The Darkness Will Rise From The Deep
by Kandakicksass

Summary

AU where Merlin and Arthur had an extra eight or so years of peace before meeting Mordred - who happens to be their son. Born of magic, Mordred is therefore never spoken of after a shamefaced Arthur forces Merlin to give him to the druids to raise. Merlin recognizes him almost immediately when they meet again – and unfortunately, so does Mordred, who grows up with not-quite platonic feelings for his beloved Emrys.

Notes

Like my ongoing Sterek fic, this fic will have short chapters and frequent updates. Also, if you didn't catch it: because I am a sick, sick person, this fic includes parent/child incest, though the relationship will be instigated and pushed for by the child. I basically had a plotbunny that wouldn't go away, so... this happened. Title (of both the fic and the first chapter) comes from the song "Mordred's Lullaby" by Heather Dale, which kind of made me want to write this.
When Merlin saw him again, he knew immediately. How could he not? Those eyes (Arthur’s eyes, with a blue that could only be magical) and that hair (Arthur’s shape and volume, but with Merlin’s coloring and slight curl). There was no doubt that this was their child, the result of a “mistake” on Arthur’s part and tempted desire on Merlin’s.

Help me. His voice was clear as day in Merlin’s head. Merlin listened to him plead, watched the guards, knowing that he should turn away and leave him but unable to do so.

So he beckoned the boy – his boy – forward, ushered him into his arms and into the castle. “Come,” he whispered, fervently, panicking when the guards’ footsteps seemed to come from all directions. The boy let out a soft sigh and slumped a little, tugging on Merlin’s hand, and Merlin pulled him closer, against his body. He was practically carrying his weight, but his son didn’t weigh much. He was a small slip of a thing – took after Merlin, he thought, and ushered him into Morgana’s room.

“Merlin? Have you forgotten how to knock?” Morgana sounded exasperated, but then she stilled when she saw his boy tucked into his arms. Gwen, behind her, looked dumbfounded.

“My – the boy,” he said weakly. “The guards were after him – I didn’t know what to do.” The boy’s knees gave out and without thinking, Merlin pulled him up into his arms, cradling him close. “Morgana, please.”

She stepped forward, as if to take the boy, but he held on tighter, feeling an absurd burst of panic as he let out a pitiful wheeze.

Emrys, he heard, but he didn’t understand and he didn’t have the time.

“It’ll be okay,” he whispered to him. Morgana gestured for them to come forward, but a knock at the door made them all pause.

“Behind the screen,” she hissed at him, and he slipped to the other side of the room and behind it before Morgana opened the door. He listened, barely paying attention, instead arranging the boy in his arms and mopping at his forehead with his shirt.

“You’ll be okay,” he murmured into his boy’s ear. “We’ll save you and you will be fine.”

Emrys, the boy whispered into his mind, and he closed his eyes tightly, unable to meet his son’s blue ones. Thank you.

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said quietly into the boy’s ear. His skin was beginning to feel cold, and Merlin bit his lip, brushing a hand across his forehead. Not feverish – yet. And he didn’t say why, but he could feel the boy’s understanding. He didn’t say anything, but his heart nearly stopped at the thought that the boy realized what he meant to Merlin.

“They’re gone,” Morgana said when she came back, reaching over to brush a hand over the boy’s forehead the way Merlin just had. “Is he okay? He looks pale.” Her lilting voice was concerned, her brow furrowed.

“He was hurt,” Merlin chokes, sounding weird, but Morgana didn’t say anything, just moved to examine the boy’s arm.
Merlin let her, maneuver his boy, let her take him out of his arms, even. The boy kept his eyes on Merlin, but Merlin looked away, grimacing.

Emrys, the boy whimpered.

“Can’t you say anything else?” he asked, but Morgana glared at him over her shoulder. He shimmied away, still pinned by the boy’s eyes.

As if being sarcastic, he heard the boy whisper *Emrys* into his mind one more time. *Emrys, please.* That time, the boy mouthed it, looking up at him with those huge cerulean eyes. He felt compelled, falling to his knees without a second thought. He reached back out, running a hand over the boy’s hair.

“Shh,” he whispered, feeling almost ashamed of himself.

His boy slipped unconscious, but Merlin still felt like he had never been closer to anyone. “Who is he?” Morgana asked softly. “A druid boy? What’s he doing here?”

“I don’t know,” Merlin answered, and thought to himself that he’d like the answer as well. Who had brought his boy back? Who had put him into danger like that? At the same time, some hidden part of himself whispered that perhaps he should thank whoever had caused his boy to be once again his arms. “I haven’t seen him since he was small,” he whispered, pressing his thin, clumsy fingers to the boy’s cheek. Neither woman heard him.

“What will we do?” Morgana asked him, her eyes determined. “We must protect him.”

“Yes,” Merlin agreed, wholeheartedly. “We have to.” He looked down at the boy, then gave up against the yearning in his arms and moved to arrange the boy against his body. Inconspicuously, he pressed his nose into the boy’s hair. “Please. We have to get him out of here, but not until he’s well – he’s so pale.” He felt worry bloom like fear in his chest. He had just found him – he couldn’t lose him again.

Just because Arthur hadn’t wanted their son, had been terrified the minute he’d seen a telltale glow of gold in their boy’s eyes, didn’t mean that Merlin felt the same. Giving him up had nearly broken him – this sweet boy in his arms had meant everything to him. He’d feigned an illness for five months – for what? To be forced to give his son to others to raise?

But his son was not his son. He closed his eyes until he was sure that they were dry and opened them to glance at the boy one more time. He could not get attached to something he couldn’t keep. To death, to the king, or even to the druids again, he would lose the boy.

“Watch over him, Morgana, please,” he said in a low voice. “I’ll go and try to figure out how to get him out of Camelot.” And he slid out from behind him, laying the boy gently on the ground. Morgana gave him an affirmative, fussing over his boy’s unconscious form.

He practically ran from the room, heart pounding, and made his way to Gaius’s chambers with a spinning head.
As unlikely as it is, let's just assume that somehow Morgana managed to go these extra eight years without anything major happening to cause the major rift between her and Uther, shall we? From this point on, however, the plot will continue as canon, minus, you know, the mpreg and incest.
(Shhh. We're not talking about it.)
Chapter title from the Edgar Allen Poe story Never Bet The Devil Your Head.

“He’s a boy!”

“He’s a druid!”

“A child, Arthur! He – he could be our son. He’s that young. Eight at most.”

Arthur stopped in his tracks, glaring at Merlin so venomously he actually felt like he should take a step back. “I told you never to mention him.”

Merlin was red-faced and near tears, but stood his ground. A moment of silence and Merlin had composed himself enough to respond. “He’s a little boy. He has the bluest eyes you’d ever see and my hair color, and –“

“And magic,” Arthur interrupted angrily. Merlin wanted to feel bad for him when he finally saw the fear in his eyes, but he could only think of the boy lying scared and possibly dying in Morgana’s rooms. “Merlin,” he said, forcing himself to be gentler. “I know that you worry for him. But if I find him, I have to turn him in. I have orders. Why don’t you tell me where you saw him in the courtyard, and I could just clear this up –“

“Our son,” he choked, betrayed.

“Your son,” Arthur corrects, exasperated. “And you don’t know that for sure. You don’t even know his name!”

“It wouldn’t matter if I did,” he said bitterly. “I wasn’t allowed to name the boy, was I?”

Arthur paused, scrambling for something to say. Merlin could see the conflict in his eyes and didn’t want it. He turned away. “He’s not our son, Merlin,” Arthur said softly. “The druids – they promised to take him far away from here. So quit worrying so much about some random boy.”

“You think I’m being unreasonable,” Merlin said, realization lighting his eyes with betrayal. “Arthur, I’m not being delusional. This is our boy. I’m sure of it.”

“Look,” Arthur said, voice hard. “I know you’re trying to protect the boy, but this is going too far. I don’t want to execute a child, Merlin.” Quieter, he added, “I hope we don’t find him. I hope he gets away. But it doesn’t change what I have to do.”

“You’re such a –“
But he cut himself off, and turned on his heel. Arthur called his name after him as he stormed out, but he ignored him.

“Merlin!”

He stopped only at the sound of Gwen’s voice. She was breathing harder than usual, her eyes bright with worry. “It’s the boy,” she whispered urgently when she was close enough to be audible. “He’s got such a high fever – please, Merlin, get Gaius. He needs a physician.”

Merlin froze, the news unsettling his already scanty calm. “I can’t – Gaius won’t be happy about it,” he answered, stammering the words. “I can’t drag him into this. I’ll do it instead – I’ll look at him, he’ll be fine.”

Gwen looked dubious, but she ushered him along anyway, pushing him towards Morgana’s rooms with an urgency that constricted around his heart.

“How is he?” he asked immediately, but Morgana just looked up at him with a terrified expression. “I thought she told you to bring Gaius!” she snapped at him, but he just sunk to his knees next to her, pressing a hand to his boy’s forehead. He wanted to pull his hand away, to put a wall between them (because as Arthur had reminded him, this boy was not his to keep). By the crown, though, the boy was so warm. “His arm – I think it’s infected.”

He grimaced as she showed him the wound, red and swollen around the sliced skin. “I can’t involve Gaius, not until I absolutely have to,” he muttered to Morgana, only having eyes for his boy. “I can – I’ll make it work. I’ll fix this.” He leaned in, ever so slightly, his hand still plastered to his boy’s feverish cheek.

Emrys, he heard, and almost sighed out loud in relief.

“I’ll get him some more water,” Morgana said quietly, getting up and padding away.

“My why do you keep saying that?” he asked softly, taking the rag on the boy’s forehead and using it to dab at his face.

“It is your name among my people, the boy answered tentatively.

“You’ve heard of me?” He felt like he’d been hit in the face with a brick.

“I grew up hearing stories of the great Emrys, was his answer. I am glad you are here. Thank you.

“I’m doing everything I can,” he said under his breath, so only the boy could hear him. His blue eyes opened slightly, pinning him with an intense gaze. Something about it made Merlin slightly uncomfortable – some darkness, deep within. It didn’t matter. Arthur may have convinced himself otherwise, but Merlin knew better. This boy was his son. “I will get you to safety, no matter what I have to do.” His words were urgent – he wanted the boy to know that, to know that Merlin was doing what he could.

“I know, Emrys. Thank you.” His words were urgent – he wanted the boy to know that, to know that Merlin was doing what he could.

I know, Emrys. Thank you. There was a slight smile on his pale pink lips. A slight yawn, then grimace of pain, made Merlin startle, automatically checking over his body for any visible hurts. I am tired, Emrys. I will sleep more.

“Rest,” he answered, quieting when Morgana returned, Gwen following at a much more subdued pace. “He woke again, for a little bit,” he told her, and Morgana took a breath of relief. He could sympathize, but couldn’t help the absurd urge to tell her that the boy was his. He managed to keep
silent, but the hand not on his boy’s face clenched around the fabric of his shirt.

“You have to help him, Merlin,” Morgana said quietly. “Please. He’s getting worse. If you can’t do it, you have to let Gaius help. He won’t last much longer like this.”

“I’m not just going to let him die,” Merlin snapped, and Morgana glared at him. He took a deep breath. “I swear to you. I won’t – I can’t let him die. I spoke to Arthur about letting him slip out – without telling him that I know where the boy is, of course – and he didn’t listen to me. I tried to do whatever I could to persuade him. I went that far to try and keep him safe – why do you think I would stop now and let him die?”

She let out a long sigh. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for yelling at you,” he replied, voice soft. “I’m as afraid as you are. But I’ll make it okay.”

_Somehow_, he thought. First things first – after treating him, he definitely needed to talk to a certain dragon.
Merlin’s head spun, torn between his destiny and his son. Destined to kill Arthur? His boy? How could Arthur’s own son kill him? Merlin tried to refuse to believe it – the dragon was cryptic, the dragon must be lying. But he couldn’t risk it.

His son. He shut his eyes tightly, trying not to cry. Right at the moment, Arthur was surely on his way to break their boy out of prison, to try and save him in spite of his insistence that he’s not their son. He was depending on Merlin to free them, to open the grate and let them out of the castle. Their boy’s life depended on help that would not come from him.

He didn’t know who the supposed monster was – his boy, or himself.

“Are you going to bed, Merlin?” Gaius asked him from the door to his room. Speaking to him like a child, his ward, unaware that Merlin had his own child in the dungeons, about to be caught and burned for a magic given to him at birth. Part of him wanted to tell Gaius everything – that the child Arthur had forced him to give up was the same one set to die come morning. “So early?”

“I’m tired,” he responded, listless, brow furrowed. Gaius frowned at him, but went easily enough and left Merlin to his thoughts.

Emrys. No, he thought. No. He couldn’t do this. Listen to his boy’s pleading, to the thoughts in his head through this impossible connection. He couldn’t. Emrys, his boy plead. Where are you, Emrys?

He repeated the name again, and Merlin covered his ears with his hands, choking on a sound from deep in his throat.

Help us, please, the boy whispered in his mind. They’re coming.

A beat.

I’m scared, Emrys. Merlin let a broken sound escape. They’ll kill me. The fear in his boy’s voice was too much. Merlin twitched, visibly forcing himself to keep still. His destiny was to protect Arthur. He knew that if his son lived – if his boy made it – the destiny that the dragon had hinted at so obviously would stand a good chance of passing. But –

Don’t do this, don’t ignore me! Like his father, his son sounded on the verge of tears. I know you can hear me.

I thought you were my friend.
His friend, his father – the sound of his boy’s voice was nearly drowning him. His breath came too fast, his heart beating loudly in his ears.

*We’re the same. I don’t want to die.* The sound of his boy’s voice, so clear in his head. By the old religion, how could he do this?

Then, just his name – repeated three times – was enough to get him moving. He cried out, unable to help himself, and tore from his bed. He moved as fast as possible, and the sound of Arthur’s berating when he arrived was enough to make him sigh in relief as he opened the grate to release his son and prince.

He offered Arthur some excuse about having trouble getting out of the castle, but the look in his boy’s eyes was enough to quell his words and excuses. He looked down in shame, only looking up again to help his boy onto the horse with Arthur.

*Good-bye, Emrys,* his son told him softly, silently. His lips never moved, but his eyes were on Merlin’s, understanding. *I know that someday we will meet again.*

If he touched his lips as Arthur rode away with his son, extending them to the two most important men in his life as they rode away, he knew that the boy would keep his secret.

Later that night, Arthur finds him pacing his chambers with a bite-sore lip and a stressed expression. “The boy is fine, Merlin. Quit pacing.”

“You’re absolutely sure?” he demanded, surging forward, putting himself within touching distance. “You’re sure he’s okay? The boy – gods, I don’t even know his name! But he’s all right. Back with his people, safe?”

“He’s fine,” Arthur repeated, then gentler, “And his name is Mordred. I asked, before they left.” Something he couldn’t describe ran through him at the sound of his boy’s name. *Mordred.* He whispered it aloud, wincing when Arthur gave him a dark look. “You’re not still convinced he’s – you know.”

“Our son?” he asked with a sharp expression. “Yes, I am. Arthur, why is that so hard to believe?”

“He looks nothing like me.” Then, he scoffed. “He should be worlds away.”

“That’s because he looks like me,” Merlin told him hotly. “He has my hair color and my frame – but your eyes. Vaguely, the shape of your face.”

“Merlin, drop it,” Arthur said threateningly. “I don’t know why you care so much. Someone dosed you with a potion – you became –“ Here, he choked on the words. “- with child, against your will. Why do you care so much about the boy?”

For a moment, Merlin nearly forgot that Arthur didn’t know the real reason – Merlin’s endless well of magic that ran through his body like the blood in his vein – that he’d fallen pregnant. “He’s our son,” he whispered. “Why don’t you care?”

“That boy – *Mordred* – is not our son!” Arthur bellowed at last, entirely finished with Merlin’s argument. “For all I know, the boy you gave birth to is dead! Something so unnatural… he had magic. Everything about that child was wrong. An abomination.”

“You’re a monster.” The words were barely audible, and Arthur – finally realizing that he’d crossed a line – stepped back. All at once, he realized what he’d said, how cruel his words were, but it was too late – Merlin was already making for the door.
“Merlin, wait,” Arthur cried after him. “I didn’t mean it like that!”

“Future king or not,” Merlin choked when Arthur caught his wrist. “You were right. He is not our son.” To Arthur’s clear horror, Merlin’s eyes were filled with tears. “He’s my son. Someone so heartless as you doesn’t deserve him.”

“I didn’t mean —“

But Merlin tore his wrist out of his grasp and ran down the hall. Behind him, he knew that Arthur remained stubborn, refusing to believe the truth of Mordred’s parentage. That was fine, he tried to convince himself as he pressed his face into his pillow when he finally fell into bed. He would likely never see the boy again, anyway.

He still dreamt of bright cerulean eyes and Arthur’s lips, forming the word *Mordred*. As if losing his mind, he heard the word *Emrys* whispered at the edge of his consciousness.
Then, after months of torment, he heard that voice.

_Hello, Emrys._ And those were the bright blue eyes of his son, the eyes he’d thought he’d said goodbye to forever. The same mop of hair, the same pale skin. It felt like a sword being plunged through his chest. He didn’t know whether to be relieved or terrified – _not again, his boy in danger again_ – but instead of doing anything about it, he just took a step forward toward Mordred. The boy almost smiled, his lips twitching ever so slightly, and appeared to reach out for him for just a second. His movement was interrupted by the sound of metal tearing through wood and the cloth of tents and he turned, only to look back with a determined gleam in his eye and run. He wanted to go after him, to just watch over him until he could be sure that the boy was safe, but Arthur’s men were tearing everything apart and something had to be done.

Naturally, that something was ‘flee with the rest of the druids and end up watching his son almost die again.’ He stood at the edge of the clearing, heart pounding, voice caught in his throat. He watched, frozen as knight after knight surrounded Mordred, watched his frightened son spin around, cataloguing each new threat. Then, swords coming at him from all angles, his boy opened his mouth and screamed to the heavens. Each of the knights were thrown back, unconscious, and Merlin began to realize how much like him Mordred truly was.

The boy gave him one last look before turning and dashing into the wood, but he didn’t follow. Merlin had a duty, and now that he was sure Mordred was as safe as he could be, he needed to turn back. It took some convincing, but eventually, his legs listened to him and moved away, toward Camelot. He had said goodbye once and could do it again.

He returned to the castle after Morgana and Arthur, mind numb, thoughts halted. The most important thing was to check on Morgana and he went there almost immediately. She was like him, something he had never contemplated, but she was. Morgana was born with magic like he was, lovely and brilliant and determined to make a world where magic was welcomed and used for good.

He wished he could be as unafraid as she had taught herself to be.

Arthur was waiting for him when he exited Morgana’s room. “I do hope you’re not planning on replacing me with my sister.” Arthur’s voice was quiet and serious, however teasing the words should have been.

“You’re ridiculous,” he answered, feeling that old anger well inside of him. “What is there to replace?” A glance back showed Arthur’s stunned expression at his bitterness. “Nothing. Exactly my thought.” He waited for a moment, but Arthur appeared to be at a loss for words. “I’m going to bed, _sire._ You know where to find me if you need me.”

“Merlin, don’t be like that.” It appeared that Arthur had found his words, calling after him and jogging to keep up. “What’s wrong?”
“Besides you being an inconsiderate arse?” he responded shortly, words clipped. “Nothing at all. Good night, sire.”

“Merlin,” he said lowly. “Talk to me.”

“About what?” he sighed finally, turning to face his golden-haired prince. “There is nothing I wish to discuss with you. Only that you watch what you say lest you come off an inconsiderate –“

“Arse, yes, I got that,” Arthur said, looking vaguely irritated, but no less concerned. There was a pause, then Arthur told him quietly, “We are not as close as we once were.”

“No,” Merlin agreed, eyes narrowing. “We are not. How close would you like us to be, my lord?” At Arthur’s bewildered expression, he took a step forward, into Arthur’s space. “Is this close enough?” Another step, pressing his body flush against the blonde’s. “Is this?” For a moment, the warmth of Arthur’s skin even from behind clothing was welcoming and made him want just a bit of what he’d once had.

Arthur blushed and stammered, reaching up to push him away, but Merlin was two steps ahead of him. “Go back to mooning over Gwen,” he said firmly. “I’ll have none of this. Don’t try and keep me close without giving me anything for it.”

“I’ve given you plenty! A home! Good work, standing!” Arthur, clearly against his own desires, was growing angry. Merlin had plenty of experience with his prince’s anger.

“And a son, but look how that ended.” It was like he had gone up and slapped Arthur. He hated seeing that expression on his prince’s face, but the words were bubbling inside of him, desperate to be said. “I saw him today,” Merlin said quietly. “Mordred.”

Arthur gaped, then looked down. “You shouldn’t have been at the camp.”

“He got away,” Merlin told him absently. “But I watched him almost die. I’m so sick of feeling like I’m losing something I never had.”

Arthur looked sad, which was something Merlin has never seen him express over their son. “That boy – “ He coughed, cleared his throat, and continued. “That boy is probably somewhere else entirely. Mordred is not our son. You’re projecting your desires onto Mordred.”

Merlin didn’t even try to argue. “I’m tired, sire, and wish to go to bed.” Arthur bit his lip, looking like he wanted to continue trying to convince Merlin, but he just put a hand on Merlin’s shoulder.

Instead of pulling away, Merlin looked up at him with vulnerable eyes. “I’m sorry,” he heard Arthur whisper, and watched with widening eyes as Arthur leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. “I’m sorry none of this has gone as it should.”

“I’m sorry, too,” he replied, and he was. Then, after a moment, he swallowed and said, “I love you, you know. I know you’ll never feel the same way, but I needed to say it.” Arthur looked both heartbroken and afraid, and that was too much for him. He turned.

“Merlin –“

“Good night, Arthur.” It took all of his strength of will, but he walked away.
curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, i pray

Chapter Notes

Title from the poem Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night by Dylan Thomas.

Hearing Mordred’s voice again was a relief in and of itself. He didn’t care that what he was hearing were instructions, directions – all he needed was the confirmation that Mordred was alive and well. It meant that Merlin was going to be able to see him again, be able to ease the twisted aching in his chest.

Then he realized what was happening and he was running through the corridors.

He’ll be killed, he thought wildly. What is he doing coming back to Camelot? But that didn’t matter so much as finding him, doing what he could, until he heard exactly where Mordred was headed. He realized that Mordred was not alone, and panicked enough to tell Arthur where they were going when the prince ambushed him in the hall.

He was almost relieved when they arrive at Morgana’s room only to find that no one was there – but Merlin knew better. He had been privy to a situation much like this one before and was prepared for it. “They were there,” he insisted when Arthur had raged at him, but didn’t outright call Morgana on her bluff. He didn’t yet know what was going on, and ignorance was dangerous.

Then, the crystal went missing and suddenly he understood. The person Mordred had been talking to had been a druid. He was almost certain of it, and if the crystal was something terribly important, it probably did not bode well for Camelot – at the very least, for Uther. The king only confirmed it when recounting how it had been acquired.

Seeking Mordred out seemed like a bad idea, but he had to know what was happening, to be sure that his son wasn’t going to put himself back into the way of danger. He would follow, let Arthur assume that he just couldn’t keep his nose out of the affairs of the king, let him assume that Merlin only followed him out of loyalty to his prince.

So he followed Arthur blindly, as he always had, but this time instead of eyes, he used his ears, his mind, his magic. He waited for Mordred’s voice, wondering if the boy knew that he could hear, if he would figure it out and shield his thoughts. He prayed Mordred did not and was ashamed to know that his reasons were not purely to aid the hunt for Alvarr’s men and the stolen crystal.

They’re coming, he heard, and knew that they were on the right track. As inconspicuously as possible, he urged Arthur forward, urged him in the right direction. He just hoped his urging didn’t backfire on him.

Backfire it does. He watched, helping only when he could do so without being caught with sorcery, as good knights were killed by Alvarr’s renegades.

He watched as his son impaled two knights on spears, frozen as Mordred whispered words into his head that he would hear again and again every time he slept.

I shall never forgive this, Emrys. And I shall never forget.
He didn’t know how to reply and instead said nothing, letting Mordred turn on heel and run into
the wood. He had said it once, said it twice, said it a thousand times – this time he was sure.
Seeing his son again would not happen for many years, if at all. He stood there, trying not to
scream or blow something up. His magic welled under his skin, rising with his torment, and to
release it he aimed toward one of Alvarr’s men and launched him backwards into a tree. Distracted
by the fighting, none of the knights nor Arthur saw his display.

Once back in Camelot, Merlin felt burdened with both his suspicions of Morgana and the
knowledge of his son’s words. Whether aimed toward him or his prince, he did not know – he did
not care to know. Everything had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

“You look like someone’s died,” Arthur told him that night as he readied himself for bed. Arthur’s
expression was grim as well, but he had noticed somehow that Merlin’s emotion ran deeper. “Why
are you so quiet?”

He opened his mouth to tell him of Mordred’s words – to tell him how it had felt to see his son that
day – and paused. He took in the sight of his prince, sliding under his covers and glancing at
Merlin, waiting for an answer. He took in golden hair and blue eyes and remembered how his eyes
had flashed when his mouth had formed the word *abomination*.

*This is what Arthur will think of me, as well,* he thinks, the realization dawning on him. *He cannot
overlook his prejudice for his own son and he won’t overlook it for me.*

“Nothing,” is what he told Arthur. “Nothing. Just thinking about today.” He wanted to talk to
Arthur about their boy, but always forgot that Arthur would not the way Merlin wanted him to. To
Arthur, he was not their boy. He wasn’t even Merlin’s boy. Arthur had convinced himself that the
child of Merlin’s body was far away or even dead, and would not consider otherwise. He wanted to
talk to the man he’d loved so fiercely about the boy that had come out of their union – but that man
would never look at Mordred or even Merlin the same way.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” Arthur said suspiciously, but Merlin cut him off.

“You don’t want to hear what I’m thinking, Arthur,” and maybe it was the use of his name, or the
look on Merlin’s face, but Arthur didn’t say anything. He looked down and covered himself with
the burgundy quilt.

“You can go, then,” Arthur said shortly in reply. Perhaps Merlin should have been irritated by the
curt dismissal, he was only relieved for it. He couldn’t take much more of his prince’s presence
tonight.

He gladly made for the door, shoulders tense, expecting to be called back, but there was nothing.
He slid into the hall and shut the door behind him. He leaned against it, breathing a sigh of relief.
As much as he loved Arthur, it became more and more difficult to be around him as time passed.
He wanted so much and received so little – and could not say anything about it.

He went to bed hungry, fatigued, and heartbroken – but none of those things were new to him.
In that way, years passed. Putting Mordred out of his mind was neigh on impossible, but so was keeping up with his prince-turned-king. It helped somewhat, having Arthur around, that little piece of his heart kept near. The other piece would never be recovered, he knew that. Though the opportunity to be a true father was torn from him, the loss was still there, deep within his heart. As much as he hated his king for how he had treated both himself and his boy, he loved him just as much. How could he not? Arthur had his love first, though no greater than what he felt for his son. He followed blindly as ever, aching for his boy and for the family he should have had.

So the years did pass with Merlin’s devotion, Arthur’s growing leadership, Camelot’s successes and failures. His king aged gracefully and so did Merlin, to everyone’s surprise. To be honest, other than the length of his hair, he didn’t appear to have changed at all. His muscles were just that bit firmer, his expressions just that much more serious, but to most, he appeared not to have aged. He watched his prince become a ruler, watched the Lady Morgana become swallowed by her own hatred, watched as Guinevere became a queen. Camelot changed around him, though he remained the same.

Then, one day – Merlin ten years older and feeling none the wiser – Gwaine and Percival never came home.

The rescue mission was supposed to be routine. He and Arthur went on plenty of those stupid adventures and always came home safe and relatively sound. He wasn’t supposed to run into druid seers or see terrifying visions of a future he desperately needed to stop.

The worst part was that he was sure he knew that face. He knew it, like it was something just out of his grasp. Somehow, the vision was something he’d imagined before in a thousand ways, yet never wanted to face. Still, the dark-haired youth who had captured his attention could have been anyone. The vision was clear, but not clear enough he could be certain. He refused to believe it.

Of course his stupidity caught them in a trap, like a fool, and everything seemed to stop. They were felled, caught – well and truly caught, Merlin more so when he realized who the leader must be.

“Stop!”

He knew that face – the very face he’d seen in the vision. Handsomer, cleaner, and dressed in the clothes of a hunter, but the same man. His eyes seemed to pierce Merlin’s soul, deep down. The man knew him, he was sure of it.

“Shouldn’t we leave it to the Lady Morgana to decide their fate?” His gaze was so serious, with just that hint of amusement in it. He felt like a toy, but still – he couldn’t see the man in front of them as evil. Dark, yes – but not evil. His eyes were not like Morgana’s. The man pointing Arthur’s sword at the king agreed, pulling away. They renegades went to prepare their travel, he could only assume, leaving the mysterious man with Merlin and his king.
“You don’t remember me, do you?” he asked Arthur, helping him up. “You saved my life once, many years ago.” His voice – smooth as silk – was contemplative, considering the situation.

It was too much. Weakly, Merlin put together what he’d tried not to and what Arthur could not. “Mordred.” My son – my poor son. How long had he wanted to hear his son speak out loud? How long had he wanted to hear his voice? It practically killed him that he was finally getting his wish, under these circumstances.

As if he’d heard Merlin’s thoughts, Mordred smiled perilously at him, then turned back to the king. “Hello, Arthur.”

He turned to lead them to the rest of the group. “Mordred,” he hissed, catching up so Arthur couldn’t hear them. “You don’t have to do this.”

“On the contrary, Emrys,” he said pleasantly in reply, giving him a glance. His eyes were still the same bright blue that they had been when he was a child and his hair had only curled more as he’d aged. His little boy was a man now, and Merlin could only wish that he’d been there to see it, to actually raise his boy. To be a father. “I think I do.” Then, softer, “I told you I would never forgive. Never forget.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Merlin replied under his breath. “Mordred, please. I never wanted you to be hurt.”

“I know,” he answered lightly and Merlin met his eyes in surprise. Mordred had that smile on his face – he was laughing at him. “Dear Emrys. Did you really think that I blamed you solely for all of this? I knew from the beginning you could never wish me harm.”

“Mordred—”

“I’m not saying I forgive you,” he continued, ignoring Merlin’s anguished expression. “Just because most of my anger isn’t at you doesn’t mean you’re off the hook, you know.” He paused, letting Arthur catch up. The king looked like he was deep in thought, several feet away. “You almost let me die the first time,” Mordred whispered, stepping closer so that their noses were inches apart. “I trusted you, confided in you, and you almost let me die.”

“I didn’t want to,” he replied, sounding choked. “That wasn’t what I wanted – but there are reasons I can’t explain to you.”

Mordred, still so close, appeared to be contemplating his words. “Reasons good enough that you would have let your own flesh and blood be slaughtered?”

Merlin took a step back, eyes widening in shock. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he had half a thought to be afraid. It would have been much simpler if he was. “You know,” Merlin whispered. “How long have you known?”

“Since I was a child, Emrys,” Mordred told him, and Arthur was almost to them. “I knew all along.” He reached out, gripping Merlin’s chin, bringing him closer again. “We have much to discuss, Emrys, but now is not the time.” He leaned in, just enough to make Merlin go rigid, then smiled. It was both beautiful and horrible, that sweet grin etched on his son’s face.

“Are we going or not?” Arthur snapped at them, irritable and worried and resigned to his death.

“Of course we are,” Mordred answered softly, holding Merlin’s chin for just a moment more before releasing it. “Come, Merlin.” His grin turned crafty. “Your highness.”
Arthur frowned and followed, but this time it was Merlin who lagged behind.
They walked, frozen and hungry, behind the men who had tied them up. They weren’t the only two, either – there were at least ten more men tied to the caravan as well. The idea of where they were headed gave Merlin a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, but he was forced to keep moving. Every now and again, Mordred would look back and catch his eye. He would beg to slow down, to rest, but he got nothing except bruises and hurts. He watched helplessly as Arthur became more and more run down.

They finally rested for the night, but then of course Merlin and his king were forced to watch as their captors ate. They were taunted with bread, but thankfully Arthur was unconscious long before he could really feel the need for food that had been denied him.

His son spoke in their favor, tried to help – and in the morning brought them bread. He said nothing about the talk they needed to have.

“You shouldn’t be so quick to judge me,” Mordred told him quietly. Clear as day, though the words were never spoken out loud, he heard to judge your son. “You fear me, Emrys, don’t you?” And he reminded him again that they were the same. There was nothing Merlin could say, but he kept looking up at his son, meeting his eyes until finally Mordred seemed to give up on a response. He set the bread loaves on the ground by Merlin’s feet, a clear offering, and stood. He turned, nearly walked away, but Merlin called after him.

“What is Morgana looking for in Ismere?” Mordred gave pause, as if considering whether or not to answer. Finally, he did.

“The Diamair.” The word was short, factual. Merlin was just relieved that Mordred answered the question. His blue eyes – like his own, like Arthur’s – met his curiously, as if he wanted to know what Merlin was after.

“What’s that?” he pressed, needing to know. Mordred sighed, and looked back at him. His eyes were conflicted – almost sad.

“In the language of my people,” he began hesitantly. “It means ‘the key.’” The sinking feeling in his stomach had returned.

“The key to what?”

A long pause went uninterrupted between them.

“The key to all knowledge,” Mordred said at last, and turned away to leave Merlin to think.

It was later that day when Arthur and Merlin made their escape. He gave a fleeting thought to the
other prisoners he was leaving to a likely death, then another for his son – but as quickly as it came, it left. They ran until finding a large gap in the ice and snow, then at Arthur’s beckoning, leapt across it.

Mordred followed them to the gap, but did not attempt to make it. When Arthur did not fire his weapon, Mordred turned from them.

“Why did you not kill him?”

Merlin’s voice was soft, too quiet – like Mordred’s solemn expression as he stared at them across the gap in the ice.

“Did you really want me to kill the boy?” Arthur snorted. “Please.” Merlin shook his head, tentative, then looked up over the ridge of snow to watch as Mordred walked away from them again.

“Of course not,” he answered. “He helped us – he was the one to bring us bread, and to tell me what Morgana wanted. But I don’t understand why you spared him.” He met Arthur’s eyes. “Please, humor me. Just tell me.” He didn’t want to say that he hoped Arthur wanted to spare his son, but instead of giving him hope, Arthur just sighed.

“He’s still a child yet,” Arthur told him. “An adult, sure, but still young. He’s a druid, but he doesn’t even have magic. I saved his life once, so I figured, why kill him now?” He paused. “Perhaps it was weakness.”

Merlin looked down, biting his lip. Part of him wanted to tell Arthur the truth – that Mordred did have magic – but he couldn’t give his king a reason to have their boy killed. “That’s it? Weakness? Your fondness for a boy you once condemned to death?”

“What else do you want from me, Merlin?” Arthur snapped, then growled and pushed himself to his feet. “Don’t say it. I know what you want, but now is not the time.”

There were so many things Merlin wanted to tell him – that their son had filled out, with Arthur’s jawline and musculature. He wanted to tell him that the aspects of his parents had finally balanced in their son, but he did not.

“He’s not evil,” he said instead. “I can’t believe that he’s evil.” Arthur looked back at him with a clenched jaw, but when he saw the earnestness in Merlin’s expression he relaxed.

“I don’t think so either,” he agreed finally and Merlin nodded, getting up to join Arthur as they began to cross the snow. He glanced over his shoulder at the other side of the gap, where Mordred had disappeared. Our beautiful son, he thought without really considering the thought. He grimaced at the stupid longing that clenched his heart and tried to ignore it.

He followed Arthur into Ismere, to certain death, the same way he always did, and prayed he would not be forced to raise his hand against Mordred.

He never imagined that Mordred would save both his and his king’s lives. Never in a million years did he imagine that Mordred would turn on Morgana the way he did – eyes flashing with upset and anger and sadness. He was barely conscious, but he could still see the confliction in Mordred’s eyes. In the end, though, he left Morgana on the ground and went to aid Arthur.

Merlin wondered vaguely as Mordred got Arthur to his feet if he knew the full truth of his parentage – not only the legendary Emrys, but the Once and Future King. He decided it didn’t matter.
Mordred might have paused on his way out for Merlin, but he managed to whisper, “Get him to safety.” His son did not even acknowledge his words, but barreled forward, toward the sound of the knight’s footsteps.
It should have been the proudest day of his life. Under any other circumstances, it would have been. That was his son, kneeling at his father’s feet, pledging allegiance to a king and a country that his parents loved.

It should have meant more than potential betrayal. He shouldn’t have had to question if his son had saved his father’s life for some nefarious purpose, or if he’d gone back to collect Merlin for the same reason. He shouldn’t have been watching his son’s knighting and wondering if it was the beginning of the end.

“Arise,” Arthur said, and Merlin wished that the proud father look was more than coincidence, that Arthur really was knowingly knighting his son and bursting with pride, knowing that he’d made something wonderful, something he could be proud of. “Sir Mordred, Knight of Camelot.” His lips curled around the title with a pleased smile.

The knights and gentry cheered, of course, and Mordred had stood and looked around with a huge smile that Merlin didn’t think he’d ever be able to forget. His sweet son, who had never really belonged anywhere, was finally part of something. In that moment, it was so difficult for him to believe that his son could really be the monster his destiny had painted him as.

He slipped out to wait for his son to exit the hall, just inside an antechamber. His boy walked in obliviously, the same grin on his face, and Merlin slowly exhaled before speaking.

“Here. Let me help you with that.” Mordred gave him a nod, and he reached around the boy’s shoulder to reach the clasp. Mordred’s body was warm against his own, and he slipped the cloak off.

“Thank you.” His son’s voice was soft, gentle. He met Merlin’s eyes, peering at him through his eyelashes.

“You know,” Merlin told him quietly. “If Arthur knew you had magic, things would be…” He trailed off, not really wanting to say it but knowing that the warning had to be out in open air. “Very different,” he finished lamely. He went to set down the heavy crimson cloak. He turned back to face Mordred, trying to school his expression in one more befitting the great Emrys that his son had grown up hearing so much about. “Tell me something.”

Mordred cocked his head, eyes curious but not malicious. “Of course.” He didn’t even appear tense – his shoulders and posture were relaxed, as if he knew that Merlin would never hurt him.

“You saved Arthur’s life. Why?” He went up to him and began removing the cuffs and small armor pieces that Mordred no longer needed. It was hard not to just stare into his boy’s mesmerizing eyes, to be caught in their conversation.

“Because Arthur is right,” Mordred answered after a pause, his voice sure. Merlin met his gaze,
surprised. “The love that binds us is more important than the power we wield. Morgana had forgotten that.” He shrugged, as if it were no big deal – but it was. To Merlin, the conversation they were having was pivotal.

“You really believe that,” he said quietly. He moved away to set the armor pieces down, but Mordred followed him and caught his wrist. His grip was warm where it touched Merlin’s skin.

“I do,” Mordred told him firmly. Merlin’s rigidity loosened until Mordred was holding his hand more than anything. “Morgana once saved me out of compassion and love – she no longer has that warmth. She is little more than hatred.”

“You do not intend to fall into that trap.” Merlin’s tone was questioning but his words were more of a statement. For the first time, the answer was something he already knew.

“No. I do not.” Mordred searched his expression for a moment before smiling slightly. “You have decided not to condemn me any longer?” He let go of Merlin’s wrist and reached up, lightly tracing the side of Merlin’s face. Something inside him wanted to flinch away, but a larger part welcomed the affection. “Your eyes are so much more open now.”

“I don’t want to believe the worst in you,” he said, forcing his tongue to work. “I never did.”

“You reasons for letting me die... they no longer matter to you?” he asked with a raised eyebrow, settling his hand on the side of Merlin’s neck.

“It’s occurring to me that they might only matter because I’m letting them,” he admitted, then swallowed. “I was cruel to you. I’m sorry.”

Mordred stepped back, eyes challenging. “Are you saying that because you know that I know who you really are to me, or because you mean it?” Merlin opened his mouth to object, but Mordred put a finger across his lips. “Listen to me, Emrys. I know you are not cruel at heart, but you almost left me to die.” He paused, then added softly, almost accusingly – “Your own son.”

“I can’t tell you why,” Merlin managed to croak. “But I mean it. Mordred, I’m sorry.”

“What sort of darkness are you hiding from me?” Mordred murmured, but let Merlin pull away. “I can’t,” he repeated firmly. “I’m sorry – and I promise I won’t let it happen again. You are more important than any reason I might have.” When Mordred gaped at him, he impulsively leaned up and pressed a kiss to his son’s forehead. “I’m proud of you, Mordred. Really. You have overcome so much – I could never have asked for better. Whatever reasons I had – they can’t apply to you, I’m sure of it.” He added the last part for his own sake, but Mordred looked almost dazed. He looked happy.

You will not push me away any longer, Emrys? his boy questioned, probing his mind, but Merlin only shivered at the intrusion and shook his head.

“No,” he answered aloud. “I – I promise.” He immediately knew that a promise like that was foolish to make, but he couldn’t deny his boy anything, as he was starting to realize.

Mordred smiled at him widely, triumphantly, like he had achieved some long life goal. “You are mine, Emrys,” he said intensely, his voice so quiet Merlin almost leaned in, entranced. “We’re each other’s now.” Mordred traced his fingertips from Merlin’s temple to his chin and swept from the room, leaving Merlin to stand there, dizzy and confused, but ultimately happy. It was what he had wanted – a relationship with his son, a family, someone to love and to take care of.
He wouldn’t let Mordred down. Just like he’d said – they were each other’s. He refused to let any amount of fear or uncertainty put a wall between him and his boy ever again.
when it comes back you won't be scared and lonely

Chapter Notes

I don't know what I'm doing anymore sorry if it sucks jeez i just love them so much and wanted to write a fic i never knew this would happen
Title from Scared by Three Days Grace.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Predictably, Merlin spent a week avoiding his son.

He wasn’t doing it to be cruel (accused Percival, who had taken the distraught knight under his wing), teach Mordred some sort of lesson (asked a very confused Leon), and he certainly wasn’t trying to avoid his own romantic feelings (cried Gwaine, who looked disappointed when Merlin assured him it wasn’t the case). Even Arthur, who might have been closest in assuming that Merlin didn’t want to be around a man he’d “once” claimed as his son, wasn’t quite there.

Merlin was scared.

So scared, in fact, that every time Mordred so much as looked at him, he promptly looked (and walked) away. He knew his behavior bordered on ridiculous, but he couldn’t help but see his boy and be overwhelmed with fear. This was his child, and he’d barely handled knowing about him the nineteen years that he hadn’t been around.

It didn’t change the guilt he felt every time Mordred’s eyes found him, hurt and almost angry – but more often than not, hopeful, waiting for Merlin to go over and talk to him.

“Are you punishing him?” Arthur asked. Merlin had been making his bed while the king sat at his desk, looking over a treaty, but it didn’t meant that Merlin was too distracted to pick up on the too-casual tone of his king’s voice.

He didn’t pretend to be ignorant of who they were talking about. “What on earth would I be punishing him for? Mordred hasn’t done anything wrong.” (Yet, his mind added, but he firmly stamped that thought down. He’d promised. If he couldn’t keep any of his other promises, he was determined to keep that one.)

“For not being who you want him to be?” Arthur asked evenly. Merlin wanted to get angry, but when he turned around to glare at his golden-haired king, Arthur’s calm, concerned expression made him pause and sigh.

“I’m not punishing him,” he said at last, finishing with the bed. “I’ve been busy.”

Arthur shrugged, stretching. “It’s not like you have much of a reason to spend time with him,” he said thoughtfully. “I just noticed how frustrated the boy’s seemed every time you’re around lately. The knights are getting antsy on his behalf. They’ve seen the way you run the other way when Mordred tries to talk to you.”

Strangely, though, Mordred hasn’t tried to speak to him through their strange mind link even though all of the things Arthur was saying were true. “It’s nothing.” he murmured, lost in thought,
missing the look that Arthur gave him.

“Are you sure this isn’t because he’s not what you want him to be?” he asked suspiciously. “You spent years going on about how sure you were about him being –“ As always, Arthur couldn’t even say the words our son.

Merlin’s lips pressed together tightly. “I haven’t been punishing you for not being who I wanted you to be. Why would I punish him?”

Arthur blanched at his thinly veiled jibe. Merlin tried valiantly to feel bad about guilt tripping Arthur for breaking his heart, but he just couldn’t do it. He didn’t like thinking of himself as a vindictive person, but the abrupt end to their would-be relationship had left him just the slightest bit bitter. Usually he could ignore it, but Arthur always had a knack for saying something that made him angry.

“Merlin,” Arthur said at last, quietly, and he sighed.

“You’re right,” Merlin responded. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t fair.” He was quiet for a moment. “I’m not intentionally trying to upset Mordred. It’s a lot to handle.”

Arthur nodded, expression tired. “I understand.”

A long silence went between them.

“Merlin,” Arthur called to him. Merlin had been in the process of leaving, but paused on his way to the door. He looked back at his king, and wished that he didn’t have to deal with the guilt, with the way he looked at Merlin like he was something Arthur wanted but could never indulge in. Now, though, no matter how much Merlin wanted to, he would never touch Arthur the way he once had. Not a married man, not this conflicted king he’d sworn to protect.

Arthur bit his lip and ducked his head. “Nothing.”

He understood, and offered Arthur a small smile. It wasn’t a particularly happy smile, but Arthur looked relieved for having seen it. “Do you need anything else, Arthur? If not, I’m going to go.”

“I don’t need anything,” Arthur grumbled, eyes a bit brighter, and waved him off. “Go on, then. Lazy servant.” He rolled his eyes and left.

Merlin closed the door to Arthur’s chambers behind him and, seeing the empty hallway, closed his eyes and reached out with his magic for that familiar consciousness. He had been practicing using his magic to locate people for a while, but it was still unfamiliar. He brushed past guards, serving girls – Guinevere, taking a walk down to the gardens. Finally, he found Mordred, alone in a guard tower.

He walked up to him slowly, the trek taking him a good ten minutes. When he got there, Mordred didn’t even turn from the window, watching a couple knights – Leon, it looked like, and Percival – train in the courtyard. “Are you done being angry with me, Emrys?” Mordred asked him off-handedly, but when he glanced over his shoulder at Merlin, his eyes weren’t as calm as his voice.

“I wasn’t angry with you,” he sighed, walking forward. He rested his elbows on the window sill, inches away from his son. “Surely you knew that.” The daylight was fading fast, casting shadows on Mordred’s face. A golden flash of Merlin’s eyes lit the two torches on either side of the window.

“If you weren’t angry with me, why have you been avoiding me?” Mordred asked, eyes hard. “You
told me you wouldn’t push me away anymore.”

He swallowed, not wanting to admit the truth but knowing he had to. “I was scared.” Clearly not expecting that response, Mordred frowned. “It was easy enough at the time to say I wouldn’t be strange around you, but then it kind of hit me. That you were really here, I mean.”

“Like I haven’t been here before,” he scoffed.

“Here for good,” he amended. Then, softer, “You’re not just going to disappear in a few days – you’re here for good, and if I do something to ruin our relationship further, you’re still going to be here. I would have to face you every day.” He sighs, and finishes. “I don’t want to screw anything up. So naturally, I just avoided you. I’m sorry.”

“I’m tired of your apologies, Emrys,” Mordred told him in a tone that would have been gruff. “Just – I told you that you were mine now. I wasn’t joking – we belong to each other, Emrys! It’s not just coincidence that you know me, that I was *a part of you*.” Walking in, Merlin had not been prepared for how intense Mordred’s eyes would be. He felt a little overwhelmed, but unable to interrupt. “We have a destiny, Merlin, just how you have a destiny with Arthur.”

“Different kind of destinies,” he told him quietly, and Mordred huffed, leaning against the walls. His curls, splayed across the stone, gave him a sort of ethereal halo.

“You’re right,” he said sharply. “He doesn’t want you. He pushes you away, like you tried to push me away – but I’m not going to let you anymore.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” He intended his tone to be firmer, more in control – instead he sounds meek. “You don’t control me, Mordred.”

His son groaned, running a hand through his dark curls. “You’re not a puppet,” Mordred grumbled. “I don’t want to make you do things – I just want you to stop treating me like I’m not important to you! Because I *am*. I spent the entirety of my childhood knowing that one day, we would stand together.”

“You idolized me,” Merlin said softly. “But I’m not the same hero you always heard about in stories. *Emrys* is a myth.”

“*Emrys* is you,” Mordred told him, leaving no room for argument. “I did idolize you, and then I met you and idolized you further. I love you, have always loved you.” He cupped Merlin’s neck, clearly trying to make a point.

“That’s not love, Mordred,” Merlin murmured, pulling away as much as he could before Mordred tightened his grip.

“It is love,” he insisted, his eyes bright and honest. Mordred’s magic enveloped him, mixing with his. The feeling wasn’t entirely unwelcome, but unfamiliar. It made him itch from the feeling of different beneath his skin. He could feel his son’s magic practically cooing at him, begging him to agree, to see things the way Mordred did. “Do you not love me?”

“I-“

“I am from you,” Mordred whispered. Their melded magics were clearly having an effect on him as well, judging by the flush high on his cheeks and awe-filled eyes. “I came from you – body, soul and magic.” His hand slid down to press against Merlin’s stomach, as if trying to find a physical imprint of his stay within Merlin’s body. “You are meant to love me.”
“Of course,” he said, brain unable to formulate another reply. Mordred just smiled at him.

“Now come,” his boy encouraged, taking his hand and leading him to the door. Merlin was at a loss for what was going on. “It’s going to be time for dinner soon. Eat with me.”

“I was going to eat in my –“

“Eat with me,” he repeated, eyes imploring. “We can go down to dinner together. Surely eating with the king and queen, with the knights, is more fun than sitting in your room alone?”

Even posed as a question, it was clear that he didn’t intend to let Merlin back out. “Alright,” he agreed with a sigh. Mordred grinned at him, pleased, and Merlin couldn’t help but laugh and let Mordred pull him from the room, leaving his reservations behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Come visit the random that is me at tisthewoman.tumblr.com!
*shameless self promotion*
Really though I love all of you and I'd love to talk to you if you'd like. :)
I saw life begin in the ship we're in and history unfold

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from "I Really Want You" by James Blunt.

The first to speak when Mordred pulled Merlin to the dining hall was, predictably, Gwaine. He looked downright smug when he said it, and more than a little relieved. He wanted to wince at the varying looks of discontentment melting into relief at the bright smile on Mordred’s face. It honestly astounded him how quickly everyone had become attached to the boy. (But then, he wasn’t one to talk. He’d gotten attached that very first day.)

“Finally admitted your big crush, eh, Merlin?” Gwaine was laughing, winking at him when his face turned a spectacular shade of red. A crush? On his son? Half of him wanted to correct the knight, but the other half realized how it must have looked to them without context. He was just lucky more of the knights hadn’t been taken in by Gwaine’s strange fixation on his love life.

“Don’t torture him,” Mordred said breezily, pulling Merlin into a chair beside his own. “We’ve just sorted everything out.” But he grinned at Gwaine and blushed prettily all the same, a light pink. Merlin was just glad that Mordred was as embarrassed as he was.

“I can’t sit and eat with you – I have to serve Arthur,” he said, leaning in so Mordred could hear him. Mordred just glanced over at him with a raised eyebrow.

“You hardly ever serve Arthur, especially not during informal meals like this. What does it matter if you’re eating elsewhere by yourself – not serving Arthur – or eating with us?” He rolled his eyes, but the expression was fond.

“What’s this about serving me?” he heard, and Merlin glanced over at Arthur, striding into the room with Gwen on his arm. She waved hello to him and the knights, but Merlin couldn’t help but frown a bit, feeling his mood slip. He’d forgotten he’d have to watch the happy couple the entire time he ate. “Are you finally going to do your job, Merlin?”

“He’s eating with me, Sire,” Mordred told him brightly. Arthur raised eyebrow at Merlin, but gave a small smile. Arthur, unlike the knights (especially Percival, who still looked put off by Merlin’s change of behavior, watching Mordred with an unsure gaze, as he was prepared to defend him if needed), had enough good sense and subtlety to not say anything about. Merlin was grateful.

He was decidedly less so when Arthur pulled back Gwen’s chair, pushing her in and pressing a kiss to her cheek. She smiled up at him and Merlin felt his stomach twist. As much as he’d (mostly) gotten over his feelings for Arthur, it still hurt sometimes to see her bask in what he’d wanted so dearly.

Do they bother you?

He looked back at over at Mordred, whose expression had soured. He was watching Arthur with narrowed eyes. “No,” Merlin said quietly, nudging Mordred’s ankle with his foot. The contact made his magic hum with pleasure. “I’m fine.” Mordred nodded, expression contemplative.
Do you still love him? his boy asked, cocking his head, those eyes boring into Merlin’s. You suddenly seemed sad.

“None of your business,” Merlin responded with a mild glare, but Mordred just searched his face before shrugging and turning to smile at the kitchen maid setting his dinner in front of him.

You have me.

Merlin’s glare melted and he just stared for a moment, mouth slightly open, at Mordred’s earnest expression. Unable to form words, he gave his son a weak smile, and Mordred bit his lip.

Don’t look so sad when you look at him anymore, Mordred ordered, starting unsure and ending with a firm command. He gave you enough. You don’t need him anymore. When Merlin started at his words, he put his hand on Merlin’s knee as if to ground him. Aren’t I enough?

The moment was broken by Gwaine. Naturally. “Why do you keep denying that you two are in a relationship of some sort?” He sounded whiny and curious, mock agony in his tone. Merlin was going to kill him.

When Mordred began to frown and turn away, looking sullen and upset with the lack of answer to his question, Merlin slid his hand forward to cover Mordred’s on his knee before it could slip off. Mordred’s eyes snapped back to his, shining as a smile twitched his lips. It was a million things – smug, proud, happy. He couldn’t regret making his boy look so pleased.

“Because we’re not,” Merlin answered – grumpy on the surface, but fighting a smile.

He noticed Arthur watching them, completely missing whatever Gwen was saying at the moment, with an expression of confusion and concern. He didn’t look entirely pleased. “A secret relationship?” he asked, clearly making an effort to appear nonchalant. “Doesn’t that sound far-fetched?”

Gwaine snorted, ignoring Percival’s groan and Leon’s laughter. Even some of the others – Kay and Bedivere, just to name two – were laughing behind their hands, hoping not to offend the king. “Oh, come, Arthur. Look at them. Mordred here looks at your manservant like he hung the moon – and don’t get started on how Merlin watches the boy when he’s not looking. Precious.”

“Gwaine!” Mordred cried, flushing brightly in embarrassment, earning the laughter of more of the knights. Even Percival couldn’t help a chuckle, though Arthur was having a hard time to keep his smile. He looked like he’d swallowed a lemon, his expression nearly a grimace. “Ridiculous,” he grumbled, glancing over at Merlin. If he was being honest with himself, he’d nearly forgotten the comment about him, he was so caught up in the pink on Mordred’s cheek. “Are you laughing at me?” The entire table went silent at the sound of Mordred’s voice, slightly on the shrill side and embarrassed beyond measure.

Mordred sunk down in his seat when the entire table went up in a roar of laughter. Merlin was fairly sure that Gwaine was going to choke himself and even Guinevere was pressing her hand tightly against her mouth to avoid laughing. (It wasn’t working). The only one who didn’t look amused was Arthur, whose eyes had widened drastically.

Merlin chose to ignore him, realizing that it was easier to let them think that Mordred had a crush on him than explaining that he was Merlin’s son. Instead of paying Arthur any attention, he squeezed Mordred’s hand and grinned crookedly at him, trying to reassure him. Mordred glanced over at him, still red in the face but smiling. He had a feeling that this whole fiasco was going to come back to bit him in the ass later, but for now, he was glad that he’d sorted all this out.
Mordred sat up straight again and began to eat properly. Merlin followed suit, smilling to himself.
would you lie with me and just forget the world

Chapter Notes

This is not beta read, so all mistakes are my own! This chapter probably needs some work but I'm too impatient to work over it again, so I hope it isn't too bad. I also wanted to point out the striking similarities between BBC Mordred and Dorian Gray, which I noticed while writing. Even ignoring the fact that they are both acted/voiced by Alex Vlahos, it's an eerie comparison...
Chapter title from Chasing Cars by Snow Patrol, because I couldn't resist.

“You will eat dinner with us again tonight, won’t you?” Merlin wasn’t entirely sure as to why his son had followed him to the woods just beyond the castle. He was certainly not helping Merlin gather herbs for Gaius, as he was sent to do. As a matter of fact, Mordred wasn’t really helping him do anything at all. He just stood in the clearing Merlin had found, watching as Merlin knelt in the grass and plants.

He glanced up at Mordred, who was not-so-patiently waiting for an answer. “And be laughed at all through the meal? I should think not.”

Mordred, sweet boy he was, pouted like a child. Sometimes Merlin forgot that he was almost an entirely grown man, and Mordred did nothing to help that image most of the time. “They won’t laugh at you,” he insisted, kneeling down to Merlin’s level. “I’ll tell them off if they do.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” he snorted dryly. “With your kitten’s claws and mouse’s roar.” He chuckled to himself, until a quiet oomph was coughed from him by a sudden weight on his back.

“My kitten’s claws can do some damage,” the boy murmured in his ear, arms sliding over his shoulders to lock affectionately over his collar. “You know as well as I that I can be dangerous when I need to be.” An image flashed in his mind of his boy, some years younger, throwing upwards of six knights back several feet.

“No,” he said softly. “Perhaps you’re right.” He tilted his head the little bit necessary to make eye contact. “Do you really need to be draped all over me like this?”

“Why would I not want to be close to you? You, all I have in this world.” Merlin felt that perhaps he was a little too used to the feeling of Mordred murmuring into his ear. He chose not to fight it and instead said a little prayer of thanks that the knight was at least not wearing chain mail; he wore only a soft tunic and pants with leather boots, a sword slung at his hip. His body was warm and Merlin chuckled to himself, putting a hand up to cover Mordred’s affectionately.

Mordred buried his face in Merlin’s neck, making him wonder just when his boy had become so comfortable with him. “Come to dinner with us,” Mordred murmured.

“All right,” he relented. “I suppose it can’t hurt. Not like you’re going to take no for an answer.” He grinned when he felt Mordred’s belly quiver with laughter against his back.

“I like it when you can’t say no to me,” Mordred told him cheekily with an impish grin, sliding off his back to sit next to him, cross legged, on a patch of clovers. “Reminds me that I’m important.”
“I’m sure you think you’re more important than you really are, you sod,” Merlin snarked, but Mordred just laughed and fell back, head pillow on grass. He looked up at the sky in their little clearing, grinning, and Merlin couldn’t help but grin a little himself.

“What are you thinking about?” Mordred asked curiously some time later. The sun covered his face in light, making his eyes sparkle with flecks of tell-tale gold.

“What?” Merlin gasped in mock surprise. “You’re not going to read my mind?”

“I prefer listening to you talk,” Mordred hummed, not even phased. He rolled his eyes but smiled nonetheless.

He took a minute before answering Mordred’s initial question. “I’m just thinking about how glad I am that you’re here, instead of somewhere out there.” He nods in the general direction of Ismere, toward the sands and misery they both had a difficult time putting behind them. “Somewhere where you’ll become a monster to survive. I much prefer you in here, acting the silly boy you are.”

Mordred propped his head up on a hand, watching him with those eyes that gazed into his soul. “I’m not a little boy anymore, Emrys,” Mordred drawled, chuckling when Merlin huffed at him. “I’m a man now.”

“Yes, one who likes to roll in fields and play pranks on the cooks when he thinks his father isn’t looking,” Merlin snorted. Mordred just grinned at him, not ashamed in the slightest.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t do the same thing as a young man, father.” Mordred turned his attention to the skies, but Merlin was preoccupied with a shudder. The word father sounded so strange on his son’s lips. “What are you looking so broody about?” Mordred asked, cocking an eyebrow at him.

Merlin shrugged, but Mordred just stared him down until he sighed. “It sounds odd. When you call me that, I mean.”

“What, father?” The fey-like grin was back, eyes dancing with mischief.

He nodded, narrowing his eyes at his boy. “To be honest, it feels strange to even think of myself as your father. I am, of course, and I don’t regret it – but it is strange.” He reached over, brushing a lock of Mordred’s hair out of his eyes. “I just wish I’d had the opportunity to raise you properly.”

“So you regret giving me up?” Mordred asked, his grin slipping ever so slightly. His eyes were still bright, as they always were when he was learning new information, but they weren’t so pleased anymore. “I always wondered –“

“I didn’t give you up,” he interrupted, eyebrows furrowing. A spark of the old anger kindled inside of him. “Arthur forced me to give you to the druids to raise. Partly because you clearly had magic, and partly because you came from my body.” When his son’s eyebrows rose, expression darkening, he rushed to explain. “He thought I was given a potion against my will, and with the magic on top of that – he was scared.” The of you went unsaid. “He didn’t want to hurt you, but he also couldn’t let you stay in Camelot. How would he possibly explain you to Uther? Besides, it’s not like he could make me his wife or something.” He made a bitter, darkly amused sound.

“But surely, as king he could…” Mordred sounded disbelief, but Merlin just sighed.

“He still calls the night we had sex a mistake,” he admitted lowly. “Then of course it took him forever to believe that I was really with child. I couldn’t very well explain to him that my magic caused it, so he jumped to the potion assumption and automatically decided the night we were together was little more than rape.”
Mordred was sitting up, leaning forward ever so slightly, entirely engrossed in the story. He looked furious, and Merlin winced. He had to do something; Mordred developing a hatred of Arthur wasn’t something he needed. “Then he made you give me away.”

He nodded, biting his lip. “It was partially out of his fear and partially to protect you. I know that much. He really did want you to be safe, but he’d been raised by Uther. Can you imagine growing up terrified of magic only to realize your child was born of it? It was a perfectly ghastly realization.”

“But not for you?”

He smiled a little at that. “I adored you from the moment I saw you. It nearly killed me to let you go, but I also knew that he was right – it was better for you to grow up where you could be yourself. I couldn’t risk your life, and I couldn’t leave Arthur.”

Mordred was nodding, comprehension clear in his eyes. “Because of destiny,” he realized, and Merlin nodded. After a long moment, he sighed. “I understand.” But his mouth was twisted ever so slightly and Merlin could see his vulnerability plain as day. It was moments like this that he was reminded that his boy was still just that: a boy. His rosy cheeks and young face were more than just an innocent mask. “Didn’t he want you, though?” he asked after a long moment, cocking his head to the side. “I can’t imagine why anyone wouldn’t. You’re powerful, and kind… beautiful.”

Merlin made the choice to pretend he was most certainly not blushing. “He’s for the most part attracted to women,” he said and Mordred gave an ah of understanding. “The night we had was probably curiosity on his part. He really does love Gwen,” he added, and smiled a bit ruefully. “I don’t begrudge her that, usually. Last night was a mounting of a lot of frustrations.” He picked a few more leaves for Gaius, adding them to his basket.

“But you love him?” Mordred’s inquisitive eyes narrowed for the slightest second.

“I do,” he answered. “But he’s still my best friend. My king. He comes before pining.” A pause, then he added, “You do, as well. I don’t want you to have to deal with my issues. They’re just hard to put behind me.”

Mordred was silent for a long time, then he leaned forward, covering the hand Merlin had on a small plant with his own. “Love me instead,” Mordred insisted, and Merlin’s eyes flew to his in surprise. His voice was intense and strong. “You said I come before your pain, your love for him. Do one better. Put me first, Emrys.”

Aren’t I enough? The memory of Mordred’s words gave him pause.

“Before the king?” he asked dryly, unable to think of a better response. “Should I be your manservant instead?” Mordred frowned at him, clearly frustrated.

“That’s not what I meant. Obviously I’m not more important than the king in the whole world, but between us… I’m just saying – you should spend more time and emotion on me. Won’t Arthur be glad that you’re finally getting to be with your son? That you’re not just sitting around, wasting away over him?” Something still seemed strange about his phrasing and emphasis, but Merlin ignored it.

“Maybe if he actually believed me when I told him you were our son,” Merlin snorted, and Mordred bit his lip, looking even less pleased, if possible. “Don’t worry so much about it. If he knew, I can’t imagine what he would say.” He paused. “Well, if he knew that you were actually our son, he’d know you have magic, so I don’t really think it would end well either way, even if he
responded favorably.” He rolled his eyes and Mordred laughed a little.

“I don’t need him, then,” he concluded, and Merlin sighed in relief that Mordred didn’t appear to be overly upset. “I have a parent. He will be my king, and a good one, but you are more important to me.”

“No one is more important than Arthur,” he murmured, but Mordred just gave him that strange half-smile.

“I disagree,” he said simply, and laid back down to watch Merlin finish his task in an oddly peaceful silence.
Several weeks after their first dinner together, Merlin was standing on guard at the coronation anniversary feast. He had watched Mordred’s concerned glances toward Arthur all night. His boy’s expression was two parts confused, three parts worried, and one part curious. He wouldn’t expect any less from his boy, but even after he’d been given the explanation for Arthur’s solemn expression, he’d still watched him.

He knew that the minute he’d stepped out of Arthur’s chambers, he’d be accosted, but he had his own concerns to assuage.

“You going to be all right?” he asked Arthur without looking at him, voice carefully measured. It would do no good to have Arthur thinking that Merlin was pitying him or calling him out on his emotions. He didn’t look up, instead hanging up Arthur’s cape and cuffs.

“I’ll be fine, Merlin,” Arthur huffed, but it was weak and he rolled his eyes, turning around. It was moments like this where he was reassured that his friendship with Arthur had not been lost. His king was sitting on the edge of the bed, giving him a weak half-smile with trusting eyes. This was his best friend, and he was hurting. Past grudges forgotten for the moment, at least, he went forward and put a hand on Arthur’s shoulder.

Sighing heavily, he rolled his head so his forehead pressed against Merlin’s arm. “I hate this time of year,” he admitted lowly. “The anniversary of my coronation should be a happy day.”

“You lost someone you loved,” Merlin told him, gentle and quiet. “No one blames you for being upset. We all know how it feels to miss someone dear to us.”

The king tensed. “At least you have someone to fill the void,” Arthur said accusingly and Merlin yanked his hand back, glaring. Why was it that one of them always had to start a fight? “You have your Mordred – don’t think I don’t see the way he hangs all over you. Have you told him you think he’s your son yet?”

He didn’t deign that last bit with a response. “I still have a significant lack of my mother and a father,” he informed him in an icy tone. “Why are you so hostile about Mordred? I thought you liked him. You insisted on knighting him, so you must have.” Because honestly, he didn’t understand. Arthur was the one who wanted he and Mordred to reconcile and then when they did he’d begun shutting the boy out ever so slightly, throwing him subtly resentful glances.

“I do like him,” he argued, but the words fell flat. After a moment’s uncomfortable silence, he hung his head. “I didn’t realize how affectionate he was. He takes up all of your attention, and as you are my manservant, that is just not on.”

“That was a pathetic excuse,” Merlin told him, frowning, but when Arthur seemed to draw into himself even more he sighed. “Arthur. No, look at me.” He did, with a sullen expression. “Mordred
and I have an understanding. It’s good for me, I think.” He paused, then added, “Haven’t things been so much better lately? Between us?”

The thing was, it had. The joking and bantering had come much easier since Mordred had begged him to divert his over-attention. He felt more comfortable in Arthur’s presence, much less like he was following around a lost love like a duckling.

“What does the boy have to do with it?” he asked, and he didn’t sound angry exactly but he definitely wasn’t happy. “Surely you’re not just reveling in his little crush on you to make you feel better about us?”

It took several lengthy minutes and even more deep breaths to stop Merlin from decking him. “Mordred and I have an understanding,” he repeated firmly. “And it’s really none of your business.” A short silence passed. “He doesn’t have a crush on me,” he added. Arthur laughed softly and looked up at him through golden lashes.

“You’re delusional,” Arthur informed him, smiling slightly. “The boy is gone on you. Which is funny, considering, but also kind of creepy. You should inform him that you spent most of your life thinking he’s your son.”

“There’s still no proof he’s not,” he shot back and Arthur tensed slightly but managed to keep his expression friendly.

“There’s no proof he is,” he reminded him and even though Merlin knew the truth he didn’t say anything. “He doesn’t have magic for one – our son did.” It was probably the first time in ten years that Arthur had said the words, and even then, the few times he’d said it, it had been in disgust. Merlin couldn’t help but be relieved at the progress they seemed to be making. “Besides, his infatuation with you is unethical anyway - you’re nearly twenty years his senior. Even if you don’t look it.”

He blinked, choosing not to be offended. “What do you mean, even if I don’t look it? Of course I look it.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Merlin, if I didn’t know any better I’d say you haven’t aged a day since you turned twenty. I know I’ve changed; I always hear about how I look so manly and rugged now.” Merlin snorts but Arthur just shrugs. “You, though? You’ve barely changed. Still baby-faced after all these years.” Arthur gave him a cheeky grin.

Merlin had never given much thought to his appearance, but Arthur’s baby-face comment was depressingly accurate. “All right, you prat,” he griped, but he was grinning too hard to be truly annoyed. “I’ve had enough of your abuse. I’m going to go to bed, yeah?”

“Go on.” Arthur waved him off, but he, too was grinning. “And Merlin?” He paused, waiting for Arthur to finish. The man gave him a warm smile. “Thank you.”

He didn’t specify what for, but Merlin knew. “You’re welcome,” he answered softly, and left, slipping out into the corridor.

He wasn’t attacked right when leaving, but he knew it was only a matter of where his boy had been hiding. As he reached a staircase, he said lightly, “Eavesdropping is frowned upon, you know.”

Clearly sulking, Mordred stepped into the hall from where he’d been hiding around the corner of the stairs. “It wasn’t eavesdropping,” he pouted, but Merlin just chuckled, knowing that Mordred had just wanted a confirmation that Arthur was okay.
“You’re adorable,” he told him cheerfully, and laughed when Mordred huffed at him. He led the boy away, and sent a wordless prayer that Camelot would remain calm for just a little while longer.
the curves of your lips rewrites the story

Chapter Notes

First: Chapter title from one of my favorite books, The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde.
Second: I can't express how sorry I am that this update took almost a full month. I've had so much going on - solo/small ensemble state contest for my vocal solo, finals, graduation - all excuses, but I really have been busy, otherwise I wouldn't have put it off so long. But here it is! Hopefully updates will be more regular now that I'm out of school.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Merlin really shouldn’t have been surprised when Uther’s ghost began terrorizing the castle. Honestly, it shouldn’t have been a shock. Insane things happened all the time.

It was a shock anyway.

So there he was, fighting to keep himself still as Arthur fought with his father, argued with him — in the end gave up and told him no. Uther had attacked Gwen, hurt Percival — Arthur was done with Uther trying to rule the kingdom that Arthur now governed, and Merlin was so unspeakably proud of him. Uther appeared to be less so. The shield came out of nowhere, knocking Arthur out before Merlin could so much as move. Merlin bit his lower lip, knowing that he had to step in and afraid he would say something he shouldn’t.

(He interfered anyway.)

“Get away from him, Uther.” His voice was loud in the large, empty room — a command, the first he had ever directed toward the former king. “You’ve caused enough harm,” he continued, slightly softer. “You don’t belong here. You must return to the other world.”

Uther’s expression screwed up into anger. “This is my kingdom — you think you can drive me from it? You are nothing but a serving boy!”

But Merlin stopped letting Uther treat him the moment he died; he’d sworn he was through taking orders from hateful rulers. “I am much more than that.” He clenched his jaw, waiting for it, and sure enough a bench jerked into the air and flew toward his head. A slight turn of his head, a flash of gold, and it was flying backward toward the wall. He watched Uther’s expression as it smashed into pieces against the wall.

“You have magic?” Uther’s voice was a deadly whisper, but Merlin was through with being intimidated.

“I was born with it!” he snapped back, ashamed at the hoarseness of his voice.

“I made you Arthur’s servant.” The spirit sounded disbelieving — shocked into an sort of complacency. The calm wouldn’t last. “You are a sorcerer?”

Merlin’s lips screwed up into a bitter smirk. “Even while you were king, there was magic at the
heart of Camelot.” Uther’s shock broke and he growled wordlessly, taking a step toward Merlin, then another.

“I will not allow you and your kind to poison my kindom!” he roared, and something inside Merlin snapped like a thread pulled too tight.

“You are too late!” he yelled back, making Uther pause. Merlin’s smirk only grew, bitter and furious and only a touch deranged. “Your son and your kingdom has an heir, Uther, a boy born of my body and Arthur’s touch.” He laughed when Uther’s jaw dropped slightly, eyes widening, spark of anger igniting. “Nearly twenty years ago,” he continued in a breathless whisper. “I gave birth to a little boy with bright blue eyes and dark curls, and that boy is of magic like me and my father before me.”

“You lie,” Uther said, like it would change what Merlin was telling him, and he just laughed at the angry former king. It was freeing, finally coming out to his tormentor with all the things he’d wanted to throw in his face before his death, knowing he never could.

“I do not,” he answered, grin too wide and eyes too bright. “As a matter of fact, that boy is a knight now in your son’s court. You might have seen him, my darling boy – my Mordred.”

"I'll kill him," Uther promised, his upper lip curled over his teeth in a snarl. "I'll end him before he has a chance to ruin my kingdom."

"It is not your kingdom any longer," Merlin spat, eyes flashing. "And you will not hurt him. You will not touch my boy."

"Boy? He is a monster! An abomina-"

"You will not call my son that!"

The air in the room seemed to freeze at Merlin’s raised voice. “You’re wrong,” he muttered, shaking his head slightly. “You’re wrong. About so much. Arthur is a better, and more worthy king than you ever were – and my son is worth twice of you with or without his magic!”

Uther screamed, but Merlin threw him back without moving, his eyes lighting like a bonfire.

“Merlin!” He jumped in surprise, turning around to see his wide-eyed boy stepping out from the shadows. “I followed you,” Mordred told him, looking bewildered and afraid, and underneath it all – pleased. There was a glow in his cheeks that Merlin knew came from his own words and he couldn’t bring himself to regret them. “How did this happen?”

He looked around the room in confusion, eyes lingering on Arthur’s prone form.

“Our king is sentimental,” he muttered, and walked over to Arthur’s side. “He’s breathing – that’s a good sign. He’ll come around soon.”

“Good,” Mordred agreed, kneeling next to him and peering at him curiously. “Did you banish Uther?”

“Temporarily,” he sighed. “He’ll come back sooner or later. Once Arthur wakes up, he just needs to blow the horn again to end this.”

“We’ve had more difficult resolutions,” Mordred told him, raising a hand to rest it on Merlin’s shoulders. He let the warmth of his son’s hand ease the tension in his body and sighed, rolling his shoulders a bit. “Are you going to be all right? You seemed upset earlier.”
He took a deep breath and gave his boy a wry smile. “I’ve just had enough Uther Pendragon for one lifetime. I’ll be fine.”

Mordred smiled a little dopily and ran a hand through his messy curls. “Fair enough.” They took a moment to calm down, heart rates slowing and magics melding – reveling in the soothing feeling of being an *us* instead of a *me*. He could almost literally feel his soul lifting, chasing away the darkness Uther's apparition had conjured. “Look,” Mordred said softly after a few minutes. “He’s coming to. Sire?”

And Arthur honestly didn’t look to happy about it. “Did someone bludgeon me in the head with a blunt object?” he groaned, and Merlin just rolled his eyes.

“Would you just blow the horn, sire?” he snorted, helping Arthur to his feet. “Thanks ever so.”

“I don’t take orders from you, Merlin,” Arthur grumbled, but when the doors opened, banging against the walls with the force that they were thrown wide, he grimaced and pulled the horn from his belt. “Okay, blowing.”

Both Merlin and Mordred winced at the sound of it, but afterwards was a long moment of stiffened silence, then slowly, a more and more peaceful looking Uther began to dissipate.

“Can we all just go to bed now? I have to be up in a few hours,” Arthur told them gruffly. Neither Merlin nor his boy mentioned the odd glistening of Arthur's eyes. Instead, Merlin just smiled a little crookedly.

“Seems a little pointless to go to bed now, don’t you think?” he asked Mordred, who nodded in agreement, but Arthur glared at him.

“Three hours of sleep is better than none. To *bed*, Merlin!”

“Yes, Sire!”

“You too, Sir Mordred.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Mordred met his eye as they were ushered out of the hall, and they shared a smile. Just before parting for bed, Mordred and Merlin stood alone, having seen Arthur to his chambers. "You will be all right, yeah?"

"I'll be fine," he assured him. "Honestly. I didn't lose my temper that badly."

Mordred's eyes seemed to tell him that his son knew something he didn't, but clearly Mordred elected not to say anything about it. "Uther Pendragon cannot hurt you now," he said instead, almost casually. "This is our kingdom, our world. We can erase what's left of his world and rewrite it with our own. So don't let anyone put that hurt in your eye anymore."

He was nearly speechless, but the glimmer of fondness in Mordred's eyes prompted him to speak. "You don't have to protect me, you know; it's supposed to be the other way around. But... thank you."

Mordred beamed at him, and leaned in to press a soft kiss to his cheek. "Good-night, Emrys."

"Good-night," he answered, almost bemusedly, and watched as his boy hurried off to bed, the castle safe once more for his wanderings.
Chapter End Notes

Once again, I don't know what I'm writing. Sorry for doing this to you. I'm sure you all had high hopes for this mess, haha!
Merlin sighed, cocking his head to the side as he watched the knights fight. He had been there for a solid two hours, and it was clear as to what was going on. Arthur was going particularly hard on Mordred for some reason, and by the resigned expression on the boy's face, he knew it.

"Does it look like they're being a little more vicious than usual?" He glanced over at Gwen, who was peering at her husband in confusion. "If he's not careful he'll run poor Mordred through."

"I wouldn't let that happen," Merlin told her absentmindedly, and when she snickered (good-naturedly, but slightly irritating nonetheless) he just frowned and tilted his head downward the slightest bit. "He's been strange about Mordred lately."

"Why?" Gwenivere asked him, her eyebrows drawing together, mouth turned downward. "He was so insistent about the boy being knighted, but I've noticed it too - he's been slightly bitter, almost."

Merlin struggled to find an acceptable answer and gave up, deciding to tell her the truth. "He thinks that Mordred has a crush on me. Honestly, I think he's just worried I'll stop devoting all my attention to him."

Gwen was silent for a long moment. "Maybe that will be a good thing." She didn't say it harshly, but something about her solemn tone made him think that she definitely intended it as he took it. He couldn't bring himself to respond, and instead clenched his teeth and attempted to take in a long, deep breath. He tried to think of an excuse to leave, but thankfully, his boy did it for him.

"Merlin!" Mordred called, sauntering over (and trying to hide a slight limp). Behind him, Arthur steadfastly ignored his call and began to spar with Leon. "Merlin, remove my armor, will you?"

Gwen made no secret of her watching their interactions, but he didn't care. He was just glad he could turn his attention from her mostly unintentional accusations. Mordred cocked his head with the smile of one forcing false bravado and held out his hand.

Merlin automatically reached for the leather protecting his forearms, unlacing the ties and pulling them off.

*Was she bothering you?*

He pierced his boy with narrowed eyes. *Why do you always sound like you're going to kill her if I say yes?*

Unexpectedly, Mordred laughed, startling Gwen from her spot behind them. He heard her dress rustle as she jolted, but didn't look back. *Emrys. Because I would. My loyalties to the king don't extend to someone who causes you such pain.* Mordred tugged at the neck of his chainmail, masking a shrug. *I don't want to dislike her, but I do. When she causes you to make that face, I do.*
It was at times like these that Merlin was honestly at a loss for what to say. Mordred’s matter-of-factness on the matter made him pause, knowing that arguing would be futile but not wanting to let the almost-threat slide.

He focused on the clasps of Mordred’s armor and responded absently, refusing to give his words too much thought. It’s not her who hurt me. He glanced up at Mordred’s expression, watching his loyalties conflict in his eyes. Don’t worry about it, Mordred. Really. Then, softly, “Murderous isn’t a good look on your face.” He touched Mordred’s cheek lightly to make his point and stepped back, Mordred’s cloak and various leathers in his arms. “Come on,” he added louder. “Let’s go put your things away, young man.”

“You sound like Gaius!” Mordred complained, following obediently in spite of his whining. “You hardly look five years older than me, don’t you call me young man.”

“I’m still your father!” he laughed, knocking Mordred’s shoulder with his own lightly.

He realized his mistake the moment the words left his mouth, but it wasn’t until he heard a choked sound from behind them that he realized how foolish he’d been. He turned his head just enough to meet Gwen’s wide eyes – a quick check told him the knights were still absorbed in their sparring and hadn’t heard a word, but the Queen most certainly had.

Merlin froze, unable to move, the armor in his arms not the only weight on his body.

“He’s –“ She didn’t finish her sentence, but they all knew where it was going.

“Merlin,” Mordred said quietly, putting a hand on the small of his back. “Your Majesty,” he added. “If we could talk to you? In private.” He ushered Merlin along toward the castle, glancing over his shoulder to make sure she followed. She did, dazed and confused, until Mordred led them into an empty room and shut the door behind them. Almost immediately, her passiveness faded.

“This your son!” she exclaimed, the look on her face caught between a sort of bitter almost-betrayal and shock.

“How did you even know he existed?” Merlin blurted, face twisted in confusion. “No one –“

“Arthur told me, you idiot,” she sighed, exasperated but not unkind. “Do you think he would marry me without mentioning that he had a magical child out there in the world that he accidentally forced upon his best friend?” Her voice had softened by the end of her sentence and closed it with a wince.

Mordred, too, winced at her wording, and Merlin set down Mordred’s leathers and pressed a hand to his shoulder. “He didn’t force the baby – Mordred – on me,” he said slowly, making sure the point was clear. “The only thing he forced me to do was give him up.”

“But the potion –“

“Was not of Arthur’s doing,” Merlin told her firmly. “And Arthur would do well to quit feeling guilty over it.”

“And Mordred is your son?” she asked, cocking her head to the side but sounding significantly quieter.

“Arthur doesn’t believe it,” Merlin snorted. “But yes, he is – we both knew from the start.”

“Well, Merlin here didn’t realize I’d known the whole time – always the fool, this one,” he teased,
and Merlin rolled his eyes.

“Wait.” They both stiffened at the halting word, meeting Gwen’s narrowed eyes. “The baby you had with Arthur had magic.”

Merlin closed his eyes in defeat, the hand still on Mordred’s shoulder tightening its grip. Mordred, however, didn’t appear to be daunted. “Yes, your highness,” he agreed quietly. “I do.” That was all he said, but the finality rang in Merlin’s ears.

“He wouldn’t ever hurt Arthur,” Merlin told her softly, urgently. “Or anyone. He saved Arthur’s life, fights for him – that has to count for something.”

She watched them, examining them for a moment, before she seemed to relax slightly. “I believe you,” she announced, sounding reluctant. “I don’t feel right about letting it go, but Merlin – I can’t separate you from your son again. Not after you’re so clearly attached.”

“I was attached the first time,” Merlin told her in a low voice. “But I wasn’t given a choice.” Then after a moment he deflated, and nodded. “Thank you,” he rasped. He let his hand fall from his boy’s shoulder, but Mordred only put one of his own on Merlin’s, fingers digging into tense muscle and subtly kneading out knots.

She slowly came forward, hands up to show she meant no harm, and wrapped her harms around his shoulders. She buried her head in his shoulder and he let his arms come around her in return, not wanting to admit how much he had missed being close to her. His best friend in the world finally seemed to step back into reaching distance. When she pulled away, Mordred stepped back into Merlin’s space almost possessively, but his magic glided over Merlin’s skin in a too-familiar way, projecting contentment, pleasure – happy that Merlin was happy. He smiled over at his boy, welcoming the closeness.

Gwen’s eyes flickered with some unknown thought as she watched the exchange, but she said nothing. “I only want what is best for you,” she told him after a moment. “Please believe that.”

“I know,” he said, and he knew that she understood his feelings for Arthur – the burning pain that had dotted the past twenty years they’d spent together and the ghost of bitterness he felt when he saw the king with his queen. Yet somehow, the understanding wasn’t resentful – just a quiet knowing, and he prayed a blessing for Gwen’s kindness.

“Merlin,” Mordred murmured, “I’m hungry. Can we visit the kitchens?” He nodded absently, Gwen nodded as well, turning to leave. They followed her out, but after the door shut behind her, Mordred paused their movement, just before the doorway.

“What is it?” Merlin asked, the peculiar look in his boy’s eye getting to him. Mordred pursed his lips, then spoke.

“You two are friends,” he said slowly. “That’s why you didn’t want me upset with her.”

“I know what you’re capable of,” Merlin agreed. “I didn’t want anything to happen to her.”

Mordred nodded, backing up just the slightest bit, the intensity of his eyes easing. “Nothing will,” he announced, and just like that Merlin realized how deep Mordred’s loyalty to him ran. His love for Gwen would protect her through Mordred’s love of his beloved Emrys, and the feeling of power made a shiver run down his spine that wasn’t just an effect of Mordred’s magic trying to swim in his veins with his own.

Mordred didn’t speak again as he led them out, but he didn’t have to.
Things start getting steamy in this chapter! It's mostly a thank you for sticking with me here and an apology, but also a result of an unusual spike in productivity now that I've got two stable jobs and responsibility and adulthood. So cherish it, because while I'd like to promise my productivity spike will continue, I also did sit ups today, so that's a hint that this is an outlying high. Let's all pray anyway! This chapter is also really long compared to the rest of the fic, but I wanted to get a lot in.

Title from Flight by Sutton Foster.

Merlin’s realization had changed something between them, he realized later, adding a sort of tense undercurrent to every word they shared – and as Mordred insisted on following him nearly everywhere, it made for a stressful past week. He didn’t like the feeling of power that Mordred gave him with his loyalty, but he’d already seen the effects of pushing his son away and knew it wasn’t an option.

He welcomed the boring meeting between the knights and the king, all gathered at the circle table, if only for the diversion of Mordred’s attention. He’d clearly recognized Merlin’s acknowledgement of the tether between them and rarely turned his intense gaze away. He was waiting for something – Merlin could recognize that much – like watching someone putting together a puzzle. He’d had his aha moment and Mordred was waiting for the rest of the pieces to fall into place.

Being the focus of that attention – of that magic – was exhausting. That was probably the worst part of it all; Mordred’s magic wouldn’t leave him alone even when his attention was (rare as it was) elsewhere. Even then, as his boy gave an idea for an upcoming trip that Merlin would no doubt be dragged along on, Mordred’s magic was crawling along his skin – more sluggish that it would have been if Mordred had been focusing on Merlin, but still a very real presence. Sometimes he wondered how Arthur and the others couldn’t feel it; he could feel the air charged with the energy and was very much baffled at the ignorance of the knights.

“Merlin can go, too, of course, to carry supplies and such,” Arthur was saying, dragging Merlin’s thoughts back to the matter at hand. He sounded on the very edge of irritated, his eyes darkening and his mouth tightening when Mordred visibly perked up. Merlin was becoming irritated himself, tired of Arthur’s coldness, but forced himself to sound upbeat when he interrupted.

“Merlin can go where?” he asked as cheerfully as possible, ducking down to put his head at the level of the sitting knights from where he stood next to Arthur’s chair.

Arthur made a loud, exasperated sound. “One would think you weren’t listening,” he grumbled sourly, but repeated himself for Merlin’s benefit. “We’re going out on a hunting trip, Merlin. You are accompanying us.”

“To carry supplies and such,” he repeated with a raised eyebrow. Arthur raised his right back, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

“Why else, Merlin?” he asked sweetly. “It’s not as if you’d successfully hunt anything if you tried.”
“All right!” he said, affronted, standing straight up and putting his hands on his hips. “That’s it, Arthur Pendragon – I’m going to show you wrong.” He wasn’t sure what made him say it – the blush on his cheeks, the watchful gaze of his son that he so wanted to be worthy of, who deserved more than a clumsy oaf… Whatever the reason, it was said and clearly done.

Arthur looked honestly surprised. “You’re going to hunt with us?”

“You’re going to try and hunt with us?” Gwaine looked delighted, but Merlin gave him a flat expression.

“Somehow your phrasing is more insulting than even Arthur’s shock,” he deadpanned and snickers went around the table, but no objections.

And that was how, four hours later, Merlin was riding a horse a good five yards behind the others, grumbling to himself as they trotted away from the castle. Only Mordred, predictably, stayed with him, slowing his horse every time the stallion got antsy and tried to pick up speed, filling the air with mindless chatter.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you be threatening with Arthur watching. Is that why he seems to think you’re a clumsy child?” he mused, making Merlin want to rub his temples. Some part of him, though, was thankful for the company and even the slight frustration that the ceaseless babble caused. It made him feel like he was really a father, just that small, stupid thing – putting up with chatter – and it caused him to feel just a little more awake, a little less drowsy and bitter.

“I am clumsy,” he replied after a long silence and a pointed inquisitive expression from Mordred. “And Arthur knows it. I really am a shoddy servant, to be honest, but in my defense I didn’t want the position in the first place.” He paused. “Besides. It worked out for the best, hasn’t it? Arthur’s still alive, somehow, and I haven’t been sacked permanently, so I suppose I’ve got to be doing something correctly.”

Mordred rolled his eyes, relaxed and open in a way that Merlin rarely saw. “He hasn’t sacked you because he still hasn’t forgotten how much he likes your ass, even though he tries,” he grumbled good-naturedly, and Merlin turned red, mouth gaping.

“Don’t be vulgar!” he spluttered, and Mordred just laughed at him, not in the least ashamed.

“What?” he chuckled. “You know I’m right. Not that I can blame him.”

Merlin felt something vaguely unpleasant settle in his stomach. It felt like doing something wrong, the feeling he’d gotten as a child when an older, intimidating barmaid had leaned down and smirked at him. It felt like want – and wanting to run away.

But he refused to let it show on his face, firmly telling himself that Mordred was making a joke (though, when he thought about it, Mordred seemed to make jokes like that more often than he’d realized).

“Come on,” Mordred complained when the silence grew too long. “Don’t be angry; I was only teasing.”

“Don’t make fun of Arthur like that,” he said lightly, though still firm, as if that had been his concern. It was the easiest way to deflect him, with half-truths and distractions. A suspicious Mordred was a dangerous Mordred, so all he had to do was keep him sated, away from distrust that would lead him to prying. “It’s over now, so stop being a child about it.”

Mordred frowned, but his eyes were still bright. “Maybe I’m jealous,” he pouted, but laughed when
Merlin rolled his eyes.

The bickered amiably for several hours, until Arthur finally found a suitable camp. “We didn’t catch much on the way here,” he acknowledged, but glanced around with a satisfied smile. “But as long as we’re quiet and unobtrusive tonight, tomorrow will be plentiful, I’m sure. This is a nice area.” He began directing the knights in the building of their fire, setting up a general perimeter.

Mordred went with Merlin to collect firewood, though Arthur sent them a slight frown at Mordred’s new habit of following Merlin around like a puppy. “We should set our bedrolls up away from the rest, and talk all night,” Mordred told him with a happy sigh, clearly enjoying the nature. Sometimes Merlin forgot that this is what Mordred had grown up with – trees and life instead of stone and the bustle of cities. Even Ealdor was livelier than this, less pure, and Merlin had to admit he felt at ease surrounded by the forest.

“I would agree, if I had a bedroll,” Merlin snorted. “It’s a non-essential, when I should be carrying Arthur’s hunting gear, and armor, and an extra weapon – because of course we need to be prepared….”

Mordred cut him off with a grin. “Point taken. You can share mine, then, and get no say in where I place it,” he decided cheerfully, giving no room for argument. “That won’t be a problem, will it? You’re my father, after all, and since the entirety of the knights think I fancy you…” He trailed off with pink cheeks, and the stone in Merlin’s stomach was back, but he forced himself to breathe through it and laugh.

“The rest of the knights can stuff it,” he declared, making Mordred chuckle again and handed him a pile of thin branches. “Now help me carry these – you came along; you might as well do the work.” Mordred grumbled, but he had a feeling it was for show; the magic dancing on his skin was upbeat, pleased, and Merlin was frankly glad to have such an obvious tell for Mordred’s moods. For someone with such good control over his magic, he was surprisingly lax with it when it came to Merlin.

“You two took long enough,” Gwaine teased when they came back to camp, but Merlin refused to let the innuendo get to him.

“Merlin says you can stuff it,” Mordred informed him, mock somber, and laughed delightedly when he was tackled by a faux-offended Gwaine.

“You seem in a better mood,” Arthur pointed out quietly when Merlin sat next to him on a makeshift log-bench, and he didn’t necessarily sound upset about it, just a little solemn. “Lately, I mean, not just now – these past several weeks.”

He met Arthur’s too-blue eyes, and found that for some reason they seemed off, missing the flecks of grey that made Mordred’s eyes seem almost silver in the right light. These were the eyes he’d loved for close to twenty years, but for the first time, they seemed imperfect. It seemed like progress. “I’ve been in a better mood,” he responds slowly. “But we’ve talked about this.”

“And I started paying attention,” he sighed, setting down the weapon he was cleaning. He clasped his hands and rested his chin on his knuckles, watching Merlin with weary eyes. “I’m sorry for being hard on Mordred. It’s been a lot to take in.”

“You’re used to having all my attention,” Merlin corrected, not unkindly. “And to be honest, I was used to giving it to you.” He cocked his head to the side, examining Arthur’s expression. “But I’m trying to be happy, to make up for what I’ve lost, and I’m trying to be happy for you, too.” He said it because it meant something, and Arthur clearly recognized that. He closed his eyes and exhaled
slowly before replying.

“I do love her,” he murmured lowly, after a long pause. “I don’t know what was between us, because I didn’t allow it to happen, but I need you know that the pain our marriage caused you – it’s not for nothing. I love her, Merlin, but I’m used to having you in spite of that. And that’s awful, I know.”

“I’m surprised you’re admitting to it,” he said, at a slight loss for words.

Arthur didn’t respond to the jibe, which relieved Merlin slightly, because it wasn’t intended to be one. He inhaled and exhaled slowly again. “I want you to be happy,” he said with difficulty, and then, quieting when a knight passed by too close, “And I didn’t realize somehow that it would not be with me.”

“I don’t think I did either, Arthur, but – gods, but it has to stop, all right? The jealousy, the giving Mordred bruises that take weeks to heal, everything.” His breath was shuddery, and he doubled his efforts to stay quiet enough that they would not be over heard. “You need to stop taking your misplaced feelings of betrayal out on him.”

“I will,” Arthur whispered, and it sounded almost painful to say. Perhaps it was freedom from the stone confines of Camelot, but this was probably the most honest they had both been in months. Merlin nodded, and – double checking to make sure no one was watching them from where they sat in shadows – leaned over to press a kiss to the slight stubble of Arthur’s cheek.

“Thank you,” he whispered, and pulled away.

When he got within reaching distance, Mordred tugged Merlin close without being unreasonably intimate in public, and glared daggers at Arthur. “I don’t like the way you touch him,” he snarled, squeezing Merlin’s arm a little too tight. When Merlin hissed, he immediately loosened his grip. “I didn’t listen in, because I know it would bother you, but please tell me you weren’t agreeing to an illicit affair or something.”

“Our expressions should have told you that’s not the case,” Merlin told him matter-of-factly, and gave him a meaningful look that made him deflate, jealousy leaving his body slowly.

“Sorry,” he muttered, and Merlin didn’t have the energy for another emotionally charged talk and let it go, reaching up to squeeze his shoulder reassuringly.

“Let’s go eat,” he murmured, and Mordred followed him without prompting.

Everything seemed to go smoother for the rest of the night, even settling in for bed – once his head had hit his bedroll, Mordred’s idea of talking all night had flown out the window with his consciousness. Merlin wished sleep had come so easily to him, but while Mordred slept he stared up at the trees and the stars beyond the branches.

Mordred seemed to inch closer and closer as the night wore on, and after only an hour or two he seemed to be wrapped around Merlin like a child, his arms and legs locked around his father’s torso. If he was being honest with himself, it was the warmth and contact that helped him relax, muscles loosening until he was so close to sleep, eyelids fluttering drowsily, heart slowing into an even rhythm –

Mordred was hard.

His eyes snapped open, his heart picking up the pace in a second, and he tried valiantly to convince himself that he was mistaken. They were lying on a hard ground with bedrolls that had seen better
days – it was nothing to think that he had shifted onto a rock or root beneath the thin roll.

He knew he wasn’t wrong, though – the heat, the warmth of Mordred’s breath against his neck; all of it was contributing to a very obvious problem that made Merlin want to shriek and yank himself away, made him want to push back against lightly rocking hips and take something he hadn’t in years.

He slowly pulled Mordred’s limbs off of him and wrapped the thin blanket around Mordred’s shoulders instead. Body too wired to sleep afterwards, he curled up into a ball against a tree, the bark rough against his back, his arms locked tightly around his knees. He was much colder there and wanted desperately to climb back under the blanket with Mordred – but wanting had got him in this situation in the first place and he was through jeopardizing his relationship with the people he would give his life for, with the person that had haunted his mind since the day of his birth.

Merlin refused to look over at his son, preparing for the coming morning of acting like nothing had happened and, even though he swore he could feel eyes on him, looked into the dying fire with tired eyes until the morning cast shadows over the sleeping bodies of his family.
Mordred let his magic reach out before he did when he slowly drifted out of unconsciousness and into a state of semi-awareness. Merlin had clearly been up all night; his own magic seemed sluggish in his veins, even for being so unused. Sometimes Mordred forgot just how much work his father did on a regular basis – he must have been exhausted.

“How long have you been up?” he yawned, opening his eyes enough to peer non-threateningly at Merlin – who, in the golden spray of sunlight, looked more like the Emrys that Mordred remembered dreaming about as a child.

“What long enough,” Merlin answered quietly, tired-pliant and obviously forcing himself to pretend that nothing was wrong. Even if it was essentially a lie, Mordred loved the smile on Merlin’s lips. There was real affection behind it, he knew, even if Merlin did not yet understand the depth of his own feelings. He would, and Mordred would wait and revel in the small affections.

“You’re going to need your energy,” one of the knights grumbled as he was woken from sleep, good-naturedly in spite of the grumpy tone. Gwaine’s head popped out from under a blanket, and he was grinning, rubbing sleep from his eye. “You made Arthur a bet and we all intend to see you through!”

Merlin visibly blanched, but didn’t say anything. Mordred let his magic reach just that bit further, digging gently into Merlin’s shoulders. His father relaxed slowly, sending another forced smile Mordred’s way, but Mordred could physically feel some of the tension leave Merlin’s body as if he were laying a hand along his back.

“Help me up, Merlin,” he purred, drawing his name out. It was part challenge, though Merlin couldn’t know that – he refused to listen in on others’ thoughts and could have no idea that his beloved son’s horrible actions were on purpose.

Part of him wanted to pull Merlin down on top of him, pull him close and continue what he’d started, let that overwhelming hunger inside of him take over. Oh, he knew all the reasons why he shouldn’t – one reason being the scar Merlin tried so hard to hide from the others that marked the place where Mordred had been pulled from his belly. The thought was almost arousing; his own claim on Merlin’s body that Arthur could not touch. He had made his peace with the wrongness of it all long ago; now he just needed.

Instead of acting on that beast inside of him, he let Merlin pull him to his feet, and he just smiled brightly and clapped him on the shoulder gently, murmuring a thank-you before kissing him chastely on the cheek. The way Merlin stiffened for a split second shouldn’t have been amusing, but Mordred didn’t let himself think about it as he made his way toward the fire.

As unsurprising as it was, Merlin’s over-friendliness made him feel awkward enough to avoid Mordred for a good deal of the day. He didn’t let it ruin the trip – Merlin’s quietness wasn’t unpleasant and he followed Arthur around most of the day regardless – though it gave Mordred this
underlying wave of bitterness he never seemed to be able to shake.

He stalked off into the woods to actually get some hunting done after the fourth time Merlin had successfully avoided having a real conversation with him, and scowled at the game like it had offended him.

He didn’t realize Percival had followed him until he felt a large hand clap him on the shoulder. “Upset, my friend? Your face alone is scaring off the prey.”

He turned his frown on his fellow knight, probably looking more grumpy than truly vicious. “I’m not upset about anything,” he grumbled, and frowned deeper when Percival laughed.

“Are you sure that Arthur monopolizing Merlin isn’t what’s got you in such a foul mood, mate?” he teased and Mordred gave him his most withering glare, though it didn’t seem to do much good. “C’morn, it’s not really a secret that you fancy him, what with the way you follow him about like a little puppy – hey!” He laughed as Mordred swatted him on the arm, the perfect picture of young embarrassment. “You do know he’s a servant, right? You can just ask him to come help you out. He’s supposed to be hunting, anyway, not following Arthur around camp.”

Mordred stopped walking and turned to look at Percival incredulously. “I’m an idiot,” he marveled and Percival just laughed, but waved him off, gesturing for him to head back to camp.

“I doubt Arthur’s left camp yet,” his shield-brother urged. “Honestly, go on!”

It was startling just how openly Percival had accepted his inclinations on the matter. He knew that everyone would be thinking differently on the matter if they’d known the full truth – but Mordred couldn’t bring himself to care as he speed-walked back to camp.

“Merlin,” he called when he found him prodding at the fire. “Merlin, come with me. We’re going hunting.” Merlin’s eyes narrowed at him as he stepped into the sunlight, but Mordred couldn’t help but smile at him wider. His magic reached out and danced along Merlin’s skin, urging him to step forward.

While Mordred didn’t expect too much of a fight, he also didn’t expect Arthur’s eyes to light up, a grin curving his lips upward. “Yes, Merlin!” he agreed, his tone making it very clear that he was on the verge of laughter. “You said you’d hunt us something, didn’t you?”

He could see the curses in Merlin’s thoughts rather clearly across his face. He didn’t even need to skim his mind to find them.

“I hate you,” he hissed as he followed Mordred back into the woods, leaving a chuckling Arthur behind him without a word.

“No, you don’t,” Mordred said smugly – he hadn’t intended to tease Merlin about the little wager, but it was a delightful cover for forcing Merlin to spend time with him. He watched Merlin out of the corner of his eye, but only spoke up when they were far enough away from the others. “You can do this, you know? If you want to hunt a bit you can.”

“I’m not a very good aim,” Merlin told him grimly, making a face at the bow Mordred offered him.

“It’s going to look suspicious if we don’t bring anything back,” he reminded his father, sidling closer and slipping the bow into his father’s resistant hand anyway. He covered that hand with his own, and guided Merlin’s other to the string. He drew it back, mimicking the actions. “And besides, poor aim or not, we’re not going to shoot from a hundred yards away, are we? I’m sure
you’ll be fine if you make an attempt.”

“I don’t like hunting, Mordred,” Merlin muttered, but he could feel him give in, just a bit. He smiled just a bit, welcoming the warmth of Merlin’s body against his, before pulling back and taking the bow.

“I’ll show you,” he hummed, spotting a deer yards away and readying an arrow. “Then you can try, yeah? It’ll be fine and the knights will all be very impressed.” He winked at Merlin and turned back to the deer – the doe, upon further inspection.

Merlin seemed to hold his breath until he let the arrow fly and she went down. He handed the bow to Merlin and gestured for him to follow as he climbed over a bit of coiled branch to get to the doe.

“I can show you how to skin her and prepare the meat as well,” Mordred added as he knelt down to their shot, brushing a hand over her flank. It felt only right that he provide for his father, which in some way seemed backwards, but right.

“Did Merlin shoot that?!”

They both turned in surprise to Gwaine and Leon, both of whom had jaws dropped in shock. Merlin opened his mouth, probably to deny it, when Mordred stood and answered in the affirmative. Merlin’s mouth snapped shut and he turned to give Mordred an incredulous look. “That he did,” he repeated proudly, clapping Merlin on the shoulder and pulling him into his side. “And you all doubted him. Ye of little faith.” He smirked at the blush Merlin gave.

“That’s me,” he said weakly. “Merlin the hunter.”

Gwaine laughed, eyes bright with amusement, and clomped over to help carry the doe back to camp. When Merlin’s eyes met Mordred’s on the way, he only smiled and sent a gentle, silent thank you to Mordred’s mind. He ducked his head down to watch where he was stepping, but he was smiling back nonetheless, understanding that all was, for now, forgiven.
“Does it really take that long to shine some armor, do you think?”

Merlin glared up at Mordred before turning back to his task. “The longer this takes, the less time there will be today to muck Arthur’s stalls.” He paused, then huffed and added, “I figured that after nearly twenty years, his majesty would get a lesser servant to do things like that. But no.” He rolled his eyes.

His son stretched and sat down next to him, his hair shining in the sunlight where Merlin had elected to take up his task. It was moments like this, when his boy was peaceful and happy, that he could finally see the bits of himself that had been buried as Mordred aged. He looked so much more like Arthur now it almost broke his heart, but his calm and serene smile brought out Merlin in him. It was a blessing to see, and he couldn’t help but smile in spite of his grumpiness.

“Do you realize how hard it is to believe that you’ve lived almost forty years?” Mordred mused, peering at him thoughtfully. You look thirty, at most – my baby-faced father.” He laughed when Merlin blushed to the roots of his hair.

“Thirty-five years, you insolent child,” he snorted, and nudged Mordred in the shoulder, setting the armor aside. “It’s the magic, you know. At least I assume.”

“It is,” the boy hummed. “You can kind of see it, in the right light. This glow.” He reached up with a faint smile to stroke his fingers over Merlin’s cheek. He jerked away slightly, but didn’t let his expression so much as twitch. Grinning, Mordred did it again before drawing his hand away. It was incredibly difficult for Merlin to keep his mouth shut, but was glad that he was able to. He had no desire to row with his son over something that, now that he was thinking about it, seemed ridiculous. The mistake of a young boy.

“Don’t you have something to do?” Merlin asked with a raised eyebrow when his breath returned to him. “Training or some such.”

Mordred laughed. “You’re petty, Emrys,” he teased, and Merlin let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “The only thing I have to do is spend time with my family, and avoid the new princess in town, whoever she is.”

“Mithian?” Merlin asked, and snorted softly when Mordred nodded. “Why? She’s perfectly lovely.”

“Something just seems off about her,” he shrugged, but his eyes were piercing. “There’s magic residue all around her. I haven’t been able to figure out how, because she’s not a magic user as far as I can tell – but it’s not old. Some of it seems recent enough that it had to have been done while she was here, but it’s not your magic. I would know. It’s familiar, but it’s not enough for me to
“You’ve felt a lot of magic in your time,” Merlin reasoned, relaxing with him. “But we can look into if it will ease your paranoia.”

“My paranoia,” Mordred repeated, lifting his eyes to a ceiling in a *why me* type of expression. “Between the two of us, I’m clearly the most suspicious.”

“You’re suspecting an innocent girl,” Merlin argued lightly.

“Who suspected an eight year old boy?” Mordred taunted and grinned when Merlin huffed at him. “A perfectly innocent child you nearly had executed, Father.” He lifted his eyebrows and waggled them when Merlin glanced over at him again.

“I said I was sorry for that,” he reminded Mordred uselessly as the boy was just smiling at him, uncaring. “How did you ever forgive me?” he asked after a long moment of searching his son’s eyes. He honestly could not believe that Mordred even did.

“It took a lot of talent and caring more about having you in my life,” Mordred answered thoughtfully, *truthfully*. He reached over and laced his fingers with Merlin’s. He squeezed, drawing Merlin’s eyes from their interlocked hands to his son’s incredible eyes. “I forgave you abandoning me to the druids, beloved Emrys. I think, at this point, I would forgive you anything.” The last part was thrown out casually, as if he wasn’t giving Merlin free reign with his heart.

“I wish I saw myself the way you do,” he murmured, and didn’t realize how close Mordred was until he could feel his exhale on his skin. “Mordred –“

“Just,” he whispered, eyes gloriously intense. Merlin was caught up in the galaxies he saw in them, frozen, wishing he could move but unable to draw even a breath into his lungs. “For a moment –“

Mordred’s lips were soft, trembling sweetly against his own. He thought his heart might stop in his chest and couldn’t move, inhaling sharply and receiving only the taste of Mordred’s breath. Mordred pulled away with a soft sound, just back enough to bring their entwined hands up, letting go and sliding the back of his hand against Merlin’s palm to entwine their fingers again before cupping Merlin’s cheek with his palm.

“Mordred,” he managed, pulling away ever so slightly, but his son – *his son*, and his stomach churned uncomfortably – just pulled him back and pressed another kiss to his mouth.

“Just let me show you how I see you,” Mordred murmured with a husky, warm voice, pressing ever closer, kissing him again. "It doesn't have to mean whatever you're thinking." His voice was a soft purr and for a split second Merlin doubted very much that it could have meant anything else.

“I –“

But Mordred’s mouth was more insistent than Arthur’s had ever been and even if these broad shoulders and strong hands had come from himself he still couldn’t move. His magic felt like a livewire, reacting to the overwhelming presence of Mordred’s own, and his skin buzzed with an energy he couldn’t remember ever feeling before that moment.

“You can’t,” he hissed when Mordred pulled away, expression innocent and unassuming.

“Can’t kiss my father to show my love?” he crooned at Merlin, something victorious in his eyes when Merlin involuntarily drew a sharp breath. “My *devotion?* My –“
“Merlin.”

Arthur’s eyes blazed in a way very unlike their son’s, and at the reminder, Merlin felt physically sick, finally finding the strength to pull away.

“I need to talk to you,” their king snapped, strong as iron. Merlin was only too happy to scramble to his feet, leaving Mordred behind. He was almost out of reach when he realized their fingers were still intertwined. Eyes narrowed, going between Merlin and an impatient (furious) Arthur, he leaned in just enough to reach Merlin’s knuckles with his lips.

Stunned and fighting panic, he ripped his hand away. He hurried after Arthur, who had turned sharply and stormed down the hall and away from the alcove where he’d been polishing the armor. Though Mordred called his name - *Emrys* - softly after him, he didn't turn around.
“What,” Arthur hissed the moment they were out of Mordred’s earshot, grabbing Merlin’s arm and dragging him more up to speed. “Was that?”

“Mordred –“

He was cut off and pushed into Arthur’s chambers without a word. His expression made Merlin want to cower, and felt his magic flare up as an automatic defense. He knew logically, that Arthur would never hurt him, but he also knew Arthur’s hot temper.

Arthur did not look pleased. That was lightly putting it, really, with Arthur’s blue eyes furious slits and his nostrils flaring. He hadn’t seen the king so angry in a very long time, and it broke something inside of him to know that this anger was directed at him. “He was kissing you,” Arthur growled, his voice a low, wild thing. “That boy you like to call your son.”

“He kissed me, yes,” Merlin managed, sounding faint and slightly shaky. He held up his hands defensively, backing up when Arthur’s glare grew fiercer. “I don’t think he meant anything by it, Arthur – just… just a way to show his affection.”

“You’re my manservant, and he is a knight. You are not his mentor or his brother or his father,” Arthur ground out, stalking closer and shoving Merlin into a chair. He made a soft sound of pain, his shoulder jarring with the back uncomfortably. “He has no reason to give you kisses of his affection. And as someone who is a good deal older and is supposed to be a good deal wiser, I would have thought you would do the right thing and push him away!”

Merlin stared up at him wordlessly, meeting Arthur’s furious blue eyes, feeling sick. “Quit pushing me, Arthur,” he muttered.

“No argument?” he fumed. “Nothing to say for yourself?”

“What do you want me to say?” he asked quietly. “I can’t be responsible for Mordred. I didn’t encourage him.”

“You also didn’t force him to stop,” Arthur snapped, turning and throwing himself into another chair, facing Merlin. For once, he looked less the radiant king and more a tired man aging before his years.

“Tell me the truth, Arthur,” Merlin began, his voice low. “What is it that’s really upsetting you? Is it the age difference?” Arthur twitched, but didn’t respond. Merlin stood, looming over Arthur’s chair. “Is it that he’s a knight and I’m just a servant?” Still no response. “Is it because secretly, you finally understand that he’s our –“

“Don’t you say it,” Arthur hissed, glaring up at him. “If he were really, you wouldn’t allow this.”

“I didn’t allow shit,” Merlin growled, throwing his hands up in frustration. “And I don’t belong to
you! I will discipline Mordred as I see fit, but you coming in there and acting as if I were an unruly child only enforces the idea that he shouldn’t listen to me, despite anything I might say. What are you trying to accomplish?”

“Need I remind you that you are not his father!” Arthur snapped back. “If anything he has a right to discipline you. I should be the one disciplining him – and I will as soon as I get it through your thick head that you shouldn’t be allowing this!”

“You will not touch him,” Merlin said in a low voice, and all at once Arthur seemed to pause, perhaps unconsciously sensing danger. “You leave this to me – I can handle Mordred. But you are irrational and angry and you’ve been bitter about Mordred for months. King or not, you’re being unfair!”

“I don’t take orders from you, Merlin.”

“Maybe you should,” he said, and bit back a long list of angry things he wanted to say, threats and promises of revenge should Arthur touch his son. Then, Arthur sighed, deflating, and Merlin was struck by the fact that this was Arthur. His king, his destiny – the man who had once been the love of his life. “Please, Arthur. As a friend – as whatever you consider me. Just let me handle Mordred. He’s a boy, who doesn’t know what he’s doing, and I’ll speak to him about it.”

Arthur examined his expression for several long moments. “Do that,” he agreed at last, but it was very distant. Merlin hated feeling so far away from Arthur, but it couldn’t be helped, not in this instance. He had to protect Mordred first.

Merlin took a step back, straightened his posture, and said with all the stiffness Arthur was showing him, “Am I dismissed, sire?”

Arthur’s mask cracked, ever so slightly, to show Merlin his own pain at their emotional separation. But he nodded and didn’t speak again.

He marched himself out of Arthur’s rooms, forced himself not to look back, and when the heavy door shut behind him he sagged against it, feeling out of sorts and exhausted.

“How angry is he?”

He wiped at his eyes furiously, and tried not to look too distraught when he met Gwen’s solemn eyes. She’d always been lovely in her modest dresses, but she was radiant in these gowns and jewelry that befitted her new station. He almost didn’t recognize her, but he needed the comfort of his best friend, just this once.

At once, she was by his side, his expression enough of a tip off. She put a careful arm around his slumped shoulders, and the other on his head, pressing his face into her shoulder. Should anyone walk by, they would be in a world of scandal, but he needed it more than he could ever express. He just squeezed his eyes shut against her and wrapped an arm around her waist, a silent thank-you.

“I saw him dragging you off,” she murmured, leading him away toward an unused guest room. Once inside, she sat him down much gentler than her husband, and drug another chair closer to sit by him. “What on earth happened?”

He covered his face with his hands, composing himself. “Mordred – I don’t know, I don’t understand. He kissed me, and Arthur walked by before I could push him away. I would have, Gwen, he’s my son – I just –“ He cut himself off, groaning instead.

Gwen put a hand on his arm, quiet and pale. “Arthur saw?”
“I haven’t seen him that angry in a very long time,” he muttered, and dug his fists into his eyes. “I don’t know how to resolve this situation. I can’t do everything, Gwen!”

She bowed her head in sympathy. “I know, Merlin,” she said softly, and when she leaned in to hug him again, he didn’t – couldn’t – pull away.
They were very quiet for a very long time, Merlin’s face pressed to the soft material of her sleeve.

“Mordred kissed me.” He felt like he had to say it aloud again to reaffirm it to himself, and he winced. “I’m sure he didn’t mean it inappropriately, but Arthur walked in and refused to listen to a word I had to say on the matter. He just kept yelling, saying I was encouraging Mordred – he went mad!” He brought a hand up, clinging to her arm, and she petted the back of his head gently.

“Mordred kissed you,” Gwen murmured quietly, repeating him. Her tone was puzzled. “But he knows you’re his father. He’s said so himself.” Her voice, soft, seemed so much louder spoken into his ear.

Merlin frowned. “He didn’t mean it like that,” he insisted in a low voice. “He knows – he’s seen the scar. If there had been any doubt – which there wasn’t – that’s proof enough, isn’t it?”

“Scar?”

There was a long silence, before Merlin sighed heavily and sat up straighter. He took a deep breath and lifted the hem of his shirt.

“The magic couldn’t manipulate everything,” he said with a humorless smile. “Whatever magic allowed Arthur to impregnate me wasn’t enough to let me birth the child. I don’t understand the logistics of how it happened, but the end result was surgery.” He bowed his head, letting his fingertips brush over the mark before he let his shirt fall. “I let Gaius dig into me with a scalpel to have my baby.”

“Was it worth it?” she whispered, something strange in her voice that he couldn’t identify.

He met her eyes, expression clear and probably as honest as he had ever been with her since the day they met. “Yes. I can’t think of anything more worth pain than my son.” Suddenly, the kisses earlier seemed much less important. It took a forced reminder of the miracle of Mordred’s very existence to put things in perspective, it seemed.

Gwen was still childless, but some mothering instinct unused inside of her made her expression achy and sympathetic. “Of course he was,” she whispered. “My god, Merlin. I couldn’t even –” She couldn’t seem to give her thoughts words.

He gave her a side-glance, then a small smile. “You will,” he assured her softly. “Not to make this awkward, but – Arthur is virile. Clearly.” He gestured down at his scar. “You will have children who will be as dear to you as Mordred is to me, and then you will understand.”

She ducked her head, abandoning her regal poise. There were tears in her eyes. “I feel awful for being jealous,” she told him thickly. “But watching you with the adoring child my husband gave you –” She glanced up and met his astounded gaze. “It’s been too long to go without a child! The people are concerned – I am concerned. I want a child, Merlin, as much as the people do. I know
Arthur does as well. I wouldn’t even have realized it had I not seen you and Mordred, heard you talk about him.”

The thing was, Merlin had always thought Gwen wasn’t interested in the typical “family” way. He supposed that no matter how strong or independent, the want for unconditional love and family were universal – after all, he’d never thought he’d be in that position, either.

“I’m sure you will get your child,” he said softly. “One less dangerous than my own, perhaps, but it will happen.”

She nodded, bowing her head again, chocolate curls obscuring her vision. “What if it never happens?” If Arthur and I aren’t compatible? What if Mordred is the only heir Camelot will get, and he’s not even mine?”

Merlin didn’t have an answer. Gwen saw that immediately. She shuddered, just once, and raised her head again. Her expression was pained, but her eyes were dry.

“I’m sorry for dumping that on you,” she sighed. “Being queen… it has a lot of unspoken expectations. I just feel like I’m failing, and I-“ She paused, searching for the words, but he didn’t let her finish.

“I don’t blame you, Gwen,” he murmured, and hugged her, because if she could take the time to comfort him he could do the same for her. “And you are an amazing queen, child or not. Give it time, yeah?”

She smiled a bit, grateful, and nodded. “I’m very lucky to have you in my life, Merlin,” she confided, taking his hand and squeezing it.

“I was about to say the same thing.”

*

Later that night, Merlin found himself taking a seat next to Mordred from where he sat, legs dangling over the edge, in a wide window ledge overlooking Camelot. He’d thought it would be awkward, or uncomfortable, but really it was just welcoming. He was too close, in too deep.

And he was fine with that.

He sighed, leaning against Mordred’s body. Older by twenty years or not, Mordred had the broad shoulders and muscle Merlin never would. So much like his father – but he’d gotten much from Merlin as well. His untamable hair and pale skin, his magic. The important things.

“You’re not panicking anymore,” Mordred acknowledged in a murmur against his hair. Merlin made a vague gesture, watching his long fingers twist in the air. “Does that mean things with Arthur are sorted?”

He snorted, sitting straight and angling himself so that his back was against the edge of the window, facing his son. “Silly boy. Arthur will be angry for a while, I’m sure, but I’ve decided not to be. It wasn’t a big deal.” Arthur could burn with anger as far as Merlin was concerned – he had his wife, his kingdom. His best friend, when he wanted him back. But his talk with Gwen had only enforced his decision to take care of his relationship with his son.

As if it were an invitation, Mordred leaned forward and kissed him again. It was chaste and gentle, and Merlin let it happen, ignoring the clenching of his stomach. For the sake of his son’s happiness – a little extra, harmless affection couldn’t cause much damage, could it? He’d seen Arthur kiss
noblemen and his knights in the spirit of brotherhood; it was the same.

Maybe, if he told himself that enough, backed it up with the memory of the slow smile that was spreading across Mordred’s lovely face, he would believe it.
when nothing really mattered except for me to be with you

Chapter Notes

Well, Bee, has it been four months since you updated this? I think it has! Would you look at that?

So so sorry guys. I don't have any excuse; I had a month off over Christmas and all that, but in my defense I got a playstation and all the Bioshock games. (I have no defense. Feel free to hate me forever.) Regardless, my Merdred obsession has bit me in the ass again, so expect another update soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The vague peace didn’t last long – soon enough they were in the forest searching for Mithian’s father, and Morgana was exposed to him. He was knocked down only long enough to delay his saving Arthur’s life again, but it didn’t spare him from Morgana’s eyes, empty but for rage and blind hatred.

He wanted to visit Mordred, when they returned to the castle. He wanted to curl up at his side and cry into his soft hair, press chocolate curls down under his fingertips, and mourn the Morgana they had once known.

He did not. His head hurt, still bleeding ever so slightly, and when he arrived at the castle he was quick to say his muttered goodnights to Arthur and the men before retreating to his tiny bed. He probably should have known that Mordred would be waiting for him there, should have known that if he hadn’t sought out his son, his son would seek him out instead.

He didn’t fight it, just walked up to Mordred where he sat on Merlin’s bed and wrapped his arms around Mordred’s ever broadening shoulders, pressing his face into the top of Mordred’s head and breathing into his hair.

“You’re bleeding,” Mordred murmured. Merlin couldn’t say he was surprised Mordred caught it; he let the familiar tingle of magic wash over him. “It will seem suspicious if I heal it all the way, but I can stop the bleeding.” Merlin couldn’t say anything, wouldn’t, just pressed his lips into Mordred’s hair while Mordred’s magic closed his wound enough to make a difference. “No, here –“

He pushed Merlin away, just enough to press a kiss to his mouth. “Not now, Mordred,” Merlin whispered, eyes firmly shut.

“Let me distract you, father,” Mordred pressed, winding his arms around Merlin’s waist. “You may tell me what happened later, when you are through breaking into pieces. Let me try and keep you together.”

Another kiss.

“It was so awful, my love,” Merlin said, voice low and rumbling. Mordred could hear the way his words thickened, though Merlin’s shut eyes were still dry. Mordred didn’t say a word about the
endearment that slipped out.

“You are loved,” Mordred whispered into his mouth, neither of them really kissing, just breathing each other’s air. “No matter what happened, it cannot harm you here.”

Merlin knew that as the father, it should have been his duty to protect Mordred, to comfort him. There was no excuse for him to curl up into a ball next to his son, almost in his lap, and shudder into his shoulder as he forced back tears, but he did. He sat on the bed and let Mordred’s soothing nonsense comfort breathe some relief into his body.

The more kisses Mordred pressed to his face, to his ruddy cheeks and forehead, the more normal it seemed to just let them happen. The pit in Merlin’s stomach, no less present, lessened in guilt and discomfort, turning into a hesitant sense of foreboding. His brain continued to tell him that it was wrong in some way, and yet his hands reached out for Mordred’s shirt, smoothed over it and cupped his neck, his jaw.

Merlin forced himself to breathe deeply, and pulled away enough to take Mordred’s face in his hands. Mordred met his gaze with wide eyes – his beautiful child, with his cherub cheeks and eyes bluer than the sky. Still smaller than him, in some ways. “I saw Morgana,” he confessed. “It was her magic you felt here in the castle. She was so angry, so full of deceit and hatred, Mordred.” It physically pained Merlin to think of it. “I haven’t realized until now how much I missed her. She was such a kind soul, once upon a time. She protected you, loved her brother and Gwen and even Uther. What corrupted her spirit, Mordred?” Merlin’s voice was still low, stumbling over words. “It wasn’t magic. It couldn’t have been. Magic doesn’t corrupt. Could I have even stopped her, done anything to help? If I had told her -”

“Merlin,” his boy interrupted, bringing his own hands up to cup Merlin’s cheeks. “Emrys. I don’t know. I wish I did, but I don’t. Morgana let hatred envelop her and that’s on her, not you or Arthur. Her hatred is no fault of yours.” There was a long pause. “I miss her as well. I barely knew her, but I felt so close to her then. I fooled myself, when we met up in Ismere, that we were still close, that she could still understand me. But she can’t, and we have to let her go.”

Merlin let his head fall forward, forehead knocking gently into Mordred’s. “Please don’t ever go,” he plead, against his better judgment. He could never tell Mordred the truth, could never tell him of the prophecy. He could, however, obtain a promise to put his mind to rest. “Promise me you will never let that happen to you. I need you here, with me. I couldn’t bear it if you joined her, let her poison you against Camelot.”

Mordred gave him the queerest smile. “Emrys. You know as well as I that no matter my loyalties to the kingdom, my home and my heart lie with you.”

It wasn’t an answer, not really, but it was the truth. When Mordred leaned in to meet his mouth, Merlin let it go. The kiss was soft and short, almost chaste. Something in Merlin knew that it was not, not entirely, but the rest of him fought that realization and let himself enjoy the closeness. The only human being since his mother that Merlin had felt entirely comfortable wrapping himself up in – his boy.

“Come, Merlin, lay down,” Mordred told him soothingly, gently pushing Merlin’s jacket off his shoulders, encouraging him to kick off his boots. Mordred had already made himself comfortable, his outer things and even his chain mail folded neatly in the chair by the bed.

Merlin watched, everything seeming slow and dull to him except his boy, who arranged himself in Merlin’s bed and opened his arms, just enough room left to fit Merlin in his arms. He remembered what had happened the last time they had slept near one another, but Merlin also knew he couldn’t
fault Mordred the involuntary actions of a young man. Besides, he wanted the warmth and comfort
Mordred was offering, and Merlin had few opportunities to hold his son.

Mordred was holding him, really, but as he lay gingerly next to his boy and let the knight huff and
rearrange him until Merlin was laying half on top of him, a warm hand brushing through his short
hair, it ceased mattering.

He relaxed slowly, but thoroughly, to the point that when Mordred tilted his chin up for another
kiss, Merlin couldn’t make his brain wrap around the idea that this was somehow less pure, that the
location was turning innocent displays of affection into something else.

“I fear I will never get enough of your mouth,” Mordred murmured, so softly Merlin was sure he
had heard him wrong, and deigned not to comment on it. He thought, idly, that perhaps his lack of
contesting Mordred’s actions was only encouraging him to do it. He certain couldn’t seem to go
very long without returning for more.

An attention-starved child, Merlin reminded himself, pushing away the dizzy awareness of how
strangely intimate Mordred’s hand was, resting on the dip between chin and neck.

Mordred’s lips were insistent, however – bold and genuine. Merlin didn’t realize until his lips were
parted, breath slightly heavier, that Mordred had been coaxing them open. He had a split second to
acknowledge the action before Mordred's teeth were closing gently over his bottom lip, sucking
lightly. Mordred shifted, letting Merlin lay flat on his back with wide eyes, so that he was hovering
lightly over him, and pressed his mouth firmly against Merlin's.

This was not the kiss a child gave his father. The thought was seared into his mind, making his
stomach churn and his skin blaze wherever Mordred touched it. He had half a mind to pull away,
but Mordred's tongue licked shallowly into his mouth.

No, he thought, pushing the word into Mordred's brain. It was weak in his own mind, and Mordred
seemed more than willing to call his bluff. Yet, he pulled away, still close enough for his breath to
fan over Merlin's skin, far enough that Merlin could just make out how red and slick his lips were.

A certain heat twisted low in his gut, washing over the disgust and illness that had settled there.

"Would you really push me away, Emrys?" Mordred whispered, leaning down to trace his tongue
over Merlin's bottom lip. When he pulled back enough, his eyes blazed, meeting Merlin's without
shame or fear. "We are fated. I was written into your destiny when I was conceived."

Merlin made an awful sound, closing his eyes tight and tilting his chin up, trying to face away from
Mordred. "You're my son," he said, and repeated it. "This isn't - this isn't right. You know it."

"I am your son," Mordred agreed. "It's only natural that I take my comfort in you. I love you,
Emrys. With every pore of my body. It's not wrong, Emrys. We are of magic and fate and love
stronger than blood."

It wasn't pushy, or aggressive. Just desperate, honest truths. Everything he said, Mordred genuinely
believed, strongly enough to beg that Merlin return his affections. He brought a hand up, tugging
Merlin's face back so their eyes met.

"If you love me, too, just as much, then it's fine," Mordred told him, refusing to let Merlin look
away. "It's fine. It could never be wrong, not when we're fated."

Merlin wanted to argue - but how? He loved Mordred, loved him with every fibre of his being.
Could he really push him away, break that fragile thing in his eyes. That thing like hope and
He wrapped an arm around Mordred's neck, the other clutching at his sleeve, and pulled him down into his arms. "Just let me hold you for tonight," he told him quietly. "Just that, for tonight."

And Mordred's face was pressed into his neck, but Merlin could clearly make out his response. "Alright." There was a smile against the skin of his collar, because Mordred knew it wasn't a no. Just a not yet.

Merlin bit his lip hard enough to bleed and held on, because he knew it, too.

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to come harass me about updating, or if you have any particular fondness for bands, In The Flesh, and social justice, feel free to come visit my tumblr @tisthewoman. Always happy to talk, even if it's about how I'm a lazy mess who should get on top of her fics.
Merlin woke the next morning in an empty bed. Mordred had not left; he was sitting quietly on the floor next to him, Merlin’s magic book open in his lap. His fingers traced the edges of the pages gingerly, as if he were afraid to damage it.

Merlin rolled onto his side and propped himself up on an elbow. He put the side of his face in his hand, gazing down at his boy. Mordred knew he was awake – the moment his eyes had opened, the magic lightly tracing patterns on his skin had warmed, a welcome. Merlin wondered when the wrongness and strangeness of Mordred’s magic had worn off and become a familiar, comforting presence.

“Doesn’t it worry you, to hide this here in the castle?” Mordred asked him absently, still engrossed in the book. “What if Arthur found it?”

“What reason would Arthur have to go ransacking my room?” Merlin snorted, pausing to yawn halfway through. “He never comes in here, anyway. Much too homely for his standards.”

Mordred broke his focus on the book to glance up and over his shoulder at his father, smiling at him. He looked so much like a boy in that moment – hair an unruly mess, cheeks pink and eyes bright – that Merlin reached out to ruffle his hair, and simply left his hand there afterward, stroking thoughtfully.

“You’re perfect,” Mordred told him, humming softly, and while Merlin was very aware it wasn’t true, he let it go. "No, don't make that face. Sorry." He leaned his head in, pressing their foreheads together. He didn't look very sorry, but Merlin wouldn't trade his smile for the world.

Merlin made the conscious decision not to pull away when Mordred kissed him softly, smiling against his mouth. Mordred pulled away with that gentle grin still curving his lips upward. "Why do you look so pleased?" Merlin asked him, though he was sure he knew the answer. Mordred’s eyes sparkled, twisting his body to throw his arm onto the bed, propping his head up in his palm. Mordred’s magic was as bright as his eyes underneath Merlin's skin, keeping him warm and enveloped.

"I just love being close to you." Yeah, Merlin knew what the answer was. The thing is, Mordred was being genuine and smiling, the happiest Merlin had ever seen him.

He paused, lost for words for a second. It was genuinely the happiest Merlin had ever seen him. His boy who had so much pain and suffering in his life for one so young. Merlin had never imagined, when he’d first held his tiny, wailing little boy with the bright blue eyes, that his child would ever experience what he had. And half of his pain was Merlin’s fault.

"I love you," he told him, perhaps for the first time that he can recall, and he means it. "I really do. My precious baby boy."

Mordred leaned in and kissed him again. It was perhaps a strange reaction to those words, but for some reason, Merlin's common sense was gone and he couldn't argue.

Naturally, when Merlin finally gave in and kissed back, putting a hand on his cheek lightly, Gaius walked in.

"I'm sorry?" Gaius looked more confused than anything, but at least the closed the door after him. Merlin groaned, his heart skipping a beat, and he pulled away from Mordred.
"I'll be right back," he told his son quietly, and Mordred closed his eyes, taking a deep breath before covering his face with his hands. He didn't like the way his happiness seemed to drain out of his expression. "Don't," he said, leaning in and hesitating only a moment before kissing the side of his face. "Beloved, I just need to make sure it's okay."

"Go," Mordred agreed, pulling his hand away. He was smiling again, just a little bit, and waved Merlin off with one hand.

He went, slipping into the hall and down the small staircase. "Gaius," he called quietly. The man looked over his shoulder, to his credit looking dubious but not disgusted. "I just didn't want to not - it's not what it looked like." Gaius was one of three people who knew Mordred was his son - and one of those three still refused to believe it. He really did not want to make it difficult between them – and, if he was being honest with himself, he really didn’t want proof that something really had gone very wrong between himself and his child.

"You can do what you like, Merlin," Gaius answered, messing with some jars. "It's no business of mine what you do with your child. I just... didn't think that you would be the kind of father to -"

"It's not like that," he insisted, feeling a little sick again. "He just - he says it comforts him, that it's just a way to show his affection. And, it's platonic. It's... it's okay."

Gaius paused entirely, putting down the jar in his hand. He turned to face Merlin with a strange expression on his face. "Merlin. You're trying to tell me that Mordred talked you into this?"

"There is no into anything," he hissed, intent on keeping his voice down. "Gaius, it's not - it's not like that."

"But he did, talk you into this? He kisses you, not the other way around."

"Yes," Merlin said, biting into his lower lip. "It's a comfort thing, Gaius. Just being close, after not seeing each other for so long." He clenched his fist, feeling a little uncomfortable. There was sweat beading at his temple.

"You don't have to convince me," Gaius told him after a long pause. He came forward and put a hand on Merlin's shoulder. "Merlin, you're clearly not taking advantage of him. I know many men who do far worse to their sons - but if he is taking advantage of you, then that I have a problem with."

"I'm not taking advantage of him."

Mordred stood just a few feet away, hidden by early morning shadows. His face wasn't angry, like Merlin might have expected - he looked upset, certainly, but more than anything, his expression desperate in a strange way, as if seeking some sort of outside acceptance. That Merlin was his perhaps, or that he was allowed to be close with him at all.

"Mordred," Gaius sputtered, surprised. "I wasn't accusing you. You can't blame me for... for worrying about your father." He glances toward the door, as they've taken to doing every time they mention Merlin and Mordred's relationship.

Mordred stepped forward, setting his hand on Merlin's hip, pressing up close to his back. His chin settled just over Merlin's shoulder. "I wouldn't hurt him," Mordred said quietly. "Never in a million years. I just want to be close to him, in every way." He pressed his mouth into Merlin's shoulder, turning his nose into his neck.

"Mordred," Gaius said softly, taking a couple steps back. Mordred's claim was obvious enough. "I
know you love your father."

"I do," Mordred agreed. “More than the sun and the moon and each star in the sky.” Something in

his eyes made Gaius hesitate before nodding.

Merlin was almost terrified to turn around. How strange was it, to feel nearly afraid of the intensity

in his son’s eyes? To know the lengths Mordred would go to for him, the moment he sensed even a

hint of conflict?

Gaius’s next words were unexpected. “Take care of him, then. I’m putting my faith in you, my boy.

Protect each other.”

Mordred finally let go, his need to stake his claim easing. When Merlin glanced to the side,

Mordred seemed to him almost proud. “I intend to,” Mordred replied easily, and finally Gaius

smiled.

Merlin huffed a little, and finally let his racing heart calm. It was okay. Whatever they were doing,

Gaius was on his side. It couldn’t be that wrong, if he had Gaius’s support – if it made Mordred

look as calm and sure as he did right at that moment.

“You charmer,” he said, almost accusatory, but Mordred just turned a little lopsided smile on him

and he gave up on being stern at all. It felt almost wrong that he was so easily twisted and turned

by Mordred. He could hardly resist him, and while he wanted to fight it, it was so much easier to
give in to the closeness. “All right, come on – you’re probably missing out on something important

and knightly, and I’ve most likely got a king to rouse.” He paused. “Or, depending on how late it

is, a king to get yelled at by.”

Mordred snorted, eager to get past the heavy conversation, but happily led him to the door.
Mordred refused to leave his side the next day. Arthur was quiet and withdrawn, and the near-death experiences they'd returned from had inspired him to allow the knights one day of rest. His son took advantage, but there was very little Arthur could do without causing a scene, and it wasn't like Mordred wasn't allowed to watch on as Merlin did his chores.

Honestly, Merlin was thankful for the company. Mucking stalls was more interesting with another person to talk to, even if that person watched his every move with keen eyes and that queer, overly-fond smile. He was grateful for the help Mordred sometimes is inclined to give, and he wouldn't complain about frequent kisses and the sound of his boy's laughter.

They took a break for lunch, sneaking away to the kitchens to bother the head cook, Greta. She was entirely enamored with Mordred - for good reason, in Merlin's biased opinion. He was enamored, too.

"I'll never understand why you insist on bothering me instead of eating with the other knights," she was saying, a hand on Merlin's shoulder. She was grinning anyway, a couple missing teeth in her smile, no less lovely for it. There were some people who were lovely for their personality rather than their appearance, and Greta was one of them.

"His highness is in a mood," Mordred mock-whispered to her, smiling impishly when she guffawed at him.

"Mind your cheek, boy," she said, pointing at him, but Merlin had never heard someone sound more amused. "Honestly. Maybe you need a bit of mothering, to curb that mouth of yours."

Merlin stiffened a little, but Mordred just smiled serenely at her. His hand found its way to Merlin's shoulder as well. "I like to think I have all the mothering I need from Merlin here," he told her cheerfully. "He takes good care of me."

Greta kept her smile. "I'm sure he does. He's a responsible boy, our Merlin." He relaxed a bit, but argued for the sake of it.

"I'd like to think of myself as a man," he complained good naturedly and she laughed.

"Too right you are, I suppose. Now, go on then, before Katrina comes back to giggle over you."

She poked Merlin in the cheek, and he blushed a bit. Katrina was a lovely enough girl, and almost reminded Merlin of Freya, but he wasn't the type of man to have casual dalliances and he certainly wasn't suitable husband material. From what he understood, her mother had her eye on one of the knights, hoping to marry Katrina into a good family, and Merlin couldn't blame her.

Merlin let Greta take their bowls and stood, taking Mordred’s hand in his own to pull him to his feet. “Time to return to my work, then.” He smiled at Mordred’s pouting, jealous face. “You coming, love?”

It slipped from his tongue unintentionally, but the grin that twitched his son’s lips upwards was worth the minor embarrassment.

Greta gave him a knowing look, but Merlin just pulled Mordred away, leading him with a gentle hand on the wrist.

“She thinks we’re secret lovers,” Mordred whispered into his ear with a little laugh as they headed
down towards Arthur’s chambers. “Not that she’s entirely wrong,” he added quietly, and Merlin forced himself not to stiffen. It was the first time Mordred had verbally confirmed the direction he was pushing their relationship in, and Merlin had to remind himself firmly that he knew. He’d always known.

“The cook doesn’t need to know that,” he forced himself to say, and Mordred’s little grin became less hesitant, Mordred’s hand smoothing down Merlin’s back. It was more comforting than he wanted to admit.

“Oh, there you two are!”

Merlin looked away from Mordred to blink at Gwen, who was coming toward them with a radiant smile. Merlin stiffened a little, made uncomfortable by the way her eyes traced the contact between them, but she didn’t say anything, just put a warm hand on his shoulder in greeting.

“Arthur was wondering where you two were. You weren’t at the midday meal.” She turned her smile on Mordred.

“We were having lunch in the kitchens, my lady,” Merlin told her after a moment. He rarely ate in the hall with the knights – why was it a big deal today? He was there for supper, but rarely any midday meals.

She laughed. “It doesn’t bother me – it was Arthur who was wondering where you were. Don’t worry so much.” He smiled a little weakly, and she patted him lightly on the shoulder and passed them.

He waited until she was gone before letting out a quiet breath, and Mordred’s hand slid down his arm to take up his hand. “Why so stressed? She is your friend, is she not?”

“She is,” Merlin answered quietly, and tugged his hand away to wrap an arm around Mordred’s shoulders, to breathe in the scent of his hair. “You’re so confident, Mordred. Much more comfortable with this than I am. I love you, I do, but.” He took a great, shuddering breath. “She saw your hand against my back and I froze. You’re my son. It’s terrifying to think that others could find out about us, to pass judgement on us.”

He purposefully used the word us, to make it clear to Mordred that he was in this, to the end. They were in this together. Judging by the gentle nod of Mordred’s head, he understood.

Mordred didn’t respond for a moment, but he knocked their foreheads together and smiled at him. “I am your son,” he said after a long moment. “And I am yours.” He met Merlin’s eyes, almost close enough to make them cross, and Merlin knew immediately what he wanted.

“And I’m yours, too,” he responded, and Mordred’s gaze gentled.

“Too right you are,” he said firmly, but it was teasing and friendly and beautiful. Merlin loved him, so much.

“I still have work to do,” he reminded Mordred after a moment of casual closeness, and the boy huffed but backed up just enough to let them continue down the hall. “Don’t you get cheeky with me!”

Mordred laughed, and sped up to jog away down the hall, sending Merlin a grand smile over his shoulder.

Merlin paused, amazed at Mordred’s gall, then laughed and went after him.
Mordred had been waiting for Arthur for the past half hour. He had amused himself for maybe five minutes by going through Arthur’s various papers and then his closet when his desk hadn’t turned up anything too interesting, but it had gotten old fast. He’d gone to sit impatiently, foot tapping on the stone, his cloak falling over his shoulders and the sides of the chair like water.

He wasn’t intentionally trying to appear intimidating, but when the heavy wood door finally creaked open, Arthur paused, his expression torn between discomfort and displeasure. Mordred couldn’t pretend, even to himself, that it didn’t hurt a little to see Arthur so standoffish with him.

“Your highness,” he greeted amiably. His bright tone was at odds with his serious expression, he was sure.

“Sir Mordred,” Arthur returned stiffly. “Not that I’m not happy to speak with you, but what, pray tell, are you doing alone in my rooms?” Mordred just smiled at him guilelessly. His hands were clasped in front of him, posture relaxed, but Arthur was practically projecting his thoughts. It was Mordred’s eyes that made him uncomfortable – Arthur’s blue, in someone else’s face, with a sort of darkness Arthur could never imagine in his own eyes.

In many ways, he was so much older than Arthur. He has carried a weight Arthur never would in spite of his heavy crown. He was a good king, one with promise and a future of greatness, but he was not Mordred’s parent, nor did he have any real power over him. His allegiance to Arthur was allegiance to Merlin, and to the hope of a better kingdom.

Somewhere deep down, Arthur knew that.

“Am I intruding?” he asked with all the innocence of the boy he never truly was. “I just needed a word in private and didn’t want to stand in the hall for all the world to know.”

Arthur closed his eyes for the briefest moment, took a deep breath, and looked at Mordred again with a much more level expression, the barest, tired smile on his face. “I apologize for my curtness, Mordred,” he said. Mordred was mildly surprised by the attempt at friendliness, but he only smiled back. “Please – what did you need to speak about?” He pulls out a chair at his table and sits across from Mordred.

“I just feel as if there has been some sort of wedge between us as of late, sire,” he told him with wide eyes. “I know my presence in this kingdom is still new, and if there is some sort of issue, I would rather leave before tensions turn into something more difficult to deal with.” It was the truth. Mordred preferred to never come to blows with Arthur or any of the knights. They had been good to him, and the knights at least counted among his friends, of which he had very few.

Arthur bit his lip slightly, his gaze off the side as he tried to think of what to say. He couldn’t very well tell Mordred that his possessiveness over Merlin was the issue, nor could he admit to himself that his discomfort was with the concept of his son being in love with the man who had brought
him into the world.

“I’m not angry with you,” Arthur said after a long silence. It felt like a lie but wasn’t. Mordred tilted his head, waiting for Arthur to continue. “I just worry that your relationship with Merlin is… unsuitable. For a man of your standing.” He shifted, looking uncomfortable. “Besides which, you two spend a lot of time together. Merlin has duties to be attended to and I worry your training falls to the wayside.”

“Has Merlin been behind in his work?” Mordred asked. He knew the answer already, but it wasn’t fair of Arthur to make it seem as if Merlin was being neglectful when he wasn’t.

Arthur shifted again. “Not – not as of yet, Mordred. I just worry, is all.”

Mordred sighed, straightened his back, and dropped the innocent guise. Immediately, Arthur’s back straightened as well, his expression defensive. His hand dropped to his side – to his sword, no doubt.

“Sire, perhaps I should be frank with you. Merlin is mine,” Mordred told him blandly. “He was mine from the beginning and will always be mine. I love and adore him, and I would die for him. I would kill for him.” Arthur grew tenser and tenser, but Mordred didn’t have time to listen to him argue. “I’m not telling you this as a rebellion against you, sire – I’m telling you because you deserve to know. You have been very kind to me –“ Not as of late, but that could go unsaid. “ – and I know you are concerned about my relationship with Merlin. You needn’t be.”

“Mordred,” Arthur tried to interrupt, but Mordred continued as if he hadn’t heard.

“My standing is my problem and my relationship with Merlin – who despite his service to you does not belong to you, and whose personal life you cannot control – is my business as well. I appreciate you looking out for him and myself, but it’s unnecessary.” He shrugged casually, as if he wasn’t likely in the process of making an enemy of his king.

“I’m your king,” Arthur said quietly, as if that was reason enough for him to play god with their lives. “If I forbade it –“

A queer smile graced his lips as he met Arthur’s gaze. “As king, there is really no reason for you to deny either of us a chance at love, don’t you think?” Of course, it wasn’t as if Mordred could go to the public and demand outrage at Arthur’s decisions, but for those in the know… Arthur had no reason to draw attention to their strange situation, even amongst the knights, or his queen, who was bound to recognize his actions as the work of a jealous man.

Arthur, above all things, looked defeated. His eyes were downcast, his mouth turned downward into a frown. Mordred felt no joy at his pain – he understood what it was like to love and lose Merlin. The difference was that he was asserting his claim, where Arthur could not and would not do the same.

“I have pledged my loyalty to you and this kingdom, your highness,” Mordred reminded him quietly. He gentled his voice. “I owe you my life, and I am grateful to you. Even though you have been… harsh with me these past few months, I still count you among my friends, and among those I trust. Please don’t think I’m trying to hurt you with this.”

Arthur looked up, blue eyes not quite angry. “You are too free with the way you speak to me, Sir Mordred.” His tone was even, but he couldn’t muster the authority his words demanded. Mordred offered no rebuttal, and after a moment Arthur sighed. “There are things I cannot tell you, Mordred, and that you cannot understand. Can’t you just trust me that a relationship with Merlin
would be unhealthy for you?”

Strangely, Mordred could feel the genuine concern in his voice, and realized at once that there was more to the situation than just Arthur’s guilt. He thought—well. He understood why some might misunderstand and assume Merlin was manipulating or taking advantage of Mordred in some way—the age difference was notable enough, and yet he still couldn’t honestly comprehend why anyone would believe Merlin was capable of such wrongdoing.

Either way, Mordred’s answer was the same. “I know more than you think, sire, and I assure you I am in no danger.” With that he stood, pushed his chair in, and bowed deeply. “Your concern is appreciated, but unneeded. I think I should take my leave now, sire.”

Arthur waved him off, rubbing at his face with the other hand. “Go on, then.”

“Good-night, sire.”

“… good-night, Mordred.”

The door shut behind Mordred with a quiet sound, and while he had accomplished much, he could not bring himself to smile as he walked away from a good man left to stew over his own mistakes.
the sooner will his race be run

Chapter Notes

The title is from Robert Herrick's "To The Virgins, To Make Much of Time," which obviously has nothing to do with this (except... lol maybe it does), but I liked this line for the chapter title anyway. Sorry for the lateness of this chapter, guys, and I hope you all enjoy it even though it's mostly just setting up the closing arc of the fic.

Also, a quick reread made me think I should be mentioning where in the timeline we are. Because I don't wish to rewrite the entire show, I do get very vague about specific plot elements, since several chapters are just recaps of the episodes with Meredred elements. I apologize if there's been any confusion, and I plan to go back and add the episodes in the author's notes for reference, as well as making it more clear what's going on in future chapters, because I doubt that anyone is reading this and watching the episodes for reference.

This chapter is set at the beginning of S5E5, "The Disir."

Swords, clashing.

A loud huff of breath. A stern expression, two pairs of blue eyes focused only on each other, then—
an arm caught, a sword ripped away, and a body lying panting on the ground.

“You’re getting good, Mordred,” Arthur said, smiling stiffly, letting his sword drop from
Mordred’s throat. His hair shone brightly in the sun, and Merlin smiled at the visible attempt at
amicability. He was sitting on the sidelines, watching the knights spar, and had been pleasantly
surprised by Mordred’s skill. Arthur’s praise was not at all unwarranted, and pride warmed a
private section of his heart. “Very good.”

“My Lord.” Mordred let Arthur heave him to his feet, and Merlin watched their interactions with
an attentive eye. He stood, brushing grass off his trousers, and made his way in their direction.

“I may have to start trying soon,” Arthur added as Merlin approached, and he was almost proud
that Arthur’s tone wasn’t mocking, just teasing.

“My Lord,” Merlin called casually, making his way over. Arthur gave him a tight smile as well,
and Mordred’s attention shifted over to him. He couldn’t hide the pleased smile that curled his lips
upward at the genuinely delighted expression on his son’s face. “Mordred,” he greeted lightly, eyes
warm. “You fight well. Better every passing day.” Mordred beamed at him, meeting Merlin
halfway and touching his arm lightly. There were knights circling them, still clapping lightly, and
the gentle touch sent a few of them snickering quietly. Merlin glared at the closest – Gwaine and
Percival – and turned his attention back to his son.

“You think?” Mordred asked, squeezing his arm in claim.

“Aye,” he agreed, chuckling a little when Mordred’s smile grew brighter, if possible. He glanced
over Mordred’s shoulder at Arthur, who was making an impatient gesture for them to hurry their
conversation. “But go, now – discuss your sparring with the king. Perhaps he’s got something to go
over with you.”

Mordred huffed, but did as he was bid, and Arthur made a face but began briefing Mordred on technique regardless. He watched as Arthur and Mordred spoke – animatedly, on Mordred’s part, though Arthur’s expression was schooled into careful neutrality. It was better than nothing, Merlin reminded himself. When they were finished, Arthur waved at Merlin to follow him, and he immediately did as he was bid. Mordred, as Merlin passed, touched his arm again.

*I’ll find you later, Emrys,* Mordred told him as he walked away, making to chat with the knights, and Merlin threw another grin at him before turned and followed Arthur into the castle.

“You saw his sword work,” Arthur began some minutes later as they entered his chambers. He was rolling his shoulders, a sure sign of a good workout. Mordred had been a good opponent, Merlin thought. “Quite… satisfactory.”

“You were impressed,” Merlin sighed. No matter the progress made between the two, Arthur’s reluctance to warm up to Mordred was growing old quickly. “Don’t pretend you weren’t. I was impressed as well.”

“You’re biased.”

“I’m right,” he retorted.

Arthur sighed. “I’ve decided he’ll receive nothing but encouragement from me,” Arthur told him in a grudging tone, and Merlin’s shoulders sagged a little in relief. Finally, a concession. Perhaps there was hope. “He’ll make a fine knight – one of the finest, if I’m not mistaken.” He began properly stripping his armor and chainmail, slipping behind the divider.

“He will,” Merlin agreed, still hesitant. He knew there was more to the situation than what he was hearing, but he was still hopeful for a truce. Even though Mordred wouldn’t say it, he knew that Arthur’s standoffishness stung. He would never know if it was the pain of being rejected by his father or by his king that made Mordred’s face so dark when he thought about it, but either way, it was awful to watch. “He’s clever and strong, and he’s loyal. He’ll fight for us, happily.”

Arthur emerged from behind the divider. His expression was unreadable, and Merlin shifted uneasily. “He’ll fight for you,” Arthur said flatly, and immediately Merlin understood why Arthur had gone stiff again. “He loves you. He would do anything for you.” There was a pause. “Does he know yet that you believe he’s your son?”

Merlin’s mouth tightened into a flat line. “I love him, and he knows that. It is enough.” The words were biting. He didn’t want to fight with Arthur, but this topic never ended well.

Arthur, surprisingly, didn’t rise to the challenge. He just sighed heavily. “He came to me, you know. Made his claim on you, told me that you were his and he intended to be yours.”

Surprise went through Merlin like lightning. His next words came unbidden to his mouth. “He is mine.”

They stared at one another for several long minutes. “I hope you know what you are doing, Merlin,” Arthur said softly, some of his old fondness seeping through. “I recognize that I have done wrong by you, but I still… I care for you enough to want good for you. I cannot reasonably keep you apart without making an enemy of you both, and I don’t want that, but I will not stop worrying.”

“I don’t ask you to. I ask you to allow me my own choices.”
“You are allowed,” Arthur told him, and Merlin nodded. He put away Arthur’s things, and left without another word, but before he walked out, he braved a smile in Arthur’s direction. Arthur’s returning smile, however sad it may have been, was a relief to see.

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Mordred found him later, as promised, and when he did he did so with the brightest eyes and limbs jittering with excitement.

“Emrys,” Mordred breathed immediately, bursting into his room and crashing into Merlin where he was hanging up his washed clothing. Merlin laughed, turning a little to wrap a comfortable arm around Mordred’s waist. “Emrys, I have been selected for a mission. I will accompany his highness to find the sorcerer who killed Sir Ranulf.” Mordred spoke with the eagerness of a child who had received a gift, and it was heartening to see him so happy because of Arthur. Then, the words registered.

Merlin’s eyebrows rose in surprise, his lips parting slightly. There was a pit in his stomach, an uncomfortable feeling churning at the information. “Sir Ranulf –“

“Has been killed,” Mordred repeated, and there was a note of melancholy underneath the excitement, though it was quickly buried. “And Arthur is bringing me with him to apprehend the sorcerer who did it.”

Merlin did not like the idea of hunting down a sorcerer – hated it, even – but he had plenty of experience with truly cruel magic users. If had truly killed Sir Ranulf, there was no reason to doubt that this sorcerer was like Morgana. What made Merlin’s limbs stiffen in fear was the thought of sending Mordred out on a mission to find a man who had already killed a good knight.

Logically, Merlin knew that his worry was ridiculous. Mordred had survived on his own since childhood, and he had taken on more formidable foes than one sorcerer. The logical thought didn’t make it any easier to think of his son engaged in true battle.

“You are no doubt worthy of it,” Merlin said slowly, thinking back to his earlier conversation with Arthur. “But… this sounds dangerous.” He bit his lower lip when Mordred’s smile dimmed a little.

“Of course it is,” Mordred agreed slowly. “But you know I can handle myself. I want to do this, to prove myself. Maybe, if Arthur sees –“ Merlin knew where he was going with the comment immediately, and didn’t make Mordred finish. He released Mordred’s waist, and instead cupped his face with both hands.

“He’s already seen you have the makings of a great knight,” Merlin told him softly. “You don’t need to put yourself in danger to prove yourself to him.” He shrugged when Mordred huffed, his exhale warming Merlin’s wrists. “I don’t want to see you in danger,” he added, to make himself clear. “It is not lack of faith in you, Mordred – that’s not why I don’t like this. I just have a bad feeling. I want you safe, always.”

Mordred softened a little, and reached up to hold Merlin’s wrists loosely, just for the contact. “I have already told him it will be my honor to go. We leave at dawn, and you are coming as well. You can protect me yourself, if you so desire.” He pulled Merlin’s hands off his face and slid his own hands up to lock behind Merlin’s neck, lacing them at his nape and knocking their foreheads together gently. “I will prove myself, to him and you.” He craned his neck a little, pushing his soft mouth against Merlin’s. “It will be just fine; you’ll see.”

As he always did, Merlin pushed aside the discomfort and let himself be drawn into the kisses.
“I will keep you safe,” he assured Mordred, and the smile against his mouth was answer enough.
tis expectation makes a blessing dear

Chapter Notes

Title from the Suckling poem "Against Fruition." There is a certain level of irony in my chapter title choices lately.

It was not just fine.

Merlin took a deep breath, pausing in between placing the stones on Osgar’s grave. Another sorcerer gone, one that he wasn’t entirely sure deserved his death. This man had brought them trouble, of that he was certain, but Merlin had a feeling that Osgar had only been the messenger. Had it not been him, it would have been another.

Judgement from on high? On Arthur? The thought terrified Merlin, so much so that his hands trembled as they placed a stone. What had caused the Disir to send Osgar to give Arthur the runemark? What had Arthur done?

“What would the king say? Sorcerers are not permitted marked graves,” he heard from behind him. He almost wanted to startle at the interruption, but he had felt Mordred’s magic wash over his skin at his approach, and it felt like second nature now to welcome it.

He sighed heavily, letting Mordred come up behind him without comment. “It's all right, Emrys,” he said like he’d thought even for a moment that Merlin was concerned he’d tell. “I'd have done the same.” He kneeled down next to Merlin and sighed himself. His eyes were dark and sad, the previous merriment gone. “He was one of us, after all.”

Merlin wrapped an arm around his shoulders, leaning over to press a kiss to his temple affectionately. He didn’t dare get more physical, not out in the open, but he couldn’t resist the urge to comfort entirely. “It won’t always be like this,” he told Mordred quietly, his voice a little rough. “One day, we will live in freedom again.”

Mordred gave him a small, quirky smile. “You really believe that?”

He swallowed the response I have to, and instead simply replied, “I do.”

Mordred let his hand come up to trace the side of Merlin’s face, just for a moment. “Until then, we go unmarked – in death as in life.” He let loose another sigh, and with a quick glance around, leaned in to kiss Merlin’s lips once, softly. “I hope for your sake you’re right, Emrys. I hate to see you so hurt.”

Once, he would have doubted the sincerity. Merlin couldn’t doubt him then if he’d tried. If nothing else, Mordred had proved himself endlessly devoted to his father, and if Merlin was honest about it, there was a vicious sort of possessive pleasure at that knowledge. His son, his forever, if he had his way about it.

“I’ll be fine, love,” he said firmly. “It’s not your place to worry about me.”

Mordred’s smile was small and private and a little sad, but honest. “I will always worry about you.” He stood, and waiting for Merlin to stand as well before he stepped closer. “We should head back
to camp, but first—" He leaned forward.

Merlin pulled away, glancing around nervously. "Mordred—"

The boy rolled his eyes. "No one is around. I’d notice if they were." He wiggled his fingers a little. "Magic, Emrys. Just kiss me, okay? One little kiss. Let me steal a moment with you; we haven’t been close in days." Part of Merlin wanted to say that it wasn’t the place for it, but the rest of Merlin understood his desire for touch, the part of him that shuddered under the mixing of their magic.

Merlin let Mordred press his body close. He encouraged Mordred’s arms over his shoulders, and wrapped his arms around Mordred’s waist, pressing their mouths together again with more finesse and more fervor. For a good, long moment, it was all he knew – the warm cavern of Mordred’s mouth, which opened against his eagerly, his tongue seeking out similar compliance from Merlin. A shudder went down his spine at the intensity of the kiss.

"Enough," he said finally when Mordred’s kisses began to make him shiver. "We’re out in the open; this isn’t the place."

Mordred shook his head, still close enough for his dark curls to brush against Merlin’s face. "I’m not ready to let you go," he whispered, and when he pressed ever closer to Merlin’s body, there was a shameful hardness digging into Merlin’s thigh that made him flush. Mordred left feverish kisses against Merlin’s jaw, rubbing against him in the worst, and best, way. "I just want to be close to you."

It was Merlin’s darkest and worst kept secret that he too wanted to be close to Mordred, and he hated himself for it. He also didn’t hate himself enough to truly want to stop.

He still pulled away with a wry smirk at the frustration etched into his son’s expression. "No, Mordred," he said firmly, leaving one last lingering kiss on the boy’s pink mouth. Almost without his permission, his hand slid down to ever-so-briefly brush over the line of Mordred’s hardness, a tease that surprised even himself with its boldness.

Mordred groaned without restraint, his hips rocking forward against the fleeting touch, and for the first time, Merlin felt in control. Mordred was often needy and desperate to be with him, but this was the first time his desperate was for Merlin to give him something and not to take.

Merlin often felt like he belonged to Mordred, but it was that moment that finally impressed upon him that Mordred was **his** as well – his boy, his long-lashed love, his world.

Mordred met his eyes, pupils huge and dark, but it was the look on his face that really hit Merlin. In spite of the clear frustration, he was smiling, unwillingly charmed. Merlin thumbed the dimple in his chin lightly, not quite able to keep his hands off the boy. "Tormentor," Mordred breathed after a long moment of eye contact.

"Tempter," Merlin retorted, pleased at the huff of laughter Mordred rewarded him with.

He looked at Mordred’s bright blue eyes, at his pink cheeks and pink mouth, and wondered how anyone could think magic was wrong when it gave him this boy. No matter the law of Camelot – magic was a gift, and it had given Merlin one. The love he felt for Mordred was complicated and deep and sometimes – often – painful, but it gave him meaning. Sometimes, he thought selfishly, more meaning than his destiny with Arthur gave him.

"Go back to camp," he told Mordred gently. "I’ll be right after you. Let me finish this."
“You’d better be right behind me,” Mordred said warily, but Merlin just rolled his eyes and gestured for him to go.

He knelt in front of the sorcerer’s grave who had brought with him the news of Arthur’s imminent judgment by the goddess. He pressed two fingers to the stone on top in respect for a fellow magic user, one who served the Old Religion faithfully.

The same Old Religion, the same gift of magic that gave him the gift of a son to love.

He bowed his head for a moment, then stood. With one last glance at the subtle grave, he headed back to camp. He had a king to worry about.
Merlin watched Arthur struggle with the runemark and the conflict of faith it presented. He understood in a way that being told to do something according to a religion he didn’t believe in would be difficult. He knew that even accepting the runemark’s warning as valid was validating the Old Religion, and magic by extension, even just to the point of caution.

He also knew that ignoring a warning like that would bring nothing but trouble. It wasn’t his place to order Arthur about, especially not with things as rocky between them as they were, but he also shuddered to think what would occur if the Disir and triple goddess were ignored.

It was that line of reasoning that stopped Merlin from protesting when Arthur insisted on setting out to find the Disir.

The morning Arthur demanded they ride out, Merlin helped Arthur prepare. He’d gotten all of their supplies ready, and was making last minute rounds to ensure everything was in order when Mordred approached them. He had a determined look on his face and was leading a horse.

He watched his son’s approach, knowing his son was planning something.

What are you doing? He let the words ring in Mordred’s mind, but his son did not stop or even spare him a glance, though his eye twitched a little.

“My lord,” Mordred called. “You are going to the White Mountains?”

Arthur startled a little, but answered without looking over at him. “I am.”

“Then I humbly petition to come with you.” There was a long pause, and Merlin’s eyebrows shot up. Mordred hadn’t spoken of this to him, but he wasn’t quite surprised by it. Mordred was a good knight, and one determined to prove so.

“This is not for novices, Mordred,” Arthur told him patiently. His voice was amicable, and Merlin hid a smile. He had a strange feeling about this development, but couldn’t deny that seeing the slowly healing relationship between Mordred and Arthur was relieving.

Mordred put on what was almost a pout, if it could be called that when directed at his king. “Did I not serve you well?” It was almost childish, but still somehow came out persuasive. Arthur sighed.

“You did.”

“Then I will do again.” Mordred nodded a little, as if to back up his statement.

Arthur faced him fully, examining his expression. “It is no mere sorcerer this time, Mordred. Our mission is dangerous – in ways we cannot perhaps imagine.” His tone was grave, but had no effect on Mordred’s resolve. Merlin’s heart ached with dual emotion – the same bad feeling that plagued
him when pursuing Osgar, and pride. So much pride.

“Then,” Mordred said slowly, picking his words with care. He met Arthur’s gaze head on. “You will need good men by your side.” His volume dropped a little, but he spoke with no less sincerity. “Let me serve. Let me do my duty.” His blue eyes, so like Arthur’s, were no less convincing in Mordred’s face. God, Merlin loved this impossible, beautiful boy.

Arthur caved, as Merlin knew he would. “Merlin,” he called, in a tone that attempted exasperation and came out nearly fond. “See to it he has everything he needs.”

Mordred tried to bite down on his smile, even as Arthur turned away, but there was no denying the small skip in his step when he made his way toward Merlin.

“Yes, yes,” Merlin teased under his breath when Mordred was in distance. “We’re all very pleased with your accomplishments, Sir Mordred.”

“Quit laughing at me,” he hissed, but his face was still open with pleasure. He reached out and squeezed Merlin’s hand, only for a moment. “He likes me more now, I can tell,” Mordred told him in a low voice. “He’s less suspicious, see? This will work out. I can protect him, and you, and this kingdom. It will work.”

Merlin’s smile went from teasing to gentle, to a private fondness that any onlookers would be embarrassed to see. Merlin couldn’t bring himself to care, and he cupped Mordred’s cheek quickly. “You are a good, and brave, knight. He’d be stupid to deny you when you are clearly talented and willing to serve.” He patted Mordred’s cheek softly and drew away. “Now let’s get you all together, shall we?”

Mordred happily let him put together his essentials for the trip, and before they knew it, they were on the road.

It was a simple journey – no bandits, no rogue sorcerers or other major peril. If it weren’t for their destination, Merlin would have said it was almost relaxing. Mordred stuck close to his side as they rode, and when they arrived outside the cave, Mordred was at his side the second he dismounted.

Arthur threw an order their way, walking toward the entrance with his sword out. At the sight of the brandished metal, Merlin blanched and called out, almost without thinking, “My lord.”

Arthur turned to face him. “What is it, Merlin?” he asked, concerned.

Merlin made his way over, leaving Mordred behind, and lowered his voice to speak. “This place is sacred.” He looked around nervously, then threw a pointed look at Arthur’s sword. His king’s concerned expression dropped instantly, replaced with that familiar exasperation.

“It’s a cave, Merlin.”

He could have groaned aloud. “It’s more than that,” he insisted.

Arthur wasn’t to be persuaded. “To me, one cave is the same as another.” Typically stubborn and bullheaded, Merlin thought. The uncomfortable pit in his stomach was growing larger, his magic tingling. There was something about this place that called out to him, that warned him. Suddenly, he had the strong urge to hold himself and Mordred back, to refuse to enter.

“You can’t go armed into a sacred place,” he insisted in a low voice.

Arthur’s only response was a heavy sigh, like he was tired of dealing with Merlin entirely. “You
want us to go in there, unarmed?” His tone was heavy with skepticism. “Of all the ridiculous things that you have ever said, Merlin – and there’s been a few – that’s the most ridiculous. By far.” He strolled away determinedly, and the knights followed.

Mordred, as he passed, gave Merlin a helpless shrug and “what can you do?” expression, and with a tight jaw, Merlin followed them in.

It happened so fast – one minute, Arthur was arguing with the Disir (lightly, not half as forcefully as he’d argued with Merlin before), and the next, Gwaine was drawing his sword and yelling. The next, the Disir had thrown him back and the air itself thrummed with dangerous magic.

The next, something was thrown in Arthur’s direction, but before Merlin could do anything about it, his son did.

Merlin’s vision tunneled, only able to see his son’s prone form sprawled on the ground, having thrown himself in front of a spear to save his king.

“Merlin!” Arthur called to him, an edge of fear in his voice, and Merlin ripped his gaze from Mordred. He came forward, ushering them out. The knights carried Mordred out, and Merlin stayed behind to watch their backs, his heart pounding with MordredMordredMordred.

A spear was thrown by an invisible hand and was deflected with Merlin’s amber eyes. The Disir watched him knowingly, and made no move to stop him when he fled the cave after his king and his knights and his boy.

He stumbled out, ears ringing and his throat tight with panic. He followed the knights, catching up with them only once they were far enough away that Arthur could collapse and position Mordred over his lap. Arthur’s expression was tight with worry and some faint traces of what Merlin would call guilt.

Merlin could hardly speak, dropping to his knees next to Mordred’s body. His son was pale and his eyes unfocused, and Merlin looked down at him with terror in his eyes, in his throat, in his trembling hand.

“Merlin,” Arthur said, choked, but Merlin could only press his fingers to Mordred’s face, too familiar for their company but unable to stop.

“Mordred,” Merlin whispered hoarsely, pressing his full palm to his son’s face. His voice was choked with unshown tears. “Mordred.”

“How is he?” Arthur asked him quietly, and the knights around them were silent, waiting for an answer. Merlin couldn’t look away from Mordred’s face, so pale and warm against Merlin’s palm. In any other company, Merlin would have been self-conscious about touching Mordred so freely, but while none of these men knew Merlin’s true relationship with the boy, they knew that the bond between them was more than friendship. Hell, they’d teased Mordred about his affections for Merlin even before Merlin had realized the extent of them.

“It is not a simple wound,” he managed after a moment of examining the wound, his shaking hands trying not to make anything worse. “Sorcery is involved.” The wound was pulsing with magic. His shaking worsened when Mordred let out a harsh breath.

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“Is there anything you can do?” Arthur questioned. There was a grave sort of resignation in his voice.

Merlin’s mind raced. He could try – but what if he made it worse? He didn’t know enough and he
couldn’t make an attempt with magic, not in front of the knights and Arthur.

“This is beyond my skill, sire,” he said after a long pause. He finally just cupped Mordred’s face in his hands, leaning in to knock is forehead against Mordred’s as his son so often had done to his. “We need to get him back to Camelot.”

“That is a long and arduous journey,” Arthur argued, his own voice tight. “What if he doesn’t survive it?” And there was the guilt, nearly hidden but not well enough.

Merlin pulled back, glaring and venomous in a way that Arthur had never seen. Arthur’s shock and discomfort was clear in his eyes, but Merlin could not and would not care about Arthur’s feelings, not now, not when his son’s life was in danger trying to save his king.

He did not say it was Arthur’s fault, but part of him wanted to. “I will not put his life at risk messing about with a poison I know nothing about,” he said shortly, and he leaned in to take Mordred from Arthur’s arms, carefully positioning him in Merlin’s own lap instead. He was not the easy-to-carry child he’d once been, but Merlin was not so weak that he couldn’t move his own son’s weight. He petted at Mordred’s hair, his fingers still trembling. “So he will last until we reach Gaius. He has to.”

Gaius would know what to do, Merlin told himself as the knights prepared to head back, leaving him on the ground with his boy. Mordred would be fine.

He hoped that if he kept telling himself that, he would eventually believe it.
Merlin didn’t know what he expected to happen – perhaps that the second they crossed the boundaries into Camelot, Mordred would be healed. He had this absurd belief that everything would be fine if they could *just get him back to the castle* –

But Mordred was laid on a cot in Gaius’ chambers looking no better, skin waxy and pale. He could only be sleeping, Merlin thought as he watched Gaius and Arthur fuss over him. He rubbed furiously at his eyes, as if it would help stop his desperate need to cry at the sight of his son, bandaged and wounded and looking like death.

“Merlin is right,” Gaius told Arthur gravely after his examination was complete. Arthur was sat directly at his side, where Merlin would be, if he felt he could keep his hands off his dying boy. “This is no ordinary wound. There is magic at play.”

“Can you save him?” Arthur asked. He put a hand on Mordred’s arm.

Gaius’ face was pitying and solemn. “I am but a physician. There are limits to my knowledge.” Arthur’s face twisted in a mixture of pain and guilt. Merlin barely reacted, almost numb.

Arthur pulled away, only to slam his fist into a cabinet. His head was bowed. “There must be something that can be done.”

“Perhaps,” he allowed, slowly enough to show his hesitation. “I shall do everything in my power, sire.”

Arthur slumped in defeat. “Let me know the moment he improves,” he sighed wearily. He cast another guilty look at Mordred’s unconscious body. “Or…”

“I shall,” Gaius agreed. Arthur turned and swept from the room without even looking at Merlin, which was fine by him. Gaius finally turned to him, and Merlin pulled his finger from his mouth, where he was chewing on his nail. “Only your magic can save him, Merlin.” Gaius’ tone was peculiar, but not peculiar enough to warrant distraction from the task at hand.

Merlin stood immediately, practically jumping from the chair. His eyes met his mentor’s, conflicted and determined and terrified of losing the one thing that seemed to give him meaning anymore. “Then tell me how,” he said.

“Look at you,” Gaius murmured, as if in response. “You’d really do anything to save his life, wouldn’t you?” Without giving Merlin time to answer, he continued. “What happened to the young boy who came into my chambers just a few years ago?”

It was more than just a few years – and they had been long. They had changed him. “He grew up,” Merlin answered, moving close enough to Mordred’s bedside that he could sit and take hold of the boy’s clammy hand. “And he learned the meaning of duty.” To his king, to his friends, but most
importantly, to his son.

Gaius nodded once in understanding. “A healing spell, then, Merlin – but a strong one, and it won’t be enough on its own. The spell will need to work as a conduit for your magic, but only enough to give you direction.”

“You’re telling me to just shove magic at him and hope it works,” Merlin said in disbelief. Gaius didn’t rise to the bait.

“It is that or beg the Disir to remove the poison themselves,” Gaius told him quietly. “You can save him, Merlin – your magic is strong enough. It is not an inherently fatal poison – just one controlled by the Disir.”

Merlin closed his eyes, another effort to fight back the tears. “What spell then?” he asked hoarsely, still holding Mordred’s hand.

Gaius came up behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder. It would have been comforting, if Merlin were capable of being comforted. “The strongest you know.”

He nodded. “The spell given to me by Kilgharrah, then.” He looked over his shoulder at Gaius. “It saved Morgana and Arthur both. If it can’t heal Mordred…” His hand clenched around his son’s, and he forced his touch to gentle. He tightened his other fist instead, nails digging into his palm.

“Then do it.”

Merlin nodded and took a shaky breath. He stood, debating the best way to go about it. When he had healed Arthur, it had helped to be above him, to see into his center where the poison was eating away at him. Mordred’s ailment was similar enough that Merlin decided to do it the same way, albeit more intimately. He straddled Mordred’s waist and moved the arm resting on his stomach to the side, so Merlin could plant both hands on his son’s chest.

Mordred was chilled, but his heart still beat, and Merlin was there to save him. Where he had failed so many times, Merlin would succeed. He was there, and doing everything in his power to make sure he did not fail Mordred again.

He let his eyes glow. “Ic þe þurhhæle þin licsare mid þam sundorcræftas þære ealdaþ æ!” He let the magic reach down, exploring and seeking out the darkness in his veins. It was everywhere, but not in the same near violent way the poison had spread within Arthur so long ago. It was there, but dormant. Keeping his son at death’s door and not a step closer, as if it were waiting for something.

There wasn’t enough force behind his magic, and Merlin dug the pads of his fingers into Mordred’s skin a little harder, and repeated it. “Ic þe þurhhæle þin licsare mid þam sundorcræftas þære ealdaþ æ!” His magic seeped into Mordred’s skin, like a thick coat of oil being absorbed. He could almost see it.

His heart leapt into his throat when he felt a weak, answering pulse from magic that was more familiar now than anything else. Mordred.

“Ic þe þurhhæle þin licsare mid þam sundorcræftas þære ealdaþ æ,” he hissed again, leaning over so far he could almost press his forehead to Mordred’s chest. He focused all of his energy on his hands, on the magic whirling within him almost violently. He could feel it snuffing out the poison in Mordred’s body, but it still wasn’t enough.

“Ic þe þurhhæle þin licsare mid þam sundorcræftas þære ealdaþ æ!”
Gaius stumbled backwards as his voice grew in volume and glass shattered from somewhere around them, Merlin’s hoarse yell seeming a thousand times louder. His eyes were nearly burning with gold in a way he could almost feel – but most of all, he felt *Mordred*.

It was as if they had become one for a long, dizzying moment, as Merlin’s magic filled him and expelled every ounce of darkness in his veins – even, it seemed, in his soul. Merlin’s arms wobbled, threatening to give out, but he stubbornly kept himself upright, his breath coming quickly with the exertion.

Finally - *finally*, blue eyes opened and met his.

Mordred’s pink mouth, which had seemed so pale a moment ago, spread into a tired smile. “Your eyes are beautiful, Emrys,” he whispered, and then his eyes fluttered closed again into a much more peaceful sleep.

Merlin allowed himself the luxury of sobbing, before he lowered himself onto the cot, half on top of Mordred. He wrapped a hand around Mordred’s neck, angling their heads together so Merlin could cry into his curls.

He didn’t know how he’d explain to any of the knights how Mordred had made such a quick turn for the better, but at that moment he didn’t care. His son was alive – had saved Arthur, and now both of his most important people were safe and well, within the warm arms of Camelot.
Arthur returned long after Mordred had sunk into a natural healing sleep. Merlin watched him come in, laying on the cot with his son nestled into his side, and offered him a tired smile.

Arthur was not smiling. He looked as if he were about to cry. Gaius slipped from the room quietly as Arthur came up and took the chair he’d sat in previously. When he was sat down, still silent, he reached out and took Merlin’s left hand. Arthur’s head bowed, and he pressed his forehead to their clasped hands.

“He’s going to be fine,” Merlin told him softly. “Gaius… Gaius managed to find a cure in one of the obscure books.”

Arthur didn’t speak.

“He’s tired,” Merlin continued, taking it upon himself to keep the conversation going. “But safe. He woke up just long enough to greet me, and then slipped unconscious again.” He squeezed around Mordred’s shoulders gently, hand twisting so it could play with a curl at the base of his son’s neck. “Got a smile out of him as well. He’s stronger than we both gave him credit for.”

Finally, Arthur spoke without looking up. “He could have died.”

Merlin hummed. “And would have, without our bringing him back to Gaius so quickly.”

Arthur’s head rose, and he met Merlin’s eyes with surprisingly red-rimmed eyes. He took a deep breath, but there was a deep exhaustion on Arthur’s face. His weary king. “If he had died, it would have been my fault. Because I decided to go to that cave and trample all over it like a buffoon, instead of heeding your advice and respecting it.”

Merlin shifted uncomfortably, honestly surprised that Arthur was acknowledging the real reason the Disir had gotten hostile. He’d expected Arthur to blame it on magic users being inherently evil – not acknowledge that he’d disrespected a sacred place.

Arthur held his gaze. “I would have taken your happiness from you again,” he whispered, and Merlin had to bite his lip to stop it from trembling. “And I am so sorry, Merlin.” He reached out to pat Mordred’s shoulder lightly. “And I’m sorry to him as well, and I will tell him so the second he’s up for seeing visitors. He is a true and loyal knight, and I can’t even express the guilt I feel for my hand in his pain.”

“That will mean more to him that I think he’d admit,” Merlin murmured, and he squeezed Arthur’s hand.

“Arthur finally cracked a small smile. “You can have this, Merlin. We never talked about it, not really, but I… I never could have had this with you. The people would have revolted – they needed a queen, and a proper heir, and they wouldn’t have accepted anything less. You, though – you can have this. No one will question it if you or Sir Mordred remain unwed, and I will always fight for you two.” He hung his head. “I’ve fought too long against it. It was selfish. I love Guinevere, and I am happy in my marriage, but I was still coveting you as if you were mine to hold and I deeply regret my hand in your pain, as well.”

Merlin turned, bowed his head and pressed his nose into Mordred’s hair. He kept his face away as he felt a single tear slip down his cheek. His hand was still clasped in Arthur’s.
“I love you, Merlin,” Arthur said quietly, and Merlin squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to make a sound. It was something he never thought he’d hear from Arthur’s mouth – something Arthur the king would never say to Merlin his servant. This was something different. Not Arthur the lover, perhaps, but Arthur the friend. “I want your happiness. I hope you believe that.”

“I do,” he answered roughly, and Arthur let out a soft sigh.

For the first time, Merlin thought, it didn’t hurt to discuss this. When he took a deep breath and met Arthur’s gaze again, his smile was small but genuine. Arthur smiled back, and then coughed, cheeks slightly pink.

“So,” he said in the faux-grumpy voice he defaulted to when he was done talking about his feelings. “You say he’s going to be alright?”

Merlin hid his smile, kept it inward. “He’s just fine. He’s not going anywhere toward the training ground for at least a week if I have anything to say about it, but he’s fine.” He broke Arthur’s gaze to press a kiss to Mordred’s forehead.

“We’ll have a great feast for him when he’s ready for it,” Arthur told him, giving nothing away if he had any reaction to the kiss one way or the other. “The knights will be relieved he’s okay. I know they were all distraught when he was wounded.”

Merlin nodded, biting his lip again. “Gwaine probably blames himself, you know. For starting the ruckus.”

Arthur winced. “He’s been at the tavern since yesterday,” he admitted. “I’ll send someone to get him, and gather everyone to tell them the good news.” He opened his mouth to say something else, but was interrupted by Mordred, who startled them both with a groan and rubbed at his eye with a fist.

His eyes opened blearily, and he glanced at Arthur, then at his father.

“What time is it?” he asked, voice rough with sleep. “I don’t remember much since the cave.”

Merlin let him rearrange himself into a more or less upright position, though his arm trembled where it held him up. He was still weak, and part of Merlin wanted to snap at him to lay back down. He didn’t, and let Arthur answer.

“Just after noon,” he replied, and reached out to clap Mordred lightly on the shoulder again. “We got back to the castle yesterday, and Gaius healed you after you were hurt by the Disir.”

Mordred nodded, wincing like his head hurt. “I’m alive, but I’m not sure if I’m all in one piece. Healed, you say?” He looked down at his bruised torso with a grimace.

Merlin sat up properly as well, and gestured for Mordred to lean against him. The cot wasn’t very large, but neither of them had a problem with Mordred being draped over Merlin. “You were poisoned,” Merlin answered the unasked question. “You very well could have died, but I… Gaius interfered in time. It’s gone from your system now, but you still need to rest.”

He helped Mordred rearrange himself so that he rested against Merlin, laying between his legs. Merlin propped himself up with one arm and brushed his fingers through Mordred’s hair with the other. It was a more than compromising position if they had been discovered, but Merlin didn’t sense anyone but Gaius near the chambers, and Arthur wasn’t someone Merlin felt the need to hide from any longer.
Arthur spoke with Mordred for a while longer, including the heartfelt apology he’d promised Merlin he’d give, but eventually Mordred looked too exhausted for even the King to demand attention from, and Arthur stood.

“I’m going to go,” he announced, smiling. “Glad you’re alive, my friend,” he said to Mordred, and offered Merlin a warm, private smile before turning and leaving.

Once the door was shut again, Mordred murmured, “He can’t ever know the truth about us.” He didn’t sound upset about it – it was just fact. “He can’t know. It will ruin him, and it will ruin us.” He turned his head, pressing his nose into Merlin’s chest. “But so long as he never finds out, we’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine.”

Merlin kissed his head, and prayed Arthur would never know.
Several months passed after Mordred nearly died, and though Merlin’s relationship with his son had never been stronger, another darkness overtook Camelot. A darkness overtook Merlin’s two closest friends, and it positively swallowed one of them.

Gwen changed after being kidnapped by Morgana, and not for the better. She was manipulative and quiet – speaking with deliberation and with double meaning for every word. She was not the Gwen Merlin knew, nor was she the so very royal Queen Guinevere they had gotten to know in the face of the public.

So after months of trials and tribulations, Merlin left Mordred behind and joined his king to save the queen and his oldest friend. He hadn’t wanted to leave him, but knew that his son’s presence wasn’t necessary and could, once at the pool, distract Gwen from their goal of cleansing her with the magic of the White Goddess.

It was hardly a surprise, however, when he was woken from his fall onto the rocks by his son’s steady hands. Stubborn, beautiful, intuitive boy.

“Emrys,” Mordred whispered, determined and worried. Behind him, the faint sounds of rustling assured Merlin that Arthur was still alive, quiet mutterings to his still sleeping wife. “Merlin!” His smiling face – his relieved face – came into view. “My lord, he wakes! He’s fine.” With a half-laugh, he leaned down and kissed Merlin’s mouth soundly.

“Oi,” Arthur complained from behind them. “None of that! Not around me.” It would have been joking, but there was a strange sort of stiffness in his tone that made Merlin slightly uncomfortable - but Arthur sounded just relieved enough that Merlin said nothing. Arthur had been strange about Mordred for days, but he’d never been hostile about it. Merlin brushed it off as him getting used to the open affection Mordred was beginning to give him in Arthur’s presence.

He drew his attention back and smiled at his son, drawing up a hand to caress his son’s cheek. “Mordred,” he managed to say, tone pleasant if not a bit choked. “My head hurts like it’s been clobbered with a mace.”

Mordred laughed again, and helped him up. “I’m sure it could be still arranged, my love,” Mordred said teasingly, and still chuckled when Merlin’s cheeks went ever so slightly pink. “Come, let me feed you and make sure you’re well. You’re not the only one with some base healing training.”

“I’m fine,” he groaned when he was standing properly, his back and head aching fiercely. “You don’t have to take care of me. That’s my job.” In contrast to his grumbling, he leaned heavily on
Mordred’s side, his headache sparking whenever he took a step.

“But I’ll watch over you regardless,” Mordred told him warmly, softly, in response to Merlin’s pain. “Give and take, Merlin.”

Merlin just gave him a smile and let him hand over food and blankets and, when the darkness had fallen, Merlin let Mordred position them so that Merlin’s head rested on Mordred’s chest instead of the hard ground.

The next day, it all fell apart again, but they’d had the night to bolster spirits, and by the time Merlin had to chase off a dragon, he’d more or less convinced himself that everything – him and Mordred, Gwen, Arthur – would be fine.

Even Morgana’s appearance didn’t stop his determination to set things to right. Even as she tossed them through the air like rag dolls, he landed knowing he would get up again. He did, and curled over Mordred’s body protectively, glaring daggers at the woman he’d once called a friend.

“When did you become so fond of the boy?” she asked, faux-innocently, some mad glint in her eye as she watched them like a predator watches prey. “You and Mordred. The things I could tell you about him, about that boy there…” She smiled sharply. “He’s more like me than you could ever imagine.”

Mordred stirred as she spoke, but Merlin kept him safe, sheltered.

“Merlin,” Mordred whispered before Merlin could reply. “You need to… Guinevere.” Merlin helped him up like Mordred had done for him the evening before, and shielded him behind his back.

“Mordred is nothing like you,” he told Morgana clearly. “I know everything, everything there is to know about him and I still trust him. You couldn’t change that.”

Morgana faltered for a moment, clearly taken aback. She was no pillar of strength – not anymore. Powerful sorceress though she may have been, she was confused and hurt and wounded, and not entirely sane. She looked ill, and Merlin worried for her though he could not do anything for her.

“Merlin,” Mordred said again, recovering quickly. He took and squeezed Merlin’s hand. “You have to go after Arthur. Go on. I can handle her.”

Merlin turned his gaze from Morgana to his son. “You expect me to believe –“

Morgana interrupted them. “You know,” she said, understanding the meaning beneath his words easily. She appeared almost wounded. “You know about him, and yet you still trust him? You still…” She frowned. Merlin’s heart ached for her, for the mistakes he had made in letting her think she was alone all those years ago – but he couldn’t right those wrongs. When she spoke again however, Merlin stilled entirely. Her confusion and hurt had hardened, and she spat, ”You think I don't know - I do, Merlin, I know your secret. Yours and Arthur's secret. Guinevere told me everything. You might know about Mordred, but what would Arthur say? Not just a sorcerer, but his own bastard son? You don't know the things that boy is destined for, and yet you still trust him even though you know what kind of hell he came from, what kind of monster he is.”

Even Mordred shifted uncomfortably, hurt at her phrasing and unwilling to show it except in the way he pressed closer to Merlin.

"I love him," he said flatly, and added, “and I do trust him. I trust him with my life.” Then, to drive the point home even to himself, he added, “I’d trust him with Arthur’s life.” Destiny or no, he had
chosen to give Mordred the benefit of the doubt and not even Morgana's poisonous words would stop him from doing so.

Mordred drew his attention away again. "Go, love," he whispered. "She won’t hurt me. Not really." He leaned in to press a quick kiss to his lips. The novelty of it hadn’t worn off, especially considering that Mordred had no qualms about showing it to the world. He’d never kiss Merlin in front of the knights or in the streets of Camelot, but in private, with Arthur or even Morgana, who had no means of using it as leverage, he felt no shame in it.

*If you're hurt,* he began, pushing the words into Mordred's mind, but Mordred just kissed him one more time, uncaring of their audience, and pushed him away. He turned to face Morgana. It was a dismissal, and Merlin ran after Arthur only because he did believe that somewhere deep down Mordred was right. Morgana wasn’t gone enough to hurt the boy she’d fought so hard to save years ago. Merlin had to believe that.

In the end, he was right – it was Mordred who struck her and stopped her long enough to get away. Morgana had not laid a hand on him, and the knowledge renewed the faint hope she was more than the darkness that had consumed her, that had risen from the deep within her and poisoned both her and her family.

Merlin saved Gwen, still disguised but not disguised enough to stop Mordred from sending him small, amused smiles every few moments in spite of the dire situation. As he cast the spell, Merlin wondered if he could save Morgana, too.

On the way back, Merlin and Mordred hung behind. It was only partially a ruse to give Arthur and Gwen some time to themselves. “Safe again,” Merlin commented softly, and Mordred only smiled.

“Safe, and together;” he agreed lightly.

They were that, and Merlin smiled back. Even if things did not turn out alright, so long as they were together, it would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

It looks like there's going to be approximately three more chapters? Give or take? Probably three, though. Sorry if this chapter seems jumpy; I didn't want to skip this major arc, especially since it's so close to the end, but it also wasn't going to change very much from the show except, you know, Merlin and Mordred, so I deemed it non-essential and did a sort of summary chapter of the important bit (i.e. the end).
The night after they returned from healing Gwen, Mordred came to him in the darkness. He was quiet as a mouse and contemplating, crawling into Merlin's small bed without need for encouragement. He knew Merlin would never turn him away.

_I want you._

Merlin hummed a little, bringing a hand up to run through Mordred's hair as he settled in the bed. “Don't you always?”

Mordred made a small sound of frustration, but he only buried his head in Merlin's neck. _You know what I mean. I want to make things… clear. To leave no doubt._

... _that I love you?_

Mordred shrugged. _That we belong to each other. That we're meant for each other. That my destiny, the only destiny that matters, is with you._

Merlin continued petting his hair. “Morgana unsettled you more than you let on,” he realized aloud. Mordred huffed lightly, but Merlin wasn't pushing him away. He'd long since given up on the pit of wrongness in his stomach, in spite of his guilt and the way he felt as if he were taking advantage.

_The way you reacted… it made me think that there's something you're not telling me. I know there is - there's always been something you won't say. How you wanted to let me die as a child, even though we were kin._

“It's better if you don't know,” Merlin said quietly. “I don't even know how Morgana… but then, she might not actually have known. She was trying to unsettle you.” He sighed.

Mordred brought up one of his strong hands to cup the space between Merlin's jaw and neck. _I just want to be close to you. A little reassurance, Emrys, is all._

Merlin, for once, wasn't going to argue with him. He had nowhere to be the next day, as per Arthur's explicit instructions to leave him and his wife be. “I swear to you that whatever destiny you may have… whatever dark secrets Morgana mentioned… it will never change how much I love you. I would do anything for you.”

“Well love me,” Mordred said aloud, finally. His tone was mildly desperate, a man looking for answers and begging for them. “I'm tired of… of seducing you. I need to know you want me.” Then, as if he was too ashamed to say it out loud, _I need you to take care of me._
Merlin didn't reply with words; he was as tired of fighting as Mordred was of pushing. No matter the consequences, no matter how unusual and maybe even wrong it was… he wanted his son as much as his son wanted him.

He tucked a finger under Mordred's chin, drawing him out and up, and planted a firm kiss on his mouth. *I can't love you like you want with your clothes on.*

Mordred scrambled to comply, and while he did Merlin stripped with more efficiency and calmness than he did anything else. Mordred had been a capable and mature seducer before, but it was as if he no longer knew quite what he was doing. All of his persuasion was gone and in its place was a need for touch and acceptance.

Merlin met him halfway, ignoring any self-conscious thoughts about his nudity, about the scar on his stomach, about silly things like his knobbly knees or the way his prick swung in the air. Mordred kissed him eagerly, unaware of all the things Merlin wanted to hide, and Merlin let go of them because if Mordred didn't care, he didn't either.

Mordred was a beauty, though. He told him so quietly, sometimes with thought and sometimes on a whisper as he traced his fingers over the hard muscles of his abdomen, his broadening shoulders, his - Merlin could not help but shudder - half-hard cock. So very eager.

“I made you,” he whispered, half to himself. It was an unpleasant reminder, but he only kissed Mordred once more, pushing him back onto Merlin's bed. “And I love you and I will have you, and that's all that matters.”

Mordred nodded, but his large blue eyes were shining with tears. Not happy tears, either. Merlin knocked their foreheads together.

“You belong to me more than you will ever belong to some strange, distant destiny,” he promised, and Mordred surged up with his mouth and his strong hips, pressing himself against Merlin just until Merlin covered him with his own body.

*Emrys.*

*I'm here,* he assured.

And he was, more than he had ever been, and he took Mordred in hand and moved his hand slowly, just enough to encourage but not enough to distract him.

Merlin kissed his neck, his shoulder, a little patch of skin by his right nipple. He kissed him and worked him over so gently Mordred squirmed in his grip but never resisted even as Merlin wormed his way down and teased him with his mouth, something filthy and dirty and entirely too enticing when it made Mordred shiver the way he did.

*We need oil,* Mordred told him, nibbling at his lip while Merlin rubbed circles over his most intimate place. *Emrys. Oil.*

“Impatient,” he murmured, suckling lightly at the side of Mordred’s prick. Nevertheless, he let his eyes flash gold, and a small bottle flew from one of his shelves into his outstretched hand. “One last chance to back out, love.”

*Why would I want that?*

In spite of himself, Merlin had to smile, and he pulled away just enough to cover a couple fingers with oil. “This will probably be uncomfortable,” he warned, preparing to slide a finger in. He
traced circles around the warm flesh, and when Mordred just nodded, he pushed inside.

Merlin's last experience was a man had been nearly two decades ago - and yet he could still imagine what it was Mordred was feeling. He could remember how strange it had felt, like a fullness he'd never get used to, how it had taken him off guard when deft fingers had stumbled upon that strange spot -

Mordred gasped suddenly, his back arching and thighs spreading. The surprise was written across his face - as familiar as he'd been with the concept of sex with men, he clearly had no practical experience. Something dark within Merlin rose up in a sort of possessive pleasure, and he hid his smirk by drawing Mordred's cock into his mouth.

That's good, Mordred told him, his mental voice just the slightest bit shaky. That's … that's good.

He sucked a little harder, slurping around the head of Mordred's prick, as he simultaneously crooked his fingers into Mordred's body.

Did you expect it not to be? It was little more than a mental whisper, and Mordred shuddered again.

I knew it would be good, because it would be with you. But, other than that… Mordred brought a hand down to curl into Merlin's hair. I didn't know what to expect. Though, I'm almost glad it was a surprise now. He let out a soft cry, hips pushing up off the bed at a particularly firm press against the sensitive spot inside Mordred’s body.

Merlin took his distraction as the opportunity to slip another finger inside of him, searching out that spot again to distract from what he knew was slightly painful, the gentle burn of a muscle being used for the first time.

Mordred barely reacted to the pain, just carded shaky fingers through Merlin’s thick hair the way Merlin had done to him earlier.

It was something close to comforting to have Mordred underneath him like that, open and vulnerable and finally so close he could literally taste him. After so many years apart, Mordred was truly his. Never mind that he’d never foreseen this kind of closeness – he would take what he could get.

This, he could get.

In only a few minutes, Mordred was trembling beneath him, his mind projecting the basest of thoughts – more, mine, Emrys Emrys Emrys – and Merlin pulled away from his flushed cock to press a kiss to his thigh before drawing away entirely.

He resituated himself so Mordred’s legs fell on either side of Merlin’s hips, and Mordred’s hand fell from his hair as he moved, down his neck and chest until finally he just gripped the coarse blanket underneath them. His eyes were delightfully hazy, sparking gold every few moments. He wondered if his own eyes did that, if Arthur had seen and pretended he hadn’t for his own sanity.

He loved it.

“Are you ready?” he asked roughly, his hand stroking up and down Mordred’s thighs. Mordred hummed and Merlin couldn’t help but smile, though he squeezed Mordred’s leg. “Use your words, love.”

I like it when you take control, Mordred told him instead, his unfocused eyes clearing just enough
to lock with Merlin’s. He huffed a laugh, and leaned in to kiss Mordred. Funny thing to say when he’d been so eager to take the lead so many times before, he thought but was almost immediately distracted by the smile on Mordred’s face. *When you tell me what to do, it’s like you’re a god. So strong… I could serve you happily forever.* He rolled his hips slowly, his ass inching up closer to where Merlin’s own prick was ready and willing.

Merlin knew that part of Mordred’s flattery was more manipulation – the words were true, but he said then with the intent to get Merlin hot, and it worked.

“Are you *ready*?” he repeated, voice low and thick with want.

_Take me, Emrys. Love me._

He slicked a hand with oil and coated his cock liberally, not wanting to cause Mordred any more pain than was necessary. When he gripped Mordred’s thigh again, sliding down to his knee to push his leg up to give himself more room, his hand was too slippery to find purchase, and Mordred gave him a half-grin, pulling his own leg up on Merlin’s behalf.

“Cheeky boy,” Merlin murmured, and took pleasure in the way his cock pressing in wiped the grin off Mordred’s face, replaced it with a gasp and clenched abdominal muscles. He hummed, slowly thrusting just a little bit inward, and back out, before repeating the motion. “Relax, love,” he said, and all bravado was gone. It was just warmth and affection. Mordred sighed shakily and did as he was bid.

*It’s more than I expected*, Mordred sighed inwardly, just loud enough for Merlin to overhear, and he pressed forward with his hips and his mouth, kissing his cheeks and jaw and laughing against the hollow of his throat when his rolling hips made Mordred gasp.

*It always is,* he agreed, slipping into nonverbal communication easily when his breath became more important. His muscles were all taut, the movement of his hips carefully controlled for a seemingly endless time, until Mordred was panting and twitching, already so close to release.

_Emrys._ His voice came soft and desperate and plain needy, and Merlin groaned at the sound of it, his hips snapping just a little bit harder forward. Mordred choked on a sound that might have been a moan, and Merlin’s control snapped like a twig under the foot of a careless knight. He slid both hands, now more or less dry, up under Mordred’s knees, folding Mordred upward, and thrust forward faster, with more depth and force and _ah-ah-ah, Emrys._

“I love you,” he said out loud, because he felt as if it were something he needed to say aloud like a confession. “I love you,” he repeated, voice tight and rough, and Mordred groaned in response, the muscles in his chest and arms flexing and bunching as he neared closer and closer to the edge.

Merlin pressed forward again to kiss Mordred’s mouth eagerly, panting against his lips and slipping one hand up to cup his cheek as his hips stuttered, as Mordred’s body clenched around him.

There was something endlessly beautiful about the way his boy – whose hair was so like Merlin’s, whose eyes flickered gold with the magic he’d gotten from his father – gasped with his orgasm, cheeks flushed and body shaking as he came apart.

Merlin muffled the soft whine he made as he came into Mordred’s shoulder, pressing his forehead into sweat slick skin as he followed his son into _absolute_ bliss.

*Next time,* Mordred began tiredly while Merlin pulled out gingerly. He was momentarily
mesmerized by the sight of his own fluids leaking out of Mordred’s reddened entrance, but was brought back to Mordred’s words when he continued. “Next time,” he continued aloud. “It’s my turn to take you apart.” His smile was sly, but when Merlin just laughed, it softened into something warm and familiar.

“I’m already yours,” Merlin answered, settling in next to Mordred, thinking vaguely about cleaning up and feeling no desire to do so. “To do with what you will.”

Mordred kissed him again, mouth already red from use, but he was comforted and gentle and Merlin would do anything to keep him that way.
After finally finding some sort of peace, everything went downhill so quickly that Merlin was almost shocked by the speed and ferocity of its descent.

“She is one of my closest friends, Emrys,” Mordred seethed. “You can't expect me to do nothing. She is hurt, vulnerable.”

“She is dangerous, and very likely the cause of those men’s deaths.” Merlin spoke with a grim expression, still as stone. “I cannot ignore that she has brought harm to this kingdom.”

Mordred spat angrily. “My friend, Emrys! I need to at least help heal her. She cannot stay out there alone and hurt.”

“You cannot put yourself at risk to save her!” Merlin replied, more forceful than he meant to. Mordred glared at him, eyes flashing in frustration and anger. “She will be fine, I'm sure. And if she is found, there is no reason for anyone to suspect a mere girl of murdering out men in cold blood.”

“And if she is not fine? Or if she is caught and found guilty?”

Merlin met his eyes, serious as death. “She is guilty. You know it as well as I do.”

Mordred choked on whatever he wanted to say next, his fist clenching. Finally, he reached out punched the wall of Merlin's rooms. “That doesn't stop her from being my friend,” he managed, voice rough. His eyes were bright with tears.

Merlin sighed, dropping his firm posture. He went forward and drew Mordred's head into his neck, letting his son plaster himself to him in search of comfort. “That I understand,” he said quietly. “But I do not give Morgana a free pass for her cruelty because I once considered her a close friend. Kara's actions are her own.”

Mordred struggled against him for a moment, but Merlin held on tightly. “Emrys,” he said, furious. “Let go of me. You don’t understand! How could you possibly understand?”

Merlin let him pull away, but kept a firm grip on his upper arms. “She was involved in the deaths of your fellow knights,” Merlin told him in a low voice. “Would you be so complacent if she’d killed Gwaine? Leon? Percival?”

It made Mordred pause, to Merlin’s relief, though he felt no joy when Mordred hung his head, voice a wretched, grieving thing. “I don’t want to believe she would do such a thing,” Mordred told him, still looking down.
“You would have. Before you joined Camelot,” Merlin reminded him. “I’m not saying I don’t understand her… different perspective. But I cannot condone this threat to the kingdom.”

“You don’t have to,” Mordred said quietly. “I don’t… I won’t bring her into Camelot. But surely you understand that I need to make sure she’ll be alright. I need to help her so she can get out, and then she will pose no threat to the kingdom.” He reached up, cupping the back of Merlin’s neck and leading his head down until their foreheads pressed together. “Please.”

Merlin sighed, knowing it was a bad idea, but the truth was, he did understand.

“Promise me you’ll be safe about it,” he said, kissing Mordred softly. He let his hands stroke down Mordred’s arms. “You’ll come home safe and preferably not in shackles.”

Mordred let out a huff of a laugh, the situation to dire for real laughing. “Of course.”

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Emrys didn’t want him to go; he’d made that very clear. But – and it was an important but – he’d trusted Mordred enough to let him.

He glanced fondly back at the castle that held his father and his world, and he turned back to the forest with determination. He could and would do right by both Kara and Merlin. He avoided a few guards – people he called friend loosely, people who threw him trusting smiles and patted his back after training. His loyalty was always to Emrys – to the father he had twisted into loving Mordred just as much as Mordred loved him – but he couldn’t deny an attachment to Camelot and her people.

He had made good friends here. He hoped he would never have to betray that trust.

He slipped through the forest quietly, following Kara’s voice until he found her, curled up on the ground but otherwise safe and fine. He knelt down and put down his torch before drawing her into a tight hug.

“Could you believe?” she said softly, and he cut her off.

“No.”

She pulled back, examining his face with a queer sort of smile. He did the same, taking in her gentle chestnut waves, her green-blue eyes. He’d been enamored of her, once. When his life with his father hadn’t seemed possible, he’d entertained the idea of keeping Kara with him forever. “If it hadn’t been you…” Her meaning was clear, and he sighed in relief that it had been him.

“I know.” He glanced down at her leg and its wound, flashing her a concerned look. “Your leg?”

She smiled again. “It isn’t deep.” He slung his bag off his shoulder, rummaging through it, glancing up at her and then back down to her leg.

“Let me see,” he said softly. “I’ll clean it. These will help it heal.” He pulls a few vials out of his bag, holding them up with another gentle smile.

“What’re we going to do?”

Her voice was quiet, unsure and almost but not quite afraid. “I’m going to help you get better,” he told her as reassuringly as he could.
Her eyes were hard to read. “You’re a knight,” she said, matter-of-fact, as if that changed anything. He could tell she wasn’t pleased about it, but friend or not, it wasn’t her decision to make.

“That doesn’t matter.”

She let out a little sound. “Of Camelot. Why, Mordred?”

There were no easy answers, and Mordred had no interest in explaining everything to her. She was an old and dear friend, but she’d never understood his preoccupation with Emrys. “Arthur is a good man,” he said lightly instead, tone perfectly even.

“I can’t believe you’d say that,” she said with a little laugh, clearly disbelieving.

Part of Mordred – the part that still loved Arthur, his not-father, his king, and his friend – wanted to rear back, to let the darker part of his soul take over. “You don’t know him,” he said instead, in a low voice, tending to her leg and very consciously not causing her any pain though his fingers longed to clench.

“He’s your friend?”

The answer was immediate, and in spite of everything he truly believed it. “Yes.”

She was quiet for a moment and Mordred resisted the urge, only by sheer willpower, to skim her thoughts. He owed her that much for all her long years of friendship. “Does he know who you are?” she asked finally, and he stiffened, knowing that she wouldn’t understand his willingness to hide. She wouldn’t understand any of it, what Merlin was worth.

She’d never stood in Emrys’ presence or basked the warm golden glow of his magic. She’d never seen the incredible feats and kindness and power. She hopefully never would.

“You’re a druid,” she continued when he didn’t reply, as if he didn’t know that. “You don’t belong in Camelot.”

He finished with her leg, and pulled back just a little. “I believe in Arthur. You’ll see,” he said gently, as honest as he could. “One day, it will change. You’re safe here.” He put a hand on her cheek, just grateful to be able to touch her, grateful that she was alive and more or less well. “No one will harm you, I promise.”

She sighed shakily and just let him cup her face, pressing their foreheads together. “I’ve missed you, Mordred,” she said. He smiled, about to reply in kind, when there was suddenly a mouth against his.

A mouth that did not belong to Emrys.

He pulled away before he could stop the reflex reaction. Her eyes found his, confused. “I can’t, Kara. I missed you too, of course, but I can’t do that.”

“You loved me once,” she said softly, persuasively, her mind pushing lightly against his, and he pulled away from that as well.

“I’ll always love you,” he told her truthfully. “But you know… you know that Emrys is precious to me. He’s the only one.” He didn’t specify what he was the only one of, but he knew that she understood. Something twisted on her face.

“You’re still… after all these years?” she asked, deceptively neutral, but he nodded regardless of
any possible danger. He would never be ashamed of Emrys.

She let out another shaky sigh. “I should have known.” She met his eyes, face cleared of any frustration or even the cool emotionlessness from a moment before. “I’m just glad to see you again.”

He smiled at her helplessly. “And I you.” He hugged her again, and stayed to talk until he absolutely had to return to the castle.

As he gathered up his things, leaving Kara with a few more medicines and foods, she watched him with an unfathomable expression. It melted into a smile when he said goodbye. “Be safe,” he told her, clutching at her hand.

She kissed his before releasing it. “Of course. You as well, Mordred.”

They parted, and Mordred returned to his father if not completely than somewhat content.
Merlin humored Arthur on his hunt for the knight-killer, but he knew about Kara and had no intention to betray Mordred’s trust to the king. He did not agree with her or her methods, but she was important to his son, and for that Merlin would have to back off.

Arthur was walking ahead, searching the ground with a focused blue gaze. “Merlin! Here.” He came forward, knocking shoulders with Arthur affably. “It’s all about staying alert. What do you see?” Merlin heard the snide tone and raised an eyebrow.

“I see a pair of breeches that need cleaning,” he snarked instead of a real answer.

“Come and have a look. Closer,” Arthur urged, deceptively polite, and then –

Merlin was laying in the mud. He wasn’t even surprised by it, though Arthur looked incredibly proud of himself. “Brilliant,” he sighed, picking himself up and trying to brush off the mess as much as possible. “Two pairs of breeches that need cleaning.”

Arthur groaned, gesturing. “On the branch!” he hissed, and Merlin’s eyes were drawn to it – snapped clean in two.

“It’s broken,” he said, because it seemed like Arthur wanted a response.

“What does that tell you?”

Merlin squinted at him, disliking his tone but knowing he’d already mouthed off enough. “Something left the trail.” He glanced up, raised an eyebrow, and decided that no, he had not mouthed off enough.

“It’s recent,” Arthur was musing to himself, still examining the branch.

“An animal,” Merlin said wisely, trying not to smirk.

“You think so?”

He nodded, though Arthur wasn’t looking. “A deer,” he specified, keeping eye contact.

“Would have to be a big one,” the king murmured, beginning to look around.

It was very hard for him not to laugh. “With very big antlers,” he added.

Arthur looked up at him, looking decidedly unimpressed. “What makes you say that?” Finally, Merlin thought, and he nodded forward.

“Because it’s looking at us.” Merlin gave the deer a subtle little wave, though it wasn’t very
interested by his greeting. “It’s all about keeping alert,” he said wisely, but halfway through Arthur’s attention was caught again. Merlin was sick of examining the mud, and nudged his arm. “Come on.”

Instead of going with him, Arthur went forward. “That’s not a deer,” he said grimly, gesturing toward a boot print in the mud, and all of a sudden Merlin’s mirth drained away. “Merlin.”

His mind grabbed onto the first excuse he could think of. Those were Mordred’s boot prints, they had to be. “They’re from when we were here yesterday,” he said, trying his best to sound nonchalant.

“It was dry yesterday – it rained last night. These marks are fresh.” Arthur’s tone was stony and dark.

“Our men have been patrolling this area night and day,” he pointed out, uncomfortable. “It’s probably one of them.

“Who?” Arthur asked, exasperated. “I had their reports. No one’s been through here.” He continued forward, but Merlin had a knot in his stomach and he called after him softly.

“Arthur –”

“Don’t hurt me.”

A girl younger than them both by at least ten years stepped out, limping badly. It must have been Kara – green-blue eyes, red-brown hair. “Careful. Arthur, she’s wounded,” Merlin told him unnecessarily, but Arthur had no aggression in his posture.

“Please,” Kara said, expression going between wide-eyed and guileless, directed at Arthur, and scrutinizing, directed at Merlin. “I mean you no harm.”

Finally, Arthur put his sword away and moved forward. He went to help her, very aware of her limp, and Merlin had a split second to sigh in relief that the situation didn’t escalate.

Then, she tried to kill Arthur.

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“Why?”

Mordred’s blue eyes were filled with tears, face twisted in anger, but Merlin made no attempt to argue with him.

“I didn’t tell him,” he said calmly.

“You gave me your word!” his son howled. “You were going to let me handle it!”

Merlin’s eyes narrowed. It tore at him to see his son so upset, but he didn’t know the whole story. “She tried to kill Arthur.”

Mordred went very still. “She what? But…”

“He was trying to help her – he wasn’t being combative or rude or even sarcastic, Mordred. He went forward to help her, and she tried to kill him. I’m sorry, but even I couldn’t have helped her escape after that.” He looked away, frustrated and upset and disliking the heartbreak etched in Mordred’s expression.
“She wouldn’t have,” he said softly.

“She said her only regret was that she failed to do it, Mordred. She said that. I’m sorry, but… I can’t help her.”

Mordred squeezed his eyes shut, beginning to tremble, and before Merlin could go forward to comfort him, Mordred crossed the space between them first and buried his face in Merlin’s neck.

“I’m sorry, my love,” he whispered, and Mordred only trembled harder.

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Kara’s trial was more like an unfamiliar interrogation. Arthur was angling for a confession that she was being manipulated by Morgana – it wouldn’t be the first time and Merlin knew how little Arthur wanted to kill a mere girl. But, question after question, she admitted what she had done with no regret, and claimed to do so for herself.

There were other ways to fight for one’s right to exist, Merlin thought, hating the look he saw on Mordred’s face with every new answer Kara gave.

Arthur, to Merlin’s relief, didn’t lose his temper, and Merlin was reminded that he really was a good king. He was kind and calm and was trying to be fair, even though he knew that Arthur was pushing it even with the trial, because she had tried to kill him.

“Yet,” Arthur said finally, sighing. “You have friends here.” Merlin froze, glancing between Mordred and Arthur. Mordred’s eyes were locked on Kara. “Somehow you got treatment for your leg… from someone in Camelot. Who?” He sounded casual, but Merlin knew how much it must have hurt him to accuse someone within his walls of treason.

She paused. “I treated myself.”

“You’re lying. Whoever it was left a trail of footprints in the mud.” Mordred’s face was overcome with realization, and he looked down, beginning to shake again.

Mordred, Merlin called. Don’t draw attention. Love, calm down.

It was all for naught, however, because neither of them expected Kara’s next words.

She was silent for a long time, and then finally looked up, directly at Mordred. Merlin’s heart was in his throat, his own hand shaking when she opened her mouth to speak. “I loved you, and I thought…” she said, and her words barely made sense – but the next ones did. She fixed her gaze on Arthur. “It was him. Your knight, Sir Mordred.” Merlin’s heart stopped, his limbs like lead – even Arthur stilled entirely. The knights looked between each other, but finally, all eyes settled on Mordred.

Kara continued, triumphant and hurt, betrayal clearly no bother to her at all. “A druid who turned on his people to join a king who didn’t even know that he has magic.” Arthur made a soft sound. “He’s a sorcerer,” she hissed. “I’ve known him since childhood, and I know him better than any.” It wasn’t true, because Merlin knew Mordred better than she ever would… but that wouldn’t save him.

Arthur was quiet for a moment. “Kara, you show no remorse for your actions,” he whispered. “I have no choice but to declare you an enemy of Camelot. At dawn tomorrow, pursuant to the laws of this land, you will be taken from your cell…” Mordred met and held Arthur’s gaze. “… and hanged.”
She was taken away, with some pithy parting shot that was wasted on Arthur, who was still staring at Mordred.

“Was she being honest?” Arthur asked, choked, and Mordred’s mouth opened, but no sound came out.

“Sire,” Merlin said tightly, coming forward.

“No, Merlin. I need to hear this from Mordred.”

Mordred’s shaking worsened, his face pale. Finally, he took a deep breath, words short and weak. “I… I never would have hurt you or this kingdom,” he said, weakly, and Arthur made a wounded sound. “I was born like this!” he defended himself, desperate and honest, all masks and manipulations dropping to shatter on the ground like glass. “I just wanted to serve you, a good king, and –“

“Silence,” Arthur said flatly. His face was bone white, and Merlin felt horror seeping into his bones. He felt cold, his heart racing unevenly. “I cannot…” Even Arthur looked terrified, his words coming out slowly but with dread in every syllable. “Take him away,” Arthur said weakly. “You are guilty of consorting with a plot against Camelot, of possessing magic, and are sentenced to hang after the Saxon girl tomorrow.”

Merlin stepped forward, hands trembling. “Arthur, think about this – he is a loyal knight! He hasn’t done anything –“

“Silence, Merlin!” Arthur snapped, and Merlin was almost gratified to hear his voice crack. “My word is final.”

He grabbed Merlin’s wrist, and held on to stop him from running after his son, whose sobs echoed throughout the hall even after the guards had dragged him away.
Arthur dragged Merlin to his chambers. He didn’t fight, even when Arthur closed the doors behind them, looking terrified and hurt and a thousand other emotions Merlin couldn’t read.

Merlin didn’t want to. Arthur had just sentenced his son to death.

“He’s our son,” Arthur said, realizing, but there wasn’t any disgust in his face. Merlin half-expected it, with the realization that Merlin’s first real romantic relationship was with their son – but the disgust never came.

“You’re going to kill him,” Merlin whispered, numb.

“He’s bewitched you, Merlin!” Arthur cried finally, and there was genuine grief in his eyes. Merlin felt cold at the sight of it. “He has magic, and he must have made you fall in love with him with it. Gwen told me, when she was under Morgana’s control, that Mordred really was our son, that he had magic, but I didn’t want to believe it. I tried so hard to forget about it, but you have to face facts. He’s a sorcerer and he’s in with the girl who tried to kill me. He’s manipulated the both of us.”

Arthur’s face was pasty, ashen and contrasting with the dark circles under his eyes. A few more tears slipped out as he yanked at his own hair, as if the physical pain was a distraction from the emotional. “I don’t want this. I never wanted this, Merlin – in spite of everything, you have to believe I never wanted this. Mistake… mistake or not, he was our child. I never wanted harm to come to him, but he’s given us no choice. You have to see that.”

It took several long moments for Merlin to realize that his own cheeks were wet, silent tears that he couldn’t hold back. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you call him our son,” Merlin murmured, and Arthur choked on a sob. He took the few short steps between them and threw an arm around Merlin’s neck, wrapping the other around his waist. Merlin stood stock still in the embrace.

“It was my destiny to protect you,” Merlin said quietly, and his eyes closed. Tears slipped down his cheeks regardless. “I was supposed to keep you safe and support you, so you could be the king you were destined to be.”

Arthur made a confused, unsure sound against his neck. “What? Merlin –“

“I was supposed to protect you while you united all of Albion, while you became the greatest king history had ever known,” Merlin told him, and by the end of it his chest felt tight with the denied urge to sob himself. “And such a long time ago, you made me choose between you and my son, and for the sake of that destiny I chose you. Because I believed in you, and because I loved you.”

He pulled way and took Arthur’s hands in his, lacing their fingers. He knocked his forehead against Arthur’s, then pulled Arthur’s hands up to his mouth and kissed his palms.

“But I cannot choose you this time, Arthur,” Merlin admitted, and there was a physical pain in his chest. “This time, I have to choose Mordred. I can’t turn away from him again. I have, so many
times, and I have promised myself that I would never again turn my back on him.” He stepped away, and pushed Arthur’s hands back when the king reached for him. “I choose our son, this time. I love him, and while I would never turn against Camelot, I can’t stay here and let you execute our child. I won’t say goodbye to him again.”

Arthur’s face screwed up in hurt, some mixture of anger and unfathomable grief twisting his face into an ugly grimace. “What are you saying?” He broke again, another wet sob tearing from his throat. “I don’t understand! Merlin, what are you saying?”

Merlin closed his eyes again and coughed on a sob himself, before opening his eyes again and facing Arthur dead-on. He watched as his king, his first love, his best friend, stumbled backwards from him in fear. The same eyes that Mordred called beautiful were to Arthur something to hate, and a part of him died at the sight of Arthur’s terror. “I will blast my way out of this castle if I must,” he said gravely. “I will not hurt anyone unless they make me, but you will not execute my son.” He took in a shaky breath. “Let us go, Arthur. Let us disappear, and you will never see us again. You can pretend we never existed, but let us go.”

“I can’t.” Arthur reached for his sword in spite of his tears. “You have lied to me. You are a betrayer, a sorcerer, like he is.” But his sword shook in the air. This was not the confident, stern warrior Merlin knew – this was a scared, wounded man trying to pluck up the courage to break his own heart.

“He never would have betrayed you!” Merlin cried, the dam breaking on his emotions. “His loyalty was always to me, but you were his king, and he would have died to protect you.”

“A trick,” Arthur retorted sharply, eyes wide and still shimmering with tears. He looked almost manic, his mouth bitten red and his hair twisted and ruffled with the way he’d gripped it as if to tear it out.

“Not a trick,” Merlin told him. “Never. I have seen into his soul, and I know him.”

A flash of his eyes sent Arthur flying backward, pinned to the wall. Merlin hardly registered the sound of Arthur’s sword clattering to the ground.

“If you take nothing else from this night,” Merlin murmured, slowly walking up to Arthur’s trembling form, prostrate against the stone. “Then take this to your grave, Arthur: I loved you, second only to the love I feel for my son. I loved you, and would have died for you, and Mordred would have done the same.”

He brought a hand up, tracing the side of Arthur’s face with a few fingers. He turned his head away, closing his eyes so he didn’t have to see Merlin’s face, to see his golden eyes. He knew that Arthur wouldn’t listen to anything else he had to say, and he sighed. He leaned in and kissed Arthur’s mouth one last time, and let that be his goodbye. With a snap of his fingers, he put Arthur to sleep and let him slide from the wall to the floor.

He turned and left his king on the floor.

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Mordred and Merlin reached the borders of Camelot, leaving alarms and unconscious knights and a kingdom Merlin loved behind them. Kara was left in her cell, angrily screaming after them, but not even Mordred had turned around once Merlin had freed him from his own cell. She had betrayed him, had proven to be a cold and cruel person, and Mordred had made his choice long ago.
They left Camelot, and once they were in foreign lands, Merlin did look back.

“We can never go back,” Mordred said quietly. He was no longer sobbing, no longer wounded and hurt. He was curiously strong, one calloused hand in Merlin’s. When Merlin stopped, he did not pull – he just squeezed, comforting.

“No,” Merlin breathed, feeling simultaneously as though a weight were lifting from his chest, and as if he were being crushed.

“But we’re together,” Mordred told him, squeezing his hand again. “I’ll do anything for you, Emrys. Father.” A moment of silence passed, and he added, “I love you.” His gaze, however, was also on the kingdom they were leaving behind.

“I love you, too,” Merlin sighed. He’d chosen Mordred, finally, and while it hurt in that moment, he had faith that it was the right choice to make.

He turned his back on Camelot, on his friends, people he still and would always love dearly. He turned, and let Mordred lead him away.
Epilogue

Long years later, once the worst of the bitterness had melted away into nothing, Mordred murmured the news against the nape of Merlin's neck. They were both slick with sweat and Mordred’s hips rocked gently. Merlin was full of Mordred, happy, their magic dancing and entwining, his skin accepting eagerly the intrusion that left him tingling.

“Arthur has lifted the ban on magic in Camelot.” He punctuated his announcement with another gentle thrust.

There was something to be said for soft lovemaking in the morning, in their small hut on the corner of at least three kingdoms. They were as anonymous as they could be when one of them was the legendary Emrys, and they liked it that way.

“It’s only been five years,” Merlin said on a sigh, reaching back to grasp at Mordred’s hip. “It took him long enough.”

Mordred chuckled a little against his spine. “Looks like you fulfilled your destiny after all, my heart,” Mordred told him, half-teasing.

“So it seems,” Merlin laughed quietly, and whatever words that were left were swept up in the slide of skin.

Once they had finished and were decent, Merlin stepped out to take deep breaths of fresh air. They were more or less hidden on the edge of a forest, and Merlin loved their small patch of wildness. There were animals all around, all sorts of life and magic and natural wonders.

It was no Camelot, and he thought of his home – his true home, even after everything – often, but he would never feel out of place in their little house, in their little forest.

“We’ve harvesting to do today,” Merlin thought aloud, and from inside Mordred made a sound of agreement. He nudged the door open, coming out and handing Merlin a bowl of cooked eggs. There wasn’t much to harvest – much of what they ate they obtained doing work in a nearby village – but they did have fruit and vegetables ready to bring in, and plenty leftover they could hand out to the poor in town.

“There’s plenty of time for that,” Mordred said mildly. “It’s still early.”

Merlin chuckled, looking back at his son. An adult, in many ways, yet in others – such a child.

“You just want to sleep more.”

Mordred’s smile was sheepish but honest, and Merlin only smiled helplessly at him, as much under his spell as he’d been from the beginning. His little son with blue eyes.

He would do anything for his son – and he had. He’d let the darkness from within himself eat him away, fill in the empty spaces, and now he couldn’t even feel guilty about all of the promises he’d broken for the boy he’d lost and found and nearly lost again.

He ate his eggs, humming in pleasure at the taste.

“Love you,” he said, just because he could.

Mordred smiled back, a beautiful and genuine smile. “I love you more.”
It wasn’t possible, of that Merlin was sure, but he didn’t argue.

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