked under a blanket. What clothes Arthur could see seemed to be Merlin's again, the scruff had been shaved away, and as Arthur got closer, all the bruises and scrapes on Merlin's face had disappeared. There was a chair next to Merlin's bed and Arthur sunk down into it heavily; it felt like he hadn't stopped moving in the three days since Merlin had been found, unable to rest until he was at his betrothed's side again.
From the time when he opened Merlin's door to the time he sat down, Merlin's eyes had remained closed, and they didn't open when Arthur took his hand. He bowed his head over the limp fingers and then pressed his lips to the pale skin. "I'm sorry, Merlin. I'm so sorry. I feel like I betrayed you or... I don't know." He sighed and stared blankly ahead at the far wall. "I found you purely by chance. If Lancelot hadn't come back to Camelot, if he hadn't been near the mountain, if he hadn't come across those trails... Merlin, you were so hidden that I never would have found you. You were so lost and..." His eyes were burning again, and he didn't bother trying to force the feeling away. "I didn't search hard enough. I found you, but I failed you."

The tears began to fall and Arthur let them. He hadn't let himself cry since Merlin went missing, too afraid that crying would mean that Merlin was gone and that Arthur was never going to find him. It was a bit of relief to finally let them go after all this time, and yet, they hurt too. He couldn't help but grieve, even though Merlin was back, but it didn't seem like it was his Merlin who had returned. He couldn't be sure that his Merlin would ever return, and it was all because he had given Merlin iron bracelets, and hadn't looked hard enough to find him fast enough.

The fingers in his suddenly twitched and Arthur's head snapped up. He had to brush his free hand over his eyes to clear his vision, and when he could see again, it was to find Merlin's eyes open and fixed on him. He inhaled roughly and sat up.

"Merlin..."

Merlin's mouth moved, but just like before, no sound emerged. Arthur smiled, but it was still watery. Once the tears had started to fall, it was difficult to get them to stop again. The hand in his tugged and he regretfully let it go, but Merlin just reached up to touched his face, trailed fingers over his eyebrows and down his nose to his lips and then across to his cheek and into his hair.

"Yeah, it's me. It's Arthur. And you're home." He couldn't help himself from whispering, even though there was no need. It just seemed as if making any loud noise would break the sanctuary of Merlin's room. "You were in there for so long, I can only imagine how this may seem like a dream to you, but I promise you, this is real. I'm real. You're out of that place and you're never going back. I can promise you that."

The smile Merlin gave him was soft but sad, and it just made Arthur want to start crying again. It was a smile that looked like it meant that Merlin didn't believe him, that Merlin thought that he was still back in that room again. Arthur stood slowly, taking care not to startle Merlin, and leaned forward to press a kiss to Merlin's forehead.

"I'll stay here as long as I need to, until you're well again. Alright? Morgana and Agravaine will-" Merlin sucked in a panicked breath, eyes going wide as his chest began to heave. "Merlin?"

Arthur reached out to Merlin and Merlin shrunk away from his touch. Startled and confused, hurt, Arthur pulled away and sat back down in the chair.

"Morgana?" Arthur repeated, and Merlin shook his head just the tiniest bit. "Agravaine?" Merlin's breath hitched a second time and Arthur's frown deepened. "I know you don't like my uncle, but he, and Morgana, will take care of Camelot in my absence."

Merlin started shaking his head more and his breath quickened to an unsteady pace. Merlin opened his mouth to speak and then snapped it shut when he didn't make a sound.

"Merlin, it's all right," Arthur tried to assure him. "Agravaine will-"

He got cut off by Merlin's hand making a slicing motion through the air between them. Then Merlin
surprised him by grasping his wrists, but only making a circle around them with his thumb and forefinger. He shook Arthur's wrists and gave Arthur a meaningful look. Arthur could only stare down at Merlin's hands in deep confusion. Merlin huffed out a breath through his nose and released Arthur's wrist only to grab his own wrist with one hand, and then switch to grab the other.

Arthur watched him repeat the motion three times before he ventured, "The bracelets?" Merlin nodded emphatically, but it did nothing to clear Arthur's confusion. "I don't understand…" Merlin's lips were moving again, but it wasn't Arthur's name they weren't shaping this time. "Agravaine?" Merlin nodded again. "What does Agravaine have to do with-" Merlin mouthed his uncle's name again and then shook his bare wrists at Arthur forcefully.

A sick feeling began to form at what it seemed like Merlin was implying. He didn't want to believe it, but he didn't want to disbelieve Merlin after all he'd been through. Suddenly, he remembered what he knew about the Door; that only authorized humans could pass through it. Authorized humans like his uncle.

"Merlin, are you saying it was my uncle who did this to you?" he asked, feeling faint, even as he posed the question. Merlin nodded, face all hard lines like Arthur had never seen.

When Arthur had returned to Camelot, his uncle had been packing for a trip, he said to visit a noble, but now, it made more sense. Arthur had made it back the same day, only hours after he'd had Finna relay back to Camelot that Merlin had been found. If his uncle had been responsible, it would explain his haste to leave the castle so quickly. But why?

The memory of the condition Merlin had been in when he had been found flashed through Arthur's mind. Why had Agravaine taken Merlin? Why had he kept him hidden and away? Why had he hurt Merlin's betrothed? Why why why?

Suddenly, he remembered that when he had set out for the Door, Agravaine had joined them as far the fork in the road. That he was already enroute to wherever he had been heading to to hide. Arthur stood so fast that the chair tipped over and he bolted for the door and flung it open.

"HUNITH!" he bellowed.

Arthur hadn't been able to take his eyes off Merlin since Merlin had stepped through the Veil into the moonlit clearing, and it had nothing to do with the fact that their hands had been bound with ribbon shortly afterwards and still were. No, it had everything to do with how vibrant and alive Merlin looked, his wings so vibrant they nearly glowed, cheeks flushed from laughter and wine, smile bright and ever-present since before they had left the clearing for the feast. The feast celebrating their marriage at long last, only four years late.

"You're staring again," Merlin said under his breath, still facing ahead, presumably entertained by the antics of their people under the influence of wine and food and music and displays of magic.

Arthur smiled. "Of course. Who wouldn't be able to take their eyes off such a beautiful husband?"

Merlin huffed out a laugh and glanced at Arthur out of the corner of his eye. "No, really. What's with all the staring?"

"Well," Arthur drawled, leaning in to murmur in Merlin's ear. "It could because I can't stop thinking about how I'm going to be bending you over the desk in my room before dawn." Arthur pulled back just far enough to see the way Merlin's face darkened in a flush. "But it could also be because of how proud I am of you."
Merlin's head jerked back and he shot Arthur a startled look. Arthur smiled at him. The strange sensation in his chest… *brightened*, making him feel warm and happy.

"I know! this is taking place later than either of us wanted, but we're here," Arthur started. "I know you'll never be the way you were before, not exactly, but the progress you've made is amazing, even if you're not exactly happy with it. You are incredibly strong, Merlin, and I'm incredibly lucky to have you."

Merlin stared at him for a long moment before he smiled. "I'm already stuck with you, Arthur. No need to flatter me now."

Arthur reached up with his free hand and cupped the back of Merlin's neck. "I mean it, Merlin." He slid his fingers into Merlin's hair and curled them into a fist, shaking gently to enforce his point. "I'm proud of you, and I am the luckiest man in the world to have you at my side."

Merlin smiled a watery smile and leaned into Arthur against the pull of fingers in his hair to press their lips together. As Arthur should have predicted, Gwaine started hollering from his table.

"I can't believe you made me knight him," Arthur whispered against Merlin's lips.

Merlin shrugged. "He deserved a reward for finding the bald man Agravaine hired. For bringing me the peace I wasn't sure I'd ever find again." Merlin's fingers laced through his didn't convulse when he said his tormentor's name, and his voice didn't tremble when he spoke of his imprisonment, more signs of how far he'd come in the healing of his mind. "Besides," Merlin said and then waved his hand. There was an loud shout from Gwaine's direction, followed by the sound of crashing and laughter. "At least sometimes he can be good for a little entertainment."

Arthur chuckled as they pulled away, and then he started laughing again at the sight of Gwaine pulling himself out of the wreckage of a table, shedding food as he stood. After he was back on his feet, Merlin waved his hand again and food and table reformed, returning to their places, except for what was in Gwaine's hair and clothes.

"You're both terrible kings!" Gwaine called out, and then tried to flirt his way into a dance with Percival.

"Let's see what he says about us after he's on stable duties for a fortnight," Arthur said and Merlin laughed. Arthur had always liked the way Merlin's laugh sounded, but tonight, with that warmth in his chest flaring every time it happened, he loved it even more.

"You two sound like you're having fun," someone said, and Arthur looked up to to find Morgana standing in front of the table. He glanced to his right where she'd been sitting last time he looked, but apparently she'd gotten up and he hadn't even noticed. Although, in Arthur's opinion, he could hardly be blamed from barely being able to take his eyes from his husband; he and his best friend were finally wedded after too many tumultuous years both together and apart.

"Well, Morgana," Merlin said, voice dramatically haughty, "I would hope so. It's our wedding after all."

She laughed. "A wedding that will lead to a very prosperous time for both of our lands."

It made him think of a similar conversation they'd had, years ago, the night before Merlin was found. "Prophecy?" he asked, grinning.

"Intuition," she replied with a smile of her own.
"Merlin, you don't have to do this yet!" Arthur exclaimed, frustrated and pacing Merlin's bedroom floor as Merlin walked around, throwing clothes every which way for no other reason that to be contrary, that Arthur could tell. "You've only been back three months! You only started talking again a week ago!"

"I don't care!" Merlin exclaimed in that newly hoarse voice of his, flinging a shirt at Arthur who caught it and flung it on the ground at his side. Merlin stared at him with eyes blazing and wings fluttering agitatedly, posture aggressive like he was this close to starting a fight with Arthur like they hadn't done since they were boys. "You've had him imprisoned for three months, Arthur. I know that you're only waiting on my testimony before you sentence him to death, and I'm not going to get any sleep until he's gone. I'm not even sure I'll get it when he is gone! Half the time, I'm not even sure I'm home! I wake up every night in a nightmare that I'm back there. Every night, Arthur! Don't you remember? It took me five weeks before I was even sure that this place was real. That it wasn't my mind finally breaking down, that the madness hadn't finally reached its peak."

His voice had grown more and more hoarse as he spoke until it finally petered out, and when it did, he glared at Arthur and fumed, his breath coming in heavy pants. He was finally starting to gain back all the weight he'd lost while imprisoned, but he was still weak, three months not nearly enough time to regain his natural athleticism, especially when he spent most of his time holed up in his room. Merlin would never say it, but Arthur knew that he was afraid to leave, afraid of being taken again.

Arthur moved forward slowly, as he usually did with Merlin these days, afraid to startle him like a skittish colt ready to bolt. Merlin didn't move as Arthur approached, but he did glare harder. Arthur reached up to cup Merlin's face and he pressed their foreheads together, and Merlin let him, even though his glare darkened.

"I know that I need you before I can sentence him, that both of our courts need to hear your testimony. I know how much it will help you. I know." He gave Merlin's head a little shake for emphasis. "But I don't think you're ready for this. Your voice still gives out easily and you haven't left your room any time I've been here, and from what Will and your parents say, and from what all of everyone says, no one else has seen you leave your room either." He pressed a fierce kiss to Merlin's mouth as Merlin stared at him with wide eyes. "I'm scared for you, Merlin. If you can't leave your own room, in your own castle, in your own realm, a realm that all humans except for me have been temporarily revoked from accessing, then I think leaving now will do you more harm than good. I don't want you to go back to the way you were when you came home and I'm scared that doing this so early in your recovery will mean you will. Do you understand?"

Merlin sucked in a long, slow breath and nodded. He closed his eyes and then kissed Arthur softly, finally reaching out to wrap his arms around Arthur's waist to pull him close and hold him tightly. Arthur moved his own hands into Merlin's hair, which he could never resist touching when the opportunity arose to do so. When Merlin finally pulled away, his eyes remained closed and his breathing had calmed, but there was a flush to his face that Arthur never tired of seeing.

"I'm sorry," he whispered against Arthur's lips.

Arthur shook his head. "Don't be. I understand why you have to do this, I just want you to understand why I'm afraid for you. Do you?"

"Yeah," Merlin replied, nodding. "Yeah, I understand."

Arthur sighed in relief and kissed Merlin again. "Good. Then you understand that you don't have to ride back to Camelot with me? I can meet you there, and that way you're not out sooner than you're ready for?"
Merlin's arms tightened for a moment, holding Arthur close. It was common for him, nowadays. He told Arthur once, before everything that had happened that he like the way Arthur felt, that his weight and his touch was comforting. When he was recovering, he'd frequently reached out for Arthur's hand, sometimes going so far as to pull Arthur from his chair into his bed, especially if he'd just woken from a nightmare. In bits in pieces over the last week, since he'd gotten his voice back, Merlin had explained what had happened to him: the torture and the healings just for more torture, the accusations and the confessions, the hallucinations. Agravaine's pleasure in it all. The only way he'd been able to tell Arthur at all, he'd said, was because he'd pulled Arthur into bed on top of him and had been able to feel the that weight to help keep him in the moment, to remember that he was safe.

Finally, he pulled back, but he didn't let Arthur go. "I know," he said, nodding. "I know. But I need to do this. I think it will help, and I want you with me when I do." Arthur couldn't help the way his hands tightened into fists. Just thinking of Merlin back in his world, seeing his tormentor again, made his heart race faster. Merlin closed his eyes and pulled just a little against Arthur's grip, making him remember how much Merlin used to love the way Arthur would, on occasion, take control of him and move him to his will. "What about this: if I don't feel safe, if at any time I get too scared, I'll step back through the Veil and come here. Okay?"

"You promise?" Arthur asked, voice firm, and Merlin nodded.

"I promise."

Arthur stared Merlin straight in the eye for a long moment, testing his gaze and conviction. When Merlin didn't look away, always a sure sign of a lie or a half-truth, Arthur nodded once. "Okay. Let's go."

Arthur laced the fingers of his left hand with those of Merlin's right, leaving his sword hand free, and he didn't let go the entirety of the slow journey from Merlin's room to the stables where a group of guards were standing with the king and queen. Balinor and Hunith looked just as worried as Merlin felt, and Arthur could see the way they restrained themselves from rushing over to them when they appeared, waiting until Merlin got close. Arthur extracted his fingers slowly, handing him off to his parents for last minute reassurances like he was sure they all needed, and he excused himself to check on their horses.

When he rejoined them with their mares in tow, Merlin reached out immediately to take his hand again. It made it tricky to get on their horses, keeping hold of one another, but Arthur knew neither one of them was particularly inclined to make it easier if it meant losing contact. Merlin's grip had been white-knuckled tight since they'd left his room, and it only got tighter when they set out on the road, horses riding close together and surrounded with fae guards as they left a teary Balinor and Hunith behind.

No one talked once during the trip. The loudest sound was that of the horses walking across the packed earth, and the vague, breezy sound of wings shuffling; all of the fae were tense and on alert, not just Merlin, and Arthur could tell. There wasn't even the sound of tack jangling to break up the quiet morning air as the fae never needed saddles or reins with their horses and Merlin had spent the summer after the bandit attack teaching Arthur and his horse how not to need it either.

Even when they finally reached the group of his knights waiting at the gates of Camelot, Arthur couldn't relax, even though it was his home. In fact, that might have made him even more tense, just the thought that this had been Agravaine's home once too, that there could still be people in Camelot that were in league with Agravaine that Merlin couldn't know about and so Arthur couldn't find out either, and investigation without base only went so far without offending the nobles that Arthur
couldn't afford to offend. Which was all of them. From the way Merlin just grew more and more tense, Arthur could tell he knew it too.

"Do you want to go to my rooms first?" Arthur asked as they dismounted together, both of them still refusing to let go of one another.

Merlin didn't answer for a long moment as he stared up at the castle. "No, I want to get this over," he finally said. "I need to get this over with."

"Of course." When Merlin started to move, Arthur tugged him back. "You remember your promise?"

Merlin snorted and rolled his eyes, and for some reason, it made Arthur's heart lighter. Merlin was always at his most annoying, and his most amusing, when he was being sarcastic, and Arthur had hardly seen that part of Merlin seen he'd come back. So every reappearance of that sarcasm was less annoying and more of a victory, though Arthur deeply looked forward to the day that he would find that sarcasm annoying again. But that was in a future far from now, many years away.

"Yes, mother," Merlin deadpanned. He moved to walk up the steps before Arthur tugged him back to his side.

"The way I love you cannot be compared to familial love, Merlin," he said under his breath, watching Merlin's face carefully. "And with the things I've wanted to do to you since we were teens, you shouldn't think of me in that way either."

Pink crept over Merlin's cheeks and when he spoke, it came out a bit breathless. "As you wish, my king."

Arthur inhaled sharply, surprised by the words, and Merlin grinned cheekily at him. Arthur wanted to roll his eyes at him, but he couldn't bring himself to do anything but smile at being graced with Merlin's long-absent sarcasm. Merlin looked surprised, but he smiled back, and this time, when he moved, Arthur let him.

The great hall was already filled with courtiers and nobles, both human and fae. Everyone present was somber and silent, but when Balinor, Hunith, Morgana, and Will, all standing at the front of the room on either side of the thrones, saw Arthur and Merlin, all four of them smiled tersely. Arthur could only assume they were as happy to see Merlin out and about as he was, but just as worried that Merlin would relapse or get attacked by any possible one of Agravaine's potential supporters.

Eyes followed them all the way to their chairs, and when they sat, Arthur pulled Merlin down into the consort's chair, despite the fact that, at this point, it could be a year before they were properly married. It was as much of a declaration of his faith and his loyalty as it was a way to keep Merlin close at his side. The guards waited for Arthur to nod before they opened the doors again.

"Bring in the prisoner!"

Imprisonment didn't suit Agravaine well, but he came out of it better than Merlin had. He was dirty and greasy, and he'd lost a bit of weight from the smaller, simpler meals, but he was undamaged. He was also gagged, and with good reason; the things that had come out of his mouth when he'd been arrested had been nearly unbelievable to hear, and from the prison guards' statements, it hadn't gotten any better. Arthur didn't know what hurt more: being betrayed by one of his two remaining family members, or the fact that he was about to be down to one family member.

"We are here today today to hear Crown Prince Merlin of the Fae’s statements regarding his period
of imprisonment, for which my uncle, Lord Agravaine of Camelot, is accused of perpetrating. After his testimony has been presented, I, King Arthur of Camelot, with leave from King Balinor and Queen Hunith, will pass judgement and sentencing. During Prince Merlin's statements, I ask that no one interrupt. Prince Merlin, you may begin."

Although Merlin had already gone over what had happened, hearing it a second time accompanied by soft crying from his parents and several ladies of the court, as well as audible gasps from the collective audience. During it all, Agravaine kept attempting to speak through his gag, but the sound was muffled, and when he moved to stand, chains rattling distractingly, one of the two guards standing watch over him would knock him down with a hit to the back of his knee with the butt of their spear. Through it all, Merlin kept speaking, ignoring every one of Agravaine's attempted outbursts, staring straight ahead with a grip on Arthur's hand that made his fingers go numb.

When Merlin finally fell silent, no one in the room spoke, not even Agravaine. Merlin hadn't broken his gaze from the little window above the hall's doors, and Arthur didn't pressure him to. Everywhere Arthur's eyes fell, he found somber, tearful faces, some fixed on Merlin, some on Arthur, but a good deal on Agravaine. Last, he turned his eyes to his fellow monarchs.

"King Balinor, Queen Hunith." After an hour of Merlin's hoarse, quiet voice, which had slowly deteriorated the longer he spoke, Arthur's loud and clear voice made several people jump. "Though the majority of the crime occurred in Camelot by one of Camelot's peoples, the originating crime was committed in Otherworld on one of its peoples. Do you have anything you would like to say regarding Prince Merlin's statements or the sentencing of Lord Agravaine?"

Merlin's parents exchanged looks, then Hunith nodded and Balinor stepped forward. "The fae call for the execution of this prisoner, for the kidnapping and torture of their crown prince."

Several of the nobles present gasped in surprise, but the fae all nodded in agreement. Arthur could only guess that this had been something that Balinor and Hunith had indeed spoken to all their nobles about previously, and that it was truly a consecutive decision made by their people. The fae deeply valued all life, and for them to call for an execution was unheard of and only emphasized the seriousness of the matter.

Arthur nodded and turned his head back to the collective audience. "Does anyone else have any other evidence they would like to contribute before I make the sentencing?"

It still made Arthur uncomfortable that the man who had actually done the work of torturing Merlin had never been found, but no one had been with Agravaine when the fae caught up to him. And though Merlin had eventually used some unfamiliar magic to pass an image of his actual torturer from his mind to Arthur's, the man he'd shown was completely unfamiliar to Arthur, and no one could think of anyone that matched the description Arthur gave. All Arthur could hope was that the man Agravaine had do his torturing was nothing more than a mercenary, though he still hoped that one day, the man would be found so that the entire thing could be put to rest. He had already attempted to convince Agravaine to identify his helper, but Agravaine still refused to admit that he took any part in Merlin's kidnapping and subsequent imprisonment and torture.

The crowd shifted restlessly and looked about, but no one spoke and Arthur nodded. "I have heard the events from Prince Merlin not once, but twice. I have seen the evidence of what he has endured. I have heard the request from the rulers of Prince Merlin and his people." He paused, and though he had already come to a decision, the words stuck in his throat for a moment. "For the crimes of kidnapping the Crown Prince of the Fae, torturing the Crown Prince of the Fae, conspiring to commit murder against both the Crown Prince of the Fae and the Crown Prince and King of Camelot, conspiring to commit treason against the kingdom and rulers of Camelot, and murdering his
wedded brother, King Uther of Camelot, I, King Arthur of Camelot, sentence Lord Agravaine of Camelot to death by beheading to be carried out at dusk."

Agravaine began to struggle against his chains and raged through his gag, but Arthur no longer wanted to look upon him. Not until it came time for his execution. "Take him away." The guards practically had to carry a squirming Agravaine from the room.

Once Agravaine was gone, Arthur finally turned to look directly at his betrothed. Merlin's face was pale, but his expression was steady. After a moment, Merlin turned to look back at him and then nodded. Together, they rose, hands still linked, and passed silently through the equally quiet crowd.

That night, after the execution, an execution that Arthur preformed himself, and after Agravaine's remains had been set upon a pyre, Arthur crawled into Merlin's bed and they fell asleep curled around one another.

Merlin could still hear the feast when he and Arthur finally closed Arthur's bedroom door behind them and barred it. Flushed and a bit dizzy from the wine he had consumed, and that feeling in his chest that not yet faded, he turned to Arthur who seemed to be in much the same state as he was, although Merlin still wasn't sure if he was capable of feeling the formation of their bond. He grinned, giddy with joy and happiness, and Arthur grinned back.

"Well, husband," Merlin said, already unwrapping the ribbon that had bound them together the last few hours and unable to resist using the endearment when it caused the budding bond to flare like a flame. Arthur grinned and took control of the ribbon, freeing them before tucking it into the waistband of his trousers. "I believe you have a promise to fulfil." He ambled across the room to the desk by the far wall and started to shift the scant few parchments and quills out of the way. "Something about this desk." Merlin smiled as Arthur started to move slowly towards him, pace and expression predatory in a way that made Merlin's skin hot. "And me. And something else... I think it was... bending?"

Arthur stepped around him and out of view, a block of heat at his back, and when Merlin started to turn his head to look at him, a heavy palm landed on his neck and warm breath breezed across his sensitive ear: "Face forward, husband."

A shudder wracked Merlin's spine and he could feel his heart rate pick up as the weight of Arthur's palm increased, inexorably pushing his chest down to the desktop and flooding his body with arousal. The wood was cool against his too-warm cheek and his hands where they were tucked against his ribs, and his breath was heavy enough to flutter the papers he'd pushed to the side against the base of a large, capped inkwell he'd never seen before. He felt exposed and vulnerable, his wings and the bared skin between them laid out beneath Arthur's gaze, but unlike when he was imprisoned, he felt safe and protected. He was completely at Arthur's mercy, but he knew that Arthur would never allow harm to come to him, by his own hand or any other.

He could feel Arthur bend over him, so, so careful not to touch Merlin's wings - which were hanging loosely down his back and over his arse - with any part of his skin or clothes. "Move your wings, Merlin," Arthur whispered into his ear.

Merlin gasped in surprised arousal, unaware that stimulation to his ears of all places could make the growing hardness between his legs throb the way it did, and slowly moved his wings up to fan out across the length of the desk. Behind him, Arthur hummed, and then he pressed down a little harder on Merlin's neck, not to hurt, but just enough to make Merlin understand that Arthur wanted him to remain where he was. When Arthur pulled his hand away, Merlin didn't have enough time to make a noise of protest before he felt the ties holding his shirt closed at the back of his neck and below his
wings being pulled undone. The slide of the ribbons as they were pulled away were like whispers of breath across his skin and made Merlin shiver, but the scrape of Arthur's callouses trailing down the bare skin of his spine made him shudder.

He was so entranced by the feeling of Arthur's fingers that the wet slide of Arthur's tongue following them caught him entirely by surprise. He couldn't stop the gasped moan from scraping its way out of his throat or the way his chest arched into the hard barrier of the desk. He was suddenly painfully aware of how hard he was, and that he had no way to relieve that tension; his hips weren't even close enough to the desk to rut against it. It was almost distracting, the way his hardness pulsed with need, but the only thing there was to distract Merlin from was just Arthur's mouth making the slow but steady journey down his spine from neck to waist.

"You can touch my wings." Arthur froze when he spoke, but so did Merlin, and Merlin wasn't sure which of them was more surprised.

Arthur unbent slowly and Merlin regretted the loss of his body heat and his touch. "Merlin… You know that you don't have to let me. I know how… private something like this is for your people. Just because I'm your husband now doesn't mean you need to let me. You can wait until you're ready, you know."

Merlin stared at papers near his face so long that his eyes unfocused. He hadn't meant to say it, he hadn't planned on it, but… he meant it. He really did. The only people to have touched his wings since he'd left childhood behind were Agravaine and his minion, and Merlin hated that. He hated that they were the last ones to have touched his wings, and he wanted to erase the memory of their hands on him as much as he could. But that wasn't the only reason. He had already begun thinking of letting Arthur touch his wings in the couple of years before the kidnapping had happened, and though he had stopped since, he had started thinking about it again since he'd decided that it was high time their wedding actually happened. And if he wanted any night to be the first night for Arthur to touch his wings, his wedding night was it.

"I know," he finally said. "I'm ready. I want you to touch them. I want you to touch me."

Arthur let out a long, heavy breath. "Okay," he said, and then, "Okay. If you can't handle it, just tell me. I don't care what it is that I'm doing, you tell me, Merlin. Understand?"

"Yes, absolutely," Merlin agreed eagerly. "I understand. I promise."

Arthur didn't move for what felt like a long, long time, and the longer Merlin waited, the higher the anticipation became until it felt like his whole body was shaking. When Arthur placed both palms just under Merlin's wing joints, he nearly jumped out of his skin and Arthur had to gentle him like a frightened horse. "Easy. Easy now."

Merlin just nodded and didn't say anything, simply lay there and let Arthur smooth his hands down his back, pushing the two halves of his shirt away. Merlin expected Arthur's hands to slide back up, to finally make contact with his wings, but instead, those two strong, firm hands kept sliding, pushing against the waistbands of his trousers and underthings. He gasped at the feeling of hands against his arse that weren't his own, and writhed when two thumbs slid just a little between his cheeks, barely brushing against skin that had never been touched before. But for some reason, Arthur didn't stop there, though Merlin deeply wished he would. He just kept going down Merlin's legs in that slow, steady pace until everything had fallen to the floor around his ankles.

Arthur didn't speak to give instructions, didn't need to, just wrapped one strong hand around Merlin's ankle and lifted it to pull off his clothes and his boot before doing the same to the other foot. It was a strangely pleasant sensation, letting Arthur take control of his limbs, which was equally easy to do
and terrifying to allow. When Arthur bent back over him a moment later, it wasn't just the warm, solid weight that made the press of Arthur's body so decadent, that made the bond warm, but also the gentle scrape of Arthur's clothes over Merlin's bare skin. Merlin waited to feel that weight up his back and over his wing joints, but it never came.

"You need to relax," Arthur murmured.

Merlin surprised himself, and probably Arthur too, by laughing. "I keep waiting for you to touch me and you keep not doing that. I just... I guess I'm a bit anxious. I don't like waiting for something to come and not knowing when it will. Not anymore." He paused, wondering if he should say anything, but Arthur had told him, not just now but when he was first recovering, that if something was happening that reminded him of his imprisonment, Arthur wanted Merlin to tell him so that he would never do it again. "It reminds me of him. A little. The waiting for something I know is coming but I don't know when."

"Okay," Arthur said simply, as understanding about the Merlin's uneasiness and lingering trauma as he always was. Merlin was thankful for that, as well as for Arthur staying where he was instead of pulling away. "Is it still alright if I touch your wings?"

"Yes. Please," Merlin said, not bothering to suppress his smile; Arthur may not be the best man, but he certainly endeavoured to be, and he was always the best to and for Merlin when Merlin needed him most. Just as Arthur had said that he was proud of Merlin, Merlin was just as proud of Arthur and the king he'd become. "In fact, I would rather you do it sooner than later."

No sooner had the words left his mouth did Arthur do as he asked and placed his palms flat on the base of Merlin's wings. Though the touch was expected, the actual experience of it was brand new and Merlin cried out in shock. Somehow just Arthur's hands on his wings evoked the sensation of Arthur's hands touching his whole body all at once. Or maybe that was just the bond again. It was really all starting to blur together. It took a few minutes for Merlin to realize he was panting, little moans escaping with every other exhale, but he could hardly be blamed when his whole body felt like it had been besieged by an amorous fire sprite.

"Gods, Arthur," he groaned, every limb encumbered by a strange weakness that left him immobile.

"Do you need me to stop?" Arthur asked quietly, and without any hints of his thoughts on the matter one way or another.

"I will set a curse upon your entire family if you do," Merlin threatened, even though they likely both knew that he couldn't curse a flea at the moment.

"That's your family now too," Arthur said.

Merlin blinked, a bit unbalanced. "Oh yeah."

Arthur chuckled but Merlin couldn't join in because his husband had lifted the weight of his palms from Merlin's wings until only his fingertips remained and he began to trace over the black-lined veins spanning Merlin's wings. He could feel in each sweep of fingers how careful Arthur was being not to go against the grain of the countless tiny scales, how careful he was not to exert any kind of pressure on the veins.

"I'm not sure I ever mentioned, Merlin," Arthur said suddenly, voice soft enough not to disrupt the cozy quiet of the room, "but I've always been fond of your wings."

"Just fond?" Merlin tried to tease, but he didn't have any breath to the question, or any smile to his
"Hush," Arth admonished gently, rocking his hips forward. Merlin hadn't realized Arthur had been holding them away, but the reason why he had was immediately clear and took the form of a hot length of heat between his arse cheeks. "I like the way your wings match your eyes. Such an unnatural blue. I've looked all my life but I've never found its shade anywhere except on you."

Arthur's fingertips slid from the outside of Merlin's wings to the inside, and Merlin bucked at the touch which was a strange combination of ticklish and arousing. "Is that- is that bad?" he barely managed to ask.

"Quite the opposite. I love that this colour is all yours. And I rather like the black too." Arthur's fingertips traced the edges of his wings from the underside, light enough to make Merlin squirm. "From the first moment I saw you, I loved everything about the way you looked. I loved your hair and your eyes and your wings and the colour of your skin. And then you opened your mouth."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Merlin couldn't help but laugh. "Funny you should say that. That's how it was for me too. I always feel like I'm looking at the sun when I look at you." He could still remember the first time he set eyes on the blond human boy he was going to one day marry, the way his hair shone brighter than his crown in the winter sunlight. "I thought your hair was magic for a long time."

One of Arthur's hands left his wings and he whimpered, but Arthur grabbed his hair a moment later, tugging his head back. But with the weight against his arse, all he could do was arch his back and let his head get pulled. Arthur's teeth attacked his neck before he could say anything, biting at the muscle and sucking at the skin, and Merlin flung back a hand to cling to the rock-hard muscles of Arthur's thigh. When Arthur stopped suddenly and sent cool breath over the overheated patch of skin, Merlin dazedly decided that he was going to punch Arthur after their coupling was complete; all this teasing was rude beyond belief, and now Merlin was going to have to get him back.

"I still think your hair's magic," Arthur said between kisses as his lips worked their way from the side of Merlin's throat to the back of his neck. "Sometimes it looks like there's blue in it, in the sun. And it's always soft and thick - I can never stop touching it. And your mouth..." Arthur leaned over Merlin's shoulder as he turned Merlin's head and engaged him a kiss that was so slow and long that it left them both panting for breath and made Merlin dizzy. "I can never get enough of kissing you with my hands in your hair."

It took Merlin a few moments as he tried to get his breath back to realize that Arthur was rocking his hardness into Merlin's arse in a gentle rhythm. It hit him then that Arthur was about to be inside of him, and he couldn't wait any longer for that to happen.

"Do you have oil?" he asked, the hoarseness of his voice made worse by his inability to return his breathing to normal. Arthur's arm reached into Merlin's vision and removed the lid from the inkwell he'd noticed earlier before dipping two inside and pulling them back out, dripping with oil. "Why was that on your desk?" he asked, his cheeks heating as an embarrassment that wasn't his to feel swept through him.

Arthur stood again, though this time he left one hand on Merlin's body, a heavy press at the base of his spine. A moment later, wet fingers slid between Merlin's cheeks to trace the edge of a hole he'd only found the bravery to touch a scant handful of times as a young man before his imprisonment. "I told you, husband-" Merlin shuddered at the combination of hearing that word and feeling the tip of a finger press into him before pulling away again, "-I've been thinking about bending you over my desk. I've been thinking about it for years."
"Years?" Merlin gasped, fingers convulsing around Arthur's thigh, fingers digging into the muscle.

"Mhm." The fingertip pushed in again, only this time, it kept pushing until Arthur's knuckles brushed his hole and Merlin released a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "I've wanted to touch you since we first met, though those urges stopped being innocent well before our reconciliation."

"Oh?" The question came out higher pitched than Merlin would have liked, but Arthur had chosen that moment to pull his finger back out and then push it back in, over and over, pace slow and unyielding. Logically, Merlin knew what was going where, but the reality of it hadn't really occurred to him before. He knew one finger wasn't going to be enough to get him ready for Arthur's cock, but he already felt so full that he could scarcely imagine what it would feel like when Arthur was inside him.

"Oh yes." The finger pulled out entirely and Merlin clawed at Arthur's thigh as he whimpered in loss. It had been a strange intrusion to get used to, but now that it had gone, he felt bereft and he didn't like it. He didn't realize he'd closed his eyes until he felt two fingers pushing at his entrance, wetter than he would have guessed unless Arthur had reslicked his digits. The tips went in easily, but he could feel his body resisting the onslaught and he had to concentrate on relaxing to let Arthur back into where they both wanted him.

"I used to wake up hard from dreams of you nearly every day for three years," Arthur finally continued, voice calm as if Merlin wasn't falling to pieces by his hand just in front of him. "I didn't even like you then, but I never stopped liking the way you looked. I would touch myself and think about touching you instead. I'd imagine taking you in my bed." Arthur gave a final, solid push and Merlin keened at the fullness of it. Arthur didn't shush him, or speak louder, just moved closer to his ear. "When I sat at this desk, I'd imagine you in my lap and on my cock as I worked."

And Merlin could suddenly see it as easily as if he'd plucked the very image from Arthur's mind (and maybe he had): a dressed Arthur sitting at this very desk, and a naked him sitting in his husband's lap, legs spread wide on either side of Arthur's, impaled on his cock. What would that be like? Would he be able to help his king with the missives from his nobles and the neighbors, the maintenance of their kingdom? Or would he be too out of it, drunk on sensation?

"Arthur…" Merlin choked out, overwhelmed by his own imagination, by what Arthur was doing to him, that there was more yet to come, that what had been done so far wasn't quite enough.

The fingers inside him twitched and spread, and Merlin bucked against the palm against his lower back, caught off guard by the movement. Only, his bucking just moved Arthur in and out of him in a familiar sensation, and Merlin found himself chasing after it, rolling his hips to feel the slide of Arthur's fingers in and out of his hole. As he moved, he could feel sweat forming on his burning skin, the aching in the muscles of his belly and back, the trembling in his legs, the way his hole started to loosen around Arthur's fingers.

"By the gods, Merlin." Merlin almost didn't hear Arthur over the screeching in his own mind as a third finger tried to worm its way inside his body alongside the other two. Arthur's breath against the sensitive point of his ear made him shake and rock, but he was trapped between Arthur's body and the desk with nowhere else to go. The hand at his lower back moved up and back onto one wing, smoothing from joint to tip. "My father used to tell me the only dreams that came true were the ones you made so, but for years I never thought that you'd be mine. Yet here you are, more perfect than any dream I could have ever imagine."

As three fingers pushed inside of him, Merlin's jaw slowly dropped, unable to breathe at being stretched open, unable to form a sound. Then Arthur's teeth set gently into the thin skin at the point of Merlin's ear, and the combined sensations of fingers in him, a hand on his wing, and teeth and hot
breath on his ear lit his body up like he'd been struck with lightning. It rushed through his limbs and whitened out his vision and took far longer to fade than it came over him. However, when it did, it left him shaking and, oddly, both confused and relieved. Relieved because the throbbing between his legs and the daze to his mind had eased, and confused because the beginnings of the bond in his chest was still just that: an incomplete start.

"Are you alright?" Arthur asked from behind him, equal traces of concern and amusement to his voice.

"I… um… What happened?" Merlin managed to get out as he tried to pull his mind back together.

"You came," Arthur said, now all amusement.

"Oh," Merlin replied, and then blushed. He'd heard that some men had problems with releasing too early, but he hadn't thought he'd be one of them. Arthur hadn't even gotten inside of him yet, not properly. His fingers were still in his hole, knuckles pressed to his rim. "I'm sorry."

Arthur's free arm pressed against where Merlin's was tucked against his side and Arthur bent over him to press a kiss to the back of his head. "Don't be sorry. You were a vision. Besides, I did it mostly on purpose. You always have strong reactions when I breathe on your ears and you were having strong reactions when I touched your wings, so I wanted to see if stimulating both could finish you."

"Well," Merlin said, still feeling breathless, "it appears you can."

They remained as they were for a few minutes, during which Merlin slowly got his heart and his breath back under control. He realized that Arthur was still hard, pressed against his arse cheek, off centered to accommodate the fingers still in Merlin. Merlin felt wrung out, and they had to continue to complete the bond, but he also wanted to continue. He wanted to feel Arthur in him, wanted to bring Arthur to completion with his body.

"I would love to continue," he said, shifting minutely to signal to Arthur that he was trying to get up, "but I think I need to be on the bed to do so."

Arthur stood so suddenly that it almost felt like Merlin was going to slip right off the desktop, but he was too far forward for that. He did groan in complaint when Arthur pulled his fingers free, leaving Merlin feeling unpleasantly empty. "You still want me to fuck you?" Arthur asked, sounding surprised.

Merlin turned to look at him over his shoulder, invoking a Gaius-brow. "Of course. How could I not?" He tried to push himself up with his arms, to put his weight back onto his legs, but his limbs were shakier than a newborn colts and he had to lay his body back down. "Even if I didn't, we still need to complete the bond. It just so happens that I do, as long as I get to lay down for it."

Arthur laughed and then his hands were back on Merlin, helping him stand before turning him around so Arthur could scoop him up with an arm under his knees and another behind his back. It felt strange to be airborne but not by his wings, but it felt nice to be held against Arthur's chest, to be able to see Arthur's face again.

"And I think I'd like to see your face when you finish in me," he found his mouth saying. Arthur glanced down at him and Merlin curled both arms around his neck to pull him into a kiss. Arthur stumbled but didn't stop kissing him as he tightened his hold on Merlin's body.

When they reached the bed, Arthur tossed him into the center and Merlin fought the weakness in his
limbs to scoot back to recline against the pillows, spreading his wings wide to both keep them from being trod on and to invite further touching. He was surprised when Arthur walked away, but he only went as far as his desk, shedding clothes as he walked until he was standing gloriously naked in the weak dawn light. Arthur dipped his hand back in the well of oil and slicked up his cock as he walked back to Merlin. It wasn’t until then that he realized how flushed Arthur's skin was, how dark his eyes had become, how the weight of his gaze made Merlin's own cock stir again.

"Are you sure you're alright to keep going?" Arthur asked, ever the chivalrous knight, even as he climbed onto the bed, cock bobbing enticingly with each movement, and even as he traced Merlin's hole with his slick fingers.

Merlin licked his lips and nodded, reaching out to tug Arthur closer. "If you don't get in me now, I'm going to curse your entire family."

Arthur smiled at the joke and closed the space between them. The feel of the tip of his hardness pressing against where Merlin was now loose and waiting made his heart pound in his chest. Then Arthur was pushing in, leaning forward with both hands braced on the bed to whisper against Merlin's temple as he did so: "That's your family now too."

Merlin couldn't respond, not when Arthur was slowly filling him like he was. Arthur's brow was furrowed, as if in concentration, but he didn't break his gaze from Merlin's until their hips were pressed together, at which point, his husband let out a long breath as he pressed their foreheads together. Sweat made their hair stick to their skin and every breath Arthur took, that Merlin took, pressed their chests together, they were so close.

"Okay?" Merlin asked, hands on Arthur's ribs and fingers spread wide, keeping him in place.

Arthur laughed and the sound breezed over Merlin's face. "I feel like I should be asking you that."

"Oh, I'm perfect," Merlin replied with a smile. His orgasm had left him weak, but it had also left him relaxed, like he'd just had a few cups of wine, but without the affect on his mind. He could feel the renewal of interest from his cock, but right now, he was just enjoying the way Arthur was filling him and surrounding him, the sight of his face and his body as he took what Merlin was so freely offering.

"Yes, you are," Arthur murmured, staring down at him for a long moment before he leaned down to take a kiss.

Their first kiss had been the same night Merlin had been stolen, and they hadn't kissed much after he'd come back, but it still happened enough for Merlin to wonder why Arthur only ever kissed him in that same slow way he always did. He'd seen the way desperately-aroused people tended to go after one another, but Arthur was never anything less than excruciatingly slow and deliberate, like he was intentionally trying to make Merlin go mad. It didn't always make sense, why Arthur did it that way, but right now, it did. Merlin was hard again before Arthur even pulled his hips back.

When Arthur thrust back into him, it felt like his cock was forcing the breath from Merlin's lungs. As did each subsequent thrusts, until Merlin found himself inhaling every time Arthur pulled out and exhaling every time he pushed back in. He quickly realized that Arthur fucked the way he kissed, each thrust slow but firm and deliberate, leaving Merlin a panting mess whose world had narrowed down to just... Arthur.

One of Arthur's hands wormed under Merlin's body at his lower back, pulling him up so Arthur could work his knees under Merlin's arse, and the change in angle of Arthur's thrusts sent bursts of pleasure through Merlin's limbs. Something in Arthur's expression changed and he began to fuck into
Merlin harder as he gradually picked up speed, every thrust working towards building up another orgasm until Merlin was clutching at the pillows below his head and trying to push his hips back into Arthur's.

The bond in his chest had never been brighter or warmer, and yet, it was growing more so still. There was even hints of it reaching between him and Arthur to connect them, traces of emotions and thoughts not his own and so explicit in their emotions and intentions that, even with Arthur fucking him into his bed, were making him blush. Arthur sat back on his knees, the arm under Merlin pulling him along, and the other hand pressed to his stomach. Rough callouses left a trail of goosebumps as Arthur smoothed his palm up Merlin's sternum, across the hard nub of a nipple, and down onto a spread wing. Merlin slammed his hips down at the contact and gripped the pillows so hard that he might have ripped them.

Arthur kept the pressure on his wing light, but he didn't let up. He kept brushing his fingers over scales and veins as his hips pushed Merlin to another cliff until he was teetering on the edge. The slightest breeze could push him off, and yet, he was stuck there. Everything in him: the bond, his orgasm, was waiting for something, but he couldn't figure out what. Until Arthur's hips began to accelerate even as his rhythm began to falter. The hand on Merlin's wing left suddenly and Merlin found that he couldn't suffer the loss of Arthur's skin at the moment. He wrapped them both in his wings, blotting out the light as Arthur's hand found his hair and gripped it tight, holding his head still for Arthur to devour his mouth.

The way Arthur was bending over him and between his legs pushed the softness of his belly against Merlin's cock, rubbing it as surely as a hand could, and that was all the touch he needed. His orgasm started to wash over him just as the inside of Arthur's wrist brushed the tip of his ears and shoved him over the edge of the precipice and into tumultuous waters. Arthur moaned into his mouth and the bond between them seemed to explode in light and heat, connecting the two of them across time and space and death, and for a split second, Merlin could see the future of their souls in a time far beyond Camelot.

The vision faded with his orgasm and left him limp and exhausted, Arthur's body a heavy, boneless weight keeping him pinned to the bed. The bond was a solid, unbreakable warmth in his chest, keeping him connected with Arthur in such a way that he could imagine his king's heart beating alongside his, could feel the echo of Arthur's thoughts and emotions in his own mind. His wings were slowly slipping away from Arthur's body and Merlin let them, letting in cooler air and light, and the familiar sights of Arthur's room were slowly superseding the strange things he'd seen at the height of their connection.

"Gaius told me about the bond, but I didn't think it would be like that," Arthur said, voice as dazed as Merlin felt.

"I've known about bonds since I was a child and I didn't think it would be like that," Merlin told him.

Arthur sat up on his knees with a low groan, and they both wrinkled their noses as Arthur's softened cock slipped from Merlin's hole. And then Merlin frowned at the mess of his release smeared on their bellies and Arthur's release slowly sliding from him. Arthur rolled over to the edge of the bed and got up, wobbling the few feet to his discarded clothes and back again where he swiped the cloth over Merlin's belly and then over Merlin's sensitive entrance, making him hiss at the scrape of the material. Arthur gentled his touch, keeping it slow until he was satisfied and then he tossed the clothing over the side of the bed.

Merlin shuffled his wings out of the way and weakly worked the blankets out from underneath his body, and it ended up taking the two of them to get it clear of Merlin's body. Arthur promptly
collapsed next to him and drew the blankets back over them both, leaving them in silence. It was still early, and most of the castle's inhabitants would likely be sleeping in late, but Merlin could already hear the stirring of peasant life from the people in the lower city down below.

"Do you think every time will be like that?" Arthur asked suddenly, turning on his side to look Merlin in the eye.

Merlin thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. "I really don't know. I want to say 'no' because I'm pretty sure that should only happen with the formation of a bond, but... I don't think that was a normal bonding either."

"Not normal in a bad way?" Arthur asked, sounding concerned as he reached for Merlin's hip and tugged him close.

"No," Merlin assured him as he shook his head and settled into Arthur's hold. "I'm supposedly magic taken form, and a bond is nothing but magic, so that probably had something to do with it. We can ask Gaius, but from all records, there has never been anyone like me before, so he may not know either. I am unique."

Arthur snorted and pressed a kiss to Merlin's forehead, arm tightening around Merlin's waist until they were pressed flush together. "That you are. Big ears and all."

"I do not have big ears," Merlin argued with a frown, flicking Arthur on the underside of his chin.

"Yes you do," Arthur replied, voice calm and amused. Soft lips brushed across his brow to his temple and over to his ear, and the wet tip of a tongue traced the point, making Merlin shudder. "You have big ears and big eyes and a big heart and I wouldn't have you any other way."

Even after how intimate they'd just been, Merlin still found himself fluttered and flustered by the praise. "And you say you aren't a romantic," he muttered, burying his face in Arthur's chest.

"I am whatever you need me to be," Arthur said, chuckling.

"I just need you to be you," Merlin replied. "Big muscles and big sword and big ego and all."

"And you say you aren't a romantic," Arthur parroted, making Merlin smile.

"I am whatever you need me to be," Merlin echoed, and the bond in his chest thrummed with the power of Arthur's affection for him.

"I just need you to be you."

FIN

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact:

- Arthur's white heather means 'protection'.

Well, that was a party! (not really) I think this my second longest fic though, so that's something. If you liked either thing, don't forget to reblog either thing!: karovie's art
and/or tmk13's/my fic.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!