The Scroll and the Sword

by Elizabeth

Summary

The Camelot Library and Archive of Arcane and Magical Artifacts' board has a new director and a new member. Merlin, the head librarian, is unimpressed by the flagrant nepotism. He is also unimpressed by the new board member's arrogance, looks, and attitude. Especially his looks. Especially unimpressed! He isn't affected at all. Nope. Not one bit.

When the new director asks Merlin and Arthur to track down a (possibly cursed) legendary dagger, neither looks forward to working together. But amidst death omens, Druid rituals, and global conspiracies, the reluctant colleagues are drawn together by a force beyond their control. It could be Morgana, or it could be destiny.

If collection development was this exciting or sexy, we'd have a lot more people in LIS.
The night was young and magic clung to the air like heavy dew at the summer solstice. Merlin Hunithson stood at the side of the ballroom and considered the lighting. It was perfect. Naturally. Or rather, magically. Neither the former director nor the new, Morgana LeFay, would allow bad lighting at the spring gala. The library was ancient, yes, but thoroughly dependent on happy, softly-lit donors for its operations and acquisitions. Especially its acquisitions, Merlin thought. He frowned.

As if she read his mind (and Merlin thought that impossible, but really, who knew?), Morgana’s eyes swept the ballroom to find him. They narrowed. She pointedly looked in the direction of a recently arrived group of local elites.

“How many books are in the library?” a woman asked. She was probably pushing sixty, but incredibly preserved, thin and shiny, the way very rich people are able to be. Her voice was kind, though, and Merlin took a deep breath before answering.

“Five hundred twenty-eight thousand six hundred seven books. That is, copies, rather. Slightly fewer titles, but just slightly, if that is the question. But then there are three hundred thousand one hundred twenty-four scrolls, currently, and probably,” he took another breath, “two hundred fifty or so written artefacts we don’t classify in either category. And then of course the thousands of non-written realia. And the archive has nearly, erm, two million four hundred twenty-eight thousand six hundred seventy-two documents, letters, and the like, so—”

“Fascinating!” The man boomed. He slapped Merlin on the shoulder. “Thank you for sharing!” He turned so that he blocked Merlin from the rest of the group and began to discuss the building architecture.

“Nice suit,” Merlin observed.

“You like it? I thought perhaps the oxblood was a bit overdone, but you know I like to make a bold statement.” He nodded a bit at a passing pair of young women, who giggled, and then at a trio of older women, who sighed.
“Indeed. Well, I’m glad someone is enjoying this ridiculous event.”

“Oh, come off it, Merlin. You love an opportunity to show off the library. Even your social bumbling manages to extend your mystique, your ‘oh-I’m-an-awkward-academic-even-if-I-am-gorgeous’ appeal.”

“What?”

“Never mind. You just go to the buffet table and leave the hobnobbing to me. Not sure why you—”

“LeFay directed me to!”

“Well, she doesn’t know you yet.” Gwaine paused for a moment as he turned, smile quirking at the corner of his mouth as his eyes caught someone at the corner of the ballroom, and then darting back to Merlin. “I think someone is touching the Gorlias Tree…” his voice faded into the crowd as he stepped away.

The Gorlias Tree grew from a deep basin in the corner of the ballroom. It was old: older than the five hundred year-old building, but only added during one of the previous renovations—that in the eighteenth century, in fact, which had emphasized expanding the natural specimens. Its fruit seemed to glow, especially on summer nights. It didn’t actually glow. That effect was produced by a viscous film that protected the fruit from would-be thieves (whose skin burned when met with Gorlias Goo, as Merlin called it). The seeds had hallucinogenic effects when consumed, which were particularly valued by seers and warlocks; the quantity could be manipulated to aid scrying or produce terrible illusions.

Regardless, the fruit was dangerous and valuable, and not there to be played with by some rich arsehole who didn’t know a thing about magic in the first place.

The crowd seemed to part as Merlin crossed the room. Indeed, a man stood at the base of the Gorlias Tree. He looked up at its lower branches, head cocked to the side. Everything in his posture exuded arrogance and elitism, just as Merlin predicted. As Merlin approached, the man reached toward the base of the tree.

“Don’t touch that,” Merlin snapped.

The man straightened. He turned to Merlin, a frown crossing his face. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t touch the Gorlias Tree, if you please.” Merlin took in the man’s golden hair, perfectly styled, his midnight suit that brought out the sky blue of his eyes. He felt inexplicably angrier.

The man’s eyes narrowed—in a rather similar manner to Morgana’s, Merlin absently thought—and he cocked his head the other direction. He reached down again.

“I said, don’t touch the tree.”

“I heard you.” The man was looking intently at the base. Had he not responded, Merlin would think he had ignored him completely.

“Look, I know you rich prats are used to doing as you like at any time and just, to hell with the rest of us, but this is the Gorlias Tree. It’s much more valuable than you and, for that matter, anything you own despite your, your—”

“My?” The man’s eyebrow lifted a fraction.
“Your bloody garish, ostentatious affluence—”

The man scoffed and mumbled, “You’re kidding me,” just loud enough to be heard.

“And I won’t have you buggering it up, so step away before I call the guard or—”

“Or what?”

“Take you down myself!”

“Brother!” A voice, unnervingly posh and close, cut to Merlin’s gut.

“Morgana,” the man said, bowing his head lightly. He pulled his hand back. “Your guests are a sloppy lot, despite their… What was it? Oh yes, their bloody garish, ostentatious opulence—or affluence? Affluence.” In his hand was an empty champagne flute, slightly soiled from its time in the basin. He turned to Merlin. “What were you saying?”

Merlin felt his mouth open and close a few times, felt his face flush with heat. And then the man turned to Morgana to speak, the second such dismissal he’d received in a quarter hour. The music swelled around him as if he could be swallowed by the waltz. He felt it, the delicate string melody attempting to charm him. He looked at Morgana, her amethyst gown a weapon and a tool, her brother, cool as ice in the soft, warm glow of the ballroom. Around them, couples swirled to the steady one-two-three of the music. Merlin clenched his jaw and listened and thought he would rather be anywhere else. Anywhere.

“Schubert,” the man said, turning to him. His eyes briefly seemed to take in Merlin’s suit, his old but polished shoes, his hair that was probably a mess again. And then dismiss him as Morgana asked another question about someone named Leon. Merlin walked away.

* * * * *

“Arthur, you aren’t paying attention to me,” Morgana complained.

“Hmm?” Arthur watched the man exit to the solarium, his shoulders braced as if going to war.

“Arthur. Really now. You just got here, you can’t already be shutting down. Now that you’re on the board, you have to prove you’re worth it. I won’t have Camelot be accused of nepotism. You are my appointee; now show me that wasn’t a mistake.”

“It wasn’t, Morgana. Obviously,” he drawled in a bored voice. “Now, who was your rude friend?”

“Friend?” Morgana looked around, somewhat bewildered, until Arthur lifted the soiled glass. “Oh, Merlin. He’s the—well, you better make nice with him if you want to get on—he’s the head librarian.”

“I thought Geoffrey was head librarian.”

“Geoffrey is head archivist.”

“Oh.”

“Merlin is something of a legend, it seems. He has magic, apparently, and a preternatural ability to use it without appearing to, without seeming to try, and also, well, they say he’s uncommonly smart, with an eidetic memory, and—”

“Oh, come on.”
“What?”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s a genius and magic and everything he touches turns to gold.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, Arthur, it doesn’t suit you. But yes. Despite my natural aversion to anything that may make me appear weaker than another, I must tell you, they say he’s the best at everything: acquisitions, preservation, casting…”

“Better than Gwaine?”

“Better than Lancelot.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You’ll see, brother. You’ll see.” She lifted an eyebrow, supercilious, and turned to walk away.

Arthur looked at the glass in his hand. It was impressive, the amount of disdain he’d seen in Merlin’s eyes. He thought Arthur was touching the Gorlias Tree, as if Arthur hadn’t known the significance of the plant. He clearly hadn’t known who Arthur was. He had just despised him anyway. How much more would he dislike him once he knew the new chairwoman had installed her half-brother on the library board of directors? It was a coup for the Pendragon family, a sign of unity that would resonate across the Five Kingdoms. Arthur’s seat was traditionally neutral, and served as the deciding vote in many controversial decisions. Now the Pendragons and their allies could have control over the management of the bulk of the world’s magical artefacts and texts. Moreover, they would control access to vast informational resources. It was heady, knowing the power they controlled. Arthur looked up at the shimmering Gorlias fruit. They had a responsibility they could not shirk. They must manage this power well. He placed the glass on the tray of a passing server and took two fresh flutes.

“Merlin,” he said aloud, trying to feel less annoyed. He squared his shoulders, and went to explore the solarium.
The solarium was more dimly lit than the ballroom. A slow-running stream quietly gurgled as it threaded between the trees and plants, which were strewn about in a manner suggesting a collection developed with care and ardor over generations. Arthur couldn’t identify the herbs in the urn to his left, but he knew the ash and birch trees from childhood summers at the family’s country estate. The air was warm, and Arthur thought how nice it would feel to loosen his tie, to undo a button, but knew the unprofessional look would upset Morgana. And if his father were to show up, well, he’d receive passive aggressive snipes about it and offers of a new tailor’s card for the next three years at least.

The leaves were still and they dappled the lantern light on the stone walkway. It was a thing of wonder, this building. In many ways, it was his family’s legacy. His ancestors, supposedly, had patronized it at its inception, and still centuries later, his father, Uther, used the endowments and social maneuvering to ensure his daughter be chairperson. Not that she didn’t deserve it, Arthur thought. On the contrary, Morgana’s leadership was terrifyingly effective. Arthur recalled her organization of the neighborhood children, growing up. She’d led mass protests of unequal bedtimes, chores, and allowances, all because she found out the neighbor’s daughter earned less per minute than her brother.

No one in the county had dared give their daughters early curfews when the time came, lest they incur Morgana’s wrath. She was formidable. She would turn the library about in a thrice. Uther would expect results, a return on his years of investment. Arthur felt his mouth twist as he considered what those expectations may include.

Giggles startled Arthur from his contemplation, accompanied by the scurrying of footsteps farther into the conservatory. A couple, Arthur thought, seeking a private corner for a rendezvous. He heard an exasperated huff.

“Afraid they’ll trample the flower beds?” Arthur asked, rounding a bend in the path. Merlin stood under a soft cascade of lantern light. His mouth was down-turned, and Arthur found himself straining to see the man’s eyes. Were they so angry at the couple, so worried about the garden? “Or are you guarding the plants? Afraid they’ll escape?” Because he was unpleasant, see? And the plants would —ah, damn, the dig had made more sense in his head, actually.

Merlin made a quizzical face, so Arthur doubled down with a haughty brow lift.

“Can I help you?” Merlin asked. He made a somewhat awkward step sideways, shoulders rigid.

“What—are you hiding something?” Arthur took a quick step forward and attempted to peek around Merlin. A stone bench sat behind him.

“Hey—no!” Merlin quickly shuffled backward. “Of course not!” His face, Arthur saw in the soft light, was rapidly turning a spectacular shade of pink. He brushed his palms on his trouser legs.

Arthur took another step forward. “Ah, but I think you are.” He pivoted to his left to look around Merlin, who maneuvered his body to cover something, and Arthur couldn’t help but revert to his twelve-year-old instinct at that, so he feinted to the right and then lunged as Merlin tried to block him.
“Hey!” Merlin cried, and Arthur did a quick side step and placed a leg behind Merlin. He felt irrationally satisfied as he felt Merlin take a quick few steps to steady himself and then turn and crowd against him in an attempt to reach the shadowed bench. “I—beg your—pardon!” Merlin huffed, his hands reaching blindly. Arthur absentely noted the sensation of Merlin pressing against him, his adolescent instinct also, apparently, overpowering the formality normally due in such an environment—and, Arthur guessed, that propriety Merlin seemed inclined to comply with.

“What have we here?” Arthur asked, reaching down. Merlin seemed to give one last effort, nearly wrapping himself around Arthur, and then gasping, as if he remembered himself, and all but jumping backward as Arthur lifted up an old, dust-covered bottle. He held it to the light. “Well, well, well,” he said. “Latour? Had I known they were serving this, I doubt I’d have left the ballroom.”

“It isn’t—” Merlin stopped and huffed. Arthur watched him fume, rather absurdly pleased with himself for disrupting the man’s composure, and then perhaps a little embarrassed because he really didn’t know this person.

“I—”

“Got them!” a voice interrupted them, followed by the appearance of another man. His shaggy brown hair and somewhat ill-fitted suit suggested he rarely dressed so formally, and the frown crossing his face as he spotted Arthur was so out-of-place, it suggested he was generally good-humoured. But not now. His eyes raked down Arthur’s body, and his mouth turned down at the corners. Arthur saw he held two glasses and he thought, “Oh.” For reasons beyond him, which he would absolutely not even think on later, Arthur felt annoyed. Annoyed, in fact, seemed like an insufficient word.

“I thought the librarians were supposed to be… available to the guests. Entertaining questions, so to speak. Encouraging donations, one assumes. It’s what the gala invitation implied,” Arthur said. Did his voice come off a bit petulantly? He cleared his throat.

The newcomer looked at Merlin and then back at Arthur. “Right. And is there something you need? Do you have a question?”

“Don’t bother, Will,” Merlin interjected. “Look, Mr… Pendragon?” He waited for Arthur to nod his acknowledgment. “I’m certain your sister,” and here he lifted a brow at Will, who slowly nodded in realization, “can answer all your questions. She is, after all, board chair. And she beat out many other, highly-qualified individuals for the honour.” He set his jaw, and Arthur suppressed the urge to defend his half-sister. She would prove herself, for one. She also didn’t need his defense. Also, Uther had her installed as a result of his… persuasion, so Merlin wasn’t wrong, and he didn’t even know of Arthur’s appointment yet.

“Well then,” Arthur said. He set the Bordeaux back on the bench and straightened himself, formalizing himself, allowing that side of himself to surface, as Merlin obviously expected. “I shall leave you gentlemen to your… meeting.” He strode briskly away. Giggling once again emerged from somewhere deep in the cavernous solarium.

It was not late, yet Arthur decided to go home.

* * * * *

It was late when Merlin returned to his chambers.

Head librarian at Camelot was a significant honour, and Merlin had not yet finished marveling at its benefits. The salary was, of course, a privilege. Yet the less-celebrated remunerations were more
wondrous. He had inherited housing, for one. The title came with a flat on the upper floor of the library. Its ceiling was nowhere as high as the ballroom or conservatory, but Merlin’s heart had still skipped when he first saw it. He had stepped reverently over the parquet and run his fingers softly over the molding. Freya, a particularly gifted organic archivist, had dressed the place with aromatic plants, and Merlin took in a deep breath of spicy air as he undid his tie.

The wine had been phenomenal. They had been saving it for a special occasion, and though the gala was not significant to them, Will had caught him, just inside the solarium, and waved it at him, waggling his eyebrows.

Now, Merlin felt pleasantly fuzzy, content after having just enough to mellow him and warm him. Will was his oldest and closest friend, and he appreciated the company when he felt he was on display—a feeling the gala inevitably gave. Especially tonight. Merlin pushed down the unsettled feeling that threatened his comfortable state of near-intoxication. He refused to consider what brought it on, instead thinking of his plans, with Will, to try to set Gwaine up with the new cataloger, Percy.

No one knew yet if Percy would be amenable, but Merlin had seen Alan Hollinghurst’s latest novel tucked under some papers on his desk, so he thought they had a shot.

Merlin undressed slowly, but without great care. He thought of Gwaine and how captivated he’d been by him when he started. He pictured him: all that hair and the smile, and then shook his head. The smile wasn’t right. The smile he’d pictured was far too cynical, to mocking; it belonged to someone else.

Merlin laid his head back on his pillow. Whose smile was that, though? He could picture it, certainly: soft, full lips turned up at the corner.

Sleep took him before he could remember their owner.

*             *             *             *             *

Monday morning came too soon. Merlin loved his job—he did—but it was still work. He would still do it, unequivocally, even as a hobby, had they not paid him. Yet something about the activity, work, made him begrudge it on occasion. He secretary, George, handed him a steaming cup as he sat at his desk, and the day grew a bit less daunting. He thanked the man, who was almost too obsequious, and shuffled through his agenda. He would spend the morning evaluating the preservation done to a grimoire Gwaine’s team had acquired from Peru last year. It had barely survived the trip, and had required painstaking repair.

Two hours later, he handed the book to Percy. The man’s face lit as he gingerly fingered its pages.

“When you determine what resources are necessary, translators, rune specialists, whoever, just get the list to Gwaine.”

“Gwaine?”

“I’m having him manage this project for me.” Merlin watched him. “Will that be a problem, Percival?”

“Of course not, sir.”

“Very good. I look forward to what you find.”

George met him at his office door. “I’ve made you another cup, Mr. Hunithson. Here’s the agenda for the board meeting.”
“Oh. Right.” Merlin had managed to forget. “Well done, George. If anyone needs me…”

“Indeed.”

The library board of directors met monthly. This month was number three with the new director. She had come on strong from the beginning, demanding a thorough explanation of all ongoing projects. Merlin detested being interrogated, but he did appreciate her toughness. Clearly, Morgana was smart. Yet Merlin couldn’t help but feel the other shoe was yet to drop when he spoke with her, as if she approved of his work, but she expected something different.

“Gentlemen, ladies,” she said at the meeting’s beginning. “Welcome and thank you for coming. I trust you are all rested and recovered from the gala, which I am happy to report was a success. We have already met our quarterly fundraising goal.” She paused here, as if allowing time for everyone to appreciate this windfall was a result of her leadership.

“Camelot is now fully out of the red, but we must be vigilant to remain there. And I have made plans to ensure that happens. As you know, a board seat has been vacant for several months. Some wondered if we should fill it, and I have given much thought on the matter. In the end, I felt it must be filled by someone with excellent business acumen. Someone with bright notions that can bring Camelot out of the past with savvy, innovative ideas. Someone who is not afraid of difficult decisions.” Merlin watched as she nodded at her assistant, who stepped out of the conference room.

“I have considered this at length, and in the end, only one person seemed right for the position—someone I know will not let us down. And so I am pleased to introduce our newest board member, Mr. Arthur Pendragon.”

Briefly, Merlin lost control of his face. He realized this happened when his eyes were met by the cool blue of Arthur’s. Merlin wouldn’t call it a look of disdain, per se. Initially, Arthur seemed almost startled by whatever expression Merlin wore. As the seconds ticked by, it rapidly turned to an efficient look of irritation and dislike.

“Thank you for having me,” said Arthur. Merlin tried not to roll his eyes, truly. Arthur pointedly looked away. “It’s no secret that the Pendragon family has a long history with Camelot, and I am proud to serve on its board and add my voice and, I hope, some of my experience to this group.”

Merlin looked around the board table. All eyes were fixed on Arthur, wide open, taking in his jawline, his blue eyes, and just eating it up. Merlin thought he might be sick. Surely, he thought, he was not the only one who saw this as an outrageous act of nepotism at best and, worse, probably something far more sinister. Clearly, the Pendragons were making a power move. For what? He wondered. His mind raced through an inventory of the sixth floor special collections. He needed to evaluate that section, he’d been so trusting of Lance to oversee it. Perhaps he could hint at an unplanned weed and subsequent Friends-of-the-Library sale, to see if they casually suggested any artifacts as targets.

Regardless, Merlin thought, they were after something. Probably, Uther was behind this. The man had always been a bit dodgy, Merlin felt, especially when it came to business deals. The looting he’d encouraged as a board member had been horrifying—Merlin had been outraged to find how many of Camelot’s treasures were taken from warzones.

He’d resolved what he could and determined it wouldn’t continue. Was that a goal here? Seduce—or rather, trick—the board into trusting his son’s obviously deceitfully innocent-looking face and coolly professional, confident demeanor whilst ravaging holy sites in disenfranchised communities?
Well, Merlin wouldn’t have it. This would not stand. It was an outrage! He stood, and then he left.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter three is written (on paper) and will hopefully be typed/posted soon! Thank you so much for reading--and an extra special thank you to anyone who takes the time to give kudos or comments.
I'm surreptitiously posting this at work, so please forgive any errors. Also, please forgive my awkward attempts to expand names.

Merlin’s office was his refuge. Glossy wood paneling reflected the lamps he preferred to garish fluorescents. Shelves of books and miscellaneous pieces he’d picked up over the years covered most of the walls, save for a grand window overlooking the River Brue and the village. In the distance, he could see the abbey towers amidst the mismatched buildings that suggested the age of the town and its generations of architecture.

He was frustrated. The appointment of Arthur annoyed him. It wasn’t surprising, really. These wealthy, entitled families frequently engaged in this sort of corrupt behaviour. He thought of the other board members. He must convince them to resist the power grab. It shouldn’t be hard. With a huff, he unlocked his computer and typed Arthur Pendragon into his search bar.

Unsurprisingly, the results were extensive. The first results were a pair of tabloids. “Exclusive: Countess Vivian breaks down outside nightclub… as she parties in tiny metallic dress,” read a headline from The Daily Mail, while The Sun offered, “ALL BY HERSELF: Vivian cries in private car whilst Arthur parties on Ibiza holiday.”

Beside the top stories, the Knowledge Graph read, “Arthur Pendragon is a financier and entrepreneur. He is the son of Uther Pendragon, Duke of Albion, and Ygraine de Bois.” It linked to Wikipedia, and Merlin clicked, not the least bit ashamed of his snooping. He clicked back, quickly, and opened the two articles in separate tabs, then clicked forward to Wikipedia. Obviously, the man was a joke; they were covering him in The Sun and The Daily Fail.

Merlin skimmed the education and early life sections, seeing all the usual names. Cambridge and then graduate school abroad. Merlin huffed. Daddy’s money bought him into Harvard, it seemed. He’d spent time with Pendragon-de Bois-Montaigne before branching off with his own startup. Merlin remembered the news of it going public; Arthur Pendragon had made millions. Tens of millions—maybe more. So what could he possibly want with the Camelot Library? Merlin wondered. He should be off on the Riviera or one of those savanna resorts in Kenya. Or in some absurd flat along the Champs-Elysées. That was a thing, right? Regardless, the man didn’t belong in Merlin’s library. He kept scrolling. The picture was a sterile shot taken at some benefit, and it didn’t really capture him. His eyes were hooded, not focused on the camera, and Merlin found himself leaning forward to examine how the camera had caught the blue, then leaned back, feeling ridiculous. The picture could zoom, for one. It was Arthur Bloody Pendragon, for two. He scrolled on.

Personal Life

Pendragon has been linked with numerous socialites and models. Most notably, he has dated Vivian, Countess of Tir-Mór, and celebrated equestrienne Mithian Nemeth. After university, Pendragon was briefly engaged to Sophia Aulfric, who was later convicted of attempted murder. Sophia attempted to drown Pendragon in a resort hot tub in Dubai; she was unsuccessful and caught on CCT video.
Merlin read the last two sentences several times before he clicked on the hyperlink to Sophia’s article. He looked at her picture: wavy blonde hair, fair skin, full lips. He closed the tab. The pictures of Vivian revealed a similarly beautiful blonde, but possessing that cool, thin, chic quality Merlin recognized as a decidedly upper class feature. It appeared Arthur Pendragon was a bit of a heartbreaker. Of course, based on what he saw about Vivian, she mayhap had it coming. Regardless, Arthur seemed to go through models like a footballer. Merlin opened the picture of Vivian in her metallic minidress in a new tab, then zoomed in. He stared at her. He pictured Arthur. He thought, they’ve probably snogged. A throat cleared. Merlin pictured Arthur and Vivian, lips locked. The throat cleared again and Merlin jumped. His eyes lifted as he frantically closed the window and locked his computer screen.

“Yes—er—How may I help—” his voice trailed off.

Arthur Pendragon stood in his office doorway. “Merlin, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Mr. Hunithson.”

“We met. Or don’t you remember?” His mind flashed, unwillingly, to Arthur in his gala suit, eyes reflecting the conservatory lights. He felt his lips purse.

“Yes. I was rude when I met you in the garden.”

“Conservatory.”

“Right. That’s rather why I’m here, you see.”

“To try to frighten me?”

“No, of course not. But I would appreciate a tour of the library.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“Your family all but owns Camelot.”

“And?”

“You’re a board member. Your sister is board chair. Your father is top donor. I am to believe you don’t know your way around?” Merlin watched Arthur’s face shutter.

“I do have the honour of serving on the board. And with that, I will be asked to make all manner of personnel and budgetary decisions.” His eyes raked up and down Merlin, over to a jade orb on his bookcase, up at an ancient bust of Neptune, and back to Merlin’s face.

“I prefer to make fully informed decisions and I think you should be aware of and, frankly, appreciate that, Mr. Hunithson.”

Merlin searched himself for a rejoinder that would not result in an immediate personnel decision. He considered the firm set of Arthur’s jaw. “Right. Then you best come with me.”

* * * * *

As Merlin led him from the office, Arthur kept his frustration hidden. He hadn’t planned for an
argument. Most people were happy to accommodate him, especially simple requests like a library tour. He hadn’t expected Merlin to be different, when it came down to it; sure, their previous encounter may have initiated some sour feelings, but he was qualified and competent and, well, he was nice. Surely Merlin could see that. He smiled winningly at Merlin’s secretary on the way out, and the man, George, actually blushed in pleasure. The exchange made Arthur feel a bit more surefooted, even as Merlin glared at them and directed him to the stairs.

“Oh, please lead the way, Mr. Hunithson.” He followed Merlin down the steps.

“We’ll begin with floor one,” Merlin said.

“Naturally,” said Arthur. He ignored Merlin’s angry huff of an exhale and smiled.

“Floor one,” Merlin said upon arrival. “Circulation, obviously. Tables,” he pointed, “and the reference desk is over there.” He cocked his head to the side “That’s where you can ask for help finding information.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “I have been to a library before, you know.”

“Ah, then you most likely needn’t a tour after all. Seen one, seen them all, right?”

“If you would continue, Mr. Hunithson.”

“The conference room, you’ve seen, and over here is the gallery.”

Arthur stopped and took a look around. The current show was a retrospective of Mortimer, the nineteenth-century Mystic Impressionist. Arthur took in the swirls and arcs of furious colour, silenced by the energy and beauty.

“My mother brought me here all the time, as a child.” He closed his eyes and could almost smell her: lilac and almond. He opened them again and the colours swam in great whorls about the room. He turned slowly.

“Mr. Pendragon?”

His breath sped and starbursts gathered in his peripheral, framing Merlin with showers of light.

“Mr. Pendragon?”

“So lonely,” he whispered.

“Oh for the gods’ sake.” Merlin grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the gallery. “Those aren’t even his most powerful works and you’re completely lost.”

“What?” Arthur shook his head. He felt dizzy and wanted to look at more of the paintings.

“Just imagine how you’d react to his installations. Come on, this way. No more mysticism for you.”

Arthur pushed down his confusion and a strange feeling of despair. “What just happened to me?”

“That first triptych intensifies the viewers’ emotions.” He furrowed his brow, frowning.

Arthur coughed. “Well. Moving on, then.” He didn’t really feel that lonely. He just missed his mum. Had since she died. Nothing was unusual or embarrassing about that. He watched Merlin lead the
way around the gallery to the rear stairs. Something about the man’s tatty appearance made him smile a bit, despite the despair. The sadness wasn’t gone, but Merlin’s boots looked a hundred years old, and his shirt stretched a bit across his shoulders. Arthur wondered what the paintings made Merlin feel. His pants were surprisingly well tailored, Arthur observed. They clung to his thighs and the subtle curve of— Arthur looked away.

“Second floor is stacks, mostly. As you can see,” Merlin said at the top of the staircase.

Indeed. Arthur also remembered coming here with his mother. Row after row filled his vision with leather bindings and ancient-looking scrolls. He gingerly touched a roll of parchment to his left, listening to the soft hiss of it against his finger.

“How much of this is digitized?” he asked, thinking of the fires that gutted the National Museum in Brazil, the library at Alexandria.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Digitization? You know… computers.”

“Well, little.”

“Why hasn’t that been prioritized? We could expand the digital library, create a surge in web traffic.”

“What? Why would we do that?”

“I’m certain we could find a way to monetize. Clicks are revenue, Mr. Hunithson.”

“It’s a library, Pendragon. Not a… a business.”

“Increased revenue means more acquisitions, better… programming.”

“Most of these materials are magical. A digital copy cannot capture their essence.”

“Yes, but you can just add a note about that in the erm… description.”

“There is no language that will sufficiently add that information to the metadata.” Merlin’s voice was lifted. He looked surprisingly outraged, for some reason. Arthur shrugged. Merlin lifted his hands in an irritated, confused gesture. “We would have to establish—”

“So many more people could access Camelot’s knowledge stores if they were online. Democratization of magic. Think how much more convenient it would be for some scholar in Berlin, say, or Beijing.”

“To have a partial understanding of the item?”

“To not have to travel out here in the middle of nowhere?”

Merlin’s eyes flashed with anger and Arthur wondered what the problem was. His voice seethed. “Do you realize there are people who live in this community? Not everyone is from bloody London.”

“Of course.”

“And on what do you think they rely for their livelihoods?”

“I’m talking about adding jobs, Merlin. We’re talking about more work and money.”
“For no one to travel here? I’m not just talking about the library you, you, you cabbage head!”

“Cabbage head?”

“I’m talking about the innkeepers! The bloody fishmongers who bring their catch in of a night!”

“And there would be workers to feed!”

“Do you even know what tourism is to this village?”

“You’ve still got the damn abbey. And economies change. The increased money would result in higher wages, which would trickle back into the community.” Even as he said it, he realized his wording was poor and how priggish he sounded. Merlin fumed loudly, but without any recognizable words. “Not like that. I mean, the economy would shift. Less… potters, more graphic designers.”

“I like potters!”

“Me too! But we don’t need fifty of them! No one needs that many coffee mugs!” It occurred to Arthur that he’d never seen a person actually sputter before.

“You… Tory,” Merlin said, his voice full of fury and disbelief.

“I am not!” But Merlin had already turned away and was storming up the stairs. Arthur took in a deep breath. He let it back out. “Self-righteous know it all… academic,” he muttered. He absently rubbed the binding of a worn-looking tome.

“Mr. Pendragon?” a soft voice behind him spoke.

“Mmm?” he turned. A beautiful woman stood at the stairs in a light blue suit.

“Guinevere Smith, head of operations. Merlin—or Mr. Hunithson—sent me to continue your tour.”

An hour later, Arthur arrived back outside Merlin’s office. Gwen, as she insisted on being called, was a delight. Unlike Merlin, she answered questions without making him feel lacking or ignorant. She also had a keen sense of humour and a charming smile.

“There we are,” she said.

“That’s all?”

Gwen laughed. “Yes, the grimoires, scrolls, reference materials, and offices are all we have. Oh, and the ballroom and gardens.”

“Conservatory,” he said.

“Right.” Was she blushing? Very charming indeed.

“And what is on the top floor?”

“Oh, that’s—”

“None of your concern,” Merlin cut in. He had stepped out of his office, his face still angry. He gave Gwen a look, right in front of Arthur, that clearly suggested she was fraternizing with the enemy.
Without letting her smile slip a bit, Gwen said, “Ah, Merlin, you can take it from here, yeah?” and disappeared.

Merlin’s angry eyes followed her for a moment, but then an unguarded smile swept his face. “Bloody Lancelot,” he grumbled, grinning. Then his eyes darted back to Arthur and his face fell. “The top floor is private.”

“I want to see it.”

“It’s just the accommodations for guests and such.”

“Yes, I’d like to see them.”

“There’s no need to; they’re just apartments and suites.”

“That I need to evaluate.”

“Are you seriously considering changing their use?”

“We’ll see.” Arthur wasn’t. Nor was he certain why he wanted to see them so badly. He’d stayed there as a child—maybe that was it. Or perhaps it was that Merlin very clearly didn’t want to show him.

“Fine. To the stairs then.”

“Isn’t the lift right here?”

“I’d prefer the stairs.”

“I’d prefer the lift,” Arthur said. Once again, he didn’t really care, but he just could not capitulate to Merlin.

In another exasperated huff, Merlin all but slammed his hand against the lift button. It was slow, and Arthur hummed a bit as they waited.

*Ding.*

“After you.”

Merlin rolled his eyes and stepped inside.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my! What will happen next?
Merlin hated the lift. It was small and tight and ancient in a way that was more scary than charming. He pressed his lower back against the handrail. Standing this close to Arthur, he could smell the man: leather, sandalwood, and something else he couldn’t identify. He took another deep breath, rather disliking himself for it. Arthur’s grey suit was done casually, open at the neck and cut to accentuate his athletic frame. Merlin considered his shoulders and wondered how he kept so fit. Hours in the gym? Supplements? His eyes drifted lower, and he forced them to snap back up to Arthur’s face, which held a haughty, cool look.

“Why don’t you want me to see the top floor?” Arthur asked. It was a good question. Merlin decided to be honest.

“I don’t trust you.”

Arthur looked taken aback. “Why not?”

“You’re a businessman.”

“And?”

“This is a non-profit institution. We serve the greater good here.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Yeah, for as long as you can afford it.”

“Camelot has been a highly successful-”

“Times change, Merlin.”

Merlin really hated the way Arthur said his name. *Mer-*lin. As if he was an annoyance, barely tolerable. He glared at Arthur’s mouth, picturing the way it formed the word. *Mer-*lin. Arthur’s tongue flicked out to wet his pink lips and Merlin looked away.

The lift took forever. When it lurched to a stop, Merlin yanked open the gate and stepped onto the landing.

“Yes, I remember this now,” Arthur said softly. Merlin looked at him askance. Arthur’s eyes held that faraway look, and his lips turned up. “I came here with my mother.”

Happy memories, Merlin thought. He tried to remember if he’d heard anything about Ygraine de Bois. She had been a great patron of the arts, as he recalled.

“But not for a long time?”
“She’s gone now.”

“I’m sorry.” And Merlin was. For a moment, Arthur’s face was filled with grief and Merlin reached a hand out, placing it near his shoulder. Arthur’s eyes snapped to Merlin’s, momentarily lost. His gaze seemed to drift across Merlin’s face, and Merlin felt sweat prickle the back of his neck. He opened his mouth to draw in a breath, preparing to speak, and saw Arthur’s steady examination move to his parted lips. He stood for a moment, suddenly unsure of himself. Then he remembered where he was, and that Arthur was a prat, all but threatening to evict him. “Right,” he said, lifting his hand, absently noting how absurdly soft the fabric had been beneath his hand, how strong the shoulder beneath it. “This corridor leads to the librarian’s quarters.”

“Your flat?”

Merlin paused. “Currently.”

Arthur walked casually in that direction, and Merlin wondered if he would really demand to see his rooms. “Just down here?” Arthur asked.

Merlin clenched his jaw. “Yes, Mr. Pendragon.”

“But you don’t want me to see it?”

“I would prefer you explore elsewhere.”

“Why?”

“It’s private.”

Arthur looked nonplussed. “It’s in the library.”

“But these are my private rooms. It’s a benefit of my position.”

“The homes in the village are inadequate?”

Merlin’s head ached. “The head librarian has always lived at Camelot.”

“Always?”

“For centuries.”

“Yes, well, they also used to only employ men.”

“Are you—I mean—is this—what is this?”

“What is what?”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Of course not. Just pointing out the absurdity of justifying something by its history or tradition. Most traditions are rubbish, Mr. Hunithson.” He studied Merlin’s face, yet again. His mouth quirked up at the corner. “Give me a real reason to maintain your residency.”

Merlin rubbed his hands across his face, feeling a hint of stubble on his chin, mostly left from an uneven shave this morning. “Look,” he said, “I’m not frightened of you. You can come in here and toss around these threats of reorganization or budget cuts, but I’ve been here far longer than you.” He glared at Arthur, allowing himself to feel the annoyance turn to something closer to rage. He squared
his shoulders and took a step toward Arthur. “You can’t bully me just because you’re a Pendragon; that isn’t how it works around here.”

Arthur’s eyes sparkled with his own anger. He took a few steps toward Merlin, so that they nearly touched in the corridor. Merlin refused to back away, forcing himself to feel Arthur’s quick, angry breath and meet his hot glare. “You’re right. I wasn’t brought on to threaten or bully, I was brought on to get things done.”

“And the attempts at physical intimidation are just an added bonus?” Merlin asked, his voice nearly a whisper.

“You’re the one who came at me. Unwisely.”

“Oh?”

Arthur’s voice, too, was lowered now. “I could take you apart in one blow, Merlin.” His eyes flitted down to Merlin’s chest then back to his face.

“I could take you down in far less than that, Pendragon.” He found himself mimicking Arthur’s perusal, not even sure why, nearly unconscious of it. Yet he saw the patch of chest at his unbuttoned collar, a thin wisp of hair just visible, and then, damn it all, felt his face flush. But why? It humanized the man, but Merlin wasn’t embarrassed. He considered his emotions. Anger. That was it. Nothing other than anger. He watched Arthur closely, saw the blue of his eyes diminish behind wide black pupils. I’m going to win this, Merlin thought with an absurd lift in his chest.

“You know, you’re right, Merlin.” Mer-lin again. He felt his brow drop. “I don’t think I will demand to see your rooms.”

“Good.”

“Today.”

“Today?”

“I won’t have to.”

“What?”

Arthur took half a step back and smiled widely. “I won’t have to because you’ll invite me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Once you know me, you’ll invite me in.” His eyes flitted down, and Merlin felt them on his neck, his jawline, and… was Arthur flirting with him? The wave of confusion was disorienting.

“I’m not one of—of—of your debutante conquests, Arthur!”


Merlin seized the advantage, feeling victory at his fingertips. He let his own mouth quirk up now and licked, then bit his lip. “You’ll be begging, Mr. Pendragon, before I let you inside.”

And where had that come from?

Arthur’s intake of breath was perfectly audible in the narrow corridor.

And wasn’t that interesting?
No, Merlin thought, it really wasn't. Oh, straight people. He nearly rolled his eyes, but then he looked up, demurely, at Arthur's pink face. His jaw was set as if angry, but his pupils, now, were even more blown. He took a half step forward again, and Merlin met his look, unwilling to look away.

A clatter of heels had them both stepping back too quickly to acknowledge without more questions than Merlin wanted to ask.

The heels were 100mm Louboutin pumps. Patent leather, Merlin guessed. He saw he was right as Morgana emerged from the stairwell. Her voice echoed down the hall. “Looks like I interrupted quite the pissing contest. I need you both in my office immediately.” She vanished as fast as she had appeared. “Now,” she called. “I’m not asking.”

“And so it begins,” muttered Arthur.

Morgana’s office was cold. Merlin thought his breath was nearly visible as his skin raised into gooseflesh. She sat upon her desk chair like a throne, back straight as a rod, icy glare fixed, thankfully, on Arthur.

“What do you know about Duncan’s Bane?”

Merlin laughed. Morgana’s glare snapped to his face. He stopped. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Sorry, but I’m not following. Duncan’s Bane?”

“The knave’s bodkin. The dagger of turpitude.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“I am not,” Morgana said flatly. “And it was a question, though I see now that your answer is ‘very little.’”

“It’s a myth,” said Merlin.

You mean like Macbeth?” asked Arthur.

“She means like Macbeth. Is this a dagger I see and all that.”

Morgana raised a perfectly manicured hand. “Obviously, the play exaggerates and embellishes. But you both know, with these things—”

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” Merlin finished. “Have you heard something?”

“Rumours. Unearthed during Gwaine’s last trip.”

“It’s in Argentina?”

“Of course not. The rumours were in Brazil. You know how the Nazis loved their arcana.”

“Wait, what?” Arthur looked between them. “Nazis?”
“Could’ve been Argentina,” Merlin grumbled.

“But it wasn’t, Melin; keep up Arthur. I want you to find it.”

“In Brazil?” Arthur asked.

“No. Scotland.”

“But you said—”

“Rumours, Arthur. Rumours in Brazil.”

“I’d like to go to Argentina,” Merlin said.

“You both are going to drive me mental.”

“Where am I going then, Cawdor Castle?” Merlin asked.

“Hardly,” Morgana scoffed. “You aren’t reading a Literature course.” She paused, as if for effect. “You’re both going to Caithness.”

“Both?!” Merlin squeaked.

“Caithness?!” Arthur said in the same tone.

“Yes.”

Merlin sighed and rubbed his temples.

“Wick,” Arthur said.

“Stop doing that,” Merlin groaned.

“What?”

“Answering questions I haven’t asked.”

“When else…”

“At the gala.”

“Oh. Yes. Well, if you thought a bit quieter.”

“Thought quieter?”

“Yes, it was like that with the waltz, too. You just—rub here, it’ll help.” Arthur demonstrated massaging the bridge of his nose.

Merlin rolled his eyes and pushed on his nasal bone. It did feel nice. Not that he didn’t know how to handle a headache, of course.

“Anyway, you aren’t going to Wick,” Morgana said. She pushed her hair behind an ear, looking down at an opened folder on her desk. “I’m not funding some distillery tour.” She looked up at each of them. “There is a manor on the coast. Not far from Wick. The village nearby is small, provincial… Creaghall is the name of the estate.”

“What’s its significance?” asked Merlin. He reached across to take the folder from her.
“We aren’t certain. The lead is two mentions. One is marginalia in a concordance.”

“What did it say?”

“Nothing. Just a drawing of the manor. It’s copied there.” Merlin scanned the page.

“The other mention?” asked Arthur.

“A daguerreotype of the last earl there. Dead.”

“Not an unusual subject,” Merlin said.

“Just morbid.” Morgana observed.

Arthur looked over Merlin’s shoulder with obvious distaste.

“Right. Now then, why am I not going alone?” Merlin closed the folder and met Morgana’s critical glare. “You know I work well alone.”

“I do. I also know the board members will respect both Arthur and me more if he proves himself. Finding this weapon, long thought legendary or lost, will be a coup.”

Arthur let out a deep breath. “Tell me more about this dagger.”

“Not here, please,” Morgana said. She turned to her computer. “You’re both dismissed.”

It occurred to Merlin that Morgana may not actually understand her role as board chair, as he walked back to his office. Arthur nearly outpaced him, barely looking up from the folder, which he had nabbed. He strode directly into Merlin’s office, saying, “Tea,” briskly to George, and then smiling and adding, “And custard cremes, if you can find some.” Merlin watched George blush a deep pink and scurry off, happy to be serving someone.

“It isn’t Morgana’s job, you know, to manage collection development.”

“Dare you to tell her,” Arthur said, not looking up from the documents. “Now: ‘Is this a dagger I see before me?’ Aye, there’s the rub and all that.”

“You are rubbish at Shakespeare, I see.”

“Am not! I’ve seen Macbeth at least twice. Ah, thank you George. It’s good to see someone around here be hospitable.”

Merlin waited until the door was firmly latched behind his assistant before he spoke. Still, it did not come out quite right. “The hell’s wrong with you, Pendragon?”

“Pardon?”

“You aren’t a librarian. Why the hell are you making like you’re coming along? Why are you even still here?”

“Well I am going, obviously. And it’s clear this cursed dagger or whatever is dangerous.”

“It isn’t cursed. Per se.”

“Right. As I said, fill me in.”
“You remember the feast of Belshazzar?”

“Writing on the wall?”

“Exactly. You know how the story ends?”

“Sinners killed by a vengeful god?”

“More or less—you’re found wanting and all that. Belshazzar is killed.”

“Yes.”

“That’s the earliest reference to it.”

“Wait. You mean the Hebrew Bible references an enchanted dagger Macbeth used to kill Duncan?”

“Not directly, but the entire book of Daniel is a collection of stories that, like all folklore, have abundant source material—much of it oral tradition that has been lost.”

“Indeed.”

“The Romans are the next… use of it, or so it’s rumoured. It’s all just legend, you see.”

“Right. Romans.”

“Julius Caesar—there’s another bit of Shakespeare for you. But the Romans were a conniving bunch. Multiple assassinations.”

Arthur sipped his tea absently, not looking away from Merlin.

“If the damn thing does exist, the Templars brought it here, I’m sure. And somehow it ended up in Scotland. No eye of newt or toil and trouble required for that enchantment.”

“So it is cursed.”

“It’s a magic item. Created with magic. Forged. Or, anyway, so says the legend.”

“And what is the curse—er—the enchantment.”

“Murder. Assassination. Wild success if one keeps it. Gods help you if you lose it.”

“Ah. Well then. Custard creme?”

Chapter End Notes

As I’ve said, I’m trying my best to keep a regular schedule, but it is difficult with everything. I do have the story planned, though, and that really helps. Lots of lovely tropes going to be used and some more super nerdy allusions to the Classics. Because that is how I roll.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The boys spend a long period of time together in a confined space. They are very confused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arthur played The Shins in the car. “I remember when this came out,” he said. “I was at uni.”

“Really?” asked Merlin.

(Of course. Why?”

“Dunno.”

“Oh come on, Merlin. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us. Don’t get shy on me now.”

Merlin picked an easy answer. “I thought you were younger than me, is all.”

“I thought you were younger than me,” Arthur replied. His eyes skimmed across Merlin, who fought the urge to fidget.

“Of course not. I’m a librarian, right?” We’re ancient.”

“Well you do have that look about the eyes.”

“What look?”

“The old, ‘I’d rather be anywhere else,’ ‘Get off my lawn’ attitude.” Merlin refused to respond and looked out the window instead. They’d passed into the countryside now, and early morning light shone on the wet hedgerows. “Oh come on, Merlin, lighten up a bit. We’ve a long drive ahead of us.”

“You already said that,” said Merlin.

“And it’s still true.”

“I don’t even know why you’re coming.”

“It’s my job now.”

“No, it isn’t. You don’t really work for the library. You definitely aren’t qualified.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Read my CV, did you?”
“What?” Merlin sputtered. “You—no, didn’t have to. Being a rich toff doesn’t qualify you for anything.”

When Arthur didn’t respond, Merlin peeked over at him. His jaw was set, firmly, his lips pressed together. Merlin noted the tight grip on the wheel. Not happy, then, at being called out.

“That isn’t…” Arthur began. His voice was quiet and trailed off.

“Isn’t what?” Merlin asked.

“Nothing. Never mind.”

It was quiet in the car. Land Rover, Merlin thought. Not terribly posh, but sumptuous. The soft leather seats were supple under his hand; shiny wood veneer accentuated the luxury. It was nice, he admitted. Had Merlin owned an automobile, perhaps he would buy one of these. He pressed his shoulders into the seat and inhaled. The new-car smell permeated the space, but mixed with that scent Merlin had come, already, to think of as Arthur’s. He wondered if he, too, had a smell. It was a weird thought, and he decided to never have it again.

But something niggled at him. An image, perhaps, of Arthur smelling him on his clothes. Merlin shook his head. Nonsense. Why would Arthur even be smelling his clothes? He had a maid or valet or something, Merlin was sure. And even if he didn’t, why would Merlin want Arthur to smell him?

It was a ridiculous thought. His neck felt warm and he undid a button.

“We can adjust this,” Arthur said, gesturing to the dash. Sunlight poured through the windscreen in a hot, post-rain glow. Merlin shrugged but didn’t respond.

The song changed to something by The Smiths that Merlin didn’t know the title of. It was melancholy, and the tone made Merlin look over at Arthur, whose mouth absently moved with the words. It made no sense that Arthur could be melancholy; the man had an undoubtedly charmed life. Then he remembered a time, years before, when he’d been to a doctor to see about antidepressants, and the doctor had asked him what he had to be sad about, before he knew how stupid that question was, before he knew to never see that doctor again. “Nothing, I guess,” Merlin had answered. He studied Arthur’s profile, the hair that just needed a trim, the roughness of stubble. He hadn’t seen Arthur so informally dressed. Even the pictures he’d seen during the ill-advised Google search had shown him wearing suits. Now he wore faded jeans, which looked surprisingly worn. His Henley stretched, just a bit, across his pecs, and looked soft. Soft enough that Merlin fought an inexplicable and ridiculous urge to run his fingers down Arthur’s arm. Just to feel the shirt, of course. Merlin could only imagine the horror that action would trigger.

He looked out the window. The sun was higher in the sky and the Range Rover continued its steady trek north.

* * * * *

He’s looking at me again, Arthur thought.

They’d been in the car for hours, mostly in silence. Lunch had been a much-needed break from the confined space and heavy thought. Arthur wasn’t certain why Merlin despised him so much, though he had a few ideas. Honestly, it didn’t matter. Morgana had made it clear that she—or Uther—wanted this dagger. Merlin was the most capable person there was of finding it—if it was even real. So Arthur would take him and find it.

It bothered him that Merlin thought he was so out of place. He examined the negative emotion and
then accepted it, filed it away to be dissected later. To be honest, Arthur hadn’t many friends and hadn’t made any in a long time, so the prospect of finding one amidst this caper was exciting and a bit nerve-wracking, really. And it felt all but impossible at the moment. They really hadn’t started on the right foot. Everything he said seemed to anger the man. Arthur toyed with the idea of telling Merlin he’d read history at university. He’d done joint honours, but to say so would just be obnoxious.

He remember the fights with his father over it. Uther had wanted him to be a politician or take over the firm. It had taken years to repair the relationship, even to the limited extent it was repaired. Years of benefit dinners and dates with so-and-so’s daughters and being what Uther expected. He felt Merlin’s eyes on his face. What does he see? he wondered.

Arthur certainly didn’t know what he saw when he looked at Merlin. Few people he associated with were as assured. Merlin was principled. He had dedicated himself to knowledge rather than profit. How unusual. Arthur thought of a painting he’d bought a few months ago. The gallery owner had been confused at Arthur’s determination to have it. “It probably won’t resale for that,” she’d said, looking him up and down like a sleek, hungry cat. She’d taken his money, never understanding what drew him in to the lonely landscape. Arthur smiled to himself. The sky darkened into dramatic red and violet hues and he breathed deeply.

Merlin smelled like magic.

He’d have to stop for dinner sooner rather than later.

It was full dark when they found a place. Arthur watched Merlin laugh with the waitress, who flirted shamelessly. She eyed Arthur warily, trying to feel out their relationship. The thought amused Arthur at first, but then he felt himself warm to it.

Let’s not examine that too closely, either, he thought.

The restaurant was warmly lit with soft-burning lanterns and candles. Merlin looked exhausted, but his blue eyes sparkled with mirth. The waitress had dark hair and Bette Davis eyes and for a moment, Arthur imagined the two of them together. He felt something tighten in his gut and then he imagined himself there, too, all three of them a mess of hands and legs and—

“Arthur?”

“Hm?” He crossed his legs and leaned forward.

“Are you finished?”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

The waitress watched him for a second and licked her lips. “Will that be one check or two, then?” she asked.

“One,” Arthur answered, as Merlin said “Two.” “One.”

The crease between Merlin’s brows deepened. He opened his mouth to protest, but the waitress had already walked away. When she returned with the bill, she looked between them, smiled a tiny bit and said, “I’m off in an hour.”

Merlin’s jaw literally dropped.

“Maybe next time,” Arthur said, looking her up and down in a way he knew she would like. “We’ve
a long way to go yet.”

“Shame.”

And it rather was a shame, Arthur thought as he tossed down the payment. He’d never been particularly adventurous in bed but the more he thought about it, well, he needed to get back in the car before he embarrassed himself.

“I think that woman scared you,” he said once they were back on the motorway.

“Hardly,” Merlin answered.

“You seemed shocked she propositioned us.”

“Yes. Us.”

“You find me so unappealing?”

“No, you’re—no. I—uh.” Arthur peeked over and saw Merlin’s cheeks were dark pink, visible even in the low light of the car.

“I’m what?” Arthur pressed.


“Now that I can agree with.”

Creaghall loomed in the dark, northern night. The air was cool and damp, and Arthur stretched his back as he looked up at the place. It was something of a mix between a manor and a castle, close enough to the coast that Arthur was certain there’d be a sea view from the top of the parapets. The house was rambling, but well cared for, with neatly trimmed hedges and tidily swept stone steps. Merlin pulled his bag from the car as a man in tweeds came out to greet them. “Welcome, welcome,” he said, jovial for the middle of the night. Morgana must have paid well, in advance. He looked at their meager luggage and frowned. “That’s all?”

“Yes,” Arthur responded.

“Well then. You best follow me. I’m Andrew Paterson, the estate manager. This way.”

“Arthur Pendragon, and this is Merlin Hunithson. Thank you for meeting us so late.”

“Oh of course. And I’ll have your car taken round, of course, too.” The manor was warm and comfortable, done up in greens and reds and lots of dark woods. Big brass light fixtures reflected across a grand entryway, and Andrew led them up a staircase to a western wing of the house. “Your rooms are here. Each one is a full suite, just like you asked for.”

“Lovely,” Arthur said. He looked at Merlin, who seemed dead on his feet. Andrew, too, seemed to understand their fatigue, so he handed their keys to Arthur, pocketed the offered tenner, and disappeared.

Merlin was in his room before Arthur had his door unlocked. He hadn’t realized the man could move
Merlin awakened slowly to soft, dappled light and birdsong. He lay on his back and considered his surroundings: four-poster bed, oak, surprisingly light stain, in a surprisingly light room. The motif below had been dark woods and bold tartan colours, yet this room was soft, elegant, with creams and pale gold. His body ached from the long travel, and he stretched and twisted, enjoying the soft linens and the fine down duvet. It was morning, and his body wasn’t sure if he needed to relieve his bladder or his libido. Usually during work travel he had no time for such thoughts; he should visit the lavatory and begin the day. He looked at the wall clock and listened: no movement in the room next to his. Arthur must be tired, too, after the day in the car.

The very, very long day in the car, Merlin thought. He stretched his back, pushing up his hips and his stiffness shifted against the bedclothes. He stifled a groan. He rolled his wrists and flexed his fingers, then massaged his waist as his body came fully awake. He peeked down. Their arrival had been so late, he hadn’t taken time to fully change for bed, instead just stripping to his pants. Now, he looked positively lascivious.

The arousal was non-specific. Merlin allowed his mind to wander as his hand traveled and arrived, at last, on his hardness. His mind wandered through a series of images—his standard internal library, but he felt stifled. The fantasies and scenarios staled, faltered, and Merlin flagged as he fought to pull them up and focus. Instead, his traitorous mind kept circling back to a pair of hands, gripping firmly on a steering wheel, with forearms, lightly furred, barely visible in the thickening night. Merlin fought to catch his breath as he pictured the face, too: blue eyes lazily and suggestively tracking down a waitress’ body.

And then, tightening, Merlin let his hand quicken as he pictured those eyes on him, as their owner licked his lips. They would be soft. Merlin felt his legs quiver. The lips would be soft and wet and so, so hot. He groaned aloud, now, unable to stop the quiet moan from escaping his own parted lips, which he bit, curling his toes and letting his other hand track down to squeeze and knead below the furious movement. He felt it coming and surrendered himself to the thoughts, the urges he knew he’d desperately repress in a few minutes. But for now, thighs shaking, chest heaving, Merlin closed his eyes tight and imagined licking a path along Arthur Pendragon’s collarbone, up his neck, to the ridiculously noble jawline, and arriving at last at his mouth. He came, gasping and shaking, and resolving, in the aftershocks, to never, ever, ever repeat this behaviour.

He took a scalding shower to cleanse the thoughts, and dressed carefully. I’m not going to dress for him, Merlin thought, shuffling between shirts. The blue was looser, but brought out his eyes so that people always commented on it. The red was tighter, accentuating his lithe frame. No one ever commented on that, Merlin thought. I don’t want him to compliment my eyes, he thought. He pulled on the red.

Merlin opened his suite door and found Arthur immediately outside, poised to knock. “Oh,” Arthur said. His face pinkened a bit as his eyes tracked down to his feet. “I was going to see if you’re ready. I see that you are.”

“Of course. Have you been up long?” Merlin tried not to notice the snug jeans, the jumper that looked like it had been worn a thousand times and was bound to be tremendously soft.

“No, I, um. Just a bit. I had a shower too.” His face was still flushed.

Merlin self-consciously pushed back on his still-drying hair. “Right.”
“Breakfast?”

“Please.”

The dining room held a remarkable spread, which Merlin was happy to tear into. He was always hungry after sex; pleasuring himself didn’t usually have the same effect, but today he was ravenous. He sipped his tea, making an effort to slow down.

“You’re like a starved man, Merlin,” Arthur commented. “Like you ran five k this morning or something.” Merlin caught a hint of a smirk, subtle enough that he may have imagined it. Regardless, his body heated in embarrassment. How thick were the walls? he wondered. No. Surely Arthur hadn’t heard; he’d been too quiet.

“Just happy to be out of the car,” Merlin said.

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“Yes, it really was.”

“A full day with me all to yourself?”

Merlin snorted. “You say that like it was a treat. I’m not—”

“One of my debutantes, yes, you’ve mentioned that,” Arthur said. His eyes flicked to Merlin’s chest and then away, out the window. “I noticed.”


“So, where are we off to first, Merlin? I expect you’d prefer to make these decisions, seeing as how I’m not a librarian, as you’ve also mentioned.”

“There’s that regional archive not far from here. I think it will be a good place to start.”

“Right. Archive. And, er, what will we look for, exactly, at the archive?”

“Information.” Merlin smiled.

“Such as?” Arthur gave him a blank look. “What will be there?”

“Diary entries, ledgers, anything that may mention travel or purchases or other relevant locations I may need to visit that house similar collections.”

“It’s a shame they haven’t gone digital, isn’t it? Save us a lot of work.”

Merlin just shook his head, refusing to let Arthur bother him. He could almost smell the archive. His fingers tingled. Books, paper, and leather waited for him. It was time to get to work.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO MUCH to everyone who has given kudos, bookmarked, commented, or subscribed. Believe me when I say it means a ton and truly makes me want to keep this story going.
I have about half of chapter six written, and there’s some flirting and jealousy to look
forward to!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Arthur and Merlin visit the local archive and search for signs of the dagger.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The regional archive was a small, nondescript building near the center of the closest village. Its keeper was young and, Merlin thought, startlingly attractive for a provincial historian. “I’m Mordred,” the man said. He looked at Merlin as if he knew him.

“Merlin,” he said, shaking hands. “I’m sorry, but do we know each other?”

Arthur rolled his eyes so hard it was nearly audible, then sighed. “And I’m Arthur. You have any ledgers and diaries about we can look at?”

Merlin let go of Mordred’s hand. “Sorry about him. It appears you have quite a collection here.”

Mordred smiled. “Thank you. We have not met, but I know you, Emrys.”

Merlin froze, feeling his chest tighten in shock. The hair on the back of his neck stood up in a quick prickle and he drew a shaky breath before he nodded. “I see.” He looked Mordred up and down more closely, now. His clothes were remarkably well-made. At his neck hung a triskelion pendant, heavy and old. Merlin eyed it as Mordred put his hands in his pockets, shrugging almost sheepishly, looking very young for a moment. “Please pass along my regards to… everyone,” Merlin said.

“I will. They expected you. They hope you will join us at Beltane.”

Arthur perked up at this, apparently pulled a bit from his confusion. “Beltane? Like with a fire and all?”

“I doubt we’ll be here that long,” Merlin said.

“It’s in two days, Emrys.”

“Are there cows involved?” asked Arthur. He was far too excited by this.

“Not anymore,” Merlin said. He looked at Mordred again. The man wore a cautious smile, which Merlin felt compelled to answer.

“I--we would be honoured by your presence, Emrys, sir.”

“Oh, no ‘sir,’ please, Mordred. You can just call me Merlin, if you want.”

“Merlin.” They shared a smile as he said the name. “We have a feast planned… and dancing.” He bit his lip, meeting Merlin’s eyes.

“I’m Arthur,” Arthur said in an overly bright voice. He took Mordred’s hand almost forcibly.
“You said that already,” said Merlin.

“Did I?” He flashed a million dollar smile. “It’s still nice to meet you. Are there any ledgers, any diaries about that my… um… partner and I may… peruse?”

Mordred looked between them, chastened. “Of course.” He gestured to a doorway. “Most of the collection is back here.”

“What the hell was that?” Merlin asked once they were alone.

“What?”

“The oafish behaviour, calling me your partner. We don’t really even work together you… wanker.”

Arthur huffed. “Oh please. We don’t have time or resources to support your flirting, Merlin. That isn’t why we’re here. And remember, you are on official business per the board and board chair.”

“Flirting?! Oh please, Mr. Slow-Perusal-of-the-Waitress.”

“She was asking for it!”

“Oh my gods don’t get me started on everything wrong with that statement.”

Arthur winced. “That came out wrong, but I mean it was a mutual discussion,” he gestured with his hands, “not like, at her.”

“And this wasn’t mutual? If it even was anything, which it wasn’t really, I mean.”

“Exactly my point.”

“What? What are you--”

“We don’t have time for this, either.”

For a moment, Merlin couldn’t remember what the argument was even about, and he wasn’t sure if he’d won or lost, but it felt like neither.

“You’re right,” Arthur said. “We won’t be here for Beltane.” His shoulders were stiff.

“No, I think we should.” Merlin really didn’t want to go, but Arthur obviously no longer wanted to go. “It is very important in the old religion.”

“Is that why he called you Emrys?”

“Yes.” Merlin didn’t explain further. How did one explain prophecy and destiny in casual conversation?

“Right. Because you have magic.”

“No. Because I… receive magic.” And that was something else he couldn’t explain. “Am magic.”


“Back in uni, a little.”

“Right, so in that game there are different ways to get magic.”
“A wizard learns it, but a warlock gets it from like, a demon.”

“Yes, it’s kind of like that, except… not at all. And most people just learn it, but I’m… different. I’m more of a tool of the demon the warlock makes a deal with. Or like the demon--but not a demon.”

“You serve a demon?”

“No! And also not a god. Just…deities. And it isn’t service. It’s my blood, my heritage. From my father. Patrilineal.”

“Like Zoroastrianism,” Arthur said.

“What?”

“Zoroastrianism is patrilineal. Passed down by fathers.”

“Okay maybe patrilineal is the wrong word. And it isn’t a religion. It’s beyond that. How do you even know that, anyway?”

“I’m not just a suit and a pocketbook.”

“Yes, but, still.”

“I actually enjoyed uni. And not just the D&D.”

Merlin took a moment to imagine a young Arthur, in the thick-framed glasses popular in the late noughties, taking notes mid-lecture. He blinked the image away. “Right. I’m sure.”

“You don’t believe me.” Arthur crossed his arms across his chest.

“No, actually, I don’t.”

“Why?”

“You do know you’re famous, right?”

“I’m not a Kardashian, I don’t have like, shows. You don’t-”

“I don’t need to watch a show about you to know you aren’t an academic any more than I need to watch theirs to tell that about them.”

“That’s just…” Arthur paused, as if searching for the right word. He mumbled something Merlin couldn’t make out.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, Merlin. It doesn’t matter. Let’s just find this thing so we can go home.”

It occurred to Merlin that he had won, but it didn’t feel like a victory. Regardless, he stopped arguing and did a quick assessment of their surroundings.

Whereas the first room had been a rather mundane collection of books, microfiche, and computers, the back room was exactly what Merlin hoped for. The ceilings weren’t high, but the room was packed to the rafters with books, folios, and realia. The room itself was an oval, with a rough floor tiled in an auburn and ochre pattern. Merlin stepped around it, then walked back the opposite direction. A desk stood in the center, so he pulled up on one side. “Help me with this,” he asked, and
Arthur lifted the other side with ease. They placed it to the side and Merlin stood back again, taking in the room. “Three cranes,” he observed.

“The mosaic?” Arthur looked down at the uncovered image.

“Yes. Could be a bad omen.” Merlin knelt down to inspect it: three cranes in a circle, each head emerging from the beak of another, as if devouring and creating one another. And being devoured.

“I thought cranes were a symbol of protection,” Arthur said.

“In some cultures. But here, we are surrounded by the Old Faith.”

“Druids?”

“In a way, yes.”

“And I take it they aren’t protectors here.”

“Not here. See how they consume each other? A protective crane holds a stone in its mouth. This is more sinister.”

“So what does it mean?”

“Probably nothing.” Merlin ran his hand over the tiles. They were old, he could tell. Nothing stood out, so he motioned to Arthur and they moved the desk back over it.

“Then what’s the point?” Arthur asked, walking around the desk.

“Animal iconography is common here. Take the carvings at Creaghall.”

“What carvings?”

“The panels in the stairwell.”

“The stairwell has carvings?”

“Yes, of the serpent, the deer, the bull.” Merlin let his eyes lose focus, remembering. “Yes, there it was beside the fish. The salmon.”

“Okay, but these are Druid symbols?”

“Yes, why?”

“Not Asian?”

“No, different meanings, different pantheons and spirits, although it’s all kind of the same, like, energy.” As he spoke, Merlin examined a few shelves. “And here we are.” He pulled a stack of thick ledgers from a shelf.

“What?”

“Follow the money,” he said, laying them on the broad desk.

Arthur sat across from him with a wary look. “Can’t wait,” he said, and he flipped open a page.
The archive was unnervingly quiet. Arthur heard the dry rasp of every page as he turned them, one by one, through the ledger. With the door closed, it was as if the world outside didn’t exist, and he and Merlin were the only two people alive. Merlin’s quiet breathing was also just barely audible, and Arthur felt it was almost intimate, working with him like this. Merlin scanned pages quickly, periodically peering off into the ether as if remembering something. Morgana had said the man’s mind was a formidable thing. It was. Arthur fought the urge to stare.

He’d been fighting the urge to stare all day.

It had begun early this morning. Arthur had awoken slowly, not at all rested and refreshed. He lay in bed, beginning to question why he had decided to take on this library business after all. The memory of his mum, he reminded himself. A love of history and legacy. He thought of his previous jobs and how terrible they’d made him feel, in the end. And then he heard it. A soft grunt. Perhaps it was a groan, on the other side of the wall. At first Arthur was confused, but then he heard a gasping breath and a deeper groan.

His own arousal was immediate and almost painful in its urgency. Later, he noticed his lip was bruised from where he’d bit it to keep his own gasps and moans silent.

Arthur told himself it was the natural reaction of any healthy man overhearing an obviously good wank. It had nothing to do with Merlin, of course. As he stroked himself, he’d thought of Merlin’s eyes, sharp with judgement and something like resentment. They were infuriating, he thought, not sexy, but he stroked himself faster, tighter, hearing another gasp.

And anyway, he wasn’t a caveman, but he’d never felt specific attraction to a certain man. Had he? A quick flash of Ben Whishaw flitted through his mind. Liar, he thought. Merlin’s eyes. He twisted his wrist a bit, toy ing. Merlin’s cheekbones. Christ.

He heard Merlin climax in the next room and he followed, surrendering, for now. He’d forget this happened. Just as he’d forgotten the sweaty nights he’d spent thinking of that kiss in *Brideshead Revisited*.

It wasn’t even a great kiss scene.

Arthur had heard the water flowing that meant Merlin was showering, and he rushed to do the same. A cool rinse made him feel better, more at ease. But then Merlin had to wear this damn tight t-shirt that accentuated every line of his surprisingly defined frame. He had opened the door, still wet from the shower, and Arthur had to look away. It was damned unprofessional, and he needed to get a grip. Fortunately, they’d stayed busy. Arthur had been busy working, of course, while Merlin had been flirting with this Mordred fellow.

Arthur’s finger followed another column of wispy, archaic writing. Household accounts, mostly, kept in this oversized ledger. *Livestock sold: sheep, cattle. Purchased goods: grain, linen. Feast preparations*. There was something. “Another feast here,” he said. Merlin slipped around the desk to stand behind his seat, leaning to read over his shoulder.


“Did you really just say harbinger of death?” Arthur twisted to look up at Merlin.

“So what does it mean here?”

“It’s hard to say from this. But the local filidh would have kept a record of any significant events. This is when?”

“Spring… 1253.”

“Perfect.” Merlin pulled away, and Arthur was surprised by the loss of warmth.

“Wait. Filidh?”

“Yeah, like a record-keeper and a seer, kind of. Or like a bard, in a way.”

“More Dungeons and Dragons.”

“Not that kind--actually, yes. More like that than you’d think.”

“I had a friend who played a halfling bard named Wilby Weatherbottom. He’d like you. A lot, I think.” Arthur smiled. It had been years since he’d seen Tristan. “Yeah, a whole lot.”

“Why?” Merlin looked inexplicably irritated, all of a sudden.

“Well, because, you know.” Arthur waved his hands. “You’re--”

“Gay? We don’t automatically just like each other. Gods. What is it with straight people always thinking that just because they know two--”

“Whoa whoa whoa hold up there. I meant because you’re magic.” Merlin’s face paled. “I mean, I kind of wondered about Tristan and our buddy Mark, but I’m pretty sure this thing with Isolde is going to work out.” Merlin blinked a few times, but didn’t speak. “You hadn’t said--I mean--I wouldn’t presume to know--that is… I mean, I thought maybe. Probably. But that’s just because of earlier and Mordred…” Oh hell. Arthur didn’t know what to say. He felt himself mirroring Merlin’s blank look.

“Right,” Merlin finally said.

“He was always fascinated by magic and was always asking about my family’s connections and that sort of thing. I don’t think he’s ever actually met someone who truly has magic. Just, like, fortune tellers.”

“Some filidh do work as readers.”

“I thought real magic was rare.”

“It is. But it depends on the type of magic. Seers are more common, in varying degrees. Loads of people have visions or premonitions, but it’s most common to like, think of a song right before it comes on the radio. Or have that unsettled feeling that something’s wrong. Filidh can actually see what the terrible thing is, then commit the whole story to memory, usually in verse.”

Arthur huffed a laugh. “Poets.”

“More or less. They’re more like the fortune teller in a wagon at a faire.”
“So what about you?” Arthur asked. “I never see you do magic. Isn’t that part of being a Druid?”

Merlin cocked his head as he smiled at Arthur, a sly little grin that Arthur responded to by crossing his arms across his chest and stretching his legs out.

“You wouldn’t see that, no. And I’m not really a Druid. A Druid is a type of practitioner of the Old Religion. Like the filidh.”

“This has to do with you being given magic.”

“That, and the circumstances of my birth. Also my blood. All of that.”

“So how are you different?”

Merlin chuckled. “Well. Druids need components to create enchantments and--it’s more like chemistry or alchemy. I...don’t.”

“How?”

“I am a part of the magic and I can shape it, use it, add to it.”

Arthur desperately wanted to see it, but he didn’t know how to ask. “That’s really beautiful,” he said, instead.

“What?”

“I said--”

“No, I heard you. It just seemed like an odd thing to hear you say.”

“Why?”

“Just hearing you say ‘beautiful.’”

“I think a lot of things are beautiful.”

Merlin leaned forward, across the table toward him. “You are not what I expected, Arthur Pendragon.”

“Because I have a brain?” Arthur asked. He met Merlin’s blue eyes directly, refusing to blink first.

“Because you have a soul,” Merlin said. And that answer was so unexpected that Arthur sat, staring, feeling his heart inexplicably pound, until Merlin stood up and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

My cat is named after Sebastian in Brideshead Revisited, and the 2008 film adaptation was a significant part of the inspiration for that. The book is, obviously, fantastic, as is the 1981 version. But the newer version just got me in a way few movies have.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Arthur and Merlin seek the filidh to learn about the past. There is excitement and danger that involves divination and swordplay.

Chapter Notes

I listened to a lot of Max Richter whilst writing this and have decided his music should accompany all aspects of life, including this story.

If you're unfamiliar with him, well, you're welcome. ;-) 

I just… I’ve not been… How much do you know about my family?” Arthur took a bite, eager to occupy himself as Merlin gave him that penetrating look.

“The Pendragon family?”

“Mm hmm.”

“So, how are we going to find out what happened in 1253?”

“The filidh will channel the spirits.”

“Right.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I just… I’ve not been… How much do you know about my family?” Arthur took a bite, eager to occupy himself as Merlin gave him that penetrating look.

“The Pendragon family?”

“Mm hmm.”

“Why do you ask?” Merlin looked guarded. Clearly, he knew something. Arthur just munched another biscuit and stared back at him. “Old money.” This answer was expected. “Ancient blood.” Less expected. “One of the Five.” And there it was. Arthur made sure his face remained perfectly neutral. “I think the real question, Arthur Pendragon, is how much you know about your family.” His face formed a grim smile. “And the Five.”

“Five Kingdoms.”

Merlin scoffed. “They wish.”

“You’d be surprised,” Arthur mumbled. “Five Kingdoms, passed down, with no true dominion, but uh, a, well, protectorate.” He took a big gulp of tea, then winced as it scalded his esophagus.

“According to conspiracy theorists.”
“Um.” And the truth was, there was a lot Arthur knew he didn’t know. This aspect of his father’s life he had purposefully avoided, with the support of his mother, while Morgana had craved it. “Well, you know the Camelot board members are traditionally representative of the Five.”

“Pendragon being the leaders.”

“No, the library is neutral. We lead Pendragon-de Bois-Montaigne. Though we are known for arcana. The others—”

“Villaret.”

“Healing. Essetir Pharmaceuticals.”

“Right, I knew that. Remember, I go to all board meetings.”

“Yes, but that’s just one small part of this.” Arthur grimaced.

“Angevin is the Plantagenet.”

“Yes. Politics, obviously. Amata Consulting.”

“The Mercians are still in the arts, though I know Claudia and Cosimo are also in real estate. That seems to be where the money comes from,” Merlin said.

Arthur nodded. “Still very connected in Rome, and that is a whole different mess that I don’t even want to know about.”

“And then there are the Gordons, right? But that seems an odd fit.”

“Yes, well, their history is far more complex than Lord Byron. That’s just the part everyone knows about. And then there’s the marquess, but that’s a different part of the family, you know.”

“They own the North Anglia—Caledonia Group.”

Arthur nodded. “Several generations ago it was decided all the families should have stock in each other’s holdings, so none of the Five has more power than another.”

“So you serve on the boards of other groups, too?”

“No, my father and uncle are generally the representatives. The library is separate and I don’t—”

“But with you sister as board chair, isn’t that an uneven balance of power for the Pendragons?”

Arthur considered his response. “Like I said, arcana is the…realm of the Pendragon family. Traditionally, Camelot belonged to the Pendragons.”

“Traditionally, but not for generations, right? Why now?”

“Well we aren’t trying to own it. It isn’t—it’s a public institutions, more or less.”

“It isn’t a public library, Arthur, and it isn’t run by the government.”

“No, thank god. It’s run by the board.”

“Which now has two Pendragons.” Merlin’s mouth was set in a firm frown.

“What?”
“I knew something was going—I’m not—why would I talk to you about this? And honestly, what are you playing at? What is your family trying to achieve here?”

Arthur didn’t know how to answer because even he wasn’t positive. “The opportunity presented itself, and I thought it would be a nice way of…remembering…” he trailed off. Remember my mum, he thought, but he didn’t want to say that. He didn’t want to say it to Merlin.

“Remembering what?” Merlin leaned toward him, looking him directly in the eye. Arthur felt himself mirroring the posture. A biscuit crumb had stuck to Merlin’s bottom lip and Arthur stared at it, wondering if Merlin didn’t feel it, feel something. His lips were full, perhaps pushed out a little as he awaited an answer. So pink, for a man, too. In fact, Arthur thought, his mouth was, well, sensuous. Even as it pouted. Pink, plump lips, that perhaps were even… beautiful, if Arthur was honest.

Beautiful but masculine, somehow. And Arthur’s gaze shifted to the square jawline, the thickening stubble. And then, as if he read Arthur’s thoughts, Merlin’s tongue darted out and captured the crumb, drawing Arthur’s attention back and leaving his lips obscenely wet and glistening in the afternoon light. And it struck Arthur, then, that he wasn’t going to be able to ignore this… inconvenience. He could repress it, yes, but he had reached a point, at some time over the past few days (and had it really been such a short time?), from which Arthur’s curiosity at this rude, angry man had changed, and that curiosity, now, was much more akin to wanting and, Arthur realized, attraction.

It wasn’t an epiphany. He’d gotten off thinking about the man mere hours ago. But the foolish idea that he’d forget, that it wouldn’t be repeated? Well. It was unlikely. Absurd, even.

And now the lips were moving. He forced himself to attention. “Huh?”

Merlin rolled his eyes and sighed. “Never mind. Let’s go.”

* * * * *

Tracking down a filidh in this area was not a challenge for Merlin. He made a few quick calls to Camelot and George sent him an address within a quarter hour.

“So, what does your family have to do with this?” Merlin asked on the way. “We were distracted from that.”

“Oh. Just that, I know different… groups… probably have allegiances to other families and well, I don’t have to tell you how some people feel about the Pendragons. You’ve made it perfectly clear you share those sentiments.”

Merlin turned. “What?”

“That you don’t like me, Merlin.” Was Arthur pouting? Merlin shook his head. “Or my family. You don’t. You’ve made that perfectly clear—have since we met, and during that tour…”

“You mean when you demanded to see my flat and threatened to evict me?”

“I thought you were going to hit me.”

Merlin remembered that moment. “That’s what you got out of that?” He had felt on the edge of physical attack, he recalled, but now he wasn’t sure it was a desire to hit Arthur.

“Yes,” Arthur said. His eyes raked over Merlin’s body again.

“I see you, sizing me up.” Arthur’s eyes widened and jerked back to the road. “I told you—”
“You could take me apart, yes, I remember very clearly,” Arthur said. “I wasn’t sizing you up.”

“Yes, you were! You were earlier, too.”

“I was—” Arthur stopped, his mouth opening and closing a few times. Merlin waited, watching him as he blinked several times. “I like your shirt,” he said, finally, in a rush. “It looks…”

“What?”

“G—uh… nice.” He made a strange face Merlin couldn’t even begin to decipher. And then the words themselves sunk in.

“Oh.”

“We’re here.” Arthur let out a hearty exhalation and set the handbrake.

The filidh’s house was a small stone cottage on the edge of a rocky shore. As the sun set, Merlin could just make out a stone circle about a kilometer up the coast. A breeze seemed to blow in from the sea and hum around them. Merlin watched Arthur respond to it: he furrowed his brow, but set his shoulders in defiance of any foreboding. The moon was already visible at the horizon, almost orange and angry looking. Merlin paused and stared at it, assessing it. “Lots of spirits out tonight,” he observed.

“What do you mean?”

“Nature spirits, like the sidhe but more attached to this specific spot. Some cultures think of them as elves or fae, but that’s really a misconception.” Merlin realized he was talking to ease his own feeling of discomfort.

“They’re always active at Beltane, Emrys. You know.” A woman stepped out of the cottage. She wore her age with an elegance that reminded Merlin of his mother. “Alice,” she said, holding out her hand. Merlin took it in both of his, nodding his head. She turned to Arthur. “Hmm. So you are Arthur Pendragon,” she said, looking him up and down. “Interesting.”

Inside, the house smelled of the ash and birch that burned in the fireplace. It was a little smoky from the hearth and a large number of candles that dripped creamy wax onto the surface of every piece of furniture.

“Come,” Alice said, leading them into a warm, homey parlor. “Sit.”

They sat at a small round table on emerald chairs with threadbare upholstery.

“You knew we were coming,” Merlin said.

Alice smiled. “I hoped.”

“Did Mordred say something?”

“He confirmed your arrival, Emrys. We have expected you for some time, you know.”

Alice turned and stared at him, but Arthur did not shrink. Of course not, Merlin thought. Even on such uncertain ground the man was confident. On the surface, anyway. Alice drew in a deep breath. “You know very little about your companion.” She looked between them so that Merlin was unsure to whom she spoke. She smiled again. “Let me read for you.” She opened a flat wooden box and pulled out a deck of cards.

“For whom?” Merlin asked.

“Whomever wishes,” she answered, cutting the deck.

“I’m not sure this is necessary,” Merlin said. “We really have questions.”

“You then,” she said to Arthur. “Shuffle these. She slid each pile across the table and Arthur awkwardly lifted and mixed each stack of oversized cards. Merlin watched her watch Arthur. Alice was older, but not burdened by age. She wore a long, flowing skirt and blouse far too large for her medium frame. Her hair was long and pulled back in a braid. Her hands suggested long hours spent gardening or busy with other rough tasks.

“Death,” she said. The first card, the major arcana, had been turned.

Arthur let out a short bark of a laugh, and Merlin turned back to him.

“It’s okay,” Merlin said. “It isn’t—”

“A harbinger of death? We seem to keep seeing these?”

Merlin leaned toward him, unable to stop his smile. “Harbinger of death?”

Arthur looked less amused. “It isn’t funny, Merlin.”

“Emrys is right,” said Alice. She held her hand over the card and closed her eyes. “Rebirth. Change,” she said. “The end of one stage to begin anew.”

“I see,” said Arthur.

“You do not,” she said. “But you may.” She turned the next card. “Two of Wands.” A smile turned the edge of her lips. “Yes, this change is imminent, inevitable. And yet you stand, see, overlooking splendor, considering all you do not have.”

Merlin watched Arthur’s eyes narrow on the card. The room was not brightly lit, and he leaned toward it, brow creased. “So I’m greedy,” he said.

“No. You may not have many things. It may be dominion. It may be… companionship.” Alice’s eyes darted to Merlin and back to Arthur. “You must have courage; you must be relentless. Remember, the Two of Wands,” she tapped the card then lifted her hand, “informs Death. This is your physical, your current state. You lack and you mourn. You hold the world, yet no man possesses her.”

“And what about the future, then?” Arthur asked. His voice, Merlin noticed, was tight and defiant. He stared at Alice without blinking. She turned the next card.

“Ace of Pentacles… reversed.”

Merlin cocked his head to the side. “But—” he cut himself off. It was not his reading. Arthur looked at him, questioning, and he shook his head.
“The Ace of Pentacles signifies great wealth and joy,” Alice explained.

“But?” Arthur prompted.

“It is reversed. This is the evil that may accompany such advantages.” She leaned toward him. “This is your mind, Arthur Pendragon. This quality may stifle you. These forces may prevent the change you desire.”

“My money?”

“Pendragon wealth,” Alice said, leaning back and looking into a candle flame, “is far more than gold.”

Arthur twisted the ring on his forefinger and nodded his head. He looked at Merlin and then back at Alice. “Okay.”

Alice turned the final card and beamed, her face radiant in the candlelight. “Ten of Cups.”

Merlin rubbed his palms on his trouser legs and forced himself to sit still.

Arthur looked between them again. “Is that good?”

“This card is your spirit and your future. It is what the gods, benevolent and ambivalent, destine for you.”

“And?”

“The Ten of Cups is love. Contentment. A joyful, harmonious family after a tempest of strife.”

Merlin stared into the hearth across the room. He generally avoided divination. Cartomancy was, all things considered, more of a parlor trick than magic. Cards could be interpreted to predict or explain nearly anything. Channeling spirits required more finesse, and Merlin preferred to avoid that rabbit hole lest he wind up mad, living in a cave, staring into a fire or scrying bowl for the next hundred years. Yet now he was tempted. Could he see any of Arthur’s future? What would it hold? Two children and a wife? Probably blonde, he thought. He shook his head. Why would it matter? It didn’t. Why did he feel so… unpleasant?

The sooner this trip ended, the better.

Arthur’s face was masked with a nondescript and neutral expression. A poker face, Merlin thought.

“But that is not why you’ve come,” Alice said, shuffling her deck.

“We seek answers from the past,” Merlin said. “The distant past.”

Alice flipped a card over. The Magician. She slid it to the right. “How distant?” she asked.

“1253,” Arthur answered.

She flipped another card and slid it to the left. The Fool. She closed her eyes. They waited in silence and she hummed a bit, murmuring. She nodded her head and swayed, as if to some unheard melody. Finally, she went still. Her voice came, then, gravelly and breathless:

“A feast for many, Lugnasadh Night;

The cross of red, the cloak of white.
Bountiful fete of harvest and treasure  

Wicked intent revealed among pleasure.”

Merlin felt the air quicken around them, not quite a breeze, but restless and moving. The fire brightened in the hearth. Alice opened her eyes and the irises were lit from within.

“The athame’s silver slicked with crimson,

From peaceful rest the legend arisen;

A Templar treasure borne of the shadows,

Stripped from the Earth to prepare meat for crows.

The horn éd king in black cloak with white cross

Eternally banished from Helios

By Lugus, the Triune, savior and king.

He took from the villain the blade and the sting

Ere one tribe’s powers were made unbounded

And unmatched sovereignty be founded.”

Alice closed her eyes and drew in a deep, rasping breath. Her body seemed to pulse with her labored breathing, rocking front to back.

“Is that it?” Arthur whispered.

Merlin shook his head. He opened his arms and hands and felt the spirits present. They were old watchers of the hearth, refreshed each Beltane from the sacred bonfires. He felt their outrage at this long-past violence. “They… hate the dagger,” he whispered.

“Do they know where it is?”

Merlin let his magic commune with the spirits. “ĀsciaPāsciɡaP wælseax,” he said. We seek the dagger.

Arthur gasped, but Merlin stared into the fire.

“Gerihtrēcð… geswutelast!” The fire brightened even more, heating the room. Merlin saw the images revealed by the spirits: the Templar murdered by a horned knight, face painted greenish black. The three-faced god cursing the knight’s assassin, banishing him from sunlight and taking the dagger. The fire turned blue. Nodens emerged from the sea, towering, bearded, and nude. He embraced Lugh like a brother and took the dagger.

The fire cleared. Alice panted, her eyes returning to their normal hue. Merlin’s skin tingled. He looked at Arthur, who stared at him, mouth open, eyes wide. His mouth closed but then parted again, and he licked his lips, just looking at Merlin. Merlin shivered and stared back, transfixed by the awe he could make out as Arthur studied him. The magic was still thick in the air and his gooseflesh made him feel raw and exposed. He felt his body harden and he wondered—had to know—could Arthur tell? What would he say? More importantly, what would he do? Merlin bit his lip rather than ask. He wanted Arthur to know. He wanted. He took a cleansing breath.
“The gods have taken the dagger,” he said.

“Which ones?” Arthur asked.

“Lugh and Nodens.” He looked at Alice. She was shaken and tired. “Thank you, Mother. We will leave you.”

Alice nodded. “Yes. But remember, Emrys.”

“Beltane?”

“Already the spirits and gods are responding to your presence here. I haven’t felt such… Well. If you ask for their blessings on our behalf…”

Merlin smiled. “I will try.” Composure restored, he stood and waited for Arthur to rise. They exited together, leaving Alice at the table.

The night was dark and impenetrable when they returned to Creaghall. Clouds had threatened since lunch, and the air was thick with cool mist. Arthur pulled into a side lot by a carriage house and parked.

They walked in silence toward the greenish halos of light around the lampposts, marking the way toward the entrance.

“When you did magic,” Arthur said, “it was unlike… I didn’t expect you to look that way.”

Merlin paused. “What do you mean?”

Arthur stopped too, stepping near to see Merlin amidst the thick fog. “Your eyes lit gold, like you were on fire within.” He reached out and Merlin felt the faint touch of fingers on his forearm.

There it is again, Merlin thought. This side of Arthur, poetic and strangely innocent, emerging from the façade. “Arthur,” he whispered, meeting his eyes, which were grey in the light. “Arthur.” And then everything went black.

* * * * *

Merlin fell limp against Arthur and it took a quick, horrified moment to realize why. Arthur could see almost nothing in the heavy fog, but it swirled around their attacker. He was nearly silent, but the air swished around the sword as it swung, slicing the mist. As if by instinct, Arthur twisted and dove, rolling off Merlin as he flung them down. He leapt to his feet, straining to see the swordsman.

The man was dressed to be cloaked by night, but he was tall and solid and once Arthur spotted him, he had him. The sword lunged, and Arthur dodged, turning and gripping at the arm. He pulled at the man, who grunted as Arthur’s elbow made contact with his gut. The sword clattered to the stone path.

Arthur spun and was met by a solid fist to his jaw. His head tilted back but he didn’t hesitate. He pushed back with a left hook and right uppercut. The man stumbled back, and Arthur kick him in the chest. As he fell, Arthur stepped back and knelt to pick up the sword. He hadn’t learned fencing, but it felt right as he gripped it and took a defensive stance.

Merlin groaned, but Arthur refused to take his eyes from the attacker. “Who are you?” he demanded,
pointing the blade. “What do you want?”

The man scurried back, on his feet in seconds. “Abandon your quest, Pendragon, or die,” he growled.

“Who are you?” Arthur repeated.

“Arthur...” Merlin groaned again and Arthur looked down to see his eyes open in slits. He looked back up.

The man was gone.

As Arthur carried Merlin up the stairs he thought, this isn’t how I meant this evening to go. Andrew, the estate manager, followed them, jabbering apologies and assurances. “I’ve never seen anything like it!” he exclaimed.

“Open this door,” Arthur ordered, teeth clenched. He pushed through and laid Merlin on the bed. His eyes were open but clouded and a small trickle of blood matted his temple. “You may leave us,” he told Andrew, whose hands shook as he nodded and took his leave. Arthur quickly wet a cloth in the lavatory and dabbed at the wound. Merlin hadn’t been stabbed, but the bastard had knocked him out with the pommel, it seemed. Arthur had tucked the sword into his belt, and now he place it on a writing desk. It was sleek and brightly polished. “Who the hell attacks someone with a bloody sword?” he fumed. He considered. Thank god it wasn’t a gun.

“Arthur...” Merlin moaned.

“Yes,” he said, returning the cloth to Merlin’s brow.” I’m here, Merlin.”

“What…”

“Attacked by some arsehole with a sword. You were knocked unconscious. Probably concussed.”

“What did he take?”

“Nothing. He warned us to leave.”

Merlin’s eyes met Arthur’s. His mouth curled into an impish smile. “Good,” he said.

“What’s good?”

“That means we’re looking in the right place,” Merlin said, eyes blinking closed.

“Where?”

“Castle Nuada.” Merlin’s voice was just above a whisper.

Arthur nodded, even though Merlin couldn’t see. He stood.


So Arthur rinsed the cloth and kicked off his shoes, then pushed a chair to the bedside. “Okay,” he said. He looked down to see Merlin watching him.

“Okay,” Merlin repeated, and he smiled.
Arthur smiled back and sat down.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, guys, I just want to say thanks to you for reading this and still being a part of this fandom in 2018 (or whenever you may be reading this). You're the best people.

Also, a couple of notes:
I have always been somewhat obsessed with Lord Byron, so you just have to come with me on the Gordon thing. The Romantics (esp. Byron, the Shelleys, etc.) were a weird bunch in some pretty great ways (although no one is perfect and obv. there are some problematic pieces to the puzzle, too).
Writing this story takes a long time because I get so sidetracked while researching, and I've been elbow-deep in the history of Celtic paganism for the past week or two. I've decided to merge some traditions for this world because I like the idea that it's all connected in a sort of Supernatural way.
I also base Tarot meanings off of my deck's ancillary materials, which is the Rider-Waite deck. I got it at the bookstore, fwiw, not a magic shop.

I'm having a blast, and this chapter was particularly fun to create, so once again, thanks for coming with me on this. There's still a LOT more to come.
Also, hey. Merlin and Arthur are like, [this close] to being in bed together right now. WHAT?! Oh the pining. The glorious, glorious pining.

OH, and Happy Thanksgiving. I'm thankful for YOU.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

A little hurt/comfort for you and then a little exploration and adventure for me. Or maybe vice versa.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I don’t know how you can say that. If Richard isn’t on Big Fat Quiz, it’s barely worth watching.”

Arthur shook his head vigorously. “How can you say that? That’s like saying no panel show without him is worth—and some years he hardly even plays!”

“Because he’s understated!”

“He’s funny, but he’s far from the biggest draw. Noel—”

“Oh, when they’re together.”

“Yes! That, I can agree with. But when it’s Noel and Russell Brand.”

Merlin nodded. “Gods above, Russell Brand. It’s like, every piece of advice I’ve ever ignored in one deviant package. I don’t want to look, but then I can’t look away. Can’t tell if I’m repulsed or…”

“Really, though? Like that?”

“Oh yes,” Merlin said. “I think it’s the trousers. Or the shirts.”

“I’d think you know better than to trust a man in leather trousers.”

“Yet I never learn.” Merlin sighed.


“I’m sorry, Arthur. You should go to sleep.”

“At this point? We haven’t stayed up all night to give in now.”

“I think we can head to hospital now and have it looked at,” Merlin said. “And anyway, I’m feeling much better.”

“That’s just the exhaustion. And we aren’t waiting for daylight.”

“We aren’t?”

“No. We’re waiting—” his mobile rang. “Just a second.” He stepped into the lavatory to take the call. “Gaius! You’re here?”
“Just landed.”

“Wonderful. I’ve hired a car for you; it should be waiting. Hopefully the driver is awake—he’s been there a few hours.”

“And your friend, Arthur, how is she?”

“Um… Well he is—seems fine. Uh.”

“Ah.”

Arthur blinked, racking his brain for what to say, and then sniffed. “Well. See you in a bit, Gaius.”

“Indeed, Arthur. I look forward to it.” Arthur could almost hear the imperious eyebrow lift. He ended the call and stepped back into the room. “Right. You think you can walk, Merlin, or do I need to carry you again?”

Merlin let out an annoyed little huff. “You didn’t have to before, thank you. I am sure I would have been fine despite having a head wound.”


“Just, here.” Arthur took Merlin’s arm and pulled him up to his feet.

“Wait. I must be tired. Where are we going?”

“The doctor.”

“To hospital?”

“No, he’ll be downstairs soon.”

“What? Who?”

“My GP.”

“Huh?”

“His name is Gaius. I think you’ll like him. He’s been the family doctor on my mum’s side for years.”

“Your GP lives in Caithness?”

“No, he lives in London.”

“So then why is he here?”

Arthur stopped for a moment as they left the room. In retrospect, he suddenly realized, perhaps commissioning the Pendragon jet to fly is GP up to look at his coworker’s possibly-concussed head was a little… hasty. Arthur considered possible explanations and arrived at, “Oh, we fly Gaius around whenever anyone feels poorly because we can’t always be in London.” At least part of the statement was true.

“Yes, well, if you can’t use money for a friend’s medical care, when can you use it?”

Merlin stopped in the corridor and looked at Arthur. His blue eyes were bright in the hall, which had only just been touched by the early light of dawn. “We are friends, aren’t we?”

Arthur pulled at his arm. “That head wound must be worse than I thought.”

“It isn’t serious,” Gaius said. “You just need lots of sleep. Rest. Take it easy for a while.”

“But… I thought you weren’t supposed to sleep after—”

“That is nothing but a myth Arthur. How preposterous. What are you supposed to do, stay up all night?”


Gaius packed up his bag. “Well now. I’m exhausted. I need to see about a room.”

“Planning a quick holiday?”

“I do have a few old friends in the area. I think they do some rather elaborate celebrations for May Day.”

“So I’ve heard,” Arthur agreed. He ushered Gaius into the foyer. “Of course, have the room and your expenses charged to my name. I’ll need to see about Tyr, too. We’ll probably keep the aeroplane here for now, unless he’s needed elsewhere, of course.”

“Thank you, Arthur.” Gaius favoured him with a soft, fond smile. “Your mother would be proud of you, you know. She would do the same thing for a hurt friend.”

Arthur’s smile quivered a little, but he nodded his head in gratitude. Gaius nodded back and turned away to find Andrew.

Merlin had fallen asleep in a parlor chair. Arthur touched his shoulder softly, and Merlin’s eyes opened slowly, gold-flecked and focused on Arthur.

“Thank you,” Merlin said. His voice was husky from exhaustion and sleep and as Arthur smiled, he felt a tightening in his chest and his belly that was a warm knot Arthur wasn’t certain he could easily untangle.

Arthur and Merlin walked back up to their rooms in comfortable silence. At the doors, they each stopped and looked across to each other.

The moment felt pregnant, and Arthur decided, consciously, to not look away. It felt risky. He wasn’t certain what it meant, though as Merlin’s eyes found his mouth, he had an idea.

Arthur wet his lips. Again, he was hard. He thought, if he keeps looking at me like that, I’ll have to…

And Merlin seemed to almost wince and shake his head an infinitesimal amount.
“Goodnight Arthur. Or good morning.”

“See you in a few hours.”

Again, he was inside before Arthur unlocked his door.

The sun was high in the air when they parked near Castle Nuada. They crossed an overgrown field and the remnants of hardscaped grounds before gingerly approaching the ruin. It had been grand, it was easy to see. Nuada had been something of a citadel on the craggy bluffs. The sea was an angry churn below and the roar and crash made Arthur feel connected to the place—to the sight and sound of an ageless sea—as if he’d been there before in some other, ancient time. He felt the mist cling to his skin, even on the far side of the castle ruin. He rubbed it into the back of his hands and watched Merlin pick his way over crumbled crenellations and other broken-up masonry. He followed close behind. Inexplicably, he felt he should have brought the sword.

Merlin placed his hands on the stone around an imposing entryway and hummed. He looked up. “Would be the portcullis,” he said.

Arthur tilted his head. “Wait, did you just feel that from the stone or something?”

Merlin laughed. “No. I just know enough about architecture.”

“Ah. Of course.” Inside the courtyard, Arthur stepped carefully. “I wonder how many hundreds of years it’s been since this was maintained.”

Merlin closed his eyes and smiled. “More spirits,” he said. A pair of birds alighted on the broken edge of what had once been a wall and Merlin opened his eyes to look straight at them. “Hmm.”

“I hope that isn’t a bad omen, too.”

“I think it’s fine,” Merlin said. He did not sound as confident as Arthur would like.

“Right,” Arthur said. “So what are we looking for anyway? It’s hard to believe the dagger would have just been left here, and even then, won’t we need to excavate, like an archaeological dig?”

Merlin was studying the ground as they crossed the courtyard. “Probably.”

“Then what are we doing”

“Seeing if there’s anything out of the ordinary.”

“Like what?”

Merlin stopped. His eyes fixed on a low stone structure, and then panned around it. “Like this.”

“What is this?” Arthur stepped over to the area Merlin was examining. “It looks like some sort of—”

“Bath house.”

“Excuse me?”

Merlin made a face. “It’s set up like a Roman bath.”

Arthur was torn between a feeling of awe and substantial skepticism. “How can you possibly tell
Merlin made an even sourer face. “The aqueduct, for one. And the entrances. And the general setup. It’s my job to tell these things.” He gestured to a low stone foundation. “See?”

They covered Roman baths in library school? Arthur blinked. “Of course.” He leaned against a wall and crossed his arms across his chest. “But why would there be a bathhouse here, inside a castle in northern Scotland?”

“That is an excellent question.” Merlin was kicking through the rubble in the center of the ruin, as if sloppily looking for something. Arthur walked nearer to him, watching the pieces turn over.

“Wait,” Arthur said.

“What?”

“What was that?” Arthur knelt down to the rubble and scraped it over. The stone beneath was surprisingly solid for an ancient castle, and the edge of an etching caught his eye.

“Yes.” Merlin’s eyes had gone wide. “Yes, there.” He shoved at the rubble. A smile lit his face. “Yes.” And then his face fell. “No. What is this?”

“What do you mean? It’s some sort of starburst.”

The design looked like four flat vees, for lack of a better description, open ends meeting and points out. Almost like an inverted shamrock, but pointy, Arthur thought.

“But it isn’t a star,” Merlin said. “It isn’t the four-pointed star.”


“It isn’t touching and the etching’s all wrong.”

“It isn’t touching because it’s on four separate pieces,” Arthur pointed out. “Though,” he thought aloud, “they do seem unnecessarily far apart, don’t they? Maybe it isn’t a star at all.”

“It isn’t a star. They’re too thick inside.” He cleared off more space around the flat stones.

“They’re smoother than the rest,” Arthur observed. “And are they sticking up?” He felt around each piece. “Or are the others just sunk into the ground?”

“They’re smoother because they’re a different rock,” Merlin said. “And they’re sticking up because…” He put his face close to the stone, staring intently. His eyes widened and his mouth fell open. Gently, he reached out and slid his little finger around the edge. “Gods,” he breathed.

The two birds, which Arthur had forgotten, began to chirp.

Hands shaking with excitement, Merlin reached out, gripped the edge of a flagstone, and turned it. It barely moved, and Merlin pulled back, face covered in what Arthur could only describe as delighted shock.

“Is it unattached?” Arthur asked.

“It’s a puzzle!” Merlin said.

Arthur kept his face neutral. “Okay”
“I bloody love puzzles.”

“Well can you solve it?”

“Of course.”

“Right.” He waited, but Merlin was silent. “Merlin!”

“Yes?”

“How?”

“Oh. Well the dagger was brought by the knight in red and white, yeah?”

“The Templar.”

“Yes, well the rivals of the Templars were the Hospitaller, of course.”

“Okay.”


“Mmm hmm.”

Merlin let out an exasperated huff. “How can you not—Right, the Knights Hospitaller were led by the Villaret family, Arthur.”

“Wait. Like, Cenred Villaret?”

Merlin gave him a thin smile. “Mmm hmm.”

“He’s a right bastard, you know.”

Merlin blinked at him.

“Seriously. Private jet everywhere, Dubai, Monte Carlo every month, tens-of-thousands-pound suits. Always out with those pharma bros like Shkreli.”

Merlin had turned his head to the side and was giving him a truly patronizing smile.

“What?!“

“You never take a private jet nor wear thousand-pound suits.”

“Flying my doctor around is not the same thing. And my suits are nowhere near that price!”

“That one you wore at the prince’s wedding, then? Because it was certainly cut like it cost a few quid.”

Arthur was caught off guard but then it was his turn to smile. “Tell me, Mer-lin, how do you know what I wore to Harry’s wedding?” The shade of Merlin’s ears could best be described as scarlet. It was a lovely word, and Arthur felt positively chuffed with himself. “Or if you’d rather, tell me about this puzzle.”

Merlin cleared his throat. “The Rhodian Cross is a symbol of the Knights Hospitaller.”

“And?”
“The pieces each need rotated 180 degrees. It’s actually quite simple.” He tugged at the edge of a tile but it didn’t move. He tried again, and it just barely budged. A sigh escaped his lips.

Arthur smile. “Here,” he said. “Budge over.” He gripped the first stone and twisted. It turned slowly, making an awful racket, and Arthur had to strain against ageless corrosion and dirt. He twisted the next three the same way, counterclockwise. The tiles were now each even higher than before. “Now what?” he asked.

Merlin was staring at him, face even pinker than before. He seemed to swallow before he said, “We probably need to push them together to form the symbol, if you can.”

Arthur could. He strained, again, and the stones slid together, as if on a hidden track. He recognized the symbol now, from flags he’d seen. They stared at it. “Any ideas now?” Arthur asked.

Merlin let out a frustrated sigh. “It doesn’t make sense. Unless there is a mechanism and it’s so old. And yet, it’s all odd because why is there even a bathhouse here? And if this was a basin, the lifted rock would let water out, so they’d need to drive it down and mortar—”

“A-ha!” Arthur said. The birds chirped again.

“What?”

Arthur took a quick step forward and put his foot in the center of the cross, then pressed down.

The noise was terrible. Metal scraped and clanked and scraped more. A sound like an enormous chain dragging across another surface had them both cringing and then there was a final bang. They turned around. A hole had opened in the floor of the next chamber.

“That is unexpected,” Arthur said.

Merlin giggled.

Arthur couldn’t help it. He joined in.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't realize how dialogue-heavy this was until I went to preview the post. I hope that isn't too irritating. I just like revealing the story through conversation rather than tell it to you.
Once again, I typed this at work, so apologies for typos.
And hey, thanks, as usual, for reading and everything. You're the best!
Damp, musty air nearly choked Merlin as he started down the stone staircase. It was dark, but the first turn of the stairs revealed a pair of torches. He lit them with a quick, wordless surge of magic. Fire had always been an easy element to create and manipulate. And it was flashy. He had watched Arthur twist the flagstones, biceps straining and rippling; now it was his turn to…what? Show off? He shook his head. Get a grip, Merlin, he thought. Business to attend to.

The catacomb was black as pitch, and the torchlight did little to reveal the ancient stone masonry. The place felt wrong, somehow. Merlin eyed the dusty remains of some long-forgotten corpse. He ducked under a low archway and felt the temperature drop. A wide sarcophagus sat in the center of the chamber, and Merlin gingerly stepped over to inspect it.

He felt the floor give before he heard the clack and the clang. A might crash and groan rumbled through the chamber, and then silence returned to the tomb. The door had closed behind them.

“Shit,” said Arthur.

“Fuck,” said Merlin. He looked down. It was a pressure plate he’d stepped on, somehow connected, apparently, to the mechanism from before.

“How did they possibly make this with tools from Antiquity?” Arthur asked.

“Magic,” Merlin answered. He looked around. “And determination.” He took a few deep breaths. He’d been in rougher spots before, like that time in Jakarta… “So I’m standing on some sort of trap that has now sealed us in.”

“Clearly. Well done.”

“Shut up, Arthur. The question is, what happens if I move?”

“Meaning?”

“Is there more to the trap?”

“Oh. Well, there’s one big problem here.”
“And that is?”

“It’s way too dark to see a bloody thing.” Arthur was waving his torch a bit.

Merlin looked around the chamber. “Leohtbora.” He let his magic find the remnants of flame around the room and strike, capturing the element’s latent energy and flaring up. Seven torches lit in wall sconces, surrounding them. “I’m not sure this was built in Antiquity,” he said. “Or anyway, I think it was updated.”

“Why is that?”

“The Knights Hospitaller weren’t active until later. Crusades. That’s the Middle Ages. And really, some of this structure looks like it could date to the Iron Age, if not earlier.”

“Wait, you think this site could be that old? Bronze Age? You realize, Mer-lin, that’s three thousand years ago?”

“Obviously, yes, I realize that. I’m talking about the mounds outside.”

“I’ve seen the same sort of earthworks in France, and those castles are far newer.”

“Yeah, France. And Caesar took Gaul from?”

“The Celts, yeah, I know.”

“Then why are you arguing with me about it?”

“I’m not arguing!”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing!”

“I’m just asking if you’re sure.”

“Of course I’m not sure; I’d have to commission a dig for that and your sister now controls the purse strings.”

“So then why are you arguing with me?”

“Because I know what Bronze Age hilltop earthworks look like!”

“And I know similar fortifications were used centuries later!”

“Damn it, Arthur just look to see if I can bloody move off this plate!” Merlin was breathless from a surge of irritation that seemed to be boundless. Infinite. Leave it to a Pendragon to sweep in and start questioning Merlin’s expertise. As if Arthur could possibly know more about historical ages than he. It’s my job to know things, Merlin thought. I’m a librarian; it’s what we do. Well, that and show pensioners how to do a Google search without breaking the Internet.

“What are you thinking about?” Arthur asked. He looked wary.

Merlin continued to scowl. “Charles Babbage.”

“You are odd,” Arthur said. He was peering between cracks in the crumbling mortar. “I don’t see any blades or giant balls about to come rolling at you.”

Merlin took a deep breath. “Right, well, here we go.” He took a big step back. They waited. All was
silent.

Arthur’s sigh of relief seemed to echo in the catacomb. It echoed, Merlin realized, far longer than expected. He turned to see if Arthur had noticed. His brow was furrowed, but he did not seem unnerved, so Merlin continued to consider the tomb itself. “Don’t step right there,” he said. His voice, too, seemed to echo around the chamber and down the black corridor beyond.

“What’s on this sarcophagus?”

“I can just make it out,” Merlin said. “Beneath the filth, it looks like quite the set of engravings.” He ran his hands across the stone, clearing the dust and cobwebs. It was an incredible piece that deserved to be in a museum. The sides were intricately carved with a repeating motif of ravens and shield knots above an enormous cauldron.

“I’m guessing this toucan looking thing is a bad sign.”

“The ravens?”

“They look like toucans.”

“It’s another death symbol.”

“Toucan of death.”

“You’re such a clotpole.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Yes it is.”

“What are the other symbols?”

“The shield knot is a ward against evil, probably.”

“Probably?”

Merlin pursed his lips. In the quiet, a dry rasp echoed down the corridor.

“The acoustics in this place are, uh, interesting,” Arthur said. Merlin watched him shift his weight back and forth between legs.

The rasp continued, gradually becoming more of a rustling sound. “Probably bats,” said Merlin.

Arthur made a face. “Shield knots and death birds over a, uh, water trough?”

“Cauldron.”

“More death?”

“Maybe. Or maybe actually resurrection. In which case, the ravens may be the spirits resurrected. It’s hard to say.” He met Arthur’s eyes. “Symbology is more interpretation than science.”

“So who’s buried here?” Arthur asked.

“Well, that’s a good question because look at the top.” The sarcophagus was carved with a massive cross pattée and, below that, a horse with two riders. “SIGILLUM MILITUM,” Merlin read.
“Templars.”

“1253,” Arthur said. “Kind of a grand burial for a murdered guest.”

“The body must have been brought here afterward, when Nodens claimed the dagger.” Merlin paused. “If it is the body.” He considered their next move, knowing what was coming but not pleased. “I hate this part,” he said.

“What?”

“We have to look.”

“In the sarcophagus?” The sss echoed, again, down the corridor, through the catacombs, and back.

“Yes.” Another echo. He watched Arthur process this.

“Okay.” Arthur squared his shoulders. “Let’s do it, then.” He move to one end of the sarcophagus. Merlin moved to the other. “Now what?”

“We slide it open.” The rustling was louder now. Bats, Merlin told himself. Nothing else made sense. He watched Arthur set his jaw and focus on the sarcophagus. They placed their hands on the ends of the stone lid, mirroring each other. Merlin nodded. They pushed. He felt sweat dot his brow as they heaved. A loud scrape echoed through the chamber and throughout the catacombs, bouncing off the ancient stone, through arched cloisters and vaults. It scraped and dragged, but it opened. They groaned as they let it slide down and rest against the floor. Merlin stepped back and looked. Inside, decayed robes once white and crimson, tattered but recognizable, shrouded the corpse. His arms had been at his chest, clasping the hilt of a magnificent sword, inexplicably shiny in the shadowed tomb. Merlin watched, transfixed, as Arthur reached out, seemingly entranced, and ran trembling fingers down the fuller, caressing the groove. “The Templar,” Merlin observed.

The rustling continued.

Arthur nodded and looked at Merlin. “Yes, I—” he stopped. His eyes seemed to focus, quizzical, behind Merlin. Then they widened. He went very still.

The rustling was louder. It was no longer, in fact, a rustle. It was a rattle and a clack and when Merlin turned, it was with a sickening sense of dread he hadn’t felt since, well, that time in Jakarta—and even then, the threat had been human.

As it happened, this threat was also human. Or rather had been, Merlin thought. The thought was quick, however, before becoming a clearly expressed curse. Emerging from the darkness of the catacomb beyond was a skeleton. It wore decayed armour and wielded a rusted sword, but it came, hollow eye sockets somehow seeing them or empty ears somehow hearing their quick scramble back.

Merlin was momentarily paralyzed by surprise at the skeleton. He took a gasping breath at the shock, but was then taken even more aback by the sight of Arthur Pendragon, son and heir of the Duke of Albion, lunging to grab the Templar’s sword, grasping it with steady hands, and charging the skeleton like an Olympic fencer… or, Merlin amended in shock, like a warrior knight.

Metal met metal with a crash and a clang as Arthur battled for their lives. Merlin stood, stunned into inaction, until his peripheral vision caught more movement. Another skeleton emerged from the darkness. He looked at Arthur, who spun around as he dodged the swinging blade, and then back. Yet another skeleton stepped out of the darkness.
Merlin pivoted, eyes searching the chamber. The second skeleton raised its sword and charged at Arthur.

“Oi!” Merlin shouted. Arthur leapt back. The Templar blade glistened as if it had been polished, and it reflected the torchlight as he lunged at the second bony corpse. Like lightning, quick and bright, it struck the creature’s arm, cleaving it from the rest of its mangled form.

The skeleton stumbled back, but only for a moment, during which the first fiend slashed at Arthur from the other side. His sleeve was sliced and immediately awash with red.

Merlin looked down at the droplets and found, with horror, the detached skeleton arm wriggling across the floor.

“We have to find what’s controlling them!” he shouted. He turned to find the third skeleton preparing to strike. He stepped back in panic and nearly fell backward into the sarcophagus. His arms slid over the edge and he paused, distracted, and glanced in at the Templar corpse; a small treasure accompanied the body. He looked back up. Bony arms raised a jagged blade above him, ready to fall.

In a flash, Merlin felt a hand grasp his arm and pull him to the side. The sword swung down and cracked with the impact upon the stone. The rusted blade snapped from the hilt.

Arthur’s hand slipped to Merlin’s forearm. “Come on!” He shouted, tugging. They fled into the catacomb.

The way was twisted but clear: the main path of the catacomb was wide, with low arches they ducked under at a run. To each side, narrow arches led off at various point to other chambers and tombs.

The catacombs were dark and musty, but Merlin lit each torch they passed with barely a thought. His adrenaline surged and his mind raced. Beside him, Arthur passed the sword between hands as he peeked back. The skeletons pursued them, much slower, but with deadly purpose.

“What’s that?” Arthur asked, flagging. He pointed to the left. They ducked into a small chamber. Three rustic sarcophagi leaned against the far wall, each one split open.

“We have to find what’s controlling them,” Merlin said, taking in the tomb. “There has to be some sort of totem.”

“Like what?”

“It can be anything.”

Arthur stopped. “Does the carving have anything to do with it?”

“What carving? On the Templar?”

Arthur grabbed the nearest torch and cast its light into each of the sarcophagi. At the back of each was an etching of a large chalice with a crane on its side. “Tell me that’s not like, the Holy Grail or something.” He let out a mirthless, panicked laugh. “We disturbed the Holy Grail and the remains of the Apostles are trying to kill us.”

Merlin thought for a moment. He groaned. He had seen the chalice. Typical, he thought. “No. Actually it isn’t unusual for chalices and other treasure to show up in burial sites.”
“So we have to find it?”

“Yeah.”

“And destroy it?”

“Yeah.”

“And you know where it is?”

Merlin bit his lip. “Yeah.”

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "Merlin?"

“Back with the Templar.”

“Oh for fuck’s… Okay.” Arthur squeezed the sword hilt. “Fine.” He swung the sword around as if loosening his wrists. “Let’s do this.”

“Do you even know how—”

“Shut up Merlin.”


As he charged toward the skeletons, Merlin felt inexplicably driven to give a battle cry. It was an entirely new urge, and he felt it must have something to do with Arthur and his ridiculous sword. Merlin resisted, feeling silly, but as they neared the creatures, they sped up and Arthur seemed to roar. Merlin let his own voice ring out in an incantation. “Forbærne! Ácwele!” He felt the energy of the torch fire, felt its mystical properties, how the atmosphere responded to it, and he let his spirit connect to that energy. He gripped it, coaxed it, and then let it fly.

The tattered garments of the skeletons singed and lit, but they did not stop. Each skeleton continued its march. Arthur struck. He swung the shining sword at the closest skull, slicing its top off with one quick slash. It stumbled back, but recovered, even as Arthur took a swing at the next one.

“Run!” He shouted to Merlin. “Destroy it!” He kicked at the last one’s chest and drove his blade into a mostly empty ribcage.

Merlin ducked between them and bolted. In seconds, he stood before the Templar. “Sorry,” he muttered, and drove his hands into the burial treasures. Once-bright coins, grimy with age, clattered against each other. Merlin ignored them. He had seen it, he knew, amidst the ancient relics. He shoved aside a scroll holder and grasped it: the chalice. It was bronze and heavily tarnished. The base was narrow, and the brim was wide. Merlin considered it as carefully as possible given the circumstances. The sound of Arthur’s battle continued: crashes, clanging metal, and noisy grunts and yells—eerily one-sided. There were few distinguishing marks on the chalice, but holding it to the light revealed a faintly etched Templar cross at the base and, just visible, three cranes carved in the bottom. It had to be destroyed.

“Ah!” He heard Arthur yell and a sharp intake of breath. More clanging and muffled strikes.

Merlin looked around the chamber. How do I destroy it? he asked himself. It was far too solid to be
crushed by his weight. Perhaps he could move the sarcophagus on it and smash it.

“Merlin!” Arthur’s voice echoed. “Got it?”

“Yes! I have to break it,” was his shouted reply. “I can’t, though,” he said. “How do I?” He sat it on the edge of the sarcophagus, frantically looking about the chamber. The skeleton’s broken blade sat at his feet. He picked it up, considering. It wouldn’t work.

“Move!” Arthur shouted, sprinting into the room. He drew back his sword, almost like a tennis racquet, and released a mighty swing. He struck the top of the chalice.

The noise was horrific, but brief. The cup split, top to bottom, with a terrible crack. The skeletons, all three, fell into a smouldering pile of bones and ash.

Merlin shuddered.

“What took you so long?” Arthur asked. His voice was still loud—too loud in the now-quiet tomb.

“I was going as fast as I could!” Merlin insisted, irritated again, beyond imagining.

Arthur made a face, which Merlin cheerfully returned. “Couldn’t you just, I don’t know, *magic* it apart?”

“No! It doesn’t work that way.”

“Doesn’t work much at all, apparently.”

“I shot fireballs at them!”

“Which didn’t stop them!”

“Well I am sorry that my *actual fireballs* didn’t match the *flamethrower* you envisioned, my Lord. I’ll try to keep that in mind next time we’re ambushed by undead malevolent creatures!”

“Good!” Arthur’s face was pale and his breathing was laboured.

“Arthur, your side!” Merlin gasped. Arthur’s arm had been slashed earlier, but his blood-soaked side was now Merlin’s urgent concern.

Arthur looked down at himself, seemed to grow even paler, and slumped to the floor.

Merlin dropped beside him. “Damn it you… fool. I wanted you to shut up but this isn’t what I had in mind.”

Arthur chuckled, but the sound was unnervingly soft.

“What?”

“It’s a good thing I brought Gaius.”

Merlin shook his head. “He’s not doing us any good trapped in here.”

Arthur met Merlin’s eyes. “Then get us out,” he said. His voice was a command.

Chills ran down Merlin’s back. He stood. “Yes,” he said. “I will.” Arthur’s smile was satisfied.

So Merlin got to work.
I am currently supposed to be working on a qualifying exam ("comps"). Instead, you got skeletons, swords, and a hearty helping of banter.

Now it's back to research methodology! Hopefully I'm not too delayed with chapter ten because of the exam paper, but that's my excuse. I'm also considering a quick one-shot to participate in one of the Tumblr prompt things, which I've never done before. I'm just not confident I can do quick one-shots. But, you know, I could TRY to write something short and sexy. I'll probably need a break from academia at some point this week.

Oh, and... I wonder what happened in Jakarta? I feel like that's a story that Gwaine knows.

Anyway, I'm hoping that when I post this I *may* cross over to 100 kudos(!!!), which isn't a big deal for some people but for me, it's MASSIVE, so THANK YOU to everyone reading, kudoing, and commenting--you've made my year. Maybe I'll do that one-shot as a thank you?
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Behold! A scroll and a sword. How exciting!

Chapter Notes

I'm falling asleep as I type and post this, so please forgive any typos. I'll fix them as I catch them later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It seems to me,” Merlin said, “that this direction leads to the sea. And if I were building a seaside fortress--”

“You’d make sure all the possible means of ingress were secure?”

“I was going to say I’d want an escape tunnel, in case of siege, thank you”

“Mmm.” Arthur winced.

“When was your last tetanus jab, anyway?” Merlin asked. His voice echoed eerily through the catacomb to where Arthur sat.

“Last fall, before a business trip.” Arthur’s eyelids were heavy and his head kept drifting forward so that his chin rested on his chest or his clavicles.

“Stay awake, Arthur.”

“Gaius said to sleep.”

“What was that?” Merlin’s head poked back into the chamber.

“Gaius said rest.” Arthur struggled to raise his voice.

“You’re not concussed.” Merlin vanished back into the gloom. “Maybe dig through that sarcophagus. See what else is there.”

Arthur struggled to his feet, dizzy and shaking. “Don’t think I should move,” he mumbled. Merlin had stabilized the bleeding with some of his magic words, but it fell short of healing the gashes. “Gonna scar,” he said. He leaned over the Templar and finally let himself look at the corpse.

Grotesque, he thought, but surprisingly mundane, compared to the nightmare he’d just witnessed.

God. He’d just fought actual reanimated skeletons. In real life. Pendragons had always been surrounded by magic and mystery, but this was certainly a new level of crazy. His prior experience had mostly been grimoires and a few enchanted items at the family home, outside of the library, of
course. It had been mostly a scholarly pursuit, not dangerous in the least. Even the ravings he overheard from his father’s office had been abstract conceptions of power and influence, more likely to result in a trade deal or elected official than injury or death. His mother had told him stories of magical creatures, but they, too, were abstract and faraway. All told, the Five Families and their various… adherents? Benefactors? They were more akin to political parties than say, Voldemort and the Death Eaters. As teenagers, he and Morgana had joked about the Illuminati until his father had firmly told them to cut it out. Yet now there was clearly evidence of something sinister. The Hospitaller symbol and the Templar tomb was strangely out of place in this ruin, which itself was a strange mishmash of history. And, Arthur thought, it was named for Nodens, a pagan god. Castle Nuada. Romans. Crusading knights. Druids.

“Why bury him here, like this?” Arthur wondered again, aloud. He reached out and touched the ancient shroud. It was better preserved than he thought an 800-year old corpse would be.

Around the body was a menagerie of medieval treasure. He grouped together the coins. Arthur had never been much interested in treasure. His study of history had focused far more on cultural traditions than economies, and even that knowledge was limited regarding the Crusades. Arthur knew basic aspects of the Knights Templar: they were powerful in Jerusalem and, eventually, throughout Europe. He’d read something about a system of financial exchange, but he was uncertain of the details—just that it involved a process for traveling without transporting physical wealth to the Holy Land. The Templars, supposedly, had massive wealth. Legendary treasure. They died out centuries ago, but conspiracy theories lived on.

Arthur wondered sometimes if the conspiracy theorists knew about the Five. Perhaps their ravings had led them to powerful groups that held closed-door meetings in discretely opulent estates. They simply called it by the wrong name, and they thought the Windsors or Rothschilds were involved, when that was far from the truth. The Windsors and Rothschilds were friends, sure, but he’d never seen Charles at his father’s annual holiday party. Cosimo Mercia, all of the Angevin-Plantagenet clan, Ada Gordon, and the others were always present, generally in a jovial mood. Arthur thought of Cenred and his cousin, Lot. Cenred was always present, too; as a teenager he’d always tried to convince Arthur to try whatever pills he’d brought—usually E or something. Lot had skulked around, an angry-looking, antisocial presence, almost frightening amidst the holly and ivy. Arthur had always rather enjoyed how the study would be set up with a board table for the Five Families to meet afterward because it looked like the set from a Bond film.

Now he was older, he realize it rather looked like the meetup of the baddies. Politics, Arthur thought, was villainous, even if they were just keeping each other in check. They may not be the Illuminati, but his father never was surprised by who moved into Downing Street.

The coins were accompanied by a ruby-encrusted pendant that immediately caught Arthur’s eye. The engraving did not look Celtic, but Arthur did not recognize it as representing any other culture, either. Several folded bolts of fabric accompanied the metal. He pulled aside finely-woven (and also remarkably preserved) silk, wool, and linen. Beneath them was a golden cylinder with elaborately carved ends. Arthur lifted it. The thing was large and heavy, and he laid it carefully on the edge of the sarcophagus.

“All right,” Merlin grumbled, padding back into the chamber. “Can’t find a damn—oh, that’s… hm.” He stepped over to Arthur, gingerly avoiding the pressure plate trap on the floor.

“We’re trapped down here?” Arthur asked. His body hurt, but he tried to keep his face neutral.

Merlin bit his lip. “For now. Maybe some of this will have a suggestion.” He slid his fingers along the cylinder and Arthur heard a tiny click. Merlin smiled. “Lovely,” he said. He pulled at a piece that
had sprung out from the cylinder’s side and a ridge emerged, which he brushed his fingers across. More emerged and it came free.

As Arthur watched, awestruck, Merlin unfurled a scroll. Arthur felt him shiver at his side. “This never gets old,” Merlin whispered. His voice was low and raspy in the quiet, and Arthur felt the hairs on his arms stand to attention. He turned to take Merlin in: alabaster skin and sapphire eyes, cheeks pink with excitement.

The scroll was a creamy shade of light brown, clearly ancient, but well-preserved. “Here,” Arthur said. He grasped one end as Merlin unrolled the length. They stared. Arthur saw that the pattern was beautiful, but he was off put. “This looks like random lines, like someone scribbling”

Merlin’s eyes were still wide. “Oh no,” he breathed, “they are anything but random.”

“What is it?”

Merlin ran a finger along one line and nodded, moving his lips as if counting to himself. He nodded. “Ley lines,” he said. Then he set his mouth into an unhappy line. “This isn’t ideal, actually.”

“You mean like energy lines? Why not ideal?”

“Yes. Because there are ley lines criss-crossing Britain, so this clue leads us… all over.” He let the scroll slide back into the holder, sighing heavily.

“And we’re trapped.” Arthur caught himself making a slight groan as he lowered his arms. He felt faint. The chamber was dark.

“Arthur?” Merlin’s voice was very far away. How had he gotten so far away?

“You leaving me?” Arthur murmured. His vision seemed different than normal. Narrower, perhaps. “Cause the dark.”

“Arthur?” Concern, now.

“Fine, fine. Just sleeping.” His head felt better if he closed his eyes, Arthur realized. He should always have his eyes closed. And letting his body sway, also, felt lovely. “Dancing,” he whispered.

Two hands clasped his shoulders, and Arthur heard the clank of the scroll being dropped into the sarcophagus. He tried to frown, then discovered he already had. He felt his weight supported by wiry arms. “Strong,” he mumbled. The support gave a bit as Merlin took a step to reposition, then returned, firmer. And an enormous racket sounded out.

Gears ground, metal shrieked, and stone shook. “Damn it!” Merlin yelled. His voice was louder in Arthur’s ear. “Fuckin’ hell!”

“Wha-?”

“Pressure plate!” Merlin pulled him down beside the sarcophagus and Arthur opened his eyes to see Merlin half-crouched above him, arms outstretched, shielding him with his body. He was poised like a coiled spring, ready to strike at anything that threatened. Arthur breathed, trying to muster strength to grip the sword he now saw as his.

And they waited.

The only thing that changed was a cool breeze and fresh scent of ocean. Arthur couldn’t help it. He
began to laugh. It hurt, an unbelievable amount, but he couldn’t stop. He gasped in between guffaws, in tears.

Merlin stood up straight and stepped back over the plate. He peered up the corridor, and then back at Arthur. He glared. “This is not funny,” he said. “At all. It’s ridiculous.” His mouth twitched. “We could’ve died in here. You nearly did!”

Arthur’s body hurt so bad as he shook with laughter.

“You may still!” Merlin fumed. And then he burst into laughter himself, doubling over with it. He gathered the scroll and sword and took Arthur’s arm. “All right, let’s have you.” He hauled Arthur up.

Arthur had quietened. Each step was a tremendous effort, but he walked with Merlin back up the stone steps and into the castle ruin. Merlin sealed the tomb behind them.

They were quiet as they returned to the manor.

* * * * *

Merlin ran up Creaghall’s steps and shouted for the night clerk. “Fetch Gaius from his rooms, immediately. And help me!” They half-carried Arthur into the same parlor Merlin had been treated in that morning.

Gaius met them in a flannel robe over pyjamas. “My Lord!” he gasped.

“Don’t… call me that,” Arthur grunted, gritting his teeth.

Gaius shook his head and unclasped his bag. “Stabbed? And after I told you to be careful last night,” he huffed. He rummaged for a moment and pulled out a pair of vials. One held a green-brown powder and the other a clear liquid. “Fetch me that glass,” he said. Merlin handed him a piece of the crystal beside a whisky decanter. Gaius poured both vials into the glass and sloshed it back and forth. Merlin frowned, watching. He started to ask what was happening when Gaius’ eyes turned bright gold. His mouth moved as he murmured the invocation, and the mixture bubbled and fizzed, bright green. Merlin turned to see Arthur’s reaction to the spell work, but the man had closed his eyes, barely conscious.

“Drink this, Arthur,” said Gaius, holding the glass to his lips. Arthur did, letting a tiny rivulet escape from the corner of his mouth. “Now, recline the chair, Merlin, so I can see.”

Arthur’s breathing relaxed as they leaned him back.

Gaius frowned, even more than before, and pulled a pair of scissors from his bag. “Remove the shirt,” he said, handing them to Merlin.

“But…”

Gaius lifted an eyebrow in challenge, so Merlin took the scissors and turned to Arthur. He began at the bottom.

The shirt was filthy with dirt, sweat, and clotted blood, as was the skin beneath it. With each snip,
Merlin revealed more of Arthur’s golden skin. He was solid, Merlin thought, fingers grazing skin as he pulled back each half.

“Sleeves too,” Gaius said, rummaging through the bag.

Merlin exhaled and reached down to clip the fabric tightly bunched around Arthur’s forearms. What was it about rolled-up shirtsleeves that so changed the look of a shirt? Nothing was tantalizing about forearms. And yet. Merlin allowed his fingers to trail across Arthur’s wrist and up to the hem.

Arthur’s eyes flitted open and fixed on Merlin’s. They did not smile. The sound of shears on fabric was almost loud in the stillness of the night. Merlin blinked.

“Now.” Gaius’ voice was jarring. Merlin quickly cleared away the rest of the sleeve. “Let’s see what we have.” Gaius cleaned each wound with surgical spirits. “You did this?” he asked Merlin.

“Magic,” said Arthur, voice heavy with exhaustion.

“Just a quick, stop-the-bleed.”

“It’s well done. Already healing. I’d say more than a stop to the bleeding. I wish it had been cleaned first, of course.” He gave Merlin a pointed look. “But given the circumstances, I would say you did right.”

Merlin felt an absurd little surge of pride that this man he didn’t really know approved of his healing spell. He felt like he was back at uni, meeting with his tutor.

“Well, Gaius, am I off to A&E or not?”

“No, I think you’ll find you’re much better than you think. You’ve lost quite a bit of blood, and you need to drink a lot of water and get a lot of rest. Which,” he asked, “you were supposed to do today for this one’s head.” He cast a disapproving glance at Merlin, who shrank a bit. “Tomorrow I mean it. No strenuous activity. Especially, uhh, sword fighting.” He cast a wary look at the sword and shook his head. “I preferred it when you were working in an office and merely at risk of carpal tunnel, Arthur. Keep on like this and you’ll be like the rest of your family.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. I mean it though. Rest.”

“Tomorrow I must attend the Beltane festival.” Merlin watched carefully to see how Gaius reacted to his words. No surprise; no confusion.

“Not until evening,” he said.


Gaius dropped his equipment back into his bag and closed it with a snap. “Goodnight, Lord Pendragon.” He nodded at Arthur. “Mr. Hunithson.” He exited, just as Andrew came in another door.

“Another attack? Good heavens!” he exclaimed. “I’m so sorry to hear your trip has been so… uncharacteristically violent. Especially for this time of year.”

“It’s more violent at other times?” asked Arthur.

Andrew stammered as he answered. “Er—that is—sometimes in autumn there have been activities by
local… youths.”

Merlin sighed. Samhain, probably. “We’re fine,” he assured the estate manager.

Andrew stood in silence for a moment, wringing his hands. Merlin and Arthur looked at each other. “Truly, we’re all fine,” Arthur said.

“Oh, yes,” Andrew said. “It’s just that the rooms. That is…”

“Yes?” Arthur’s voice had risen in elocution, Merlin noticed, so that it was nearly regal. He is annoyed, Merlin thought.

“Your doctor, My Lord, took one room, and then the pilot, Mr…”

“Tyr?”

“Yes, My Lord. I tried to phone, but I don’t have your mobile and so I spoke to your sister. She said she would phone.”

Arthur pulled out his mobile. “Dead,” he observed.

Merlin rummaged in his own pocket and brought out his phone. He dialed the voicemail. A woman had left a message, which he played on speaker:

“Mr. Hunithson, this is Lady Pendragon’s assistant, Morgause.” Arthur rolled his eyes. “I’ve attempted to reach you and Lord Pendragon several times this afternoon, as has Lady Pendragon.”

Arthur snorted. “Because Arthur has decided to invite additional guests on your business trip, Creaghall Manor is out of rooms.” Morgause paused, as if to provide time for Merlin to feel guilty. “Because there are four men in three rooms, two of you must double up. Lady Pendragon determined it should be you, lest your unfortunate lack of foresight cast Camelot or the Pendragon family in a poor light. Please tell Arthur to answer his mobile. Goodbye.”

“We just have so many bookings this time of year for the May Day celebrations,” Andrew babbled. “I’m so sorry; if I’d known, I would have canceled another guest or made arrangements, rather, at the neighbor’s.”

Arthur held up a hand and Andrew was quiet. “We’re sharing a room?” his eyes barely flitted to Merlin and back to Andrew.

“Your things have already been moved,” he affirmed.

Arthur looked at Merlin then. “Is your room a double?” he asked.

“No,” Andrew answered for him.

Merlin stood, blinking and quiet. Arthur Pendragon was going to share his room. Arthur, billionaire, tabloid fodder… warrior… was going to share his bed.

Merlin remembered to breathe.

He heard Arthur let out a long exhale. The parlor chandelier light glimmered on his bare chest as if mocking Merlin. He felt his pulse in his ears. The cuts were half-healed from his magic or Gaius’.

Arthur rose to his feet. “Off to bed, then,” he said. Every syllable sent a new shiver down Merlin’s spine. He closed his eyes to recall the Sun headlines, the party boy persona he’d known and expected. He could only see the determined gleam of Arthur in battle, sword thrusting… He opened
his eyes.

“Send up food, Mr. Paterson. Chicken.” Arthur looked at total ease. Completely unaffected. Of course, you daft… fool, Merlin thought. What did you expect?

And yet, there had been a few moments, earlier, hadn’t there been?

Merlin shook his head to clear his thoughts. It was madness. And the man had nearly died. It’s this concussion, Merlin decided. It’s making me absolutely mental.

I don’t even like Arthur.

He picked up the scroll. “To bed.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for so much support! I survived comps and I'll find out how I did sometime next month.

FYI, I'll be posting a one shot tomorrow or the next day for the Merthur 10 Year prompt from Tumblr. It will have sex in it, so if this slow burn is frustrating you, there's a bit of action to get you through a cold winter night. ;-) The one shot is not in this series, but it does feature coffee drinking as foreplay, and I feel like that's a win.

In the meantime, it's the holidays. I hope yours are joyful, peaceful, and full of love.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which the pining is turned up to eleven.

The last few chapters have been very plot-heavy, and I hope this balances that out a little bit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Birds were singing awake the day, but the bed was a fortress of peace and comfort. Merlin kept his eyes closed and pressed back into the pillows. He flexed his feet to wake his legs and he stretched his fingers. His left hand brushed against warm skin. He chased the sensation, letting his hand roam: knuckles, fingers, smooth skin. A steady breath, almost a soft snore, came from beside him. Arthur. Merlin awoke. His heart pounded as he drew his hand back. Arthur was lying beside him. Merlin felt the warmth radiating from his body, which weighed down the mattress enough that Merlin had moved, through the night, to a point in the bed at which they almost touched.

Arthur sighed in his sleep and shifted. Merlin could feel the hair from Arthur’s arm against his own—more a suggestion than a touch.

Birds sang outside the window, muted ambient light filled the room, and all the hair on Merlin’s body seemed to stand on end.

Merlin looked down. Fortunately, his morning erection was not visible through the heavy duvet. He had changed into a pair of loose trousers for sleep, and they did little to restrict the rise of his body. Almost as if it knew he was giving it attention, his arousal twitched.

Deep breaths, Merlin thought. He opened his mouth to quiet his own breathing, which seemed unnaturally loud in the late morning stillness. A clock hung on the wall across from him, but he would need to roll toward Arthur to view it.

They were so close. His body twitched again. If he rolled toward Arthur, it would press against Arthur’s hip.

Deep breaths.

If Arthur were to roll over, away from him, Merlin could do the same and see the clock.

If Arthur were to roll over, away from Merlin, he could press his body against him, grip his flesh, and push his cock against Arthur’s arse, maybe find a perfect place there to slide his body against.

Now the duvet was undoubtedly tented; Merlin was afraid to look. He let out a slow breath and tried to think of anything else. Like the fact that they had been attacked by skeletons the day before. Skeletons Arthur had fought off, rather heroically, with a sword. His second sword in as many days. Merlin wondered if the first attacker had been alerted by the Druids—maybe a rival grove? It made little sense; Druids were inherently peaceful. Even blood sacrifices were voluntary, and usually replaced by fertility ceremonies anymore.
Merlin thought of the May Queen and the Green Man. He wasn’t certain what the Beltane night would bring, but it might be... He pictured Arthur, bare chested and smeared with green, eyes wild like they had been in battle. He couldn’t stop the way his body writhed in response to the image.

The fires would be lit. There was a chance they would ask Merlin to take part. He might light the fires. He closed his eyes and pictured the scene: white robes, drums beating, and he would call fire from the sky. Arthur would watch him. "That’s really beautiful," Arthur had said. Merlin licked his lips and imagined how Arthur would watch him, how this powerful man would feel the heat of it on his skin and in his gut.

Merlin realized he had gasped a breath. He forced himself to still. Had Arthur’s breathing changed?

Surely not. He was still asleep. The healing spell and Gaius’ potion would fatigue him.

Arthur had watched him cast that spell through narrow slits of eyes, barely conscious. Tonight, he would see. He would look at him as he had just before the swordsman attacked two nights ago, but instead of fog and lamplight, stars and fire would cast them both in a red glow and Merlin, maybe, would reach out... He shifted his hips and the fabric drug across the tip of his arousal. Could he reach out? What would Arthur do? Vivian. Sophia. Just debutantes; never a man. What would Arthur do if he reached out? He remembered his eyes in the corridor at Camelot. “You’ll invite me in,” he’d said. Oh, what wicked suggestion. Merlin’s body nearly convulsed. His arm pressed against Arthur’s. The backs of their hands rested against each other.

Deep breaths.

Merlin turned his head. He opened his eyes. They were met by a clear, crystalline blue, hooded from sleep and thought. Merlin forced himself to be perfectly still.

Arthur’s eyes seemed to move back and forth between Merlin’s. They settled on his lips.

He keeps doing that, Merlin thought. Why does he keep doing that?

Sweat broke on Merlin’s chest. He felt warm everywhere. His skin prickled.

Their eyes met again.

His heartbeat must have been visible in his chest and his throat.

Arthur closed his eyes.

This is Arthur Pendragon, Merlin thought.

Arthur’s hand shifted; his fingers spread against Merlin’s.

Merlin pushed himself backward out of bed and bolted to the bathroom. He latched the door and leaned against the sink, breath heaving. He looked at himself in the mirror. Arthur Pendragon, he thought, even if he isn’t straight, is not the kind of man I want. His reflection revealed flushed cheeks and tousled hair. He was sweating.

He probably doesn’t even realize he’s doing it, Merlin thought. He tried to think of other reasons Arthur would stare at him. Maybe Arthur was delirious from the injury and recovery. More likely, he was trying to figure out why he woke next to a sweaty, panting man. That was probably a first. And oh, gods, what if he noticed the erection? Merlin would never be able to look him in the face again. Arthur was probably already packing, ready to flee this... libidinous hot mess of a librarian.
At least that would rid Merlin of the problem.

He turned on a cold shower and mentally recited all of Ranganathan’s colon classification classes. It helped. Some.

* * * * *

Arthur felt bloody fantastic. He didn’t know exactly what Gaius had given him, but it definitely hadn’t been paracetamol. Or maybe Merlin’s spell had been more powerful than he thought. Regardless, Arthur awakened in such a relaxed state, he felt like liquid. He was pleasantly warm. Merlin felt quite close, and Arthur opened his eyes to peer over at him.

At first, Arthur thought Merlin must be dreaming. He was flushed and a little sweaty. Hopefully not feverish. And then Arthur heard his laboured breathing. Definitely a dream. Perhaps a nightmare about those skeletons. Merlin shuddered beside him. He pressed his arm against Arthur’s, then, and opened his eyes.

No, Arthur thought, he doesn’t look scared. He looked positively lascivious. The thought sent a hot bolt of lust straight to Arthur’s groin. Merlin had been having a sex dream, that’s why he was out of breath, breathing out of his mouth. Arthur looked at his mouth. It was a mistake. Those lips were just sinful. He looked back up at Merlin’s eyes and found them staring at him. Daring him.

I wonder, Arthur thought. I wonder. He closed his eyes. Maybe I don’t have to… Maybe he will… Take my hand…

Merlin was out of bed and to the bathroom in a flash. Arthur sat up.

Oh god. He’d misread it. Arthur carefully considered what just happened. Merlin had a naughty dream, woke, gradually realized he was looking at Arthur and not… Tom Hardy or whoever he lusted after… and then ran away.

Had Arthur done anything to be embarrassed by? He had made some moon eyes at the man, but that could be logically blamed on sleep, too.

He would emphatically pretend nothing had happened. Nothing had happened.

Clearly, Merlin was repulsed by the mere idea of something happening. The shower turned on. Arthur looked down at his body. He was bandaged; of course Merlin would be put off by an invalid. He probably liked men who were lithe or coarse. Arthur was neither.

It didn’t matter. If nothing else, Merlin was a professional. He wouldn’t be interested in dating his boss’ brother.

Whoa. Dating? Arthur mentally took a step back. One did not go from considering an actor attractive (Ben Whishaw was objectively good looking, so it meant basically nothing. As was Henry Cavill. Same rule applied. And Armie Hammer, if pressed. And Richard Madden. And okay, maybe there were a few. Oh! Matthew Goode, and…), one did not go from considering a few actors attractive to fancying a coworker and being gay. Bisexual, rather. Because Gal Gadot also existed, and really?

“I’m having a mental breakdown,” Arthur said aloud. He scrubbed his hands over his face. “I’m too old for this.” And really, weren’t you supposed to figure this out during puberty? “Nothing happened,” he whispered. “You’re fine.” He kicked his feet out a bit violently and stood up. He stretched. The shower ran for a long time.
The ensuite door opened a crack and Arthur turned at the sound.

“I, um,” Merlin’s voice was quiet. His face appeared in the crack, hair wet. “I just…” He was pink and wouldn’t meet Arthur’s eyes.

“What?”

The door opened and Merlin stepped out into the room. Water droplets clung to his bare chest. A towel was draped around his narrow hips. His chest was just shadowed with hair, and the sight surprised Arthur and made him feel as if something was pinched in his own chest. His mouth went dry. He made a sound in his throat that could not quite be described as a grunt or a cough.

Merlin paused somewhat awkwardly, and then he rushed over, grabbed his bag, and rushed back into the bathroom. Arthur let out a long breath.

When Merlin emerged again, he was dressed in snug-fitting trousers and a blue shirt. It was loose, merely suggesting the form beneath, which was now seared in Arthur’s memory. And the colour. Merlin finally looked up and met Arthur’s eye. If Arthur thought those eyes were blue before, it was nothing to the hue brought out by the rich navy of the shirt. Arthur took a deep breath. Without a word, he stepped around Merlin and closed the bathroom door for his own toilet. He leaned against it.

In the shower, Arthur considered the fact that moments ago, Merlin had stood in the same place, mere minutes after a dream that had left him quivering with lust. Arthur closed his eyes under the hot spray. He was most definitely going to ignore everything that had happened in the bed, but damn. Resistance was completely futile: his cock was hard as an iron bar. “Traitor,” he whispered at it. Had Merlin stood here, moments ago, and pleasured himself the way he had the other morning? The sounds he had made then were wicked and eager. Arthur rubbed soap into his chest, over his arms, and then, at last, around his throbbing erection. “Not a kid,” he moaned. “Shouldn’t be wanking every morning.” He turned the water to an ice cold spray and let it take the edge off. He scrubbed furiously. I just really need to get laid, he thought. He shut off the water.

Birds were singing outside.

The food at Creaghall was hearty and savory, but Arthur and Merlin sat across from each other in the dining room, neither looking too pleased, and ate in silence.

By the time the pudding arrived, Arthur couldn’t take the tension. He set his fork down and looked at Merlin. “So,” he said. His voice was startlingly loud. “So,” he began again, quieter. “Tell me how you became a librarian.”

Merlin looked suspicious. “Is this some sort of interview?”

“What do you mean?”

“Making cuts to staffing or something?”

“Why would you think that?”

“The library tour.”

“Why won’t you just answer the question, Merlin?”
Merlin glared at him. Arthur felt extraordinarily pleased with himself. “Well, Lord Pendragon,” he said. Arthur winced and it made Merlin smile. “I’ve known since I was little that I needed to know as much as possible about magic, and Camelot seemed a natural choice.”

Arthur leaned forward. “Why since childhood?”

Merlin bit his lip, which Arthur pointedly did not look at. “There’s a, uh, prophecy. That may be about me.”

“What does it say? You’re going to kill Voldemort?”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “Not that.”

“So what, then?”

“Oh, well, you know…”

“No, that’s the point. I don’t.”

“Just that, I’m—well, actually they don’t know it’s me. There’s supposed to be a powerful sorcerer born at that time. It’s uh, astrological and astronomical alignments. And I can, well… do things…”

“Just power, then, no Voldemort?”

Merlin was visibly uncomfortable. “There was something mentioned about a threat to mankind and the power to prevent a great loss, but it’s a bit… ambiguous.”

“Loss?”

“Yeah, something about a once and future king leading mankind into a golden age. I’m supposed to be the great protector. But it doesn’t make much sense, considering the lack of real kingdoms around.”

Arthur smiled, then frowned. There were the Five. His mother had always called them the Five Kingdoms. Who would the kings be? He wondered. His father? Lot? Cosimo? They wished. They probably had more political power than the actual queen, though, that was true.

“Anyway,” Merlin continued. “I’ve always loved libraries. My mother worked all the time and my father wasn’t around much, so I basically lived at the library when I was a kid.”

“At Camelot?”

“No, my local. I read every children’s book they had, and half the rest of the collection.”

“What was your favorite?”

“At what age? I was mad about Harry Potter, of course, when I was older.”

“That magic is so different from yours.”

“Wizardry and sorcery are different. People who don’t have magic are so creative when they think of how it might work. But you can learn some tricks like that, to a certain extent. Hogwarts has a divination class.”

“But there aren’t schools like Hogwarts.”
“The Camelot Library is the closest thing.” They smiled at each other.

“Your eyes look very blue today,” Arthur said. And then he internally cringed. He hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

Merlin stared at his place setting and then back up at Arthur. “So do yours,” he answered. They both took a drink at the same time, silent, looking away.

Inside Arthur was on fire.

Merlin looked at his watch. “Time to go,” he said.

Beltane night had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

I know it’s a bit shorter than the last couple of chapters, but the ritual and party needs to be on its own.
Also, I am sorry not a lot happens here other than, you know, lust.

Actually I’m not really sorry. XD

Again, thanks for reading (and I’d love to hear from you here or Tumblr if you’d like to say hello!). I know I have trouble keeping up with all the content out there, so I really appreciate you taking your time to read this story. And happy holiday season.

I am thinking of writing a little story about Gwen/Lancelot about last year's Camelot Yule & New Year's Eve Party. Probably just a one shot. I've also thought about writing something similar in the Venetian setting my last one shot is in. But that would take me away from working on this, at least for the time it took to write it. Thoughts? (Dial 1 for Gwen, etc.)
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Beltane!

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a Beltane ritual that is a composite of different traditions, including the Fire Festival in Edinburgh. I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The nature spirits were singing. To most people, only the hum would be audible in the spring breeze, but Merlin heard their soft, hopeful harmonies in his skin and his bones. The woods were thick, and he led Arthur along by following the spirits more than the lights.


Merlin looked at him. “Yes?”

Arthur stepped over a fallen log and waited for Merlin to do the same. “Explain it to me.”

“Oh. Well, it’s the wheel of the year. This is the return of spring. The reemergence of green and life and new beginnings.”

“So what should I, uh, expect here?”

“The death of the Holly Lord and the emergence of the Green Man.”

“Wait. I thought they no longer did the human sacrifices.”

“They don’t. Usually. This is a ritual, or a ceremony that represents that and then the, um, union between the Green Man and the May Queen. The goddess.”

Arthur went still beside him. “Oh,” he said, blinking. He opened his mouth a few times. “So…”

“Probably. Yes.”

“You aren’t sure?”

“Every grove is different, and every Beltane is different. But fertility is emphasized.” The night was cool, and gooseflesh rose on Merlin’s arms. “Come on,” he said, urging Arthur forward.

They walked more slowly now. “Will I be expected to…”

“No one is ever forced to do anything” Merlin assured him. Arthur released a small sigh of relief. “But…” Merlin thought he should say something to prepare the man, lest he be taken unawares by
the energy of what the night held. “You should know the spirits will encourage you to… partake.”

“Encourage me?”

“It will be in the air, the dew, everything. Especially the dew.”

“Encouragement.” Arthur stopped again.

“We don’t have to go.”

“No, I want to, I just…” he shrugged.

“It won’t—the spirits won’t make you want to do anything that you don’t already… want.” Merlin felt the spirits around him coaxing them forward, almost pushing them together. Arthur took a step toward him. He looked confused and flustered. “Your… urges,” Merlin said, “will be intensified.”

“But they can’t force me to do anything? I won’t lose control?”

“No. But,” Merlin took a step toward Arthur, “they are very persuasive.”

“The old gods?”

Merlin heard giggling in the wind. “They like that title, yes.” They began walking, again, through the wood. Torches gradually became more visible as the trees thinned. The earth rose into a hill, a mound, before them. Around it, robed figures held torches, lit with low blue-white flames. Behind them, countless others stood in the dark, huddled together and waiting. Drums beat. Atop the mound, a woman stood in sheer white robes. Her naked form was visible in the blue light, as it filtered through the billowing mantle. Her face was painted white, with intricate patterns and symbols across her cheeks and down her arms.

The drums beat a hot, primal rhythm. The spirits sang louder. Merlin felt the melody in his gut and his groin. He shivered with it. Beside him, Arthur stilled. His face was wary. “Don’t be nervous,” said Merlin. Even to himself, his voice sounded husky and rough.

Around the hill, the worshippers and revelers stood in silence, watching and waiting. Merlin stepped forward. The horned god of winter, the Holly Lord, came to meet them. He was shorter than Merlin, but his towering antler crown made him an imposing figure in the night. His painted face disguised him at first, but the gleam in his eye sparked recognition in Merlin: it was Mordred representing the winter god. He nodded at them and they were flanked by painted, shadowed figures in a few quick movements. Two of the courtiers clasped his arms, pawing at his body. Beside him, two more courtiers held Arthur. The drumbeats grew louder as they were pulled toward the mound.

The torches brightened and the courtiers were revealed by the light. Each of them was naked and covered in red paint so dark it was nearly black. The smoke surrounded them, fragrant and dense, and Merlin felt it embrace him.

“Ic eom,” Merlin said. “Ic isweotolae.” The torches flickered off and on, and then sparked as the flames grew bright and hot. The courtiers writhed and rocked with the drumbeats. One reached out and undid the top button of his shirt. He looked over. Another had done the same to Arthur. The drumbeats nearly overwhelmed. The courtiers pulled his arms out and undid his cuffs. At his side, the courtiers holding Arthur did the same. Arthur’s face was red in the torchlight. More drums beat. The spirits were singing; could anyone else hear them? Merlin’s eyes tracked across the crowd and revelers. They all gazed up at the May Queen; she was stoic in the darkness at the top of the mound. Her handmaidens held aloft branches of hawthorn. They, too, were fixed upon the Holly Lord, but Mordred’s eyes were on Merlin. It felt like dozens of hands pulling at him. His buttons were undone,
his shirt was pulled free. The warmth of the torchlight buffeted his bare chest. Beside him, Arthur was also exposed, pink lines showing where the wounds were, mere hours ago. Merlin felt the sprits caress him. He wondered how it felt to Arthur. The expression on his face suggested it was intoxicating: Arthur’s eyes were closed but his mouth was open and his chest heaved, golden and slicked with a hint of sweat.

Merlin felt hands at his hips. Deft fingers undid his trousers. Drums beat, insistent. Mordred watched them, eyes hungry. The May Queen’s handmaidens waved their hawthorn boughs to each of the cardinal directions. The torches flickered. The spirits laughed. Merlin could see them dance in his peripheral vision, singing along with the drums. The boots and socks were pulled from his legs, and his trousers and pants taken as well. He stood, nude, in the firelight. The spirits giggled and he was compelled forward. Beside him, Arthur mirrored his movements. Merlin did not look. Torches filled his vision, just torches. The fires of winter. “Yes…” the spirits whispered. “Yes.” Hands pressed against his skin, rubbing his body.

The drumbeats slowed. “Yes,” the spirits whispered. “Emrys…” He felt them smile. His skin felt aflame and within him he felt the humming of the most ancient magic, the earth magic, coaxing him onward.

As if they recognized the spirit presence, the courtiers stepped back. Merlin closed his fists. The torches went out.

The moon and stars were bright, and Merlin stepped forward and ushered the Holly Lord to the handmaidens. They gripped him. The Queen stepped forward. Arthur, too, approached. As if entranced, Arthur reached forward and pulled the horns from Mordred’s head. The handmaidens leapt on the Holly Lord in a flurry.

The drums began anew, in a furious tempo. The time had come.

Merlin gasped as pure magic and vitality filled him. The spirits’ voices were higher and higher as they chanted and sang in a crescendo.

Merlin lifted his arms and opened his hands. The bonfires burst into twin, raging conflagrations. The May Queen stood between them. A figure was pushed toward her: the Green Man, the Oak King. He took his place at her side. It was Mordred, still, now smeared with green, the horns replaced by a leafy headdress. The handmaidens stepped back, and the courtiers, now in service of the Green Man, stepped forward with the torches, which they lit with the bonfires.

Merlin looked down and realized he, too, was now robed in sheer white. The thin fabric was embroidered with rich sapphire and garnet. To his right, Arthur stood, silent and awestruck. He, also, was clad in a new robe, but it was scarlet. Atop his head sat a laurel crown. Whispers filled the night air: questions. Even the eyes of the May Queen and the Green Man turned to Arthur. “Long live the king,” the spirits whispered.

He seemed to shine in the bonfire light. The united pair, goddess and god, passed between the fires into the night. They were the purpose of the ritual and the night, yet even they watched Arthur. He looked to Merlin. “Yes,” whispered the spirits. “Take his hand. Yes…”

Merlin reached out and clasped Arthur’s hand. His body was electric. “Come,” he said.

“Take him,” whispered the spirits. The drums beat on. So Merlin led Arthur between the fires, between the revelers, to the green beyond.

The green was a low meadow nestled in the woods. The grass was a soft, low-cropped carpet.
Tables lined the space, covered in rich repast. The scent of smoked meats and spiced fruits drew them forward. Freshly picked berries towered in heaps overflowing their bowls. Honey-drizzled oak cakes and piles of cut greens suggested the bounty of the season. At long last, winter had passed. The vitality of summer had arrived.

In the midst of the green was a low plinth. They stopped at it and turned. The procession had followed: the couple, their court, and the revelers behind. Mordred helped the Queen onto the plinth. Her white-painted skin glowed. Her handmaidens came forward and took away his covering. He stepped toward her, untied her robes and let them fall to the stone at their feet.

Her form was perfect: rounded hips and full breasts. Merlin watched Mordred. His body was disguised, somewhat, by the green paint. Merlin could not see the planes of his stomach nor judge the hair at his groin, but his erection was unmistakable. He sank down with her to the pile of robes and caressed her hip.

The handmaidens stepped around them, forming a circle and a shield. The drums covered their cries, but the spirits sang, and Merlin heard everything.

“Emrys,” the spirits whispered. “Tonight…”

Merlin turned, then, to the rest of the green. Torches had now been lit, dotting the field, casting light on the food-laden tables. He approached the nearest table and looked down. The drums still beat with frenetic rhythm. The spirits still sang. The revelers watched him. Arthur stood at his side.

“What are you going to do?” he finally whispered.

Merlin smiled. He let his magic go. Candles lit along the tables. He felt the spirits. “Alaþ,” he said. “Bewiexaþ.” Vines burst from the earth and twisted around the table legs and between the dishes. Flowers, red and gold, bloomed upon them.

As if a new spell had been cast, the drums stopped and then were immediately replaced by music for feast and dance—still primal and erotic, but more joyful than arcane. Voices rang out, jovial and unrestrained, as the revelers hurried to take places at the tables and begin the celebration. They passed around Merlin and Arthur in a furious rush until the two men were pressed together amid the crowd. Arthur’s chest pushed into Merlin’s back as they swarmed, laughing and shouting to one another, greeting friends and pointing to seats.

Merlin gripped the chair in front of him. Arthur pressed into him, almost as if on purpose. Through the thin robe, Merlin felt Arthur’s hands catch his waist. “Yes…” said the spirits, insistent. So Merlin relaxed against Arthur.

Arthur’s hands gripped him, hard—one at his hip, the other snaking up to his chest. He felt Arthur’s breath at the back of his neck and he shivered. The hand at his hip tightened and he was pressed even more firmly into Arthur. The robes hid nothing, and the firmness of Arthur’s erection pushed unabashed against his ass.

Even amid the crowd, Merlin heard himself moan. He felt the heat of Arthur’s gasping breath against the back of his neck. He was already hard, and now his body twitched and leaked in aching want.

Arthur ground against him and Merlin rocked back against it. He heard Arthur grunt and gasp—“Emrys!” Mordred appeared across the table as if conjured. Merlin had not seen him approach, had not realized the ritual consummation was complete.

He felt Arthur’s immediate withdrawal like being doused with frigid water. He took a few breaths.
“Mordred,” he said. “Greetings.”

The man’s face was smudged, but unmistakably delighted by his presence. A quick look revealed Arthur a few metres away, shaken and pale.

The spirits whispered to Merlin, “More. Tonight. Emrys…”

“It has been longer than I thought since I last took part at Beltane.” He looked from Arthur to Mordred and back. “I had forgotten how… powerful it can be.” He turned toward Arthur, unable to stop his body from telegraphing what he could not say out loud.

Arthur’s eyes flitted down to his robes and widened slightly. In the light, the gossamer left little to be imagined. Arthur could see the effect he had: Merlin’s arousal stood proudly, despite the interruption. Arthur licked his lips. He squared his shoulders and walked to the table, looking like a king in the robe and crown.

They both sat at the table, and Mordred sat across from them. The May Queen sat at his side. “I did not expect so many people,” Merlin said.

“We are honoured by your presence,” said Mordred.

Merlin’s leg pressed against Arthur’s. He nodded to Mordred, unsure how to respond.

“I’ve never felt the spirits so actively,” Mordred went on. He blushed. Even under the green it was obvious. “The imperative tonight, to… consummate…”

The May Queen’s smile was radiant. “My handmaidens will gather the dew, but I wonder.” She looked around. “I think the aphrodisiac has already taken its effect.”

Merlin looked. Around them, the feast had become Dionysian. Couples sat so close they were nearly on top of each other. They fed each other the fresh strawberries and shared goblets of wine. Flowers were plucked from the sprits’ vines and braided into crowns. Shirts were unbuttoned or doffed. The revelers stroked each other and kissed as they feasted. The spirits rejoiced. “The spirits are pleased,” Merlin said.

Mordred reached across the table and took his hand. “I knew—we knew you would please them. Thank you.” He squeezed Merlin’s hand, so Merlin squeezed back but then let go. Arthur had pulled away beside him, and Merlin turned to see why.

Arthur chewed at his lip. “This is just magic,” he said.

“The rite of spring,” said Mordred.

“No,” said Merlin. “Not… entirely.”

Arthur frowned. He seemed to withdraw into himself.

“Arthur?” Merlin prodded.

The May Queen made a small sound, drawing his attention. “So it is you,” she said. “Arthur Pendragon.”

The man at her right nodded, joining the conversation. “I thought so,” he said. “Were you here before, mate? For this one’s fire show?” he gestured to Merlin.

Arthur folded his hands in his lap and looked between all of them. Merlin watched a mask descend.
It was as if Arthur transformed as completely as the Holly Lord and the Green Man. “Yes,” Arthur said. Lord Pendragon. Merlin noticed he did not meet his eyes. “I saw him.” His smile was broad and unsettling.

The feast ended at sunrise. Dressed, sober, Merlin and Arthur picked their way through the wood, back to the village and Arthur’s Land Rover. The town was just waking, but the May Pole stood outside the local church, ready for the May Day festivities to begin. They climbed into the car in silence, and started back to Creaghall.

Merlin looked at Arthur and caught him stealing a glance at Merlin. They both looked away. Twice more, it happened, and finally Merlin spoke. “I’m sorry.”

“For?”

“I didn’t realize it would get so… intense.”

“Isn’t it usually?”

“No, Mordred was right. This was more powerful. More raw.”

“Because you lit the fires?”

“No, I’ve done that before.”

“Have you ever been...”

“The Green Man?”

“Yeah.”

“No, I have not,” Merlin said.

Arthur let out a small sigh.

“I’m sorry you were recognized.”

Arthur shrugged. “It happens sometimes.”

“I don’t think anyone saw...” Merlin stopped. Their eyes met again and then looked away. Merlin sighed in frustration. Beltane’s magic intensified desire, but didn’t create it. He was right: those long stares did mean something. The spirits were quiet, now, but not gone. His body stirred as he remembered the press of Arthur against him. He also felt overwhelmingly tired. It hurt to think.

They stripped to their pants and fell into bed. Merlin’s last thought before sleep was of Arthur’s breath on his neck, the grunt, and the gasp.

Chapter End Notes

And yes, Beltane spirits are my self-indulgent version of the traditional sex pollen trope.
I just decided we should hold off a bit yet (points to slow burn tag). Buuuuuut...

Lucky chapter thirteen is rather filthy so far. Oh my!

As always, I'd love for you to say hi if you're enjoying this little story <3 <3 <3
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

"Ask your doctor if Beltane is right for you!
If magic arousal lasts for more than twelve hours, seek medical attention."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The drums beat a primal rhythm and Arthur ached and burned with need. His body shook with each breath. Merlin drew him like a magnet. He took a step forward and they met between the fires. A horned man appeared before them. He placed a robe around Merlin’s shoulders and a golden crown on Arthur’s head. “Long live the king,” he said. “Long live the king.” His voice was guttural and rough, inhuman and bold. A long white scarf materialized, and Arthur took Merlin’s hands in his own. The horned god began wrapping their hands together in an intricate knot. Arthur watched and then looked up. The goddess stood in the horned god’s place. “Long live the king,” she said. She touched the cloth and it turned into green vines that snaked around their bodies. He realized he was naked and he looked at Merlin to find he was nude beneath the robe. With no one to see, Arthur could look his fill. Merlin was perfect. His chest was surprisingly broad, and he was wiry with a graceful strength. Hair trickled down his abdomen to the erection below. As he looked at Arthur, it throbbed and twitched, and Arthur knew just how bad Merlin wanted it.

“I thought you hated me,” he said.


“Wha—” Arthur’s question was cut off as Merlin took him in his mouth. His wicked tongue made Arthur dizzy. He stumbled, and then the ground opened up. They were falling, together. As he fell, Arthur heard the goddess laughing. Her tinkling voice had become a rasp; she was a withered old crone, cackling. Her voice mingled and was replaced by the laughter of the horned god, and then Mordred’s laughter, and then Cenred’s laughter, when they were fifteen years old. “One of these days, Pendragon,” he yelled. The Mediterranean was below them, but they fell too fast, too far, and Arthur was jolted awake.

He jerked and then froze. He lay on his back, roughly in the center of the bed. Merlin had curled against him in the night. One leg was thrown over Arthur’s body, and his hand rested on Arthur’s chest. Arthur’s face was turned away, and Merlin’s breath was hot against his throat. The weight of Merlin’s thigh pressed against Arthur’s morning arousal. Arthur felt his cock pulse with need and Merlin made a little mewling noise and nuzzled closer. Arthur realized, quite abruptly, that Merlin was also hard and grinding his cock into Arthur’s hip.

Part of his brain—a rational part that he usually listened to—told him he should stop, pull away, for multiple reasons. He’s asleep, Arthur’s brain said. You’re still feeling the magic from last night, it told him. As Merlin nestled closer, his thigh rubbed against Arthur, and he knew he was leaking. He looked down; the tip of his cock was just visible at the waist of his pants, and it glistened with the slickness there. Arthur took a few deep breaths. It’s wrong to like this, he thought. Merlin wasn’t in control of his body. Arthur felt paralyzed. Merlin was nearly on top of him now, and Arthur knew exactly what pressed and rubbed against his hip: he had seen it through sheer robes the night before.
He tried not to moan, tried to maintain even breaths, but now he envisioned that moment when Merlin, naked and glowing in the moonlit night, had taken the elemental power of the earth and, with a surge of pure energy, changed the seasons. Arthur felt his body shift as he remembered it, remembered the feeling of movement in the air. Had that been the magic? Did Merlin always feel that way?

Merlin’s hand moved on his chest, and Arthur stilled. Arthur wasn’t sure he wanted him to wake. If he woke, he might stop. If he woke, he might not stop. Either way, Arthur was in trouble. Maybe he could pretend to be asleep. It would be cowardly. No, Arthur should wake him so he could be certain, so he could decide. Like yesterday. Arthur remembered Merlin’s terrified scurry to the bathroom.

Clearly Merlin had wanted him while under the influence of magic... Under the influence. It was like hooking up at a party: wrong. Merlin’s fingers trailed along his ribs and it tickled. Arthur squirmed. In response, Merlin ground against him. Arthur felt the slickness where Merlin, too, must be leaking against his hip. The thought made Arthur’s body tighten as if he was ready to spend, and he took a few gasping breaths to calm himself. He wasn’t a teenager; he wasn’t going to come from Merlin rubbing against him. As Merlin’s hand gripped his waist, he thought maybe he was. He was too close, the morning was too warm, and Merlin was too far gone to resist.

He’s just dreaming, Arthur thought. I can’t. So he reached down and placed a hand on the bare skin of Merlin’s back. Merlin moaned. Too much, Arthur thought. Merlin rocked against him. Arthur needed to wake him before he was taking advantage. He pressed more firmly into Merlin’s back, but he was terrified to speak. His breath came in gasps. He felt Merlin’s breath, fast and hot against his neck.

And then Merlin froze. Oh god, Arthur thought. This is when he runs away. Which is good. I want him to run away. And yet he held him fast, fingers pressed into Merlin’s back, dick hard under Merlin’s thigh. He felt a shiver run through Merlin’s body, so he let his hand drift along Merlin’s back. Silent. No eye contact. Against his neck, Merlin released a breath like a whine. Arthur’s fingers found the top of Merlin’s pants and he pressed his palm into the small of his back. Merlin rocked into him again and moaned. Arthur felt Merlin’s left arm snake up beneath his shoulder blade, while his right hand shifted and gripped the meat of his deltoid. Merlin thrust against him once, twice, and then groaned with the third. He shook against Arthur, muttering curses. He pulled his leg back and stopped. He looked down, eyes going wide. “Oh. Oh no, you didn’t…” He scrambled off of Arthur.

“No, I—” Arthur began.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck these fucking spirits,” Merlin fumed. He rubbed his hands over his face. “I’m so sorry, Arthur, I—”

Arthur didn’t hear the rest because he locked himself in the bathroom. His hip was wet where Merlin had climaxed against him and he trailed his fingers through it, groaning. He knew Merlin hadn’t wanted this; it was Beltane and the ritual. This was all so wrong, but Arthur ran his hand through the hot wet on his skin and pushed his waistband down to grip himself, nearly collapsing with the relief of it. He stroked quickly, not even giving himself time to toy or extend the pleasure, he just came, shooting onto the floor. It felt like a weight had been lifted from him. As he turned on the shower, he wondered what effect the spirits had had on him.

But what if it wasn’t just Beltane. “The spirits won’t make you want to do anything you don’t already want,” Merlin had said. Arthur cleaned up his mess and then let the shower clear his mind.

When he finished, he realized he hadn’t brought clothes into the bathroom with him. He decided it
didn’t matter. They’d been naked together, after all. Merlin had been in the same bloody position yesterday. Arthur wrapped a towel around his hips, rolled the tension from his shoulders, and went to get dressed. Merlin didn’t meet his eye as he stepped around him to take his own shower. Arthur noted that he held a set of clothing, however, as they passed each other in silence.

Arthur didn’t wait for Merlin to head down for breakfast. The estate manager sat down at his table and it took Arthur a moment to remember his name. “Andrew,” he said (a bit triumphantly), “good morning.”

“And a fine day it is at that. Extending your visit, are you?”

“My… friend and I have been… studying some of the local history.”

“Ah! Well, you should most certainly look in at the study here, you know.”

“Oh?”

“The earls at Creaghall were mad for a bit of lore, you see.”

“Were they?” How the hell had they not already discovered this?

“Aye. When your friend comes down I can show you both.”

“Thank you, Andrew.”

“How did we not already look in the study?” Arthur asked Merlin. It was late morning and they stood by a grand oak desk in the earl’s study.

“I assumed,” said Merlin, “they removed all of this when the last earl died.” He waved his hand around.

“Hmm,” Arthur said.

“I assumed it would have been donated. To the local archive. Which we went to.” He knelt down and ran his hands over the desk. Arthur did not look at Merlin’s fingers. “Huh,” said Merlin.

“What?”

“ Weird.”

“What?”

“These carvings here. They’re runes.”

“I would think, in this region, that wouldn’t be unexpected.”

“Yes, but given the rest of the house, it’s just different. And much older than everything else in the house.” Merlin opened and closed a few drawers. “Probably a few hundred years older than anything else.”

“Well, I did a little philology and linguistics at university, but that isn’t going to be enough to help us here. Can you read it?” Arthur asked.
“You studied philology?”

“For history, yes.”

“You studied history at university?”

“Yes…”

Merlin stared at him.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Merlin shook his head and looked back at the runes. “This is just asking for a blessing, more or less.”

“From whom?”

“I don’t know yet, Arthur, obviously, or I would have said.”

“All you had to say was that it doesn’t say, Merlin.”

“It doesn’t say.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”

Merlin began to crawl around the desk on his hands and knees, giving Arthur a glimpse of his trim lower back, as his shirt slid up and exposed a sliver of skin. “Sea,” said Merlin.

“See what?”

“No, dollop head, look where I’m pointing.” Merlin was pointing; Arthur hadn’t noticed that. That realization made him forget the insult. Sea. Waves were carved into the front legs of the desk, and a man rose from them. He was bearded and holding a bag which released curved lines of wind. “Njörðr,” Merlin said. “Huh.” He sat back.

“Also not surprising, given our proximity to the sea.”

“Don’t be a knob, Arthur.”

“What?”

“Nodens.”

“T ook the dagger, yes.”

“And one of the manifestations of the sea deity is Njord.”

“But that’s a different pantheon!”

“It doesn’t matter! They also spoke different languages.”

“I think you’re connecting dots that aren’t there.”

“Oh, and you would know?”

“What does that mean?” Arthur asked. He let out an irritated huff; Merlin did the same. “Okay, say Njord is the next connection. Now what? We’re up here on the coast, lots of Norse ruins about—”
Merlin had already pulled a mobile from his pocket. Arthur watched him scroll for a moment before he held it up to his ear. He cleared his throat as it connected the call. “Mordred?” he said. “It’s Merlin.” He laughed a bit and said, “I’m well, yeah.” His voice was a low purr, and Arthur turned away from him.

What kind of a name was Mordred, anyway? Arthur shook his head. Merlin was an absurd name, too. Maybe they belonged together. They could do their sexy Druid rituals and have pretty eyes and talk about library things. Arthur looked around the study. It was mostly lined with bookshelves, but one wall held a small fireplace and two armchairs. Above the fireplace was an elaborately framed painting. Arthur took a few steps closer. The frame was stained the exact colour of the desk. Arthur examined it. It was also carved like the desk: an ocean motif filled the horizontal edges, while Njord’s face was etched in a repeating pattern up each side. The painting was a landscape. It showed an island, barren, with a small hut and a stone circle.

Arthur spun around. Merlin was leaning against the desk, obviously flirting with Mordred. “Of course,” he was saying. “But I do have to work sometime, too.” His cheeks were pink.

“Merlin,” said Arthur.

Merlin immediately looked up and met his eyes.

“Where is this?” He pointed to the painting.

Merlin’s brow creased, but then his eyes widened. He beamed at Arthur, eyes crinkling, and Arthur’s stomach lifted. “Sorry, Mordred, never mind that. We’re looking for an island with a stone circle.” He waited, listening. “Yes, Njörðr.” His voice was a bit annoyed, but then his face relaxed. “Brilliant.”

Arthur dialed Morgana’s office line. Morgause picked up after the first ring. “Lady Pendragon’s office,” she said. Arthur stopped himself from groaning, but rolled his eyes. Since she’d taken Morgause on after starting at Camelot, Morgana had been harder and harder to get ahold of. It was baffling, as his sister had been in a high-ranking, high-pressure position at Pendragon-de Bois-Montaigne and never relied on a PA. Now the woman was a go-between nearly any time Arthur tried to talk to his sister. If Morgana talked to him, everything was normal, but reaching her was nearly impossible anymore.

“I need to speak with Morgana,” he said.

“I’m afraid she is busy. Can I take a message?”

Arthur sighed. “Fine. Please tell her we need to charter a boat.”

“A boat? Why?”

Arthur rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “A… lead.”

“To where do you want to go on the boat?”

“Just up around the Northern Isles. Morgana knows what we’re working on, Morgause.”

Morgause was quiet for a moment. “I’ll pass this request along.” The line went dead.

Merlin sat in one of the study armchairs. “Let me guess. The gatekeeper wouldn’t let you speak to
her.”


Merlin just nodded. Arthur sat in the chair opposite his. He let himself look, consciously making his face neutral. Merlin sat stiffly in the chair, chewing at his bottom lip. He wore the red shirt again, and Arthur could make out a faint scent that must be Creaghall’s laundry soap. The trip had already been longer than expected. Certainly not good for expenses.

Merlin wore a pair of greyish trousers, snugly fit, that Arthur hadn’t seen before. He knew he hadn’t seen them before. They were memorable. He refused to consider it any further.

They sat for a few minutes until the silence became too loud for Arthur. “You’re quiet today,” he said. He knew it was probably because Merlin was embarrassed, but that was simply ridiculous because of Beltane. He kept on. “Don’t you want to nag at me about not being a librarian or having a conservative father?”

Merlin glared at him. “No.”

Arthur said, “Oh.” He sat back in the chair, rather at a loss. Talk, he thought. Say something. Be charming. “So…” How had conversation suddenly become so difficult? He would normally ask after Merlin’s family or friends, but it felt like a loaded question: do you have a boyfriend? That scruffy-looking librarian with the Bordeaux?

Merlin stood up in an awkward, sudden movement that was jarring. He pulled a book off a shelf, carried it to a different spot, and re-shelved it. “What are you doing?

Merlin repeated his actions a few more times. “This collection has virtually no organization at all. I can’t stand it.” He shook his head. “This is a set of St. Thomas Aquinas that has been shelved next to a pair of books on bridges.”

“Bridges?”

“Yes, bridges.” He rearranged a set of books that looked like a series or a multi-volume work, and then he turned around and glared at Arthur again. “You read history at Cambridge.”

Arthur was confused, so he didn’t respond.

“Not business.”

“Sorry?” Was Merlin upset or worried he didn’t have the knowledge required for his board seat?

Merlin stopped and leaned against a bookcase, arms crossed over his chest. “And graduate school? How did Merlin even know he went to graduate school? “Anthropology,” he replied.

Merlin pulled a sour face. “What?”

“Well, I did a master’s and not a doctorate…” It had limited his choices.

“In anthropology?”

“Yes?”

“Right.” He turned around and continued to rearrange books.
Arthur decided to add, “I also read Social Anthropology and Politics.”

Merlin paused for a moment and then resumed his fidgeting. “Politics. Something you want to share, Pendragon? Planning a run for office?”

“Oh god no.”

“Then why read politics?” He raised himself on tiptoes to reach the higher shelves, once again revealing that sliver of lower back.

“Compromise with my father, for one.”

“Oh?”

“He’d rather me be in business, of course.”

“But you wanted to… what, exactly?”

Arthur rubbed the back of his neck. He hadn’t been sure, but he had liked learning and appreciated the way old things—even old stories—made him feel. Arthur did not think Merlin wanted to hear about all that. It was too hard to articulate. University was one of the first major disagreements he had with his father, and in all honestly, it was still raw, even now. And maybe it was more than the feeling of liking old things, but Arthur had honestly never put it in words. Instead he said, “You know my family, the de Bois side, owns Dragon Crest Publishing.”

Merlin turned back to him with a puzzled look on his face.

“They—we—the firm—owns a lot of smaller companies. Publishing houses, news websites.”

“Specialty waffles.”

It was true. His uncle had bought the majority in a ready-made waffle company a few years before. Arthur was also not sure why Merlin would know that. “Yeah… it is a wide range—it changes quite a bit and I don’t really… do that.”

“Why?” Merlin was staring him down now, from across the room.

“My mum helped start Dragon Crest to give a change for more, erm, underrepresented voices to be, you know, published.”

“And?”

This was why Arthur didn’t have this conversation. Merlin stared at him so hard he felt like his answer would be recorded, and like it was explaining something about himself to Merlin that could never be taken back or unsaid, so he had to say it right. Without sounding like a twat. “And I always felt like PDM—the firm—was just part of the problem, you know? The more I thought about all those companies, I thought we’re just,” he waved his hand, “perpetuating… the… under-representation.”

“So you read history and not business.”

“I kind of thought I’d be a teacher. You know, maybe if people know about problems from the past, they can think of solutions for the present.” He rubbed his palms on his knees. “And I think I’d like coaching.”

“So why don’t you?”
Arthur laughed. It sounded a little sharp. “Can you imagine photographers sitting outside your school, waiting to get a snap of the history teacher?”

“So you started a company after all.”

“That was just a hobby with some friends from school that ended up taking off.”

“The charity app?”

“We thought the process could be improved.” Arthur forced himself to stop fidgeting. “And we wanted to make sure the funds were being used honestly. And a way to merge acts of service so it needn’t be limited to wealthy philanthropists.”

Merlin was still staring at him. Arthur couldn’t read his face. His mobile rang. “Yes,” he said.


“Sorry about that. My phone had died.”

“I heard. And now you want to charter a boat to sightsee the Northern Isles.”

“There’s a stone circle we need to find.”

“Will the dagger be there?”

“I don’t know, Morgana.”

She sighed. “Fine. I trust that Merlin will keep you on track, not let you go after anything too unnecessarily… wild.”

“Because I am so wild, yes. I am learning a lot, if that’s what you are asking.”

“Well, make nice with Merlin. We need an ally.”

“Why? Has something happened?”

“Nothing to worry about, brother. Just be safe. Safer, I mean. I’m having my assistant send you contact information for the boat just now. Do keep me posted.”

“Thanks. Bye.”


Chapter End Notes

I’m pretty certain that handfasting is not really an ancient custom, but Arthur’s dream/nightmare doesn’t need to know that.
So, when I consider Arthur, I think his moral compass makes him act a certain way, and consent is a big part of that. That’s why we end up with all the angst about whether or not a magic hangover impacts the, uh, urges. I’m not tagging dubcon because, as we know, it is very consensual. I just wanted to make sure that was clearly stated.
And librarian note: there are few things as frustrating as a well-developed but poorly organized collection, IMO. Oftentimes you get this at bookstores that try to sort into genres. Classifying fiction (outside of it just being fiction) is a nightmare, and it reveals all of the biases of the organization--and society. For example: next time you are at your local, look to see which books are sorted into romance, which are sorted into fiction, which (if they have it) are literary fiction, which are YA, which are YA romance, etc. And then consider the demographics of the authors and characters. It'll tell you a lot about the people who run the place (good and bad).

I considered putting some adorable clumsiness into the reshelving scene, but decided against it because as someone who handles a lot of significant books, Merlin should be pretty adept at it.

And hey, thanks for reading!! I haven't even started chapter 14 yet, so, I better go do that now.
The Miranda was not a mere boat; it was a yacht. As Merlin walked toward the dock, he took it in: shiny, white, and too big. He felt like a tourist. “This is ridiculous,” he mumbled.

“What?” Arthur called from behind him. The gulls were loud. Arthur would, naturally, find the yacht completely normal. Nothing amiss.

“I left my Topsiders at home,” Merlin said.

“Topsiders? Oh. I’m certain they won’t mind,” Arthur replied. Merlin rolled his eyes. “Go on, Merlin, it’s just there. Don’t tell me you’re afraid of boats.” For a moment he looked horrified. “You don’t get seasick, do you?”

“No,” said Merlin, shouldering a backpack. “I don’t.”

“Then what’s wrong? Come on.” Arthur knocked his shoulder against him. “This is going to be fun.”

“It isn’t supposed to be fun. It’s work.”

“What’s that expression about ‘choose a job you love and you’ll--’”

“Shut up, Arthur.”

Arthur just laughed.

“Why aren’t we taking a normal boat?”

“This was all we could get on such short notice.”

Merlin looked around the harbour. It was full of all sizes, ages, and varieties of seagoing vessels. He cast Arthur a skeptical look.


Merlin stepped carefully onto the deck and took in the lavish setting. The lounge chairs looked like they’d been nicked from a grand old steamer, as if Grace Kelly might have just left one. They set the tone for the rest of the yacht. While it was clearly a new vessel, the finishings were pure vintage Hollywood glamour: leather, wood, and polished brass.

The captain came across to meet them. He was a sturdy, middle-aged man with a surprisingly
grizzled look. Merlin half expected him to introduce himself as Captain Flint or Calico Jack. “I’m Ragnor Larsson,” he said. “You can call me Captain or Ragnor.” His voice had a rich Finnish cadence.

Merlin watched Arthur put on the million-dollar smile and say, “Arthur Pendragon.” He shook Ragnor’s hand. “This is my associate, Merlin Hunithson. We thank you for coming through at the last minute like this.”

Ragnor shook Merlin’s hand, too. His palms were rough, and Merlin wondered how much manual labour a yacht’s captain did. He nodded. “I understand you want to see some of the Northern Isles.”

“Yes,” Arthur agreed. “And to be up front, Ragnor, we’re looking for a stone circle.”

“The Ring of Brodgar or Stenness? I can take you to the marina at Stromness.”

“No,” Merlin cut in. “Not either of those.” He pulled out his mobile and scrolled to a picture of the painting. “Do you know this place?”

Ragnor held the phone out, squinting at the screen. He looked back and forth between them, and then nodded. “Of course. That’s an outer skerry off Orkney. I can’t get you too close without hitting rocks there. You’ll have to take the dinghy to shore.”

Merlin was stunned. How had that been so easy? “That isn’t a problem. Thanks.”

“How long is the trip?” asked Arthur.

“Each way will be several hours. It will be nightfall when we reach it.”

“We can visit the island in the morning,” Arthur said. “Use your discretion about where to stop for the night.”

Merlin noticed Ragnor smiled and nodded as if happy to take Arthur’s orders. “Let me show you the cabins. This way.”

*The Miranda* was not a superyacht, but it was spacious and lush. They were in adjoining rooms with a shared bathroom—far too grand to be called a head. The kitchen was staffed by an on-board chef. A dining area was open along a lounge.

Merlin watched Arthur lean back against a plump cushion on a double bench. He stretched each arm across the back, pulling open the top button of his shirt. Merlin struggled to keep his eyes on his face, and they kept drifting down to the exposed skin there, to the forearms, to the trim hips and well-fit trousers. Arthur looked relaxed here in a way he hadn’t been in the village, the ruins, or the manor, and Merlin felt melancholic as he considered why. *This is what he knows*, Merlin thought. Luxury. He has probably grown up on yachting trips, St. Tropez in the summertime. *This is why*, Merlin thought, *he isn’t for you*. Merlin had been on fishing boats; Arthur didn’t find the personal chef surprising in the least.

Their eyes caught and Merlin felt his face heat. He remembered the feel of Arthur’s sweat-slicked skin against his. He also remembered the realization that Arthur hadn’t come, the confusion on his face, the refusal to look him in the eye, and the guilt at taking advantage of Beltane’s sexual energy.

There had been a moment after Merlin released that was so sublime, he did not think he’d ever recover. Arthur, pressing him into his body, had groaned and shook, and Merlin thought they both had found something heretofore impossible, but then he pulled back, realized Arthur hadn’t climaxed and was probably horrified, and watched him run away. Run. Literally.
And then. Then, like an old-timey newsreel, Merlin saw, again, headline after headline in his head, reminding him of all of Arthur’s past girlfriends. Crying in cars outside nightclubs. That was just the way of these fabulously wealthy and absurdly good-looking men. Like libertines of centuries past, they moved from mistress to mistress, destroying lives and leaving behind a path of broken hearts and crippled self esteem. Because it was clear, undeniably, that Arthur had wanted it, last night and this morning. He probably didn’t realize, entirely, what it was, but he had wanted it. Merlin had felt that evidence against his body, now more than once. But Merlin was entirely certain it was also a game to Arthur. A new experience, just like the entire library endeavor. Merlin was no fool, nor was he a toy. He absolutely refused to let himself be Arthur’s plaything, professionally or romantically.

He fancied himself a librarian? Fine. Come along and help out, no damage done, Merlin would make certain. But fancying himself… curious? No. Merlin was not going to let himself get swept up in that experiment. He cringed again, remembering his own enthusiasm. But. It had been… Incredible was the word. Arthur’s body had felt incredible beneath him, between his thighs, under his hands. And he was a right bastard for taunting Merlin with it on a lark.

“So.” Arthur’s voice was soft and tentative. He looked Merlin up and down, causing his face to heat even further. He decided to sit down and did in an armchair across from Arthur. Then he stood back up. “What?” Arthur leaned forward.

“I’m going outside,” Merlin said, making the decision on the spot. He stumbled as the yacht began to move and took a few quick steps to recover.

They ended up in two deckchairs, an arm’s distance from each other, watching the village diminish. Arthur leaned back and tilted his face to the sun, which cast him in a halo of gold and took Merlin’s breath away. He pushed the feeling aside, reminding himself that Arthur’s curiosity was just that: a casual, temporary thing.

A voice in his mind said, “So? A fling would be fun. Be the experiment.” Merlin grimaced. What would have happened if he hadn’t pulled away and apologized? What if he’d let his mouth have its way and tasted Arthur--his chest, his stomach, his… Where would that leave them now? Once Arthur had tried it out, he’d lose interest, and then it would be awkward. Or worse, he’d use his power to have Merlin sacked.

He looked over at Arthur, basking in the sun. Would Arthur do that, though? Merlin considered. A week ago, he’d say yes. Now, he was not sure.

Better to not risk it. They’d finish this trip and head back to Camelot. He’d bury himself in that assessment of the special collections, maybe think of a better way to organize the alchemy section. Check in with Gwen and the other department heads on the summer reading program plans.

“You are still very quiet today,” said Arthur. He didn’t open his eyes.

What was Merlin supposed to say to that? I came on your stomach, he thought, a bit angry and confused, and then more angry. He settled on, “How does this yacht compare to your usual boating trips?” A bit small for Ibiza, he mentally added.

Arthur opened his eyes and looked at him, confusion clear on his face. He looked around the deck for a moment and then out at the water. “I love being on the water,” he said. “My grandfather used to take me fishing, just the two of us. Sometimes my mother would come, but usually just us.”

And once again, Merlin was caught off guard.
“I’d catch as much as I could and we’d have it for dinner. Grandfather would clean them because I hated that part.” Arthur put his hands behind his head and leaned back against them. “And then we’d take the rest home to my father, and he’d…”

When he didn’t continue, Merlin leaned toward him. “He’d what?”

“He’d tell me I’d done a good job and ask my mother to cook something for us.” He smiled then, a great big, heartrending grin that Merlin felt like a vice around his esophagus. “She was a terrible cook.” Arthur closed his eyes and rolled his neck in a half circle.

“I’m sorry you lost her,” said Merlin.

Arthur looked at him, blinking. He breathed deep through his nose and released it from his mouth, and then smiled in a wistful, soft way. He nodded. “Thanks.” Merlin watched him compose himself again and wondered why Arthur felt he needed the politician’s mask up now. Arthur cleared his throat a little. “Anyway, this boat is very nice. Quite a bit different than the fishing boats I’m used to.”

Merlin chuckled.

“What?”

“I was thinking that earlier myself.”

“You like fishing?”

“Oh, no, I hate the hooks. I’ve just been on a few fishing boats to get around.”

“There’s this lake in Italy, in the north. I visited it with my grandfather, just before he… died.”

For a moment, Merlin wondered if Arthur had anyone left other than Morgana and his father, neither of whom seemed close. “I love Italy,” Merlin said.

“It’s this beautiful little lake near the Alps, where the water comes down, and we’d stay in this little cabin.”

“Last year—no, two years ago—I was at Lake Como because this grimoire was found during a house renovation. I thought I’d like to move there.”

“We should go fishing there. I mean, but you don’t—that is, uh, rather…” Arthur trailed off with his mouth open, face lost and cheeks turning rosy.

Merlin decided to show him mercy. “Maybe Morgana will send us both next time they find something there.”

Arthur sat up and rubbed his hand against his thighs. “How do they decide which trips you take rather than Lancelot or Gwaine or one of the other acquisitions specialists?”

“Partly the area of magic, culture and history, and other content. Partly the danger.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gwaine and Lance are two of my best friends. I’d rather they not take on the most dangerous trips.”

“But you should?”
“I have a lesser chance of being cursed or not detecting certain traps. And having magic helps. And yes, I’d rather I be hurt than them.”

“They don’t say the same about you?”

“No, it’s a constant argument. When the trips are dangerous. They usually aren’t. It’s really rare that we be attacked or anything.”

Arthur looked wistful again. “It must be nice to have friends like that.”

“They’re a right pain in the arse, to be honest. And half the trouble Gwaine gets in, I think he causes himself, while Lance is usually being stupidly noble and trying to rescue someone or protect them.”

Arthur chuckled. He nodded, watching the water.

“What about you?” Merlin asked.

“Me?”

“Your friends.” Again, Merlin wanted to remind himself Arthur was really just a rich toff who was bored. Also his family was probably planning something sinister that Merlin would have to prevent.

“Oh,” Arthur said. “I, uh… Well, there is Leon. We grew up together. He was a neighbor.”

“What does he do now?”

“He works for PDM, with my father.” Arthur paused and made a face. “And I think there’s something going on between him and Morgana.”

“Your best mate works for your father and goes out with your half-sister?”

Arthur nodded. “I suppose he’s my best mate. I’ve never been… good at… making… friends.” He bit his lip. “Or rather, I’m good at making friends, you know, with everyone. Just not close friends.” He ran the back of his hand over his mouth and looked quickly at Merlin, then out to the horizon.

It hadn’t been the answer Merlin expected, again. Again. He looked at Arthur’s jawline and neck. The sea breeze was cool, but the sun was warm. The boat moved rather slowly, but the soft rock of it made Merlin feel de-centered, like he couldn’t control anything, least of all himself. Arthur looked over at him. “I wonder what there is to drink,” he said.

It was a terrible idea. Merlin followed him into the cabin.

Hours later, they sat on adjacent sides of the table with a pile of printouts and books between them. Arthur held a glass of twenty-year-old Scotch in his left hand and turned pages with his right. “No, no, no,” he said. “I understand why people like Julius Caesar and Macbeth, and the other tragedies, but the others are just better than the,” he waved the glass a bit, “political machinations. That’s just… life. It’s awful.”

“Is it?” Merlin sipped port and slid open the next book.

“Yes.” Arthur frowned. “None of them does anything good with any of that power, do they? Not Macbeth, not Antony, not any of the sisters in King Lear.”

“That isn’t really the point…”
“Then why point out Caesar’s tyranny? Why not offer an alternative?”

“You mean Brutus?”

“Of course. And everyone else. And all of them. You know which one I like?” He looked at Merlin intently, and Merlin’s heart did a little lurch. “Which one do you like? No, let me guess.” He looked Merlin up and down. Merlin couldn’t help but smile, and Arthur smiled back. “Something with magic. The Tempest. I can see you as Ariel.” He was staring again. Merlin picked up his reading glasses and put them on, scanning the page in front of him. Arthur was silent beside him.

“Which one is--” Merlin stopped when he looked up. Arthur was still staring, but now he looked hungry, as if he would devour Merlin, as if he wanted to--

“I haven’t seen you wear those,” Arthur said. His voice was low and sent a shiver down Merlin’s spine.

“When I read a lot…” He couldn’t stop looking at Arthur’s mouth. It was bitten pink.

“You look…” Arthur breathed deep through his mouth. His eyes lingered on Merlin’s cheeks, his eyes, his lips, his jaw. They hypnotized Merlin. “This morning…” Arthur said.

Merlin was sweating. He set down his glass. “I--”

“I wanted to wake you and I--” Arthur was leaning toward him.

“I know you don’t--”

“What?”

“You don’t… men…” Merlin realized he was also leaning forward.

“Merlin, you--”

When the door opened, Merlin thought he might smash something. He sat back quickly and watched Arthur’s face slowly show surprise, annoyance, and a bit of panic. Merlin was relieved. He knew what path they had been on and he reminded himself for the thousandth time that it was bad. He considered the pounding of his heart, his sweaty palms and chest. He tried to remember his criticism from earlier. Arthur was shallow, right?

But that was the problem. He wasn’t. He valued family and knowledge and nature, not boats and chalets. He was angry when leaders didn’t do good in the world. He had gone through all those socialites, but maybe they just didn’t suit. And many of them had seemed… awful.

No, Merlin realized as they cleared the table for their dinner plates, Arthur was not shallow. He was noble and brave and good.

“I just want you to know,” Arthur said between bites of risotto. “I should not…” He stopped and looked at Merlin. “I shouldn’t have run away. It was cowardly, and I’m sorry”

Merlin took a steadying breath. Another. “No, I’m sorry I… panicked. I should have--” he stopped, mind flooding with all sorts of things he might have done instead of panicking. He saw Arthur’s lips turn into a smile, tantalizing and a little teasing.

“Should have what, Merlin?” He took a purposeful sip of water. “Now I’m curious”

Merlin chewed and swallowed a bit. “I got that, yeah.” He let himself smirk.
Arthur blushed. It was adorable.

*Oh gods*, Merlin thought. *I am all manner of fucked.*

Chapter End Notes

You all are amazing and I'm so grateful you're taking the time to read, comment, and leave love. <3 <3

We're going to transition back into a more plot-heavy section next chapter. For now, I hope this clears up a little of what is in Merlin's head. He definitely has to be convinced Arthur is anything other than a great big royal prat, so it's really a constant struggle between Arthur's inherent goodness and Merlin's prejudices.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which there are longing looks and a stone circle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Halfway through his morning toilet, Arthur realized he was, in fact, taking greater care than normal. It was the pomade that did it, really. He brushed it into his hair with his fingers and thought it smelled quite nice in addition to giving him that casual, windswept look. He had shaved, and now he splashed a little aftershave on and thought it smelled even nicer. He wondered if Merlin would notice.

He realized he was doing it, and he continued on, regardless. He laughed at himself. “It’s Merlin,” he whispered to himself.

He hadn’t brought many clothes, so there was little to be done, but he looked down and thought it would do: comfortable denim and a soft knit shirt. He gave himself a critical look in the mirror. Then he realized Merlin was probably waiting for the bathroom, so he left through his cabin.

He wondered what Merlin was going to wear. He’d reworn that red shirt, would he rewear the blue? His pulse sped up. What would they talk about at breakfast? Would Merlin go back to being distant? Arthur’s arms and legs tingled and his chest felt full as he remembered that moment, before dinner. Merlin had been leaning toward him. He was going to-- Arthur paused and rubbed a hand across his face. He almost couldn’t imagine it. Merlin was definitely going to kiss him.

Without any magical aphrodisiac.

But there was whisky, his inner voice said. Arthur knew that all too well. Whisky and port. And a white with dinner, one of those with a long German name Arthur couldn’t honestly tell apart, but said he could. Sweet, sweeter, sweetest.

Merlin would be able to tell them apart.

What would have happened if dinner had not arrived? What if they had let the conversation go to its natural conclusion?

Instead they had pored over the documents relating to the earl. Nothing stood out to either of them. The final earl, before he died, had been a world traveler. He’d spent time in India, Africa, and South America. He’d also been considered something of an eccentric, never married, and left what remained of his fortune to the local village. Arthur liked him immensely.

I wonder if he was gay, Arthur thought. What was the phrase? Confirmed bachelor, that was it. He sat down at the breakfast table. The chef had laid out an assortment of breads and jams, fruit, and a platter of sausages and eggs. He poured two cups of coffee and waited for Merlin.

Confirmed bachelor. Arthur thought of his father. I am his heir. The earl had no heir, and hadn’t left his fortune to a nephew or cousin. I can choose someone; I don’t have to have an heir. Maybe
someday I’ll want one. He blinked a few times and sipped his coffee. Christ. He wondered what Merlin had been like as a little boy, pictured him, and the thought both warmed and terrified Arthur. He wondered how his father would react if he told him he was done with heiresses and debutantes. Am I? Sure, Merlin was clearly attracted to him on a physical level, but he was also still relatively hostile. He may not hate me, but he still doesn’t like me. The thought was annoying and perplexing. Generally, getting people to like him was easy: he smiled at them, and it worked. Meanwhile, Merlin kept asking him questions that prompted answers Arthur had never given anyone and stories he had never before shared.

Arthur turned when he heard the cabin door. His heart took off at a furious pace. Merlin was wearing the blue shirt. Arthur wondered if his own smile looked as tentative as Merlin’s. He pushed a chair out with his foot and gestured.

“You... waited for me,” Merlin said as he sat. Arthur felt himself blush as he sipped his coffee. “Thanks.” Merlin’s voice was small and breathy.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Ragnor said we’ll be there after eight, so it should be any time now.”

“Yes.” Merlin smeared jam on a piece of buttered toast. “And then we’ll go ashore and look around.”

“But still no idea what we’re looking for.”

Merlin shrugged. “We’ve made it so far knowing even less.”

“Is it always like this?”

“Actually, no. Most of the time we’re invited. Occasionally, though, we end up in something more exciting. Not usually with sword fighting, though.”

“I should have brought it along.”

“Why?” Merlin smiled and it lit his face.

“You never know, we may need it!”

“It’s just a stone circle in the middle of nowhere.”

“I imagine you’ll find a way to get us into trouble.”

Merlin’s ears turned a delightful shade of red. “Me? I’ll get us in trouble?”

“I can’t say I’ve ever been in a sword fight before meeting you, so yes.” Arthur paused. “Never even really held a sword before you, actually.”

“You hadn’t?”

“What, you do all the time?”

“No, I just… You seem really good at it.”


“Oh, no, now I can see your head growing. I take it back.”

“Too late, you’ve already admitted that I’m impressive.”
Merlin laughed and his eyes sparkled and crinkled at the corners. Arthur took a bite rather than stare. His stomach felt fluttery and unrecognizable. He finished his breakfast between surreptitious looks; each time their eyes met, Arthur felt lighter. He all but floated out to the launch.

Ragnor helped them into the dinghy. “We’ll be here, waiting,” he said. He looked around the scene with a calm, respectful demeanor. Anyone could see it was a sacred place.

Arthur could see it. The skerry was a small island, just large enough for the standing stones and the hut. They pulled the boat up on the rocky beach. Merlin was silent and rapturous. He didn’t run to the circle, but Arthur had to quicken his pace to keep up.

“Oh. Oh wow,” Merlin whispered. He leaned against the largest stone and shivered. “Can you feel that, Arthur?” His eyes were wide and painfully blue, darting around, and Arthur wanted to feel whatever it was, but all he felt was a nearly irrepressible desire to pull Merlin to him and just hold him there. It was urgent.

“Feel what?”

“The spirits moving. They’re singing, differently than Beltane--different voices--to both of us.” His eyes found Arthur’s. “I think they like you.”

Arthur couldn’t help but push his hip into him. “Is that part of the whole destiny thing? Do I have some great prophecy now, too? Or just you, Emrys?”

Merlin grinned and pushed him back. “I’ll have to ask the crystals, but they do keep calling you a king.” He laughed.

Arthur laughed, too. “My father would shit.” He paused. “But he would be happy if I married some princess.”

Merlin’s smile faltered, and when it returned, it didn’t reach his eyes. Arthur cursed at himself, then stopped, and then was just confused. Then he wasn’t confused because, damnit, he liked Merlin. Then he was even more confused because well, liking didn’t mean anything that serious, did it? He pointedly refused to conjure the mental image of mini-Merlin from earlier. Nope. Oh god. Where was this headed? He was a grown man and that was not the time to fuck around with one’s friends. And Merlin was a friend, right?

And then, clear as day, a voice in his head whispered, “Not a game.” And another said, “This is real,” while yet another voice sort of sang, “Two sides of the same coin.” The first voice whispered, “Destiny,” and it echoed a few times. The second and third voices repeated the word, and then the first voice whispered, “My King.”

It was bloody terrifying is what it was. Arthur spun around, as if he could see the speakers, though of course he could not. They had clearly been in his head. He found Merlin’s gaze on him. “It’s okay,” Merlin reassured him. He gestured to the circle. “We aren’t alone, but they really, really seem to like you.” Arthur heard giggling in the wind and watched Merlin smile. “A lot.” The smile was back, so Arthur could breathe again. He accepted it as an undeniable truth and decided to get to work.

“So, what should we look for?”

“Etchings, lines, anything.”

The stones were gargantuan grey pillars that rose from the startlingly green island grass into clear, cerulean sky. They had been worn down by sea spray, and their surfaces were porous under Arthur’s fingers. They varied a little in height and girth, but each of the sixteen was evenly spaced and firm.
Arthur took a few minutes to just walk around and experience the place before he spoke. “You know the problem here.” Merlin looked over to him. “This is far too old.”

“Right,” Merlin agreed. His face was creased and he looked out at the boat, then back, eyes darting around the island. It was almost as if Arthur could hear his thoughts.

“Let’s do it,” he said, and stepped toward the hut.

Merlin’s smile was quick, and it did funny things to Arthur’s gut.

The building looked like any other northern bothy, albeit in an unexpected location. The door was ancient timber, and Merlin pushed it open tentatively. Inside, they stepped down.

“You’re right,” Merlin said. “This is all far too old.”

Arthur did a slow assessment of the place. It had been refitted with an iron stove at some point, but the hearth still dominated the room. “Odd that both of these are here,” he pointed out. “Maybe to help cooking?”

“Seems unlikely that would be necessary out here. I don’t think anyone is staying long. There’s no lambing being done, or hiking.”

Arthur nodded in agreement. “And who’s maintaining it? This roof seems sound, kept up.”

“Probably a nearby Druid grove,” Merlin said.

“Nearby?” Arthur smirked. “Are there water Druids?”

Merlin made a face. “They can travel, Arthur. Just because they-- Oh.” He saw the look on Arthur’s face and stopped. “Well, anyway, it’s odd there are two heat sources.”

“So why did they abandon the fireplace?”

“Not abandon. It probably still works.” Merlin stepped across the small room to the hearth. “Although, I mean, there isn’t much firewood here, is there?”

“None,” Arthur agreed. He stood beside Merlin, feeling his arm graze against his own. “It does look used, though.” He knelt down and looked at the ash around the grate. “I wonder how old this is. There isn’t any wood left; it’s like they cleared that out and just let the ash stay.”

Merlin dropped to his knees beside him. “That’s true,” he agreed. “It is cleared off.” He reached out to the grate to get a closer look, but it was stuck.

“Push at it instead,” Arthur suggested. “It looks like it’s wedged in that way.” Merlin grunted a tiny bit as he shoved the grate back, tumbling forward as it gave way. The ash puffed around his hands as he caught himself, and he shook his head, peeking over at Arthur to see if he’d noticed. Arthur decided not to say anything and just watched him. Merlin scratched at his face, leaving a smudge on his forehead that made Arthur feel liquid inside. He looked down. Merlin’s tumble had shifted the ash, and now the stonework beneath the grate was visible. Arthur pointed.

Merlin’s eyes lit as he examined it. Carvings. There were ten stones, each etched with an elaborate symbol. A few were recognizable to Arthur with his knowledge of Norse mythology. “Odin’s ravens, right?”
“Huginn and Muninn, yeah. And this is Yggdrasil.”


“This is the Valknut, the three triangles. That parallels the Templar’s sarcophagus,” Merlin pointed out. “And this is Ægishjálmr, the Helm of Awe. Another protection symbol.”

“Okay, but this is just a collection of symbols that don’t have a common theme. Do you see any coherent message to it?”

Not really, but even if there is a message, there’s no sign of what to do with it.”

“Do you think it was made by the same people as the Templar tomb?”

Merlin tilted his head to the side. “It could be. Probably. Makes sense.”

“Then I’d say there’s another pressure plate, right? Maybe another tomb.”

“On this little island?”

Arthur shrugged. “You know they’ve been digging earthworks on Orkney since the Neolithic age. There may have already been something here, and this bothy, maybe was build later like Castle Nuada.”

Merlin nodded, eyes restless. “This triskele, it’s Celtic and Norse both, so that could be significant.” He brushed more ash away from the stonework. “This grate is in the way, so it’s hard to see if anything can be shifted like the castle.” Merlin pushed at it again, but it didn’t budge.

“Here,” Arthur said, reaching forward. “I’ll just pry it out.” He grabbed the iron and pulled up. It gave way as if on a hinge. As he pulled, time seemed to slow down. A boom echoed through the bothy, and the wall in front of them gave way. Arthur was immediately reminded of zombie skeletons and traps, so he released the grate, gripped Merlin’s shirt, and shoved him to the floor, half covering him with his body as he awaited an ambush.

Merlin was limp beneath him for a moment, and then he shoved at him. “What was that?” he asked.

“Shh!”

The bothy was silent. Merlin stood up, adjusting his backpack and dusting himself off. He reached a hand down. Arthur took it, suddenly conscious of the feel of Merlin’s wrist against his hand. Merlin pulled him to his feet.

“I… expected a trap,” Arthur explained a bit sheepishly.

“And here I thought you weren’t afraid of anything.”

“What? Why?”

Merlin gave him a little half smile. “You usually just square your shoulders and rush headlong, I’ve noticed.”

Did he do that? Arthur considered it. Okay, Merlin may have had a point. But still. “Not when we’re facing actual undead creatures, Merlin. Not without a strategy… or my sword.”

“Oh, your sword, is it?”
“Yes, I found it.”

“You know that isn’t how ancient relics are claimed, right? It’s not finders keepers.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “I’m not stealing some sacred artifact.”

“By claiming the sword of a centuries-dead holy knight? How would you characterize that, then?”

Arthur huffed. “I’m going to give it to the library, obviously. I’m only saying, it’s also mine. I can just tell.” He lifted his chin up and rolled his shoulders back.

“And there it is,” Merlin smirked.

“What?”

“The shoulder move.”

“Shut up Merlin.” And without further ado, Arthur stepped through the hidden door.

The chamber was small—much smaller than the catacombs at Nuada. Arthur pulled his mobile from his pocket and opened the torch. The first thing he noticed, as he was looking down, was the floor. He expected a dirt floor, and while it was dusty, the floor was clearly tiled. The anachronism was jarring, so he looked closer. They stood on a large pattern of rust and taupe stone, laid in an intricate pattern. A pattern Arthur had seen before. “The cranes,” he said, voice barely above a whisper.

Merlin, however, didn’t respond. He had turned on his own torch, which was directed at the wall before them. “Now we’re on to something,” he said. A gargantuan bas relief water god was carved into the stones along the back wall. Arthur wasn’t certain if this god was Nodens or Njord, but he rose from the sea, triumphant and cold. Arthur fought the urge to shiver and stared him down, uncertain why it felt so ominous. The engraving had one arm outstretched, pointing. Merlin followed the line with his torchlight, and Arthur pointed his up as well. The carved line from the god’s finger was long and crossed, every so often, with a hash. They both stopped their torches along the southwestern side of the chamber.

“What the…” Arthur began. He blinked a few times. “What is that?”

Merlin frowned and slowly shook his head. He looked at Arthur and then back at the wall. Instead of a carving, this wall held a fresco. Its border was benign: a circular frame, seemingly parted in quadrants. Inside it, however, was a bizarre depiction, straight from a surreal nightmare. A head, its face screaming and tortured, floated, taken aloft by enormous, feathered ear-wings that dominated the wall. The feathers also sprouted from the head in a dark plume. Blood dripped from its mouth onto wicked talons, which sprouted from its neck like gnarled viscera.

Very calmly, Merlin opened his camera app and snapped photos of the fresco, the carvings, and the stones at the chamber threshold. “None of this,” he murmured, “makes any sense.”

Arthur took that as a very bad sign. “I take it that’s not Mímir, then.”

“No.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“I have a few ideas.” Merlin started on his way back outside. Arthur reached out and clasped his
“Any ideas you’d like to share?”

Merlin looked down at Arthur’s hand, so he dropped it to his side. “I’m thinking. No. Not yet.” He pushed his hand through his hair, making it go a bit wild. “Information,” he said. “I can just… almost see it.” He looked at Arthur, but his eyes were somewhere else. Far away.

“See what?”

Merlin’s eyes finally focused on Arthur’s. “Second floor, in the back. Maybe third floor. No, second. It’s like…” he gestured upward with his hands.

“Back to Camelot?”

Merlin smiled, relieved. “For now.”

Arthur smiled back. He opened the door. “After you.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will take us back to the library.

This is a story about the romantic possibilities of libraries.

That's all I'm saying.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

In which there is a library, a curry, and a knife. Also, some other things happen. Oh my!

Chapter Notes

I am squinting with exhaustion, so I hope this isn't too laden with typos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The drive back was more comfortable, in most ways, than the initial trip, and Merlin had little to do but think of the night and the week before. They had arrived back at Creaghall at nightfall, and a clearly relieved Andrew informed them their rooms were returned to normal.

They had looked at each other and not looked at each other, Merlin realized as they drove through the highlands the next morning. This is good, he had thought. He had thought it was good, yet he had been undeniably disappointed. His body had craved Arthur’s—had on the island and the boat.

Arthur was not making it easy, either. At the stone circle and on the way back, he kept finding excuses to stand near, push his side into Merlin’s, or brush his hand across Merlin’s back or down his arm. It was just enough to notice. Just enough to be frustrating, because all Merlin wanted to do was lean in and give. And the longer they were together, the less Merlin remembered why it was a bad idea. Work colleagues. Off limits. Yet he wasn’t truly a work colleague. The boss, then. Yet he also wasn’t the boss. Come to think of it, even Morgana wasn’t truly the boss. Part of a shadow organisation secretly manipulating the world’s governments and economies? That was probably problematic, even if he did have good intentions.

Arthur did seem remarkably uninterested in the family business, considering it was clearly a hugely influential, billion-dollar, multinational firm. Arthur had casually mentioned their ownership of one publishing house; Merlin considered their actual presence in the publishing world. PDM owned multiple imprints for fiction and nonfiction, as well as multiple news and entertainment media websites. Directly or indirectly, their name was attached to a huge portion of Europe’s written word, for entertainment and for information. Arthur wasn’t on the PDM board, but those who were—especially Uther—had editorial control over a vast amount of western society’s news.

Merlin had met Uther Pendragon in passing at library events, but this consideration of his power, which was not Merlin’s first consideration, shed a lot of light on the man’s casual arrogance. It also made Arthur seem even more of an anomaly. In fact, the contrast became even starker and a little confusing.

No, the more Merlin thought about it, the only real reason he had for not snogging Arthur six ways to Sunday was the belief—no, the knowledge—that Arthur’s first romantic encounter with a man would result in massive gay panic, causing him to never speak to Merlin again.

And that, Merlin realized, would actually be devastating.
And that was more than enough to deter him and keep Merlin cautious. Also, it was an insurmountable problem. And if it wasn’t gay panic, it would be an end to the curiosity. Also terrible. Also devastating. Also impossible to prevent. And oh gods, did he really want to prevent either? What was his actual goal or hope here? What were his intentions? Merlin realized he was freaking out, so he forced himself to breathe deep and be calm. He felt the soft leather seat. He inhaled Arthur’s spicy aftershave.

It was useless. He was going to be freaked out or painfully turned on the entire way back to Camelot, there was absolutely nothing for it. So he leaned in. “Tell me about your mum,” he said.

“Tell me about yours,” said Arthur.

It was late when they reached the library. Nearly all the lights were out as they walked from the carpark to the entrance. Merlin pulled the old iron key from his backpack and let them in.

“It’s so quiet,” Arthur said. His voice was low and it sent vibrations coursing through Merlin’s body. There it was: the brush along his shoulder, the press against his hip.

“Library,” Merlin said, attempting to distract himself and lighten the mood. He flipped the switch for the side stairs. “I know a good 24-hour place I can order curry from.”

Arthur nodded, looking around the entryway. “Sounds good.” He glanced at Merlin and then back away. “Then what?”

“In the meantime, I have a few ideas where to look.” Merlin made the call and settled in for a half-hour wait for delivery. “Maybe longer,” he told Arthur, “but worth it.”

The dropped their bags, swords and all, on the circulation desk. The polished metal shone silver-white on the lacquered desk, nearly glowing in the night. They climbed the side stairs to the second floor. It was illuminated only by a few dim, perpetually-lit recessed lights. The stacks loomed like shadowy giants. Everything was at rest, a thousand and one worlds ready to be explored with the turn of a page. He heard Arthur exhale slowly through his mouth, so he turned to watch him, obliquely, as he took it in. Camelot was always enchanting, but the night offered something more. Anything could happen here, amidst the centuries of collection, history, and true, unadulterated magic. And tonight, this night, quivered with promise, like the molecules and magic lined up together to dance.

“This way.” Merlin’s voice was barely above a whisper. To be loud would disturb the spirit of the place when it was like this. His shoes sent a soft rhythm echoing against the ancient wood shelves, and Arthur’s matched it, syncopated and complementary. He stopped and looked up. “I know I’ve seen that circle before,” he whispered. “The four quadrants.”

Arthur stood behind him. He was close. So close. Merlin’s body coursed with static energy as he scanned the shelves before him. Brown leather, black, blood red. He tried to focus on titles or markings, but all he could feel, see or hear was Arthur’s heat, radiating through his shirt. He stood behind him, so near they almost touched.

Arthur’s breath stirred the hair at his nape. Merlin tried to read the shelves. Arthur’s forearms skimmed his elbows as he reached each arm around him to trail along the shelf beyond. Merlin closed his eyes.

“Merlin,” Arthur whispered. Merlin felt his body tremble. “Do you see the symbol?” His mouth was
very near Merlin’s ear.

The last time they stood like this, Merlin had relaxed against Arthur. That time they both had the spirits to blame. This time, it would be only them, alone with the allure of a library at night. “I’m not looking for that symbol,” he whispered. He let his shoulders meet Arthur’s chest and listened with intense satisfaction to his intake of breath.

“What then?” Arthur asked. He pushed his hip into Merlin’s flank, then slid himself, fully, against him. Merlin could not stop the suggestive roll of his body, instinctually drawn from him.

“Reference,” Merlin rasped. He tilted his head, exposing more of his neck to Arthur’s breath. He felt Arthur lick his lips and breathe him in.

“An encyclopaedia?” Arthur’s lips brushed his neck with each syllable and Merlin fought back a moan.

“No, it’s… an ontology of mythos… Mm.”

Arthur pressed into him, pushing him against the shelf. His body slid up Merlin’s as he rose onto his toes, and his arm raked up Merlin’s arm. Merlin let himself go limp, let himself be molded and plied.

“Got it,” Arthur said. His voice was a low growl that Merlin felt in his own chest. He felt Arthur’s muscles engage as he stretched and gripped the heavy book. And he heard the soft groan from his own throat as Arthur slid back down against him. His body rolled again and Arthur gripped him with his free hand, tugged at his hip, and spun him around. His eyes were a wild blue in the darkened stacks. Slowly, purposefully, he slotted his legs into Merlin’s. Merlin felt Arthur’s thigh against his erection. He was out of breath.

“Tell me to stop,” Arthur demanded. His eyes were wide and terrified, but they fixed on Merlin’s and cleared. “Tell me why I should stop.”

The shelves pressed painfully against his back, and Arthur’s knee nearly lifted him off the ground. Merlin fistled Arthur’s shirt and pulled. He couldn’t think of a single reason. “I… Arthur…”

As Arthur’s face tilted toward his, Merlin searched it for apprehension, mockery, or boredom—anything to hold him back. Instead, all he saw was something like awe. This is happening, he thought. I’m going to let this happen. I am going to make this happen. And then he stopped thinking; he felt.

Arthur’s lips were soft, full, and just barely wet. His kiss was tentative and delicate: their lips met, closed but not rigid. The slow caress, lips meeting lips, was gentle and cautious, so Merlin held himself still. Arthur’s mouth shifted down and his lips parted. Merlin mirrored the movement and sucked, infinitesimally, on Arthur’s plump bottom lip.

It wasn’t enough. His heart pounded and they both pulled back. Arthur pressed his lips together, and when they parted again, the wet reflected the low lights in a slick suggestion that stole what remained of Merlin’s breath.

Arthur, too, was breathless and shaking. Merlin watched him close his eyes as he reclaimed his mouth. This time, their lips were parted from the start. When Arthur’s tongue brushed against his, Merlin moaned. He traced his fingertips across Arthur’s chest, around to his back. As Arthur released the book and gripped Merlin’s nape, the firm musculature of his back rippled and shifted beneath Merlin’s touch. He explored the feeling with his fingers and palms, pressing Arthur tighter and tighter against him. Arthur pushed him even more firmly against the bookshelf. Merlin’s body recognized the size and strength of Arthur and every one of his nerve endings came alive.
Merlin’s senses were overwhelmed with him: every part of his being was Arthur, just Arthur. So he let himself give back. He pressed his tongue into Arthur’s mouth, tangling them together in a sensual dance. His right hand found Arthur’s cheek, but his fingertips brushed against Arthur’s hair and that temptation was too great. He plunged his fingers through the soft fringe and surrendered to the kiss. Arthur groaned into it and met Merlin with an uninhibited, relentless passion. Arthur’s hands, suddenly, were everywhere, stroking Merlin’s body as their pace quickened. His fingers tugged the sides of Merlin’s shirt up and boldly pressed against the heat of his back.

Merlin pulled his lips away, struggling to draw breath. Arthur’s eyes were hooded and intent. He leaned his forehead against Merlin’s. Merlin could not look away and for a moment, they stood like that, staring each other down, mere centimetres apart. Arthur pressed his lips to Merlin’s again, soft. He let out a long breath and whispered, “Wow,” nearly too quiet to be heard. And then he smiled. It touched something in Merlin’s chest, and like a switch, he felt himself glow. His own smile was impossible to repress.

“You ordered curry,” Arthur said, voice low. Merlin chuckled, a low rumble. He nodded. Arthur pushed his body against him, stealing another kiss. He stepped back. The light cascaded over the shelves from the stairwell, casting a halo around Arthur’s hair like a crown. Once again, Merlin felt a brief panic as he thought, my gods but he is beautiful. And so rich. And so powerful. And interested in me. Merlin could feel that interest. Not just interest, though. Merlin took in the look on Arthur’s face, his radiant smile and bright eyes. It was… Wow, as Arthur had said.

Merlin’s phone buzzed. “Curry,” he said. Arthur stepped back and adjusted himself. Merlin felt his cheeks heat as he did the same and led the way back to the stairwell, down, and across to the front doors. The bolt slid back with a loud clack. He drew back and bumped Arthur.

“Sorry,” Arthur mumbled. He was looking down at his wallet, which was open.

“What are you doing?”

“Paying.” Arthur gestured and pulled out a note.

“You are not.”

Arthur raised his eyebrow. “I am.”


“I said I am paying.”

Arthur sort of shook his head in a confused motion. “Wha—but why? I—”

“I said,” Merlin repeated, “I am going to pay.” He ignored Arthur’s indignant frown and opened the door. “Sorry for the wait, I—” Merlin stopped. The delivery man was different than the usual. He was lanky but fit, with dodgy eyes that refused to meet Merlin’s face. Instinctively, Merlin stepped back. He pushed against Arthur, who stumbled, but caught him, just as the man drew a knife. “What the—” Merlin pushed back further. The delivery bag dropped to the floor.

Curry splattered everywhere. It annoyed Merlin.

Arthur seemed to act on instinct, too. He pulled Merlin by the shirt, shoved him aside, sprinted to the
circulation desk, and drew “his” sword. In different circumstances, Merlin would have enjoyed
taking a minute or two to appreciate the sight of a supremely-pissed-off Arthur wielding a sword to
defend him. Instead, Merlin was just tired, confused, and angry. “Who are you people?” he
demanded.

The assassin stepped forward, knife glittering in the half-light. “Cease your search,” he cried, “or
die!”

Arthur momentarily quit his defensive stance and looked taken aback. “What?”

“The dagger,” said the assassin, tone implying Arthur was an idiot. “Abandon your search.” His
gravitas was recovered for the final statement.

“Camelot will protect it,” Merlin said.

The assassin cast him a contemptuous look. “The dagger will never be a tool for Pendragon avarice.”

“Camelot does not serve the Pendragons,” Merlin insisted. “It’s an independent…” He sighed and
rolled his eyes.

The assassin glared at Merlin, then looked back and forth between him and Arthur. He resumed his
stance and advanced toward Arthur.

As the assassin slashed his knife about, it became clear he was a trained killer. It occurred to Merlin
he could probably light the man on fire, but it seemed a little extreme and difficult to explain to the
paramedics. Arthur frowned as well, as if trying to determine if it was possible to use a sword in a
knife fight. The assassin lunged and Arthur spun away, passing the sword from hand to hand. The
assassin recovered quickly, pivoting and darting forward again with the glittering blade.

Arthur’s eyes were narrowed intently on the assassin’s knife. As it moved, he stepped back, using
the flat of his own blade to knock the arm up. As the assassin recoiled, Arthur struck him with a solid
left to the jaw. He ducked under the knife as it swung back down, leaping to the side as the assassin
stumbled.

Merlin stood to the side. He could trip the man, but he feared it would send him toppling into Arthur.
Likewise, to send a blunt object flying at his head put Arthur at risk of friendly fire. He looked for an
opening, but the lethal fight was too quick and too close to interrupt.

The assassin dove at Arthur, attempting to take out his legs, and Arthur nearly vaulted over the man
as he dodged the attack. It was difficult for Merlin to believe he’d not been trained to do this since
birth. Every motion was perfectly timed and deliberate. If not for the look of confusion on Arthur’s
face, Merlin would think the entire battle was choreographed. It reminded him, he realized, of the
first times he’d cast spells. Arthur was better, now, than he’d been in the catacombs, just as Merlin
had taken to spellcasting with preternatural skill, advancing quickly. The recognition was strange,
and yet it made sense. Merlin felt it meant something he needed to consider. Long live the king. But
now was not the time. Arthur kicked at the assassin’s leg, bringing him to his knees with a hiss of
pain. His eyes sparkled with the taste of victory and he set his jaw and leapt at the man. Merlin
watched them collapse into a mad grapple of indistinguishable arms and legs. The sick sound of fist
against flesh was only disrupted by grunts and the clatter or metal hitting floor. At last, Arthur
emerged on top of the assassin, landing one final blow to the man’s temple, knocking him
unconscious.
Camelot did not use a large amount of repair tape because they generally restored older items with traditional fibers and adhesives. Consequently, Merlin knew the third floor supply closet held a massive overstock of thick, clear and white tape. He retrieved it and secured the assassin before the man began to stir. “We have to call 999,” he said.

Arthur hesitated. He was pacing, shaking his head. His face was pallid and he wrung his hands.

“Arthur?”

“I’m calling Morgana.” He had his phone out in an instant. “There’s just, so many questions for the authorities to ask and I just—I can’t be mixed in this, Merlin, it’s a PR nightmare—even I know that.”

“Oh, so this is when your supposed business acumen steps in.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’ve spent all week being a—a nice guy and then now when your reputation might be damaged you panic and want to what? Cover it up?”

“How would knocking out an attempted murderer damage my reputation?”

“Because you’re here with me.”

“What?”

“At night, Arthur, alone. With curry.”

“That isn’t at all what—”

“Oh, bollocks. You know we could just tell them this was an attempted robbery of the library. You just—”

“We can’t let him go without answers, or we’ll be attacked again.”

“Answers the police will get.” Merlin sat down on a low bench. “I knew this was going to—why am I so—I thought at least—ahh!” He rubbed his hands over his face. “Fine,” he said. “Fine. Call Morgana. I wouldn’t want to be your PR nightmare.” He refused to look up at Arthur, but he could see him dial the phone.

“Morgana? Yes, I know it’s late.” He paused. “Yeah. Well, you need to get here now. We’ve been attacked again, and this time, he’s still here.”

Merlin stood up and walked away as Arthur clicked off.

“Where are you going?” Arthur’s voice was pitched higher than usual.

Merlin rolled his eyes. “The closet,” he responded.

“How?”

“To get a mop, My Lord.” Merlin half-bowed and gestured to the curry-splattered floor. “We have to get this cleaned up before anyone sees. Who knows what they might think? You know what a bad comment can do to our virtual presence.”

Merlin stormed away.

Chapter End Notes

I mean, it can't just be *that* easy, right? They wouldn't be the idiots we love and adore if they just got their shit together like that. I don't know who I feel worse for, Arthur or Merlin.

BTW, that kiss scene. Part of me wanted to write them falling into bed (or vinyl library sofa) together, fireworks, boom. But I was thinking about True Love as I know it, and how passion is great and all, but love is also just fun and joyful, and it makes more sense to me that they get their delicious curry and laugh about how Arthur sweats when he eats spicy food and Merlin consumes absurd amounts of naan because he has a thing for flatbread. And I'd love to see how that goes, but these people are just too busy trying to stop them.

Chapter seventeen is completely written, but not typed. Hopefully it won't take me as long as this one. I am still trying to get my final chapter count estimate, and I'm thinking 28ish.

And hey, thanks for reading and any or everything else, as usual. I'd love for you to say hi in the comments or on Tumblr. <3 <3
Bright lights, fluorescent and buzzing, cast the room in an unpleasant bluish glow. Merlin rubbed at his eyes. He switched on the electric kettle and set down a hefty, handmade mug. Camelot had them in abundance, and the first floor break room’s were from a delightful young potter named Ethan with a shop by the abbey. Merlin traced his finger around its smooth ridges and listened to the kettle heat. It drowned out the futile interrogation attempt happening outside the door.

“What is your name?” Morgana asked. Her voice was still calm, masking any frustration she felt at the half hour or more of unanswered questions. “Who sent you?” The assassin was silent. The questioning continued.

Merlin peeled open a packet of digestives, chewing one as he prepared the tea. He could still faintly smell the curry, and it rankled. When he looked up, Arthur was watching him from the hall. Merlin pointedly looked away. He stirred in a dash of milk and took a slow sip.

“What is your name?” Morgana repeated. The assassin stared straight ahead. She paced in front of him, hands clasped behind her back. “Who sent you?”

It was well past midnight, and Merlin blinked his eyes, widened them, and ate another biscuit. The front door opened and closed with a soft click, and Merlin stepped out of the break room to see Uther Pendragon, accompanied by a solid, friendly-looking man with an uneasy smile and tired eyes. Morgana’s jaw clenched and unclenched. “Father. Leon.”

Leon nodded at Arthur, then stepped toward Merlin, hand offered. “You must be Merlin.”

“Nice to meet you.” Merlin shook his hand, firm and warm.

“Morgana says she’s set you, uh,” he coughed. “Excuse me. She says you’re uh, showing Arthur how to… library.” Morgana glared at him.

Uther ignored the exchange, and Merlin, entirely. He was not tall, yet he commanded the room. He wore a smartly pressed suit, despite the late hour, complete with monochromatic blue tie. He looked between Arthur and Morgana. “What have you learned?”

“He hasn’t yet answered our questions,” Morgana replied.

Uther moved in front of the assassin, looking down his nose at the man. “And his wallet?”

“None on him,” Arthur said, voice shaping each vowel in a manner that drew Merlin’s eyes. Arthur did not look at him, but kept his eyes on Uther.

“And how did he arrive?” Uther asked.
Arthur cast a quick glance toward the entryway. “There’s no sign. He must have taken out the delivery boy at some point.”

“Delivery boy?”

“We had ordered dinner.”

Uther’s face was a mask of distaste and skepticism. “No body?”

“Of course not.” Arthur’s eyes were wide.

“Good.” Uther’s smile was grim. “We should be able to keep the press to a minimum. We’ll say you received the delivery, if asked. If not, you would have phoned them for a replacement.”

Merlin scoffed.

“Something to say?” Uther demanded. He glared at Merlin, disdainful in his perusal, top to bottom.

“We should have called the police immediately,” Merlin fumed. “They’re going to know he was delivering here, and they’re going to see he didn’t make it. And there’s probably a hurt or dead delivery—” His mobile rang. He ignored Arthur’s signaling and accepted the call. “Hello?”

“Merlin, oh thank Heaven. Kabir just got back, said someone attacked him on the way to Camelot. Bet you’re starved by now!”

“Oh. Well, yeah. Is he okay?”

“Scared, yeah. I’ll send him with another order. So sorry, mate, for the delay. Some hooligan’s made off with the first round.”

“Oh, you know, don’t worry about it tonight. I’m probably off to bed.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, just tell Kabir to take care.”

“Will do, and next order’s on me, yeah?”

“Right. Cheers.” He ended the call.

“I take it the delivery boy is fine,” said Morgana. She looked at the assassin. “Not very effective, are you?”

Leon sighed. “That’s good. Good.” He looked at Uther. “Right, sir?”

Uther was quiet for a moment. He paced to the back of the assassin, then placed a hand on the man’s shoulder and leaned close to his ear. “Which of the Five sent you?” he asked in a low, dangerous voice.

The assassin smiled. “Pendragon fool. I do not serve any of the Five Kingdoms.” His laugh was bitter and humourless.

Uther’s eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. “Then what do you want? Who sent you?”

“I told your son and the warlock. Cease your search for the dagger.” He looked directly at Merlin, then. “You may stop me, but others will come to end your search. We will never let it fall to any of
“Why?” asked Merlin, ignoring Uther’s glare.

“You know, Warlock. You know what their avarice portends. One of the Five, able to take down the others—or even one other—and all balance is lost. An entire world order, upturned.”

“I don’t understand. They don’t want to use it—”

“You fool!” He snorted. “Imagine the Pendragon influence—”

“You mean the news?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes. The Pendragon influence and Essetir Pharmaceuticals or the Plantagenet’s political maneuvering.” He looked purposefully at Uther, Morgana, and Arthur, then back at Merlin. “You know you can’t trust them, Emrys.”

“Emrys?” Uther asked, voice sharp.

“It’s nothing, Father,” Arthur cut in. The assassin raised an eyebrow, eyeing Merlin, then looking back at Arthur.

Morgana took a step forward. “If none of the Five sent you, who did? Who else wants the dagger?”

The assassin held his head high. “We do not want the dagger,” he said. “We protect the dagger from your ill intent, Pendragon.”

Morgana rolled her eyes. “What now?” she asked Uther.

Uther looked at Leon. “We take him with us.” Leon nodded. He stepped close to the assassin’s chair.

“Wait, what?” Arthur asked.

“It’s none of your concern, Arthur. Find the dagger. Let me know when you succeed.”

Merlin watched Arthur’s face, unable to identify all the emotions crossing it. “But—”

“That’s enough, Arthur. Leon, let’s get this... man to the car.”

Arthur sank into a chair at the circulation desk and rubbed his eyes. Speaking to his father was always tiresome, but tonight it had been exhausting. He had not known he was staying at the country house, yet that must be the case, given their quick arrival. Their arrival. He had also not expected Leon. And now they had taken the assassin guy back with them, which was essentially abduction. Arthur looked up at Morgana. “What is going on?” he asked.

“You tell me.” She raised her perfectly groomed eyebrows at him. “You’re back. No dagger. What now?”

“No,” he said. “What is the deal with the dagger? Really. Why do you want it? Why does Father know about it?”

Morgana laughed. “Oh Arthur. Because he basically funds everything we do. Who do you think paid for that cruise or the manor stay?” Her eyes darted to Merlin and back, then down. “We’re just acquiring it to research its properties, preserve it... and keep it out of the wrong hands.”
“Who are the right hands?” Merlin murmured. Morgana’s eyes flashed as she glared at him, but she was silent.

“I’m too tired to think,” Arthur said. He was hungry, too.

Morgana sighed. “Fine. Stay in the guest quarters on the top floor. Let me know when you know where you’re going next. Or Morgause. She’ll be the one to make the travel plan and will keep me abreast of the itinerary.” She rolled her neck to relieve its tension, and Arthur felt the urge to do the same.

“Okay, whatever,” he said. He watched her leave, and Merlin locked the door behind her.

They were alone again. Arthur took a step toward Merlin, but then stopped. Merlin’s look was ice.

“I’ll show you to your rooms,” he said.

“Oh.” Arthur nodded and gathered his sword and bags.

Later, before he fell asleep, Arthur stretched his limbs and stared at the ceiling. Somehow, he had royally fucked the entire situation. He couldn’t decide where.

His father’s cool judgement had been as unnerving as usual. He’d obviously expected faster results than Arthur had delivered. As usual. But why this time? Was it the accumulation of expenses? If that was the case, Arthur could personally fund the trip. He was enjoying himself and he had plenty of cash from the app sale.

The app sale his father had been so infuriated by. “Foolish boy,” he’d said. “It’ll triple that value if you just wait.”

“I don’t need triple and I hated every minute of running it,” Arthur whispered in the night. He rolled onto his side. This work, the searching, the fighting, felt better. Arthur was suited for it, even if Merlin didn’t think so. Arthur smiled and closed his eyes. But Merlin did think so. Arthur could still feel the ghost of Merlin’s hands. He remembered how good it felt to just give in to that touch. How warm Merlin’s back had felt beneath his hands. It had been… peaceful. Natural. Right.

Until it wasn’t. Merlin said he didn’t want to be Arthur’s PR problem. He was being facetious, but it was true. It was time to be realistic. Arthur forced himself to truly consider it: being in a relationship with Merlin—with any man—would be a nightmare at first. The paparazzi would follow them everywhere, relentless and hateful. His father, though, would be worse. Arthur ground his teeth together, then forced his jaw to relax. It didn’t matter how old he was or how frequently it happened: Arthur hated upsetting his father. How was he ever going to tell him this? And more importantly, what would his father do to Merlin in retaliation? As Arthur remembered the icy glare as Merlin said goodnight, he thought perhaps it wouldn’t matter. Once again, Merlin despised him. Back to that, he thought. All because he wanted to keep the library out of a scandal.

Liar, said his conscience. He opened his eyes and stared at the wall. Okay, he was a liar, partly. It had been partly protecting the library. But then they would have asked why Lord Arthur Pendragon was there, at night, ordering food with the gorgeous, gay librarian. They would have known. And Arthur just was not ready for that. He wasn’t.

He remembered the soft fullness of Merlin’s lips against his, the way his chest ached when they had laughed. No more tonight, he thought. He let his mind clear, and let himself be swallowed by oblivion.
Merlin didn’t answer when Arthur knocked on his door in the morning, so Arthur called him.

“Yes?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m working.”

“Where?”

“My office, Mr. Pendragon.”

Arthur hung up and went to the staircase. At least it wasn’t Lord Pendragon. He made his way through the corridor. “Ah, George,” he said as he entered the office suite. “Please bring me a coffee.”

“And a bun, My Lord?”

“You read my mind.” He stepped into Merlin’s office. Merlin did not look up from the book he was skimming. Arthur sat across from him and waited in silence. When George brought him a mug and plate, he thanked him quietly, then pushed the door closed behind him. He waited.

Merlin closed the book and scribbled a few words in a notebook. He unlocked his computer screen. Arthur sipped his coffee and waited. “When we find the dagger,” Merlin said without looking at him, “what are you planning to do with it?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. What is the plan, Arthur?”

“There is no plan. Bring it here for your special collection, I presume.”

“Then why is your father involved?”

“Isn’t he always? You heard Morgana. He’s a major donor.”

“No, he isn’t always. Neither is the board chair, for that matter. It isn’t unheard of for the board to propose something, of course, but…” Finally, he looked across at Arthur, over the rims of his reading glasses. Arthur swallowed hard. “This whole thing is wrong,” Merlin continued. “Especially last night.” Arthur didn’t miss the way Merlin’s eyes slipped to his mouth and back. Did Merlin mean him, or…

“They told me I had the opportunity to help bring Camelot into the twenty-first century and secure its future.” Arthur set his cup down on Merlin’s desk. “Because I was successful at my last job and when I’ve helped out at PDM, all of it has gone rather well.”

“And exactly what is it?” Merlin asked. “Everyone says that, and I’ve seen you’re handy with a sword, but otherwise it seems you just charm people and make terrible suggestions about digitization.”


“Innkeepers, yacht captains…”

“Oh, like you did with Mordred?”
“What does that mean?”

“You tell me!”

“This hasn’t got a thing to do with him.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!” Merlin furiously clicked at his computer, shaking his head.

Arthur stared at his knees for a few moments. “Honestly, I accepted the offer without considering it too hard. I trusted I could help Camelot, and I agreed.” He rubbed his palms on his trouser legs.

“Camelot has always been too important to risk.”

“Too important to whom? Your father?” Merlin scoffed.

“To my entire family, Merlin. As you know! My father and my mother.” He waited for Merlin to look up at him. “And to me.”

Merlin pursed his lips. They'd discussed this, in a way, already.

“Merlin, really, what do you think I would—” How could he put this? “What do you think my family has planned for some antique dagger? Plot to assassinate the queen? The prime minister? With whom my father is friends.”

“I don’t know! We don’t fully understand what it does. But I don’t think your father needs more power.”

Arthur leaned back. Merlin wasn’t wrong, but it wasn’t his place to point it out.

“Oh, so I’m wrong?” Merlin asked, arms crossed over chest.

“Have you met Cenred Villaret? Or any of the Villaret family?”

Merlin quirked up an eyebrow. “I’ve read things, but no. He isn’t on the board, doesn’t come to benefits I’ve seen.”

“Of course he doesn’t.” Camelot benefits were seldom publicized; the library wasn’t Cenred’s scene. Too few models.

“What does that have to do with the dagger? You’re planning to stab Cenred?”

“No! I’m just saying that, you know, my father isn’t… the worst…”

Merlin narrowed his eyes. “So tell me, Arthur. How does your father decide which politicians and causes his papers endorse? What did they print on Brexit?”

“You’re blaming my father for Brexit?”

“Well?”

“My father was staunchly against Brexit, but others of the Five disagreed, so the PDM stance was neutral.” It had caused substantial friction, as it had in many families. Arthur still wasn’t certain what any of the Five felt they could gain from it, but he also hadn’t paid them much mind. He voted for himself, not them. “But you know it’s not PDM’s fault the referendum passed, Merlin, really.”
“I am pointing out the absurd level of influence in the hands of one family.”

“Five. Five families.”

“That’s so much better?”

“No, but they balance each other and make reasoned decisions.”

“Based on what? In whose interest?”

“Everyone’s!”

“Oh, well, lucky us we have you to look out for all our needs.”

“ Fucking hell, Merlin, what do you want me to say? I’m here because I want to help the library stay open, have money to continue operations, and everything else you want. I’ve said that again and again. I just assumed this dagger thing was an example of what you usually do. If anything, maybe it’ll help draw people in.”

“We already have patrons, for your information.”

“I know! I am not the one who said the library is in trouble!”

“Who said— Now we’re in trouble?”

“Stop shouting. Christ! No. I don’t mean in trouble like that—”

“Then what are you—”

“Aaah!” Arthur made an inarticulate noise and shook his hands. “Why do you insist on making everything so difficult?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” Arthur counted back from five in his head. “I just—”

“Mapuche.”

“What?”

Merlin flipped a book around on his desk. “The Mapuche people of South America have a four-part creator mythos.” He pointed to a quadrant-split circle.


Merlin rolled his eyes. “Yes, Arthur. I work here.”

Arthur bit his lip. “Continue.”

“The bird thing, as you put it, is a chonchon.”

“Chonchon.”

“Chonchon.”

Arthur watched. He waited. _There it was._ The corner of Merlin’s mouth quirked. Arthur’s laugh rumbled his chest.
“Stop laughing! That’s what it’s called!”

“I know, I know, sorry. Sorry. Very serious, see?” He wet his lips as Merlin’s eyes lingered on his, and his chest lifted again as Merlin looked down at the book and rubbed his thumb across his mouth.

“Uh. Well. It’s a chonchon.”

Arthur held in his laughter. “As you said. The Mapuche people?”

“Yes. Mapuche. In Peru and Argentina.”

“Wait. But, I thought this was all done in the thirteenth century.”

“Yes.”

“Argentina?”

“I know.”

“By way of Greenland, I guess.”

“Help from Njord, maybe.”

Arthur took a sip of coffee. It had gone cold, so he set it back down. Merlin’s eyes flashed golden and it started to bubble in the cup. “Thanks.” He picked it back up and blew on it. “So we get to go to Argentina after all?”

Merlin smiled. “I told you I’d like to go to Argentina.”

Arthur took a sip and winced. He nodded. “You did indeed.”

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, it's out there. Arthur is confused, too. Fortunately, he has a friendly information specialist to hound for all the details.

To be honest, it's really hard for me to resist info-dumping to explain this whole system of magic, all of the Five, and everything else. My hope is that you figure it all out along with Arthur, gradually. Also, I apologize if the political references are annoying in fic; I needed to illustrate the influence of their media empire and it seemed silly to not use the biggest issue of the hour. I don't think it's a stretch, based on Arthur's ethics and values, to assume he’d have certain political positions.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

In which the author doubles down on the nerdiness of the fic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s the ley lines,” Merlin explained, unrolling the Templar scroll. “Beginning here,” he pointed, “crossing these other lines—”

“The hash marks on the line in the chamber?”

“Right. So this is where the ley line leaves Njord’s finger, and it crosses these lines until it gets to South America.”

“At the chonchon. Which is what, exactly?”

“Another really bad omen.”

“Are there any good bird symbols?”

“Yes. Just not in this case. This one is like a blood-sucking evil magic bird made from a decapitated warlock head… thing.” He flipped open another book and turned it around so Arthur could see another depiction of the bad-luck-vampire-head-bird.

“But it’s just a symbol, right?”

Merlin looked down at it. “Oh, I’m sure, yeah.”

“You mean you don’t know.”

“Well, you know, most things like that died out a long, long time ago. Like questing beasts. And dragons.” For the most part.

“And the zombie skeletons?”

“That was different.”

“These can’t just come to life?”

“No, they have to be created, but I don’t think anyone does that sort of thing anymore.”

“You don’t think?”

“Well, I am not an expert on the Mapuche people, obviously. I’ve never met any practitioners doing research here. That doesn’t mean they haven’t come to Camelot, of course. I just haven’t, you know, met anyone.”

“Really?” Arthur’s coffee was now the perfect temperature.
“Yes, Arthur, really.”

“I’m just surprised.”

“Why?”

“Are there many groups of um, indigenous people with, you know, unique systems of magic--”

“Interpretations of magic.”

“Unique interpretations of magic around the world who Camelot doesn’t really serve or connect or anything with?”

“Naturally. We’ve traditionally been very focused on European and some, but limited, Eastern mythos. Even fewer African materials.”

“That’s rather shocking, really. How many libraries are there like Camelot in the world?”

“A handful. Very few.”

“So why--”

“Because the classification system prioritized Western-centric knowledge. When the collection was assessed, traditionally, it appeared complete because there were materials that fit each--okay, look. This book here is a record of several South American mythologies, which is classified, broadly, under South American Indigenous Mythos. There’s no specific book on the Mapuche because there is no classification for them. Meanwhile, there is an entire code for Njord and multiple materials available regarding him.”

“But… how? It’s the 21st Century.”

“Yes, and I find these gaps every other day or more. When you’re responsible for all the world’s knowledge of magic, you can never truly finish the job. All I can do is acquire more. Which I will do, or attempt to do, in Argentina.”

“Attempt to do?”

“Many groups rely on oral tradition, so I may need to pass it over to Geoffrey for archives, who will order an oral history project. I can attempt to acquire grimoires or other artefacts, but we can’t raid tombs and take sacred items from a, uh, marginalized or less privileged group.”

“No Indiana Jones or Laura Croft.”

“Right.”

“So how did you even find the Mapuche if it isn’t… you know…”

“Classified?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, well that ontology book has a system that organizes pantheons in a quantifiable manner. One primary creator, triune, dualities, or in this case, four. It isn’t a perfect system and the author writes a lot about how problematic it is, but it is an attempt. And when you consider knowledge organization, really, it’s always a process. I mean, we can’t all be Ingetraut Dahlberg, right?” Merlin laughed. “Oh, sorry. Dahlberg was--”
“Doesn’t matter.”

“Right.” Merlin ran his hand across the books on his desk, and Arthur watched his fingers: long, pale, purposeful.

“So you found it.”

“Oh. Yes. I’ve seen the symbol before when I skimmed through that ontology system for this Indonesian trip, but that was last year, and I remembered seeing it, but not looking too closely. Anyway, the four are a young man and woman and old man and woman; they’re the four parts of the creator myth.”

“And you just saw that while skimming the book last year and remembered it and were able to find it, no big deal.”

Merlin shrugged. “Yes?”

Arthur chuckled. Merlin really had no idea. “You are incredible.”

“What?” Merlin pinkened and ducked his head, but he looked up at Arthur. Once again, he peeked over his glasses and Arthur took him in, memorizing his face, the light shadows under his eyes, the stubble that suggested a rushed morning. Maybe Merlin hadn’t even showered, hadn’t washed Arthur’s touch from the skin of his back. Arthur’s trousers felt tighter as he thought, I want to do it again. Maybe no one needed to know--maybe they could keep the tabloids and his father out of it. People did that all the time, right?

Maybe, he thought a bit frantically, they could continue from last night and no one would know. Merlin lifted an eyebrow as if he heard Arthur’s thoughts. He adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. Arthur realized he was staring, but he didn’t want to look away. His father wasn’t here right now. No one was here to see them. The door was closed and Merlin looked soft and sleepy and Arthur could pull him out of that creaky chair, shove the heavy books from the desk, and push him down with one hand, make quick work of his buttons with the other…

“Stop it,” Merlin said. His voice was a throaty purr that made Arthur shake. He met his eyes, questioning. “Stop… looking at me like that.”

Arthur leaned forward in his chair. “Like what?”

Merlin frowned. He shook his head and looked back at his desk. He cleared his throat. “We need to make a travel plan.”

“Buenos Aires?”

“To start. Have you been?” Merlin’s voice was wistful.

“I have not. Have you?”

“No, but I have always wanted to go, since--” He stopped himself.

“Since when?” He watched Merlin’s cheeks and ears flush. “Tell me,” he prodded.

“It’s stupid.”

“Now you have to tell me.”

“No!”
“Come on, Merlin, tell me.”

“I said no!” His lips were curved into a smile that sped Arthur’s pulse.

“Tell me!”

“No!”

“Mer lin, come on. I promise I won’t laugh.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Sure you do. Tell me, Merlin, please.”

Merlin let out a noisy breath. “You are ridiculous.”

“You have no idea.”

“Fine. It’s just, when I was a kid I had this computer game and for part of it you had to go to Buenos Aires, and I, well…”

“What game?”


Arthur tilted his head back and laughed.

“You said you wouldn’t laugh!”

“I’m sorry! Merlin,” Arthur said. His chest shook. “That’s just the most you thing you could’ve said.”

“Why?”

“Of all the video games and all the things they could make you want to do—slay monsters, fly spaceships—you played a geography game that made you want to go to Argentina on holiday.” His laughter bubbled over. “I lo—” He stopped himself and covered it with a flippant snort and eye roll. His face felt hot and his palms sweated. Adrenaline surged through his body, almost like it had when he’d fought the assassin. “Erm, so, uh, travel plans.”

“Right.” Merlin took off his glasses, and Arthur took a long drink of coffee.

“I sent Morgana and Morgause an email earlier. I imagine we’ll hear from them any minute now.”

“So, any ideas who might be trying to stop us?”

“I’ve been searching. Mostly going through records of societies and orders that could be somehow related to the dagger. Because it’s really been considered a myth, I don’t think there’s a lot of scholarship on any related… anything.”

“Myth.” Arthur gestured to the stack of books. “You just called those mythos, and they seem to be, well, true.”

“Uh, not exactly true—it’s more complicated. That’s why I say ‘interpretations.’ This is magic in its different, um, cultural forms or representations. I guess the dagger would be more appropriately
called a legend.”
“A legend that’s real.”
Merlin shrugged and smiled. “Some legends are true.”
“So, I want to know who’s trying to kill us because I don’t, you know…”
“Want to die?”
“Precisely.”
Merlin rolled his eyes. “Well, what do we know about them?”
“They use medieval weapons.”
Merlin glared at him. “They attacked us a Creaghall.”
“After we visited the archive and the spooky psychic.”
“The filidh.”
“Somebody had to tell whoever it is we were looking for it. Probably Mordred.” His voice did not sound petulant.
Merlin just shook his head. “He didn’t even know what we were looking for.”
“He knew the year. If they’re, what did the guy say? If they’re protecting the dagger, that would be enough.”
“I can’t imagine Mordred or Alice, either one…”
“I think, of the two,” Arthur said, “we both know who it was.”
Merlin glared at him. “What do you--what is it with you and Mordred?”
“Uh, nothing, except I think it’s pretty clear he’s the obvious person to blame here.”
“That doesn’t make any sense.”
“Why?”
“Because he’s a Druid, not a member of some secret dagger cult.” Merlin’s look was penetrating.
“You just don’t like him for some reason.”
“A feeling you don’t share,” Arthur mumbled.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Definitely Mordred. They were at the archive. The cranes are all connected to the dagger, and they started with him.”
“The cranes were on the skeleton goblet.”
“And the floor on the island.”

“We were attacked the night of the archive and filidh, the skeletons, and then last night,” Merlin said.

“Which was after the island.”

“Only Ragnor knew about that.” Merlin was quiet for a moment. “And the yacht… staff.”

“Crew?”

“Uh, yeah. Crew.”

They stared at each other. Merlin shook his head slowly. Arthur shrugged. “Whoever they are, they don’t like me very much.”

Merlin’s eyes were restless, and his face was unreadable. He adjusted the books. “Not you… your family.”

“But I am a Pendragon,” Arthur said.

Merlin’s voice was bitter. “I know.”

“Do you think…”

“What?”

“Would they be doing this if it was just you?”

Merlin wet his lips and lifted a hand to shrug. “Doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“But it does. I don’t want to get you hurt or…”

“They think your family runs Camelot, so I don’t think it’s just you.”

“But do you think if…” Arthur took a deep breath. “Do you want me to come to Buenos Aires?”

Merlin looked down and picked at his cuticles.

“If you think I’m putting you in danger or something, I--”

“I do.”

“You…”

“I want you to come.”


Merlin finally looked up. “But you’re still a prat.”

“We think we can reasonably limit the questioning by disguising the trip as a philanthropic endeavor.” Morgana stood by the conference table and Merlin and Arthur sat on adjacent sides of one corner. “Maybe these… crane people… will think it’s coincidental. If Argentina is, in fact, the correct location.” She lifted her chin. “I still find it unlikely, given the relevant dates.” Merlin rolled his eyes. “Fortunately, the museum is expanding, and they’re already on the list of PDM charity...
beneficiaries. The invitation to the gala arrived months ago. Naturally, we intended to just send a check.

“Oh, naturally,” said Merlin.

Arthur kicked him under the table.

Morgana brushed her hand along the sleeve of her silk shirt. He had given it to her for her birthday the year before. “You’ll fly out tomorrow, check in for tomorrow night. The opening is the following day. You will, of course, be expected to represent PDM and Camelot at the event and the gala after.”

“What, both?” Merlin asked.

Morgana tapped the toe of her Louboutins. “Yes.”

Merlin stood up, turned on his heel, and strode purposefully to the door. “Merlin!” Morgana called. He turned and glared at her. Arthur bit his lip. Merlin was furious. He also wore a light blue shirt and trousers that were… fitted. Arthur leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. Merlin was furious, but not at him. He tried not to smile. He also tried to keep his eyes from Merlin’s groin. He probably failed at both. He wondered what was hidden beneath those trousers. Oh god, he thought. I’m seriously checking out Merlin’s cock. Merlin looked absolutely livid, glaring at Morgana. I wonder what it tastes like, Arthur thought. He uncrossed his arms and gripped the chair.

“I do not work for Pendragon-de Bois-Montaigne.” Merlin’s voice was low and went straight to Arthur’s dick.

“Of course not,” Morgana agreed. “This is a show of unity and strength, Merlin, that will get you to Buenos Aires without obviously revealing you are there to find the dagger.” She looked pointedly at Arthur. “Find an appropriate contact through the museum or the gallery. Use that as a means for searching further. Don’t let them know why you’re both there. Say Merlin’s there to expand Camelot’s connections in the Americas. Say he’s your plus-one. Whatever.” Arthur choked a little on air. She looked back at Merlin. “Just avoid getting killed. As we’ve already said, this is not the time for bad publicity.”

“Is there something going on we need to be aware of?” Arthur asked, coughing.

“No,” Morgana said immediately. Then she paused. She drummed her fingers on her arm. “There have been some… misgivings within the Family council.”

“About what?”

“Goals. The direction of the… future.”

“For Camelot?” Merlin asked.

“Camelot is part of it,” she said. “You know, better than anyone, the amount of power hidden here.”

Merlin’s eyes narrowed, and then he swallowed and looked away, nodding.

“And what else?” asked Arthur.

“We live in… uneasy, tumultuous times,” Morgana said. Arthur tried not to roll his eyes. “We do, Arthur. Some see it as an opportunity to upset the order of things.”

“What do they want? New government?”
“There have been mentions, yes. And finding this dagger, if nothing else, will silence their doubts regarding Camelot.”

*And reinforce Pendragon dominance*, Arthur thought. Morgana would not meet his eyes.

Merlin looked at Arthur. Their eyes met and held for a few moments. Arthur nodded. “Merlin has to approve of any decisions regarding the dagger. I’m exercising my board authority for that end and will send a memo to the other members accordingly.”

“What?!” Morgana hissed.

Merlin bit his lip, not taking his eyes from Arthur. The look heated and Arthur felt exposed and undone.

“Fine,” Morgana huffed. “A memo is completely unnecessary. But the cover *is* needed to keep you two out of danger from this… crane thing.”

“Send the itinerary to my secretary,” Merlin said. He turned and walked away. Arthur let out a long breath. He watched him until he disappeared around a corner.

Morgana made a tsking noise with her mouth. “Great,” she said.

“What?”

She sighed. “Nothing. I just hope you appreciate everything I do for you, brother.” She rolled her eyes and left.

Chapter End Notes

You see what’s happening here, right?
I thought so.

By the way, I think you're going to like the next chapter. *wicked smile*
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

In which there is a very nice hotel in Buenos Aires, and Merlin is jet-lagged and sore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Every part of Merlin’s body was stiff or sore, and that fact was impossible to ignore and infuriating. He leaned his head against the car window and struggled to open his eyes.


The hotel staff met the car as soon as it halted and whisked them up to a suite. “Just one?” Merlin murmured as Arthur palmed off a tip. He looked around. The building dated from the colonial era. Its architecture and furnishings were more baroque than Merlin expected. He had assumed they’d stay at the Gran Hotel Provincial or a trendy mod place on the waterfront. Instead, they were a few blocks further into Monserrat, near the museum and Plaza de Mayo.

The suite was two bedrooms, baths, and a sitting room to share. The windows weren’t large, so Merlin stood at the doors that led to a small balcony. The view of the busy city at night was enchanting, and Merlin looked out on the bustle as the door clicked shut and Arthur did the lock.

“Are you okay?” Arthur came to stand behind him. The distance between them was, as usual, too far and not enough.

“Sore,” Merlin answered.


“I know.” Merlin yawned. The seat had been comfortable. Merlin was not accustomed to private aircraft. In fact, he flew economy, usually, so remaining in his seat was muscle memory.


“Everything.” Merlin watched the headlights on the boulevard below, but couldn’t hear anything outside the room.


Merlin rolled his stiff shoulders. “I’m tired.”

“But…” Merlin could still feel the fingertips, even though he knew they were gone. His mind conjured another memory: Arthur’s hands clutching the skin beneath his shirt in the darkened library.
a few nights before. Merlin’s body felt the absence where the hands might go, longing for touch. “I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees,” he thought. Pablo Neruda was not Argentinian, but the words flooded Merlin’s mind alongside the physical memory of warm, dexterous fingers, full lips, and need. The words were from a love poem, and it made him shiver, suddenly a little afraid. Arthur was watching him carefully. Something in his eyes made Merlin say, “Actually, if you… you want to…”

“Yes. I mean, yeah, let’s… over here.” Arthur gestured to the sofa. “Maybe we should…” He pointed to the television.

Merlin shrugged and nodded. Nonchalant. “Sure.” He stood to the side as Arthur prodded the remote, immediately adjusting the volume down. He scanned a few channels that showed newscasters and sitcoms, and then paused at a symphony performance. Merlin raised an eyebrow as he set down the remote.

“It’s Mahler.” It was Arthur’s turn to shrug. “If you sit, I’ll… Do you want me to change it?”

“No. Have you, uh, seen this?”

“This performance?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think so; I don’t recognize the… anything. No. Just the, you know, the uh Bernstein, I’ve seen that…”

Merlin shook his head. “I… Okay.” Arthur had traveled in jeans and a red jumper, and he somehow looked untouched by the hours on the plane. The sofa was deep, and Merlin wasn’t sure how to position himself. He perched on the very edge of the cushion beside Arthur.

“Here, let’s—Do you want to sit on the floor in front of me?” Merlin nodded and shifted down. Arthur’s legs were straddled around him, not touching. He was distracted by them until hands closed on his shoulders, and then everything else faded away. Arthur squeezed and kneaded. His thumbs dug into Merlin’s sore flesh. It was painful. It was sublime. Merlin nearly didn’t recognize the noise he made. “Feel good?” Arthur asked. His voice was also all but unrecognizable.

“I didn’t know you like classical music.” The strings were maddening, rising in pitch with a crescendo, then lowering in diminuendo—a give and take that refused to be resolved. Arthur rubbed the bare skin of Merlin’s neck, unconsciously mimicking the score. He’d touched Merlin’s skin before, but this felt new. It held a greater promise, a graver threat.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Merlin.”

“You are… surprising.”

“Because I have a soul.”

Merlin had phrased it that way before, he knew, but now it felt different. More. “Not that.” He tilted his head as Arthur pushed his thumb along his neck.

“I don’t have a soul anymore? Because you’re mad at me?”

“I’m not mad.” Now Arthur’s thumbs found the other side and Merlin rolled his head the opposite direction. Arthur hummed. “I wasn’t ever mad.”
“Yes, you were.”

“I was… disappointed.”

“That is worse.” Arthur’s grip tightened and Merlin groaned. “I don’t know why you were disappointed…”

Merlin had trouble remembering. One of Arthur’s hands slipped down the back of his shirt, rubbing along his spine while the other hand gripped and squeezed his shoulder. The feeling on this bare skin was fleeting, however, as Arthur withdrew his hand and gently pushed Merlin forward. He dug his fingers into his back, all along his stiff sides, adjusting his grip as his fingers moved lower. Merlin struggled to stay focused as the music swelled and Arthur released a tiny grunt. “Move up,” he whispered, lowering himself to the floor behind Merlin. The position gave him more leverage in his arms and he squeezed Merlin’s sides and shifted his attention to the lower back. “Why were you disappointed, Merlin?” His voice was close to Merlin’s ear. His thumbs met the bare skin at the bottom of Merlin’s shirt.

“I would think,” Merlin answered in a quiet voice, “that would be obvious.”

“You think my family is greedy.” His grip was almost painful, and Merlin moaned.

“That… isn’t… it.”

“Then what?” He pushed up on Merlin’s shirt, exposing more skin to his hands.

Merlin sucked in a breath. “Dishonesty.”

Arthur stopped. “You think I’m dishonest?”

“When we were attacked—”

“That man tried to kill us. Both.”

“Where is he now? Your father seems to think he’s above the police.”

Arthur’s hands pushed angrily up the back of Merlin’s shirt. “There are things you don’t know about, Merlin.” He spread his cool hands on the hot skin of Merlin’s back. “Things you don’t understand because you haven’t grown up in this—”

“Try me. And don’t be such a clotpole. Do you think I haven’t read up on your family? Especially by now.”

Arthur’s arms had pushed Merlin’s shirt halfway up his back and it bunched uncomfortably beneath his arms. “My father doesn’t deal with police because he deals with the Security Service.” He pushed his hands higher, gently rubbing at Merlin’s shoulders.

“Here.” Merlin pulled his shirt over his head in a swift movement before he could consider it twice. He kept it over his arms, which he placed on his knees and leaned his head toward.

Arthur’s hands were reverent. He slid them along the length of Merlin’s back, bottom to top, fingers not stopping until they tangled in his hair. Merlin felt gooseflesh rise on his arms, and Arthur took a deep breath, noticing. His exhalation was warm on Merlin’s skin. Arthur’s legs tightened around his hips and his hands dropped to Merlin’s shoulders. He pulled him back against his chest and groaned. “Merlin,” he murmured against his neck. “Do you know what you’ve done to me?”
Merlin shuddered. The music had built again, in intensity and volume. Arthur’s hands crept around. His left pushed back on Merlin’s shoulder, and his right slid across his chest. Merlin arched his neck beneath Arthur’s hot mouth, and he gasped as Arthur breathed him in. He felt the faintest touch of a tongue. “Hnh… Tell me… why,” he gasped, “why you really wanted…” He moaned as Arthur’s lips met his skin. “The assassin… Fuck. Secret.” His eyes were closed and his body was electric. He wondered if Arthur knew what noises he made. They were obscene. Merlin considered the noises Arthur might make beneath his hands and he let his mouth fall open.

Arthur caressed Merlin’s shoulder and rubbed his thumb on his chest. “Is this okay?” he asked, voice breaking, breath cool where his lips had wet the skin. Arthur made a satisfied sound as Merlin’s entire body trembled. Merlin shook his head and made an affirmative noise. In response, Arthur’s mouth descended on the column of Merlin’s neck. He sucked at the spot where it joined his shoulder, and then kissed his way up to Merlin’s ear, which he laved with his tongue and then nibbled.

“Tell… me,” Merlin managed to groan. Arthur pushed him even closer to his chest—impossibly tight. He squeezed him between his legs.

“Just… let me…” Arthur slid his body around Merlin until they faced each other. His eyes covered every part of Merlin’s face, then drifted down to his chest—he tugged away the shirt—and the bulge below. His eyes were bright when he looked back up at Merlin’s eyes. Then his hands were back on Merlin’s chest, and Merlin found himself pushed back against the sofa. Arthur’s hands shook as they slowly, carefully traced down his chest to his stomach. Merlin was transfixed. He watched the hands, strong but gentle and probably lethal. It felt so right, so perfect, his body throbbed.

Merlin chewed his lip. “I can’t let you do this.”

Arthur groaned and leaned his forehead against Merlin’s.

“I am too old to be someone’s secret lover.” Merlin squeezed his eyes shut and kept his voice level.

Arthur pressed his lips to the corner of Merlin’s mouth. He pulled back when Merlin didn’t reciprocate. Merlin opened his eyes to find Arthur staring at him. He couldn’t decipher the look.

“Arthur, what are you doing here?” Arthur blinked hard and looked away, blankly, across the room. When he looked back at Merlin he appeared, frankly, a bit terrified, and Merlin gave him a soft smile. “Arthur,” Merlin whispered. “Come here.” He pulled him into his arms and cradled Arthur’s head against his neck. “Arthur,” he repeated. “You are—you asked if I know what I’ve done to you and, well, no, but yes, too, because,” he sighed and squeezed Arthur, who had reached his arms around him and was holding tight. “Because yes. I just, I just cannot do this to either of us before you’re ready because I know—I really know—it will hurt too much to be your experiment.”


“You don’t want anyone to know you kissed me.”

“But I want you.” Arthur’s voice was rough.

“Yes. I know.”

Arthur reached down and trailed his fingers across Merlin’s groin. “You want me, too,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter.” It would be absurd to lie. Of course he wanted Arthur and his stupid, beautiful face. He desperately wanted to see him naked again—to really let himself look this time, to feel his skin, to taste him. But he also wanted to keep learning about him, to find out how he discovered Mahler, what he had written his master’s thesis on, and what it was like to grow up in a family with
seven houses. What it was like to grow up with a half-sister. What was his favourite film? Colour? Restaurant?

Oh. Oh no.

“Merlin?”

He extricated himself from Arthur and stood up. “I need to go,” he said. “I’m… bed.”

Arthur propped his elbow on a knee and rubbed his forehead. He opened his mouth but didn’t speak.

“Goodnight.” Merlin’s voice was small. The symphony was nearing the end. He picked up his bags and walked quietly away.

The morning was crisp and beautiful. Merlin sat on their small balcony and looked across the little table at Arthur. He wore a grey suit and his tired eyes kept warily glancing at Merlin and then darting away, like a guilty child. “Here,” Merlin said. “Have another.” The table was covered with a spread of medialunas, cream, fruit, and coffee.

“Thanks.” Arthur took the pastry and bit it nearly in half.

“They’re good,” said Merlin.

“Mmm.”

“How’d you sleep?” It was probably a stupid question, but Merlin was actually concerned. Arthur looked less alert now than he had the morning after the concussion, when they’d stayed awake all night talking about panel shows, eighties music, and football.


“Me neither,” Merlin admitted. They shared a small smile. Merlin sipped his coffee.

“You know, you seem like you’d be a tea person,” Arthur mused.

“Librarian,” said Merlin. “Known coffee fiends, all of us.”

“So the gallery. Museum. Thing,” Arthur said. “What is the plan?”

“I actually agree with Morgana about finding a contact. If anyone is likely to know about the Mapuche, the dagger, or anything else, they probably work in archives, history, cultural institutions of some kind.”

“So we just go look around?”

“It’ll be fun. And good to tour, anyway.”

“But, um, you should know that it is… well, there may be journalists and photographers at the benefit and the gala,” Arthur said.

“Okay…”

“And they may write about you.”
“Oh. Okay.”

“And they may not be nice.”

“I’m not worried. I doubt I’ll see it, if they do.”

“Your family might.”

“They’re mostly gone.”

“Oh, yeah, I suppose so.” Arthur looked out over the boulevard below. His mouth was drawn into a tight frown. Merlin wasn’t sure he could break the melancholy mood, so he settled for distraction.

“When do they open?”

Arthur looked at his wrist, but it was bare. He tapped his phone to light the screen. “Ahora,” he said. “Ready?” Merlin nodded. “Let’s go.”

The museum was a palatial building, old and stately. They were escorted inside by a tidily dressed doorman and greeted by a woman in a bold, red dress suit. Her tight-curled hair was coal black and swept up in a French twist. “Good morning,” she said. “And welcome.”

“Thank you,” said Merlin.

“Good morning,” Arthur said with the billionaire smile.

“You have not visited us before?”

Merlin answered, “Uh, no. Or, yes, we haven’t. We have not visited. Correct. Either. Neither of us.” Arthur raised an eyebrow. He shrugged and watched Arthur bite back a laugh.

“I hope you will take time to see the rest of the gallery, then, after.”

“That would be very nice, thank you,” Arthur agreed. Merlin watched the way her eyes raked up and down Arthur’s form.

“I know you are Lord Pendragon. Your friend, you are Mr. Hunithson, no?”


“I read your article on information transfer in cultural heritage institutions.” She smiled. “It was well thought out. I look forward to how your thinking develops.”

“Thank you.”

“And if we can assist any of your research in the future, please let me know.”

“Oh, wow, thank you. I will.”

She nodded and turned. “This way,” she said. Merlin looked at Arthur. His eyes were slowly tracking down her body. Merlin gave him a pointed look and started after her, and Arthur, chastened, followed.
“Really?” Merlin whispered back to him as they fell behind.

Arthur licked his lips. “Jealous?” His voice was just audible.

“You wish.”

“Yes, I do.” And with that, Arthur’s cheeks flushed, but his eyes were bright as he turned to catch up.

Merlin tried not to look at how Arthur’s arse filled out his trousers, but he failed miserably. *It's going to be a long day.*

Chapter End Notes

Pablo Neruda's poetry is (in my humble opinion) some of the greatest ever written. That line is from one of his Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair, which is one of the best things I've ever read on love and heartache. I once dated this hipster who would recite Neruda to me, and really I feel like I dated Neruda more than the hipster. Pro life tip: if someone starts sexily reciting Pablo Neruda after dinner, they're trying to get you naked and they're probably a cad (but the sex may be good, so, eh, whatever). This is number XIV. I don't know how to do hyperlinks in this, so I can't link it here, but you should read it if you haven't.

I'm a classical music nerd (blame years of piano), and the Mahler is his Fifth Symphony. The Adagietto is absolutely gorgeous. Mahler's Fifth is one of those works that I feel like it's reasonable to think Arthur, given his background, would recognize--especially the Adagietto.
The museum held labyrinthine corridors and interconnected rooms, liberally packed with ageless, priceless artefacts. Arthur was awestruck. He wanted to spend hours reading each and every object label. A room of potsherds, umber and turquoise, called to him. What kind of urn was that? What was its purpose? He was entranced by the contents and the architecture of the place.

But Merlin’s eyes were distracting. At first, they had been cold. The blue was ice and silver, like daggers themselves. Now, each time they met Arthur’s that blue was a little warmer and deeper, and Arthur kept losing himself in them. The curator, Maria, led them to the new wing, a contemporary, open space with clever windows creating an ambient lighting effect. The wing was dedicated to indigenous art, and Arthur wondered if they were lucky or if some other force had influenced the timing. He had, in truth, never been an aficionado of photography, but he viewed the first collection with curiosity informed by their mission. The next collection was primarily textiles, and Arthur watched Merlin examine them. He was delighted by every piece, and it warmed something in Arthur’s stomach. He thought of Cairo and Jerusalem, the Louvre, and so many other places he’d been. He wanted to go back with Merlin. He wanted Merlin to show him how he looked at the world’s history and art. How would he see the sensual textures of a Bernini? They had only just arrived, but Arthur was already thinking where they might go next.

“This photograph.” Merlin pointed to a small print. “What can you tell us about it?”

Maria stepped quietly in the cavernous room, and her footsteps were a soft tap. “Oh yes,” she said. “That is part of the collection from Señor Gilli. A young photographer, but very talented. He has done much to document the lives of the impoverished, rural peoples in Patagonia and elsewhere.”

“Are these his, too?” asked Arthur.

“Most of them, yes.”

Merlin looked at Arthur, and then back at Maria. “Will he be at the gala, by any chance?”

“He seems like a major contributor,” Arthur said. “And someone PDM would like to know. We’re always looking for photojournalists and other photographers for our various publications.”

Maria nodded. “Yes, we expect him.” She pulled out her mobile. “If you like, I can verify. I know he’d not want to miss the opportunity.”

“Please do,” said Arthur. As she stepped away, he inspected the print. It showed a woman in long robes holding a drum on her shoulder. The drum was painted in a variation of the quadrant design. “Do you know what the other marks mean?”

Merlin shook his head. His voice was breathy. “No.” He grinned at Arthur. “I don’t.”
“Why do you seem happy about that?”

“There’s so much we don’t know!”

Arthur stared at him, heart pounding. The urge to kiss him was nearly overwhelming. Two things stopped him. One, the museum was a public place, and chances were one of his father’s friends or a journalist would walk in just then. Two, Merlin was clearly thinking about the Mapuche, not him. Arthur walked toward a massive diptych painting and tried to distract himself. He failed. You’re a grown man, he thought. Quit being a chicken. The painting was muted shades of red and brown and it suggested more than it depicted. It seemed to churn like angry water, though the hues were earthy, not ocean or sky. The more Arthur looked, the more colours he could see, and they shook him, reminded him he was mortal, that the earth and its people are always, always dying. “I know it isn’t the time,” he said, looking over to where Merlin stood, inspecting a mask. “But you should know that I want you even more today.” Merlin froze. His eyes darted around the room before finding Arthur’s. “And I know you don’t trust me—that’s fair, I guess—but you can trust that as soon as you want me—as you let me, I’m going to…”

Merlin straightened. “To what?”

Arthur took a step. “For one, going to undo that necktie. I’m going to taste you.” He let his eyes rake slowly over Merlin’s suited form and licked his lips. “I am going to—”

“You think I’m going to change my mind?”

“No. No.” Arthur took another step. “I think, maybe you’re going to change mine.” The angry earth churned and reclaimed and was brutal as it took. But it was good, too, because it could remind them to live and Arthur, well, he hadn’t been reminded in a long time. “You know my mother died in her forties.”

“Um.”

“Do you realize how young that is?”

“Very. I never knew my dad.”

“I know.” He looked back into the painting. “I want to buy this,” he said. Merlin laughed. Arthur joined in. He stepped around the work. It was hung on a partition, and Arthur leaned to peek around its back. The opposite side held another polyptych, this one in four parts. The colours here were opposite the other side, as if in contrast. Arthur moved to have a more direct view.

The two inner pieces were higher on the partition than the other two. Each was an abstract whorl, much like the other side, but faces emerged from the colours, as if being born from a primordial churning. The first was a man, a fresh-faced youth with a straight nose and Adonis’ curls. He looked up at the woman being born beside him. She rose from the abyss like Liberty leading her warriors, but with no backward glance or hesitation. She was pure as the sun and immense.

Beside her was her aged counterpart, a wise woman with silver streaming hair and a face wizened, yet delicate. Her eyes were sagacious and steady, and she looked straight into Arthur’s soul. She was accompanied by an elder man. He bore a sadness and doubt, but his gaze was also upward, as if determined to go on, regardless.

“Gilli will be at the gala tonight,” Maria said, walking back toward them.

“Who painted this?” Arthur asked. He looked at the label. “Aglain. Is he coming, too?”
“No, I think not,” Maria answered. “He is very private.”

“I want to meet him.”

“I—”

“I need his information.” Arthur did not like to throw around his family influence, but sometimes it was useful. They needed to meet Aglain. He smiled at Maria to soften the order, but he didn’t back away from it. Merlin looked at him like he had gone mad.

“To buy—” Merlin stopped and looked up at the polyptych. “Oh.” He turned back to Arthur and smiled a dazzling, all-encompassing grin that crinkled his eyes and left Arthur weak.

When Arthur finally pulled his gaze back to Maria, she wore a soft, indulgent smile. “I’ll get you the address.”

The artist lived near enough the museum to walk, and Arthur led Merlin down the busy streets in a warm haze. Hurried tourists passed around them, and Arthur felt completely anonymous. He slowed and let himself walk even nearer to Merlin. What would he do, Arthur wondered, if he placed his hand on his back? The backs of their hands brushed against each other, and Arthur wanted to grab a hold. Something lurked just beyond his immediate awareness: a truth or a realization. He could feel it. He knew it was there. He felt overwhelmed by it, so he pushed it aside and refused to examine it. His hand brushed against Merlin’s again and he relaxed and let it be.

“People can see.” Merlin’s voice was low and breathy. In response, Arthur tangled his fingertips with Merlin’s, letting them slide together and twist. He felt Merlin’s warm skin against the pads of his fingers and through the rest of his body, as if those five points were the base of all his senses. Merlin stopped. Arthur turned to him. His eyes swept the street—they remained anonymous in the bustle, so he stepped toward Merlin, watching his reaction.

“No one is watching us,” Arthur said.

“I know.” Merlin’s voice was husky. His eyes moved from Arthur’s eyes to his lips. Then he reached over and pressed a button by the gate they stood in front of. “But we’re here.”


The gate led them into a blue and white tiled courtyard. A shallow pool filled the center of the space and a small fountain splashed merrily at its center. Around the pool, potted plants crowded the walkway at varying heights. Arthur wondered what it would look like in spring, and he was momentarily disoriented by the seasonal contrast; spring and summer had so dominated the past week at home. Yet green still clung to this courtyard at least. The weather was balmy, and Arthur could almost imagine it existed outside of time and seasonal change.

The surrounding building was pink stone, ornately designed with a veranda and wrought iron balconies. A door opened above them, and Arthur looked up into cool, assessing, green eyes. The looks was becoming familiar. Arthur could almost hear Merlin thinking. “Yeah,” he said. “Definitely.” Merlin nodded.

“Emrys,” said the man. “I am Aglain. Welcome to my home.” He gestured toward a spiral staircase and met them when they reached the top. “I heard rumours of your consort. This is he?”

Aglain bowed to him. It was one of the strangest experiences of Arthur’s life, and that included being part of a Druid sex ritual. “I am honoured,” said Aglain. “Please.” He directed them toward an open set of French doors.

Aglain’s home was a splash of colour, but somehow still peaceful. It left Arthur with a sensation of joy and relaxation. He looked more closely at the muraled walls and wondered how much the effect was due to Aglain’s warm smile and how much it was a result of mystic paint. Regardless, he liked it far more than the Mortimer paintings in the Camelot gallery. “Thank you for allowing us to visit with no warning or invitation,” Merlin said. He glance around the room was quick and neutral, and Arthur wondered if he was not affected by the welcome; it must be the art, then, and his magic must be a shield.

“It is my privilege, Emrys. I am honoured you found your way to my home.” He placed a hand on his heart. “And you, My Lord.”

“Oh, no, please call me Arthur.”

Aglain nodded in acquiescence. “May I offer you some mate?”

“Yes, please,” Merlin agreed. Aglain directed them to a small sitting area and left to prepare the drink.

“He bowed to me.”

Merlin inhaled slowly and let it out even slower. His eyes were restless. “I noticed that, yes.”

“If feel like there’s something you aren’t telling me.”

Merlin raised his eyebrows and swallowed. “Do you?”

“So there is something you aren’t tell me.” He watched Merlin blink a few times. “Does this have to do with the voices calling me a king?”

“What?!”

“At the stone circle.”

“They did?”

“So it does, then?”

“I don’t know! It doesn’t make any sense unless…”

“Unless?”

Merlin shook his head a bit violently. “I don’t know, Arthur.”

“But you’re Emrys. You’re like, the real king.”

“Not… exactly.”

“Okay, explain it.”

“I’m the protector.”
“Of the king?”

“Yes?”

“So then…” They looked at each other. Arthur couldn’t repress the little laugh he released. Then he sobered. He was *not* a king, no matter what the voice called him. He wasn’t even the head of the Pendragon Family. Furthermore, he didn’t want to be the leader.

“To what do I owe the honour of your visit?” Aglain set a tea tray down on the coffee table and handed them each a cup.

“What can you tell us about the Mapuche?” Merlin asked.

Aglain nodded, face sober. “Little, I’m afraid. At least little in the way I believe you are asking.”

“We’re searching for something,” Arthur explained. “For the library.”

“It’s a dagger.”

“Really Merlin?”

“It’s fine!”

“Alright.”

Arthur looked over to Aglain and found him watching them, fingers steepled and smile enigmatic. “Do you know where to find this dagger?”

“No,” they answered in unison.

Aglain’s mouth curved into a bigger smile. “How can I help?”

“We’re looking for a temple, ruin, or other site along the ley line.”

“Or else related to a water deity,” Arthur added. He had prepared. “Like, uh, Pariacaca or Yúcahu.”

“Huh?” Merlin stared at him.

“What?”

“Pariacaca or Yúcahu?”

“Yeah, water deities.”

The look Merlin was giving him made Arthur feel a bit weak, so he focused on Aglain, who was smiling even brighter, as if he may start laughing at any moment. “There are many sacred sites along the ley line. I will have to look into the water deity connections. Do you know anything else?”

Merlin nodded. “It is probably at least as old as the 13th Century.”

Aglain nodded. “I have a few ideas. I’ll need to look through some notes.” He gestured to an overstuffed secretary desk at the far end of the room. Merlin’s eyes lit up when he saw it. “Yes, it’s a mess. That is years of notes.”

Merlin made a small squeaking sound.
“He wants to ask you to bequeath them to the library,” Arthur said. Merlin turned a charming shade of fuchsia.

Aglain laughed. “He does, I can see.” His eyes tracked back and forth between them and Arthur wondered what he saw. He wondered, suddenly, if Agalin though they were a couple. Consort.

Arthur sat back in his chair and imagined taking Merlin’s hand there, in front of Aglain. That’s right, he thought. This one is mine. He considered how delectable Merlin looked in his suit, how crazy brilliant he was, how funny, how kind. And he didn’t think Arthur was evil any more. That was a step in the right direction. He just refused to be kept a secret. And he was right, Arthur realized. He deserved better. He deserved a partner. He deserved someone who would brag about how great he was. Not someone who would result in him being hounded or sacked.

Then again, Arthur couldn’t think what the rags could possibly publish bad about him. Merlin was about as perfect as someone could get. And maybe his father couldn’t get Merlin sacked. Maybe his influence on the board and in the Five was waning—that could be the source of his and Morgana’s angst. Maybe Arthur could just be himself and do as he pleased and fuck all. Maybe Uther wouldn’t care if his son didn’t make a political marriage. Maybe Merlin had more powerful friends than Uther.

Because the more Arthur thought about it, the more he realized he wasn’t really afraid of upsetting his father. He was afraid of what his upset father would do. And he couldn’t do much to hurt Arthur at this point—been there done that—but he could hurt Merlin. Far more than any tabloid. And this realization, so damn obvious in hindsight, made him feel ill.

“Arthur?” Merlin touched his arm. “You okay?”

Arthur didn’t know how much control he had over his face, but Merlin’s eyes widened and he looked to Aglain. “I think we should head back to the hotel. Will you be at the gala tonight?”

Aglain nodded. “I will now, Emrys.” He leaned toward Arthur. “My Lord,” he said. “You should know by now that the Fates have much planned for you.” He smiled, and it was soft and kind. “Even I have seen this in the crystals and the fire.” Merlin’s hand tightened on his arm. “I am sorry for what you will lose. I think you know. It will be hard, yes, but we will rejoice with you when the tempest has passed.”

“Until tonight,” said Merlin. He took Arthur by the arm and led him outside.

“Thank you,” Arthur managed. His throat felt thick and his stomach heaved. It made him angry. Furious and terrified.

It had been a few days since he’d seen his father, and even longer since they’d spoken, just them. Perhaps, Arthur thought, it was time.

Arthur Pendragon was not a coward. He set his shoulders (and okay, Merlin was right, he did that) and led them back to the hotel. Only this time, they stopped at each plaza they passed and Arthur put his arm around Merlin, and gradually that touch made him believe. So when they got back, Merlin went to lie down and Arthur pulled out his mobile. He had calls to make.

“Yes,” came a cold voice after the first ring.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Hello father. We need to talk.”
**Inspired by a conversation I once had with a cousin about how difficult it is to let go of toxic parents.**

Have I told you all lately how awesome you are and how much love I have for you? Well you are, and I do.

Next time, there's a benefit dinner. I thought we'd get to the gala ball, but it's taking longer than expected. I may up the chapter count to 31.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

In which Merlin has impure thoughts and there is a fancy dinner.

The night was sultry for Buenos Aires in May. Merlin adjusted his tie and tried not to stare at Arthur. He wasn’t making it easy. Cars and buses crept past them along the crowded boulevard, and they weaved between the other pedestrians on the walk to the museum.

Arthur led the way. Merlin followed, helpless against the tailoring of Arthur’s suit. His shoulders were broad and his hips were narrow as he kept looking at Merlin. He wasn’t speaking, and that silence made Merlin acutely aware of each hesitant peek back at his hair, his face, or his suit.

It was Merlin’s best black tie. He paid a lot for it because he knew it made him look good. At the time, he’d felt slight remorse, but now he thought it had been worth every penny. That had become clear the moment he’d stepped out of his room, ready for the benefit dinner.

After leaving Aglain’s villa, Merlin had been tired, but eager to see each of the landmarks and historic sites they passed. They traipsed slowly through the city, Arthur’s hand possessive on his back. At first, Merlin thought he should shrug it off, but it felt good. Yes, he thought, let them think he’s mine. He’d removed his jacket and undone his tie, and he could feel Arthur’s hand pressing against him. His body was wound tight as a spring. Every statue and every plaza took on a romantic possibility. Merlin thought Buenos Aires probably held that sensuality all the time, but it was intensified by the warmth of Arthur’s eyes and the soft press of his hand.

Still, the travel caught up with him, and he decided to lie down for a while before the benefit. They would have dinner at the museum, then attend a cocktail hour and silent auction before the larger gala event at night. Merlin never saw this side of these events. As a rule, he was a charity recipient—scholarship winner or library representative—rather than a benefactor. He was the one forced to perform, to network and answer asinine questions, not be impressed.

He heard the other shower going when he woke from his nap. Arthur must have finished whatever phone calls he needed to make. Merlin stretched. He felt better. Honestly, the ill-advised massage had helped his muscles, even if it hurt his sense of self-preservation. The nap helped even more, and when the water switched off, he decided to shower himself, to wash clean any muck from the city streets.

The bathroom was finished in pale blue tile with a walk-in shower that had an excess of jets. Merlin groaned out loud. He wondered if Arthur could hear him. He rather wanted Arthur to hear him. And yet he didn’t. He wasn’t interested in a fling. And he hadn’t lied when he said he couldn’t be a secret. He knew he couldn’t force a label on Arthur; he couldn’t press him to go through some sort of coming out process if he wasn’t ready or didn’t think it was necessary; that would be wrong. But Merlin also knew he deserved a partner, and the sight-seeing had only made that need clearer. Arthur had treated him like a boyfriend. With Aglain, Arthur had been a support, an equal member of a team: a partner. Partner. Merlin let water cascade over his face.

Arthur was interesting to talk to. He was fun. He felt like a companion, like a boyfriend should—a
lovers, but he felt, somehow, more relaxed and comfortable with Arthur than he did nearly anyone else. Far more than he had, to be honest, with any of his past, actual lovers.

He rinsed. As the water ran, strong and hot on his body, he thought what he’d do if Arthur joined him. He shouldn’t let him. He should say no. What would Arthur do then? Would he push him against the cool tiles? Merlin leaned into them. Would he press himself into him, despite his protestations—knowing that all it would take was a “please” and Merlin would say yes?

He would. Merlin soaped himself. He would say yes and tell Arthur he could do anything he wanted. He’d let him. And he would give as good as he received.

He rinsed. My gods, he thought. I am turning into quite the slut. Then he considered his unflagging erection. I wish. I really wish.

He dressed slowly, ritualistically. The mirror showed a calm, pale face and lightly styled hair. The white shirt made his eyes look electric blue. He wore braces instead of a belt, with no waistcoat, a bow tie and cufflinks made from a pair of his mother’s earrings. He stepped out of his room before putting on his jacket.

Arthur was dressed and waiting. Merlin forgot how to breathe.

They had spent a lot of time together, and Merlin had lost that first image of Arthur in the Camelot ballroom, sleek and sartorial with grace and something initially unidentifiable. It wasn’t money; a lot of people had money. This was something less tangible. Class, Merlin realized. He has class.

The suit loved Arthur’s body, it was clear. It clung to him in all the places Merlin wanted to lick. Arthur stood by the balcony doors and stared at him, rubbing at his chest, lips parted but silent. He let out a noisy breath and then they were on their way, having traded words for sighs and nods and fleeting touches that tingled.

So Merlin was refreshed and wide awake on the walk back to the museum, and every look was captured, memorized, and filed away. Every touch was a shock of energy that pulled Merlin along in Arthur’s wake, like his life itself depended on that impulse.

The museum atrium was a column-lined space that blended neoclassical form with contemporary light. Enormous skylights flooded the center of the room with amber-tinted streams of early evening sun. The benefit dinner was fairly intimate, and tables had been set up between the pillars, overlooked by statues, old and new, that reminded the diners what Truth and Beauty looked like, and why it was so important to preserve them.

Merlin and Arthur were welcomed by a smiling young woman who ushered them in and told them dinner would begin within a half hour. Arthur’s hand brushed against Merlin’s, and trailed along his hip and his back as he led them through the groups of attendees and found the seats marked with their names. He turned his gaze fully on Merlin, then, and leaned forward. “This reminds me of the night we first met,” he said. He took a step toward Merlin. “I may have to find a Bordeaux and a conservatory.”

“It would take you away from all the action out here.”

“You know, don’t you, that I would…” Arthur took another step toward Merlin, who had now been backed against the table. “I would gladly—”
“Arthur Fucking Pendragon, you have got to be shitting me.” A man seemed to materialize beside them and Arthur flinched. “Uther is sending you to these things now? I thought we had all agreed you weren’t cut out for the politicking.” His face was still, but his eyes moved up and down both of them and his mouth twisted up at the corner. “And who might you be?”

Arthur’s shoulders were tight and he had gone pale. “None of—”

“Merlin Hunithson,” Merlin interrupted. He extended a hand, which the man seemed to sneer at a little before accepting. “Who are you?”

The man raised his eyebrows and Arthur made a choking sound suspiciously similar to a laugh. “Really?” the man asked.

Merlin recognized the man from pictures, but he was not about to admit it. He just cocked his head to the side and gave an innocent, quizzical look. He shrugged.

“I’m Cenred Villaret.” Obviously, the wanker.

“Oh, okay.” Merlin shrugged as if he’d never heard of him. “Cheers.” He looked at Arthur. “I heard there’s a cartography exhibit in the lower gallery. We should try to see it before dinner, if you think there’s time.”

“Uh, yeah, of course. Let’s go now.” He stepped away, and as Merlin followed, a camera flashed in their faces. Arthur grimaced. He peeked over his shoulder at Cenred, so Merlin led them away.

He paused at the top of the stairs. “Okay, I know you don’t like him, but what was that about?”

Arthur looked back toward the atrium. He didn’t respond.

“Arthur. Hey.”

“What?”

“Cenred. What is the deal?”

Arthur made a face. “Why is he here?”

“Fancy event with press coverage. Based on what you’ve told me, it sounds like it’s right up his alley.”

“Kind of.”

“What do you mean?”

“A museum expansion… I would’ve expected him to just send money. Enough to get the family name on the wall.”

“Like you were going to do?”

“Yes, okay? But I’m just… confused why he’s here now.”

“Why do you hate him so much?”

“I don’t hate him…” Merlin lifted an eyebrow. “Okay, I kind of hate him.” His voice was low. Merlin led him down the stairs. It was quiet; even the guards were gone.
Merlin walked over to the enormous globe that dominated the space. “I’m not used to seeing you intimidated,” he said.

“Intimidated? Who said I was intimidated?”

“Life experience.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur approached him slowly.

“Most of us spend our first eighteen years or so dealing with bullies.” He put his hand on Arthur’s arm. “I take it you didn’t have very many.”

Arthur looked stunned for a moment. “I… did not.” His mouth drew into a tight, mirthless smile.

“Arthur?” Merlin let his hand rub Arthur’s arm.

“I think he tried to kill me.”

“What? When?”

“My father said I imagined it. When we were kids, swimming, at Cannes.”

“Christ. What happened?”

Arthur’s eyes were unfocused. “I’ve never told anyone but my father…”


“He just… held me down. Told me that someday he’d finish the job.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It seems like he’s always hated me. It got worse when we were ten or eleven.”

“What changed?”

“He was meaner.”

“No, I mean, did something else change?”

“No? I suppose that’s around the time my father tried to start making me be a part of the Five. So we were together more.”

“And you weren’t interested in it.”

“Right.”

“And how does Cenred feel about the Five Kingdoms?”

“It probably rivals supermodels and fast cars for his favourite thing.”

“Yeah?”

“The Villarets don’t like the Pendragons. Or the Plantagenets. Or most of the Five, really.”

“And you were supposed to be your father’s protégé.”
“But I don’t want to.”

“So you’ve given up the chance to have more power than Cenred.”

Arthur shrugged. “I think he’s just mean.”

Merlin laughed. “Maybe. Or maybe he’s jealous.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Jealous?”

“Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Because it’s Cenred, and I’m…”

“You don’t even realize, do you?”

“Realize what?” Merlin struggled to put anything in words, so he stared at Arthur for a moment instead. Arthur let out a small huff. “Merlin, all I’ve ever been is a massive disappointment to everyone in the Five. I—”

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

“Just ask my father,” Arthur argued. “And even more now.” His eyes focused on Merlin’s and they looked almost afraid.

“Arthur, there is nothing about you that anyone in their right mind could ever be disappointed by. Frustrated maybe.”

“You think I’m frustrating?” His eyes looked Merlin up and down leisurely. “Me?”

“I’m not frustrating, I just have standards.”

“So you’re saying that the only thing holding you back right now is that you don’t want to be my secret.” He licked his lips. “That’s it.”

“I don’t think—”

“But you would be… amenable—”

“Amenable? Really?”

“You’d be with me if it wasn’t a secret.”

“Be with you?”

“Merlin.” Arthur’s voice had an edge to it.

“Every time I think I don’t want anything to do with you, you change my mind.”

“I would say sorry, but…”

“Of course you aren’t sorry.”

“No, because I want you. I told you. I want you to want me, too.”

Merlin looked around them. “I thought we already covered that.”
“So it is just secrecy then.” Arthur stepped closer.

“That, and you’re a prat.”

“Oh really?” Another step. They almost touched.

“Yeah.” Arthur’s hands found the waist of Merlin’s trousers. Merlin let his eyes find Arthur’s lips. “And a clotpole.”


“It is too.”

“Then describe it.”

“Arthur—” Their lips met, desperate and frantic. Arthur tasted like peppermint, and Merlin chased the flavour with his tongue. Arthur let him, and Merlin explored Arthur’s mouth, setting a quick rhythm with each slip of his tongue against the wet heat. Arthur’s hands gripped him, but Merlin’s were unleashed. He raked them through Arthur’s hair, then gripped his ass and pushed their bodies together. Arthur let out a whine as their cocks rubbed together, aching to be freed from their clothes. Merlin grunted in response, and Arthur’s kiss went wild. He pressed into Merlin with a fierce shove that sent Merlin careening backward into the globe.

Alarms rang out. Merlin spun around, eyes flashing gold. The globe was suspended in the air, just about to crash into the floor. Merlin lifted his hands and it floated up. He righted the stand and gently let the globe settle on top of it.


“Sorry, so sorry,” said Merlin. “I took a step too near.”

“Lord Pendragon!” One of the photographers stepped around the guard. “Tell us who your friend is.”

Arthur grimaced. “This is Merlin Hunithson, head librarian at Camelot.” The photographer paused, thinking.

“Does Pendragon-de Bois-Montaigne have business plans with the library? It isn’t currently a Pendragon holding, right?”

“No, Mr. Hunithson is just accompanying me on this trip.”

“Is the Camelot Library planning a project with the archive here? We’d love to add information about that in our Arts and Culture pages.”

“No, er,” Arthur said. “Not at this time.”

“Then…” She gave a puzzled look to each of them. “Then why are you…”

“In the future, maybe,” Arthur said. The photographer had pulled a mobile out of her pocket and begun tapping at it. Arthur gave them all a big smile and said they needed to get back to the atrium, thank you, because they couldn’t miss the dinner. Merlin’s heart was still pounding from the globe mishap, so he followed without question. They slid into their chairs, both slightly breathless. And
then Arthur’s mobile buzzed. “Oh for…” He looked at it, glanced at Merlin, and then answered. “Hello.” Merlin could hear a woman’s voice on the other end.

“Excuse me.” Merlin stood. “I’m going to…” he pointed toward the restrooms. Arthur nodded at him, listening intently to the woman’s voice.

Merlin washed his hands three times, kicking himself. It was Arthur in that damned suit, being picked on and showing his vulnerabilities. He was irresistible. And now what? He was on the phone with some woman—making a late night call, too, accounting for time zone differences. He straightened his bow tie. He wasn’t sure how Arthur could kiss him like that, imply they were business associates, and then take a call from a woman all within five minutes, but there they were. Of course. If nothing else, Merlin was not stupid or naïve. He knew the upper class had different habits when it came to love.

Love.

There is was again. He shook his head at himself in the mirror. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. He realized he hadn’t ever asked Arthur if he was even single.

The photographer was waiting for him outside the door. “Mr. Hunithson?”

“Yes.” He tried to walk past, but she blocked his way.

“Would you mind commenting on the event?”

“Um. No, not at all. This expansion is a vital contribution to the cultural history of the area, particularly the, uh, indigenous people whose art is preserved in the new wing.”

“Did you and Arthur get to see everything, then?”

Merlin frowned. “Lord Pendragon and I were able to see the new space earlier today.”

“Together?” She was tapping notes into a tablet.

Merlin adjusted his bow tie again. “I don’t think I follow.”

Without looking up, she asked, “Why’s that?”

Merlin didn’t want to be defensive or combative. “We were here together, yes.”

“Thank you Mr. Hunithson.” She smiled and walked quickly away.

The dinner was arduous. Each course was delicious, but the speakers were clearly not suited to public speaking. Merlin tried to focus on the words, but some were barely audible and others droned, making little sense. He tried to focus, but beneath the table, Arthur’s leg was pressed against his, so that each time one of them leaned forward or reached for a glass, it slid along with a soft hiss of fabric and hitched breath. The whole dinner was torture, and Merlin tried to steel himself against the night.

The after dinner cocktail hour was designed to entertain the benefit guests while the larger crowd arrived for the gala ball. For Merlin, it was a whirl of introductions. Somehow, Arthur knew all of the benefactors—or their nephews—and the artists and curators all wanted to know Merlin. Arthur remained close to his side, pulling champagne flutes for them from passing trays and replacing them
when they were drained.

The gala began with a change in the music, and Merlin felt an overwhelming sense of apprehension arrive and then melt with the opening chords of a tango. The crowd split and a woman in a thigh-revealing red dress led a tuxedo-clad man into the center of the room. The violinist held a long note, vibrato, and the pianist let a light trill hover as they took position. Arthur pressed Merlin to the front and whispered in his ear. “Is this what you had in mind for your visit to Argentina?”

Merlin shivered. The room was crowded and the lights were low and Arthur slipped his hand around Merlin’s waist.

The dancers posed. The music began.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

In which there is a fancy party and an enchanted garden.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Arthur had never seen anything quite like the tango dancers. He knew he was gripping Merlin tight, but he could not bring himself to let go; everything depended upon the dancers, who looked so close to a kiss, it burned him. The woman kicked a foot back, stiletto shining in the spotlight, and then she pivoted and hooked her leg around the man. He turned her, molded her, and led her up and down the cleared space. They pushed against each other, lips parted. Somewhere in his mind, Arthur knew this seduction was an act, part of the art, but he could not look away. He saw himself in the steady pursuit and the persistence—as well as the obvious sensuality.

Arthur refused to develop an erection at a charity event, especially one with an already-annoying press presence. He watched the dance, but forced himself to focus on other things: the pianist’s effortless skill, the source of the lighting. He wondered if tango was frequently performed in Buenos Aires, or if it was a stereotype being fulfilled to coax money from the donors.

The performance ended and the room brightened. He turned to Merlin. Merlin stared at him. His lips were parted like the dancers’ and his breath was labored. “Good?” Arthur asked.

“Incredible.” He meant it. Arthur could see Merlin’s heart in his eyes and he swallowed hard and felt his chest, again, swell and tighten. This feeling was not the same as arousal. The lights seemed to embrace Merlin; he glowed. Arthur watched his lips, his cheeks, his eyes, even his brow. Had he ever really looked at Merlin’s jaw? He did now.

“I want to dance with you,” Arthur said.

“What?”

The music was sultry. “I want to dance. With you.”

Merlin’s lips curved into a subtle smile. “I’m a terrible dancer.”

“Maybe you’ve only had terrible partners.”

“Well that is probably true. What makes you think you’re any better?”

Arthur let his own lips curve into a smile. “I’ve been doing this sort of thing since I could walk.”

“Dance?”

“Charm. I know all the motions. I’ve had to repeat them over and over at events like this for as long as I can remember.”

“How romantic. Is that supposed to charm me? Knowing you’ve done this so many times before?”
“No.” Arthur’s smile expanded.

“What then?”

“I’ve never wanted to do it before.”

“What?”

“I’ve gone through the motions. This is the first time I’ve ever wanted to— I want to do so much with —” He stopped when Merlin’s breath caught. “Merlin, I’ve been trying to tell you—”

“Aglain.” Merlin looked over Arthur’s shoulder. He smiled that heartbreaking, genuine grin, so Arthur could do nothing but turn and greet the artist.

“Emrys. Lord Pendragon.”

“Arthur. Let’s move somewhere we can talk,” Arthur suggested. Couples around them were beginning to dance, and the remainder made their way to the sides of the room.

Cenred walked by, flanked by a small man eagerly tapping on a tablet and a very young, heavily made up woman in a tight dress. Arthur wondered what her eyebrows really looked like. She really was pretty; it was too bad she had chosen such poor company… in age and personality. Cameras flashed and Arthur’s attention was pulled back to Merlin. He stood with Aglain, posing for a picture and calmly answering questions about how happy he was to see the work of the curators and directors.

Camelot was a world class institution, so it made sense that he’d become accustomed to this type of coverage. It occurred to Arthur that Merlin actually was a veteran journalism subject. He’d probably been interviewed extensively when he took the head librarian position. Arthur wondered how he’d missed the articles.

“There’s a site I’ve been to once before,” Aglain said. “Just by coincidence, we happened upon.” He looked between them. “It is remote. The nearest town is accessible, but the roads do not go to the temple. It is on the edge of the Andes, to the southwest.”

“Aglain, we cannot thank you enough.”

“It is my honour, Emrys. If I may, I will be happy to accompany you to the town.”

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder. “That would be fantastic.”

“Lord Pendragon?”

Arthur turned. It took him a moment to recognize Maria, the curator. She wore a black dress that showcased her incredible figure. Arthur realized this observation was merely factual, not emotional, and that he appreciated her beauty, but wasn’t drawn to it. It was a disorienting realization. “Hello. Thank you again for inviting us.”

“Thank you for attending. I want to introduce you to Señor Gilli Iglesias. He is the photographer you asked about.”

A simply-dressed young man with brown hair stood beside her. Arthur shook his hand. “Yes. Nice to meet you. My, uh, Merlin, that is, he admired— rather we admired several of your pictures.”

“Yes, excuse me. This is Merlin Hunithson of the Camelot Library and Archive of Arcane and Magical Artefacts.” He watched them shake hands. Merlin wore a placid, neutral smile. “We both appreciated the representation of the native groups in the gallery.”

“I’m always looking for contacts who can contribute to our understanding of artefacts the library comes across,” Merlin explained.

“And my family is always looking for photography to accompany publications.”

“Which photographs?”

Arthur started to answer, but stopped when he felt Merlin’s hand on his arm. Arthur turned to him and saw his head give a minute shake. Merlin said, “I think there were a few images of Diaquita ruins, and Huarpe children.”

Gilli’s mouth twisted, then straightened. “I’m most known for my work with the Mapuche.”

Merlin nodded. “I don’t think Camelot has had any contact or acquisitions from the Mapuche. We could use a contact in the future if needed, though.” Something was wrong; Merlin’s shoulders were stiff.

Gilli gave a tight smile. “It would be my pleasure.” Get him away, Arthur thought. He was almost overpowered by the instinct.

“If you’ll excuse us, I think I see a family friend I should speak to,” Arthur said. Gilli and Maria parted ways and left. “What was that?” Arthur asked.

“I don’t know but I do not trust that guy.”

“The best connection we have to the people who probably have the dagger?”

“Something didn’t feel right.”

“Feel right?”

“Arthur.”

“What?”

Merlin just stared at him for a moment.


Merlin smiled. “Thank you.”

“When would you like to leave for Patagonia,” asked Aglain.

“How long is the trip?” asked Merlin.

“A long day’s drive.”

“Should we just fly?”

Arthur smiled. Merlin asked as if it was their option, not as if asking for permission. “We can.”

“We can fly to Neuquén and hire a car to take south.”
Arthur already had his mobile out. “I’ll tell Tyr.” He had another message from Morgana, he saw. He’d listen to it later. He saw Merlin hastily look away as he swiped to dismiss the notification. He’d acted strange when she called earlier, too; Arthur wasn’t sure why. “I don’t want to bother Morgana with an itinerary now—it’s late back home. We may just worry about accommodations when we get there.”

Merlin nodded. Arthur dialed Tyr’s number and told him their next destination. Tyr asked if there would be time for him to do a little hiking. “Absolutely,” said Arthur.

“Then we’ll leave first thing,” said Tyr. He hung up before Arthur could say thanks. Arthur briefly wondered what Tyr would have said if he had told him there wasn’t time.

“First thing in the morning,” Arthur told Merlin and Aglain. “Aglain, we will pick you up at eight, if that is okay.”

“Is that first thing?” Merlin asked.

“Sure.”

Merlin laughed. “Well how long are we staying here?”

“I thought you were having a good time.”

“I am.”

“Then we’ll stay as long as you like.”

“Are you, though?”

“Am I what?”

“Having a good time.”

Arthur could hear Cenred’s voice across the room. He heard the eager clack of cameras. The vocalist was crooning something slow and earnest. “I am.”

Aglain cleared his throat. “I will see you in the morning.”

“Yes. Thanks,” Arthur said. Merlin was looking at him. He didn’t turn to watch Aglain walk away.

The atrium had been made over for the event, and a grand set of doors opened just beyond the band, revealing a courtyard beyond. Arthur pressed his hand against Merlin’s back and led him toward the floral-scented night. It was magical. Arthur knew he’d probably seen finer displays at royal wedding receptions and fashion week after parties, but this garden looked like a fairy tale come to life. Flowers grew along every possible surface, and delicate branches were plaited together to create arbors and tunnels with secretive alcoves and lantern-lit clearings. Everything smelled of bougainvillea and lilac, despite the season. Fairy lights hovered amid the trees and they reflected in Merlin’s eyes. Those eyes looked upon the scene with something like wonder, and Arthur’s chest ached. *Mine*, he thought, and *I want to show him everything*, and *I want him to look like that at me*.

They weren’t alone in the courtyard. It wasn’t a large space, but it felt like they could be lost there. Other couples wondered by, quiet and content to be ignored. Merlin stood beneath a cherry tree. He reached up and pulled off a petal, smiling to himself in a wicked way that sent Arthur’s pulse racing.

“Nothing.”

“Your face says something.”

“I was just thinking about cherry trees yesterday. A poem.” He looked up into the branches and smiled, and Arthur couldn’t breathe.

“Merlin, I need to ask you something.”

He heard Merlin’s quick inhalation. “Yes?”

“The board.”

“Huh?”

“Camelot. The board.”

“Ah.” His face fell. “What about it?”

“How close are you to most of the members?”

Merlin shrugged. “It varies.”

“Merlin, this is important. If…” he sighed. “If someone tried to… remove you.”

“What?”

“If someone tried to have you sacked, say. Would they do it?”

Merlin’s eyes had narrowed. “Why?”

“It’s just a hypothetical.”

“Is it? Or is something going on?” He pouted “What is this about? Also, whatever happened to that assassin guy?”

“Oh for Christ’s sake. Morgana said they handed him off to someone from the Security Service.”

“What?! This is not James Bond.” Arthur briefly imagined Merlin as Q, wearing all of Ben Whishaw’s costumes, in his glasses, then pushed the distraction aside.

“I know, but business with the Five, well, it frequently involves actual state issues. So it’s considered national security.”

“That is absolutely ridiculous. Your father is a businessman. He owns publishers. He isn’t even in Parliament.”

“Only because he doesn’t want to be. He doesn’t have time. It’s more impactful to have, you know, a dozen or two lords or MPs to do his bidding.”

“You’re serious?”

“I wish I wasn’t.” Perhaps Merlin didn’t fully understand, even now. “And this is just in the UK. He’s also embedded in the European Union, the US Congress, several other countries in Africa and Asia.”

“Your father?”
“The Five. And my father isn’t exactly the leader, but…”

“He’s more powerful than Cenred.”

“Than Lot. Yes.”

“So it is James Bond. And your dad is the head of Spectre.” Arthur winced. Merlin continued, “What does that have to do with me?”

Arthur looked at Merlin. He took in his open, intelligent eyes, his cheekbones, his steady hands. He considered his erudition, his warmth, his courage. “My father wants me to marry someone who will strengthen our alliance with one of the other Five Families.”

“He wants you to make a political marriage, even though it’s the twenty-first century.”

“Right.”

Merlin bit his lip. “And?”

“I’m not going to.”

“You’re not.”

“No.” He felt shaky.

“Because?”

“Will you dance with me?”

Merlin’s face looked slightly pained. “Arthur.” His voice was dangerously low. “What is this about?”

“Do I have to say?”

“I swear, for being the most stupidly brave person I know, you are the biggest coward.”

Arthur stepped into his space and leaned in. “You think so?”

“Arthur…” Merlin’s voice was a warning. His eyes were hooded. Arthur was so close he could feel Merlin’s breath.

“Merlin.” His voice sounded like a purr.

“What?” A throaty gasp.

He crowded him and leaned close to his ear. “The Druids call you the most powerful sorcerer of all time, right?”

“They exaggerate.”

“Tell me, Merlin.” He felt him shiver. “If I wanted to get you alone, if we wanted privacy, can you do that, even here?” He put one hand on Merlin’s hip and let the other stroke down Merlin’s chest, then up to find his neck. He let it trace the column and pause to feel the pulse, hummingbird fast at the shirt collar.

“Arthur.” The warning was tighter, more urgent. “You know people can see.”
“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You never answer mine.”

“Then ask me something.”

“What are you doing?”

Arthur exhaled and Merlin trembled against him. “I’m making sure everyone out here knows you’re mine.”

Merlin closed his eyes. “Not very well, then.” He wet his lips and they glistened. “You’re just teasing me.”

“Do you know what your lips look like?” Arthur whispered. “Sin.” He could smell him; Merlin was everything. “Especially when you’ve just kissed me, and they’re swollen and wet. They’re wet right now, like you can taste it. Like you’re ready for me.” Merlin made a slight moaning noise, and Arthur’s mind was flooded with images shocking and divine. He didn’t stop to be surprised at himself. “I can’t wait to see…” He let out a slow breath.

“See what?”

“To see them wrapped around me, when I get you on your knees.” The lips parted. “I can see your tongue too, Merlin. Tell me, do you want to taste me?”

“I think the real question,” Merlin panted, “is do you want to taste me.” Merlin’s eyes were smoldering gold around the pupil. The lights in both the atrium and the courtyard had dimmed.

“Yes,” Arthur whispered. “You have no idea how bad I want to taste you.”

The lights went out. A woman shouted. Fearful cries rang out, and amid them, Arthur leaned as close as possible to Merlin without touching. His lips hovered over Merlin’s neck—that tantalizing throat—so close they could almost feel the delicate skin. The wild floral scent of the courtyard mixed in Arthur’s senses with Merlin: his soap, magic, him. He pulled Merlin toward his body with the hand pressed on his hip, and then reached his other hand beneath Merlin’s jacket, against his back. He could see nothing but the faint golden glow of Merlin’s eyes.

In response, Merlin pulled Arthur’s necktie. He scraped his fingernails along Arthur’s back, and the heat below Arthur’s navel intensified. Arthur tangled his fingers into Merlin’s hair and pulled his head back, prompting a hissing sound.

Merlin’s hands shifted. They found Arthur’s shoulders, and then pushed. Arthur stumbled back and in a blink, the lights were back. Merlin was mussed. His hair was swept up in a messy fluff. His lips were true to Arthur’s words, despite the lack of a kiss: pink, sinfully plump and wet; they begged to be kissed. He ran his tongue over the bottom lip and it was almost red in the light. Arthur panted. He fought to control himself.

“Why?” He managed to ask.

“You realize privacy is simple. It requires no magic at all?”

“Yes, but—”

“You’re trying to seduce me in public.”
“You said you don’t want to be a secret.”

“You asked me to give us privacy, in public. What does that even mean?”

“I thought we’d, you know, and then, be off with magic, like, somewhere else private to, you know.”

“Arthur, for…” Merlin shook his head. “You can’t just distract me with… that every time you don’t want to answer a question.”

But it was so effective. Or had been. “Okay fine.” Arthur looked around. People had begun to calm down, but the gala was still in disarray. “We should go. Do you mind if we go?”

“Do I mind?” Merlin rolled his eyes. “How about do I mind this never-ending back and forth? Do I mind the I-want-to-kiss-you-but-no-one-can-see? Do I mind the cryptic questions with no answers?”

“Okay, I get it, fine, Merlin.”

“Do I mind—”

“You’re the one who turned all the lights off, Merlin!”

“And if I hadn’t? What then?”

“Nothing.”

“You were just talking on the phone to some girl!”

“Morgana?”

“Huh?

“I was talking to Morgana.”

“Really?

“Yes, you can look at my call log!”

“I don’t need to look at your call log. I’m not—”

“What? Insane? Because you are.”

“I am not, I’m just tired of being jerked around.”

“I’m not jerking you around!”

“You don’t know what you want!”

“Yes, I do!”

“Prove it.”

“I told my father.”

“What?”
The semester has definitely gotten a lot more busy, so my (fic) productivity is slowing. Sorry! I'm doing my best!
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

In which the author recognizes that we are all thirsty, and we deserve a drink of water.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You mean you told your father… what exactly?”

“I told him about… well. I think I’m…” Merlin held his breath as he listened. He waited. Arthur clenched his jaw, and then visibly forced himself to relax. “I think I’m bisexual.”

“You think?”

“I am. I’m bisexual.” He made a face.

“What?”

“What is it about that word?”

“Probably pervasive biphobia that is embedded in books, film… media as a whole.” Arthur looked both perplexed and annoyed. “And, you know, toxic masculinity.” Arthur made another face. “What?”

“Just… stop talking.”

“You asked.”

“It was rhetorical.”

“Didn’t sound rhetorical.”

“Well, it was. I don’t have toxic masculinity.”

“I didn’t say you have it. It isn’t a disease. It’s part of society.”

“I know what toxic masculinity is.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Merlin, I’m sure.”

Merlin just looked at him, and then was unceremoniously elbowed in the side. “Hey!” He laughed, and then Arthur laughed, and then Arthur had tears in his eyes, so Merlin elbowed him back and scampered away.

“Seriously?” Arthur called, scrambling after him. Merlin ducked around a hedge corner. “How old are you?”
“You’re the one chasing me!”

Arthur stopped, then purposefully stepped back. “Am not.”

Merlin laughed again, harder. “Okay, so you aren’t straight. And you told your father.”

“Right.” Arthur’s face shuttered. The band started a new song. The drum was steady and slow. Arthur’s eyes were far away as a woman began to sing. The tune was low and legato, and it drifted through the garden like a breeze. They stood mere steps from each other, leaning forward as if waiting for the other to bridge the gap.

“Dance with me?” Merlin held his hands out.

“What?”

“Dance with me.” He tangled his fingers with Arthur’s. They were alone, now, in this hidden little part of the garden, where it was cool and fragrant, and dimly lit. Merlin’s other hand touched Arthur’s hip, and Arthur mirrored the placement, then pulled Merlin toward him. He swayed to the music and stepped close, so that their legs fit together like puzzle pieces. “What did he say?” Merlin asked.

“He said I wasn’t.”

“Really?”

“He said he didn’t know what had come over me, that people don’t go through this kind of phase at my age, and that there must be something else going on, and that I need to grow up.”

“Well, he is right that people don’t go through a gay phase at your age. Or at any age. So there is that.” Merlin felt Arthur’s chuckle beneath his hands.

“I told him I wasn’t lying.”

“I imagine that went well.” Their bodies moved effortlessly. Merlin felt, more than made, his head lean toward Arthur’s, just enough to feel his soft hair brushing against his temple.

“He… asked about you.”

“Me? Why?”

Arthur swayed with the music, clutching Merlin’s hand. He nuzzled close, pressing their faces together. “He thinks… it’s you who’s brought this on.”

“I’ve turned you?”

Arthur pressed his body against Merlin.

“He isn’t wrong…”

“I didn’t make you—”

“Want to kiss you? You did.”

“You’ve never wanted another man?”

“Not like this, but…” He sighed, and the hot breath sent shivers through Merlin’s body. “I don’t
“Because no one else has ever resisted you before?”

“No, because there’s nobody else like you.” Merlin started to protest. He pulled back to say no, he was ordinary, that his interests may seem abnormal to some, but in some circles he was typical. But when he pulled back, he saw Arthur’s face. It was open and half-broken and Merlin reached up and held it between his hands. “I think he’s going to try to ruin you, Merlin.”

“He would do that?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes he’s… shockingly kind. He protects people. He does what he thinks is right. But he lets nothing get in the way of that.”

“Like his son’s happiness?”

Arthur clenched his jaw. “Maybe,” he whispered.

“So what are you going to do?”

“I can’t…” Arthur trailed off and Merlin’s heart felt like it stopped beating. This is when he tells me he can’t, he thought. This is it. “I can’t be the man he wants me to be.”

“What?”

“It’s too much. Too… I don’t know, but I can’t.”

“You—”

“I choose you, Merlin. If you… If you’ll have me.” He leaned his forehead into Merlin’s. “But he’ll blacklist you. Your career…”


Arthur’s mouth quirked up at the corner. “Yes, Merlin. I said—”

Merlin silenced him with another kiss. It began chaste: a meeting of lips. They brushed over each other, but Arthur clutched at Merlin. He kissed him again and again, assailing his lips with an unceasing barrage of heat that built in Merlin until he was left breathless and quivering. “We need to get… back…” He managed to whisper. “Now.”

“Yes,” Arthur agreed.

Leaving the gala was like running a gauntlet, but everyone was awash with cool smiles and wealth. Merlin thought he might prefer a barbarian horde or something else that would let him use up the energy crackling inside of him. The lights flickered, and when Merlin passed the sound system it squealed unpleasantly and he had to force himself to relax for it to stop. Arthur tugged at his hand, and the other guests saw them. They watched them, and Arthur didn’t pull away. Can he really be like this? Merlin wondered. This man, truly, was not only brave and kind and smart, but also interested in him?
Both men were silent as they entered a taxi. Merlin watched Arthur’s face in the streetlight glow. Arthur was watching Merlin. Their hands rested on the seat between them, not quite touching. Merlin gave the hotel address; the drive was short, and Arthur kept his silent vigil. He did not speak, but as the car neared the hotel, he reached his hand up and took hold of Merlin’s bowtie. He pulled, slowly, until it came free. He ran his fingers along the crisp fabric with a soft whoosh and scratch of nail at the edge. Then he stuffed it into the pocket inside his jacket. Merlin felt he was being unmade, and thought that while the physical piece was slowly reaching a head, the methodical destruction of all his internal barriers had begun long before this night.

He met Arthur’s gaze, accepted it, returned it, and thought, *This is exactly where I want to be at this moment.*

Their footsteps were soft on the gleaming tile of the hotel lobby. Merlin nodded in response to the night clerk’s greeting and called the lift. Arthur was still quiet, and it unnerved Merlin as they waited. He tried to interpret Arthur’s face to see what was churning within. All he saw was a reflection of himself: desire, fear, and anticipation. Merlin felt lifetimes pass as they waited. When the doors opened, they slipped inside and faced each other. The doors closed, and Arthur reached out and undid the top button of Merlin’s shirt. Merlin held himself still, feeling the trace of Arthur’s fingers against his throat. He braced himself. Arthur’s mouth curved and he flicked open another button.

Finally, Arthur’s spoke. “I’m not going to let you run away from me this time.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Do you know how bad I—” he exhaled. “You’ve been driving me crazy for days, Merlin. There’s just something about you…”

Merlin smirked. “What? That I argue with you and don’t let you have your way?”

Arthur took a step toward him. “You can be infuriating,” he admitted. The lift chimed and the doors opened. Arthur turned on his heel and strode out, Merlin following. “Infuriating but also, just…” He opened their suite door and held it for Merlin.

“Just what?”

The door closed and Arthur slid the lock in place. He turned to Merlin and reached out a hand. He flicked open another button on Merlin’s shirt. Merlin looked down and saw half his chest was now exposed. Arthur stared at it, shaking his head. “How are you so…” He bit his lip. He pressed his hand on Merlin’s chest, flat against his bare skin. Merlin gasped and Arthur looked up into his eyes. He lifted an eyebrow and then pushed, backing Merlin against the wall. And Merlin knew, even if Arthur didn’t finish the sentence: it was a craving each of them felt, almost a drug. It was urgent and overwhelming, and Merlin felt Arthur shake with need as he pressed his hips against Merlin’s and let out a low groan. He gripped the edges of Merlin’s shirt and tugged it free from his trousers. Patiently, then, he undid each of the remaining buttons. “I don’t think I will ever get enough of your skin.” He spread both hands on Merlin’s chest, then slid them, searing, up to his shoulders. It split Merlin’s shirt wide, and he shrugged himself free of shirt, braces, and jacket in one hurried motion. Merlin pocketed his cufflinks and let it all fall.

Arthur took a step back. His eyes went wide as they swept over Merlin’s flesh. He looked to his hips, entranced. Merlin reached his hand out and carefully, deliberately undid Arthur’s tie. He slid it from Arthur’s collar and dropped it with his shirt. Arthur undid his cuffs and slowly unbuttoned his shirt. Merlin watched as, inch by inch, the skin was exposed. He leaned against the wall, and Arthur’s eyes fixed on his throat. He could feel Arthur watch him swallow. Merlin slid his feet out of his shoes. Arthur mirrored him, and then took Merlin’s hand. He intertwined their fingers, then
stepped forward, pressing Merlin against the wall. “Now I’ve got you where I want you.”

Merlin smiled. “A luxury hotel in a romantic city?”

Arthur rubbed his face against Merlin’s, sliding his temple along Merlin’s cheek, letting his lips drop to Merlin’s shoulder. “Exactly,” he whispered.

“That’s ridiculous, I—” Merlin stopped as Arthur’s hands found his body. They gripped the skin at his waist, then slid upward, fingers parted, and clutched his shoulders. Merlin could feel Arthur’s desire pressed against his own, and he leaned his head back and shuddered a breath. He stared at Arthur, then leaned forward to claim his mouth.

The kiss was a beginning. Merlin could feel that something changed in the air around him, like his magic shifting and accepting Arthur. Their lips caressed each other in a give and take, and their tongues met. This time, Arthur sucked at Merlin’s lips, then nibbled the tiniest bit on the bottom. His hand pushed into Merlin’s hair and his mouth dropped to his neck. “This,” he whispered, running a finger along the long column, “this kills me. Merlin.”

Merlin whimpered and leaned his head to the side for greater exposure. His nipples were sensitive where Arthur’s parted shirt slid against them, and he wrapped one arm around Arthur’s back and threaded his other fingers through Arthur’s hair. Then Arthur’s face lowered, mouth hot across his clavicle, as he made his way down Merlin’s chest. He took one of Merlin’s nipples between his lips. He sucked hard at it and toyed it with his tongue. As Merlin raked both hands through Arthur’s hair, he pushed his hips forward and Arthur met them with his hands. His fingers trailed over Merlin’s erection and found the button of his trousers. He slid the button free, and then looked up to meet Merlin’s gaze—hooded, dark—as he slowly lowered the zipper.

Merlin was going to combust. He shamelessly rolled his body, eliciting a groan from Arthur and whispered, “Mm fuck.” Arthur’s fingers toyed with his waistband and Merlin let out a frustrated growl as they traced the lines of Merlin’s hipbones, pausing once they reached the trousers. Arthur’s chuckle was low and raspy. “In a hurry?”

Merlin glared. “You…” He shoved Arthur’s shirt and jacket free. “I’ll show—” he gripped Arthur and turned them around so that Arthur was pressed against the wall. Merlin sucked at Arthur’s chest, nipping and licking, heedless of marks and caring only for the tight grip of Arthur’s hands and the quick report of his breath. He moaned Merlin’s name as Merlin flitted his tongue against his nipples and made quick work of his trouser fly.

Merlin shoved them down, and the pants beneath, exposing the thick length of Arthur’s arousal to his gaze. Mine, the thought, and he lowered himself to his knees. All mine. The lights flickered in the room; the lights may have flickered across Buenos Aires. Merlin pressed his lips against Arthur’s hipbone. He toyed with it, plying Arthur’s skin with his lips and tongue, inching ever nearer. Arthur whimpered. “Merlin… fuck,” he whispered. “Ngh…” His hands gripped Merlin’s hair and his body thrust forward, so Merlin shoved him back, provoking a louder moan and a “Please.”

Merlin looked up. He stared Arthur in the eyes and leaned his mouth forward until he was so, so close Arthur looked like he was in pain. Merlin reached up and took the base of Arthur’s cock in one hand and with the other, ran his knuckles across Arthur’s testes. He hummed in appreciation as Arthur shuddered. Then he ran his lips along the length. He lapped at it, letting his hands take a slow pace, as if massaging Arthur. “Merlin,” Arthur moaned. So Merlin, still looking Arthur in the eye, leaned forward and took as much of him as he could into his mouth. Arthur squeezed his eyes shut as Merlin sucked at him, and when he reopened them, they were glassy and amazed. Merlin worked at him, turning his wrist and taking him deep, and kneading below, with his other hand.
Arthur widened his stance in response, so Merlin licked down the side and took that in his mouth, too. Arthur was inarticulate, but punctuated his greedy noises with curses. Merlin licked and sucked and pumped Arthur’s cock in his hand. He let his tongue slide as far back as he dared, and Arthur nearly collapsed against the wall. Merlin pulled back enough to ask, “You like that?” in a gravelly voice. Arthur nodded his head. So Merlin took him back into his mouth and let his fingers gently track further along Arthur’s perineum.

Arthur spread his legs farther, and Merlin had to squeeze himself in response, lest he lose control. He pulled off and whispered a curse of his own. “Really?”

Arthur looked down. “That feels so good… fuck, Merlin… why does it feel so good?”

Merlin licked the slitted tip of Arthur’s cock and savoured the bitter saltiness there. “That is… just wait…” He mouthed along the ridge of the head, sucking at the underside and using a touch of teeth. As he sucked, he let his finger explore further, ghosting back, gentle and faint. He saw Arthur relax into him, so Merlin pulled back and ran a hand over his mouth. “Here.” He held his hand out to take Arthur’s and stood. He pushed down to help Arthur step out of his rumpled clothes. He took in the unabashed beauty of Arthur’s skin. He was magnificent, glowing gold and flushed red. He pulled him forward, to the sofa.

“No,” Arthur said. He tugged Merlin’s hand and led him past.

Arthur’s room was a mirror of Merlin’s. White linens were plush and soft on a broad bed. Merlin let a surge of magic light a lamp, low and subtle in the corner. Arthur stopped at the edge and pushed at Merlin’s trousers, but Merlin couldn’t wait. He pushed Arthur onto the bed and followed on his knees. He kissed him, letting his hands explore Arthur’s hair and skin. He leaned over him and felt his body arch upward. In response, Merlin gripped him again, slowly stroking in languid motions as Arthur grunted and whined. “More,” Arthur whispered, so Merlin lowered himself to the bed and licked him again. This time, he let himself go wild. It was wet and urgent, and Merlin let his spit and Arthur’s leaking fluids mix and coat everything his mouth could reach. And then he let his hands join. He tracked his fingers back with purpose, exploring and prodding with a sure hand. Arthur squirmed and thrust his hips up, then back toward Merlin’s hand.

Merlin’s middle finger rubbed the slick wet up and then down, around in a circular motion that prompted bucking hips and throaty noises. Merlin sucked and licked, withdrawing and pursuing at a constant pace that he mimicked with his finger. He pressed. His fingertip pushed in, a hint, for mere moments, then repeated the caress around the edge. Arthur stilled. Merlin looked up to see his mouth hanging open. “More…” So Merlin pressed. This time he pushed in, withdrew, and repeated the motion, eyes on Arthur’s tortured face. The man was coming apart. He bit at his lip and let out throaty sounds as Merlin’s finger explored, ever deeper. He let his magic feel the wet on his finger and spread it, slicking their skin to ease the movement, and then he crooked his finger, fully sheathed, to faintly brush that spot he knew would let Arthur, finally, lose control.

Arthur shattered. No words were comprehensible, just motion and touch. His hands on Merlin’s head were reverent. As their pace quickened, he gripped the duvet, knuckles white, and released obscene noises, nearly shouting, in the still, pale, comfortable room. So Merlin added a finger. He gripped himself through his trousers and took Arthur deep in his mouth, slurping at him with filthy sounds. Arthur’s thighs shook in earnest. “Merlin, I—”

Merlin relentlessly thrust with mouth and hand and something else he couldn’t define. A warmth within his own body, sensual yet not, somehow more than physical—something that felt like magic, yet was unrecognizable—grew and built, and burst forth between them like a slow static spark. Even
as he squeezed himself more firmly, it magnified until Merlin felt transmogrified: no longer mortal, but Right. Everything in him required this; his life and maybe lifetimes before had led here; all of the spirits and plans of fate had brought him to this point.

Arthur came. He tried to pull back, but Merlin chased him, rubbing those nerves and taking him deep. His body shook violently and clenched on Merlin’s fingers, and Merlin lost it. He spilled, himself, at the sound of Arthur’s shout and the taste of his hot release. He withdrew his fingers slowly, gently.

Arthur tugged at him, pulled him up, and kissed him. They kissed and kissed again, even with Arthur’s taste in Merlin’s mouth, even as they fumbled back the bedclothes, stripped away Merlin’s trousers, and pulled over a sheet.

Arthur curled into Merlin, and Merlin held him, tight, as they drifted into the soft oblivion of night.

Chapter End Notes

If you follow my other writing, you know that I just keep getting filthier and filthier. I’d say sorry, but... sorry not sorry?

Sorry this took so long to post. I’m not super confident about the timeline for the next few weeks, but I’ll do my best! Poor Merlin barely got his clothes off; he deserves better. Fortunately, I know a guy who agrees...
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

In which there is a lazy morning and a bit of travel.

Chapter Notes

I am sorry this has taken so long. The past few weeks have been tremendously busy. We aren't quite through the thick of it yet, but I'm going to continue to do my best to keep this up. Sorry if my pace is slower, though!

Arthur woke in a hot, damp tangle of naked, sweaty limbs. The sun had just risen, and Merlin was holding him. He was still asleep, and Arthur’s face was pressed against his shoulder. They were twisted in a sheet, and despite its light weight, their body heat was nearly unbearable. Yet the feel of Merlin against his skin made Arthur hesitant to move. He could feel a steady heartbeat and the slow rise and fall of Merlin’s chest. He remembered the look in Merlin’s eyes when they’d come back to the hotel, the sounds he made, the touch of his hand, his lips. The things he’d done… Arthur had honestly never felt anything like it.

What would Merlin do now? Would he remember all the reasons he had to run away? Or would he stay? And if he did, well. There was so much more they could do together, so much more to experience. And not just the urgent desire Arthur suddenly had to do as Merlin had last night. No, it was more than that. It was this: waking up together, not having to say goodnight the night before. Was it possible, really, to have this all the time?

If Merlin didn’t push him away, what then? What would he say? Arthur realized he had no idea, but he knew it would be something unexpectedly brilliant. He wanted Merlin to tell him about his favourite film. His favourite everything. What had he been like as a teenager? Arthur yearned to know everything about him, and he realized, maybe, Merlin felt the same way about him. But what if he doesn’t? He traced his hand across Merlin’s chest. Then he wouldn’t have slept with you, clotpole. He made a face. Merlin stirred against him. Their bodies were both coming awake, and Arthur felt an urge to stretch his limbs. The motions shifted his body against Merlin’s.

Merlin’s hands moved. They stroked at Arthur’s skin, on his back. Then he released him and stretched his arms up, languidly, letting out a long yawn and opening his eyes. They found Arthur’s immediately. Arthur’s pulse raced. He held himself so still his body hurt, watching Merlin take in the room, Arthur, their state, and the dim light of dawn that streamed through the curtains. “Good morning,” Merlin whispered.

“Good morning.” Arthur could hear the rasp of Merlin’s fingers against the stubble as he ran his hands over his face.

He stopped and looked down. “I need a shower.” He made a face. “And my teeth…”

Arthur looked down at their bodies, covered only by the sheet. “Me too,” he said.
“All my things are…” Merlin looked toward the door. Of course his clothes and toiletries were in the other room. Arthur nodded. They looked at each other, neither moving. The moment stretched. Arthur watched Merlin watch him. Finally, he rolled over and looked down. Merlin’s trousers were wadded on the floor. He reached out for them and the pants, still inside. “Thanks.” Arthur forced himself to look away as Merlin slipped out and slid into the pants. “Ugh,” he muttered. Arthur looked up. They stared at each other. Another moment passed, and another. Finally, Merlin said, “I’ll just…” He gestured and slowly walked out.

Arthur pushed his hands against his eyes. He’d blown it. He should have said something. Anything. He should’ve said, “Stay.” One word. He rolled out of the bed and went to use the toilet and brush his teeth. “Stupid,” he told himself in the mirror. He shook his head, and then ran a hand over his cheek. He could get by without shaving today. He wondered if Merlin would. He wanted to feel the roughness of Merlin’s stubble against his skin. Desire surged. He looked at himself. “Don’t be a coward.” He turned and strode, deliberately, out, through the bedroom, across the living room, to Merlin’s room. He heard water running as he opened the door, and he could hear the soft tap of a bottle being set down.

The bathroom door was silent as Arthur pushed it open. Fog covered the glass, but Arthur could make out Merlin’s shape through the glass door. Arthur pulled it open. Merlin turned, hands frozen. Arthur stepped forward, then closed the door with a click and looked at him.

Merlin was a beautiful thing: pale skin turned pink by the hot water, long lines and dark hair, tempting his eyes downward. He watched, fascinated, as Merlin’s cock swelled. He saw the rosy head emerge as it lengthened. Arthur chest fluttered. His own erection felt heavy and tight, and his nerves were on fire. Merlin reached out and pulled him forward into the spray.

“Jesus Christ that’s hot.”

Merlin rolled his eyes and kissed him. Merlin kissed him, but it was Arthur who pushed and clung and tried to send a message with the press of lips and meeting of tongues. The message was: I am here, and I am not going away, and I will not let this slip through my fingers but will hold you here, with me, even if it breaks me, even if it destroys what I am because what I will be--what we will be--is more.

Arthur’s hands slid down Merlin’s slick, wet body and gripped the flesh of his ass. He squeezed and pulled their bodies, finally bare, together. Merlin’s fingers slid through Arthur’s hair and gripped the side of his head. He kissed as if there was nothing else that could sustain him. He thrust his body against Arthur’s, and Arthur reached for him, clutching their desire in his hands, together. They both groaned. He stroked them, tight, and was almost lost to the sensation. Merlin hadn’t shaved, and his cheek was rough as his lips found Arthur’s neck. He nipped at Arthur’s jaw as Arthur pumped his hands. Then he pulled away and pushed Merlin against the tile wall. Merlin hissed as his skin met the cool ceramic, but his eyes still burned bright. Arthur sank to his knees, letting the spray soak him the rest of the way. He looked up at Merlin, who watched him with hooded eyes and parted lips. He looked desperate. Arthur had never done this before, but he could not wait to feel Merlin come undone.

Arthur licked and sucked and toyed with Merlin. He knew what he liked, and he tried that, but learning Merlin’s body and needs was less difficult than he feared. Merlin was vocal, and his fingers gripped Arthur’s hair and his arms braced against the shower walls when his legs weakened beneath Arthur’s tongue. He liked steady strokes and hot suction, interrupted on occasion by a long, slow lick. Arthur felt the urgency build until he wondered if he, himself, would come untouched. He quickened the pace, jaw aching, but unwilling to relent. Merlin’s moans became incoherent babble and curses and “Ar-thur-- fuck. I’m--”
Arthur gripped himself as Merlin lost control. He pumped his fist only a few quick times and followed Merlin over the edge. They panted and stared at each other, Arthur still on his knees, until Merlin pulled him up for another long kiss. This one was tender. Merlin followed it by uncapping his shampoo and drizzling it into his hands. Then he lifted them to Arthur’s head and massaged it into a lather. They washed each other, even as their bodies recovered and started to reawaken. They laughed, and Arthur leaned his head against Merlin’s shoulder. “I think if I went again right now, I’d pass out. It’s too bloody hot in here.”

“It’s perfect.”

“It’ll dry your skin out.”

“You think I have dry skin?”

“You’ll get it, taking hot showers like this.”

“I always take showers like this.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Oh, you know more about showering than I do?”

“Apparently.”

“I think you’ll find that this shower has been remarkably better than… your usual.”

“This has been the best shower-”

“A-ha! See?”

“Not because of the water temperature.”

“It’s part of the experience.”

“Think how much better it would be if it weren’t scalding-”

“It wouldn’t be the same.”

“You’re an idiot.” He kissed him to silence.

They were late picking up Aglain. Arthur apologized without an explanation, and received a knowing little smile and a quick assurance they were fine. Arthur and Merlin were tucked into the back of the car, while Aglain rode in the front with the driver. Merlin’s ears had gone completely red with the realization that Aglain knew something had happened between them. Arthur reached across and tugged softly at the hip pocket of Merlin’s jeans. When Merlin met his gaze, he lifted an eyebrow and rested his hand on Merlin’s thigh. Merlin stared at his hand, then covered it, softly, with his own. Arthur felt his shoulders relax. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

Merlin’s hand was warm and dry. The seat was soft leather, and the car’s ride was a smooth sway that lulled him. He was safe here, with Merlin. Nothing was expected of him that he wasn’t able to give. Arthur considered that; he had never thought how rare that feeling was. Furthermore, no one was trying to please him or win favour. No one was lying to impress him because Merlin didn’t want to impress him. Merlin simply was. And he was letting Arthur touch him. And he had let Arthur… Arthur felt himself warm. He opened his eyes and found Merlin eying him, almost warning him not
to get fresh. Arthur felt like a teenager. He moved his hand, the tiniest bit, and Merlin intertwined their fingers in a tight grip. Arthur couldn’t complain.

The flight was short, and the countryside was breathtaking. Tyr and the co-pilot, Anne, went to find a hotel, but Aglain took Arthur and Merlin to hire a car. An hour later, they were driving south in a slightly worn Land Cruiser.

“Don’t worry,” Merlin teased. “I won’t tell anyone I saw you in a Toyota.”

“My first car was a Toyota.”

“Your father didn’t start you on a Jaguar?”


Merlin laughed. “I know. I just wasn’t sure if you were serious or not.”

“Of course not.” Arthur thought back to when he started driving. Actually, his father had wanted to start him with something sensible and German, but he’d asked for the Toyota to make a statement about petrol and the war in the Middle East. It was the noughties, after all.

Merlin didn’t need to know that. He also didn’t need to know Arthur had access to the garage and all its contents, which included, among other things, a Jaguar or two. Aglain ignored them and clicked on the radio. He drove, Merlin in the passenger seat, Arthur in the back. The radio played hip hop and American pop music, and the houses were further apart until the sun was low behind the mountains and they were nowhere.

Aglain slowed in a small town. The buildings were nondescript, and were it not for the umber hills to the west, they could be anywhere. Just past the village, Aglain turned onto a single-lane road lined with trees. “Iseldir, my friend, has lived here for nearly a decade. He has magic, as well, from the earth.”

“Is he another artist?” Arthur asked.

“No, he is a healer.” Aglain looked briefly at Merlin before turning onto another road. “He is anxious for your arrival.”

“For Merlin’s arrival?”

“For you both.”

Arthur sat back. “Me too?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Because I’m the, uh…”

“Because you and Emrys, both, together, are… Well. It is not for me to say.”

“Is anyone ever going to explain this?”

Merlin flashed an annoyed look his direction. “It’s fine. That isn’t how prophecy works, Arthur.”
“So you’re saying I am the one in the prophecy, even though I am not a king?”

Aglain made a contemplative sound. “A dragon would know.”

“A dragon.” Arthur rolled his eyes. Merlin was quiet.

“Dragons, I understand, are very knowledgeable of such things. It’s too bad they are so rare.”

“Rare? You mean extinct?” Arthur asked. He watched Merlin shift uncomfortably in his seat.

“No, I mean rare,” Aglain said.

Arthur let this information sink in. “Wait. Merlin, you said magical creatures had died out.”

“Mostly.”

Arthur shook his head. “No way. I’d know.”

“Because my father would have told me.” He would, wouldn’t he? Not anymore, of course. He may never speak to him again, in fact. He had told him he was being disinherited, which was fine. Arthur had more than enough to begin with; Morgana could have the rest. The car pulled up to a wide, sprawling house, brown and grey in the dusky light. An older man stood on the front steps. He wore a forest green robe and a heavy-looking amulet. Arthur stretched his back, then took a place by Merlin’s side as he walked to the house.

“Welcome,” said the man. “Emrys, Lord Pendragon, it is my honour to host you.” He bowed to them.

Merlin reached out and shook his hand. “You must be Iseldir.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Please, come in. And welcome, Aglain, old friend. Dinner awaits.”

Dinner was a long, savoury affair. Iseldir had grilled lamb and boar, with a curanto that included potatoes and peas. Wine flowed, and each glass drew Arthur’s chair closer to Merlin’s until their hips touched and he felt he could breathe.

Iseldir was an exile--an expatriate from London who hadn’t been back in years. They talked late into the night.

Iseldir didn’t ask. After the last glass had been emptied, he led Arthur and Merlin down a dim hallway to a broad wooden door on oversized iron hinges. He left them at the threshold.

The door closed and Arthur stood, watching Merlin, as Iseldir’s footsteps echoed down the corridor. Merlin studied the room. A grand four-poster bed dominated the space. Massive windows lined the wall, but all was dark outside. Their bags already waited for them at the foot of the bed. Arthur wondered how Iseldir knew only one room, one bed was sufficient, but the thought disappeared as he thought he was about to, once again, share a bed with Merlin. They could sleep, pressed together, and wake together, and go, together, to find the temple in the morning.

And then they would go back to Camelot and Arthur would take Merlin on a date, maybe. They’d
watch Netflix and drink cocoa.

But first, they had this room, with its enormous bed and darkened view. “You think there are mountains out there?” he asked.

Merlin took a few steps forward. “Yes. That’s where we’re headed.”

“In the morning.”

“Only a few hours from now.”

“They kept us up too late.”

“They kept us up.” Merlin turned to Arthur. His eyes tracked over him head to toe. “You were schmoozing.”

“Me? I’m not the one who asked for his life story. I’d rather-- and anyway, I do not schmooze.”

“You can’t help but schmooze. And you’d rather what?”

Arthur took a step toward him. “I’d rather be here, with you, alone.”

Merlin let out a quick breath. “That easy? Just like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you’d be more… reticent.”

“Why? I told you I want you. I want you to be mine. I want everyone to know. Why wouldn’t I tell you?”

“You want to be my boyfriend.”

“That sounds too… casual.”

“What?”

“It sounds childish. Youthful, I guess.”

“It is the word.”

“What about partner?”

“Uh, well, that would mean something more serious than, you know, having kissed a few times and, um, a blow…” He made a face as he trailed off.

Arthur took another step. “We can fix that.” He watched Merlin’s lips part. He took another step forward. “If you…”

“Yes.” Merlin closed the distance between them. Arthur felt his fingers in his hair, pulling their faces together. He felt the immediate surge of heat through his core, and shivers, simultaneously running down his spine. This was it. This was his for real, not as an accident or one time thing, but for as long as they wanted and that felt increasingly like--

A window shattered.

Two dark-clad figures leapt through the empty space. One held a sword, and the other held out a
hand. “Wáce ierlic!” cried the man. Arthur felt a force, painful and unforgiving, push into his chest, knocking him backward in a rush, and then everything went dark.

Arthur awakened to a blinding headache and a hand on his arm. Iseldir and Aglain hovered over him. Aglain sighed in relief, but Iseldir’s forehead was still creased in a frown.

“Merlin,” Arthur croaked.

“He’s gone,” Iseldir said.

Arthur’s chest plummeted. “Gone?”

“They’ve taken him.”

“We can only assume it is this order of cranes.” Aglain explained in a calm voice.

Iseldir nodded. “And we must find him.”

“Emrys cannot be hurt. He must be protected,” Aglain continued.

Arthur was already on his feet. “I’m going after him.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Iseldir said. “You must be protected as well, My Lord.”

“No, you don’t understand. I am going after him. Now.”

Iseldir and Aglain exchanged a long look. Finally, Iseldir turned his head, slightly, and nodded once. “You have your sword, Sire?”

Sire? Arthur ignored it. “I do.” He unzipped the golf case he’d used for the transport.

“Then it has been decided,” Iseldir said. “We cannot go with you; you must do this alone.” Arthur nodded.

Aglain stepped forward. “I will get the map.”
Chapter Summary

In which Merlin is a sassy little shit and Arthur takes a level in bad ass.

Chapter Notes

Not gonna lie, this may be my favorite thing I've ever written. I hope you like it.

Then again, I've spent the past week doped up on cough medicine, so I may just be suffering the effects they warned us about in DARE class.

Merlin became aware he was bound and blindfolded, it seemed, before he came fully awake. Somehow, the realization was not surprising. More surprising was the uncomfortable static of magic coiled in him that he knew, without being told, he couldn’t release. His body felt restless and on the edge of pain. Merlin forced himself to breathe slowly and perceive what he could from his surroundings.

It was the wrist-bindings, he thought, that had captured his magic, and someone in the car stunk of onions. Merlin rather liked onions, but this person smelled like sweat and onions past their sell-by date. But onions last ages, Merlin thought. He forced himself to focus.

The car was moving. Merlin was sitting up. The temperature was pleasant. The ride was smooth. If he had to guess, he would say it was an expensive car. No one spoke, and the radio was off. Well, he thought, at least I’m not in the trunk. The car slowed and bobbed. Mountain roads. Gravel? He heard a murmur from the front. Third row seat? He heard a grunted reply, and the car slowed further, then stopped. Doors opened and cool night air—or early morning air—met his skin. Hands grabbed him and pulled him to his feet as he was awkwardly extracted from the car.

“Come on,” a voice said. It was a feminine voice, strangely familiar. Strong hands pulled him forward, amid the sound of a door opening, then closing behind him. The blindfold was pulled free.

Merlin was in a… “Is this a yurt?” he asked. The setting registered before the people. Sitting at a small table in a decidedly antique-looking British Colonial-style chair, was Cenred Villaret. Merlin turned his head. Morgause, or all people—Morgana’s PA—was standing beside him. He looked back at Cenred, who was glaring at him. “But really. Am I in a yurt?”

“Quiet, fool,” Morgause hissed.

Cenred frowned. He opened his mouth to speak.

“But I really want to know if it’s a yurt or not.” Cenred stared at him. “I’ve heard about them but I haven—” Pain shot through his head as Morgause’s fist connected with his temple.

“I said be quiet.”
“Why are you here?”

Morgause reeled back to punch him again. “No,” Cenred ordered. His voice was low and commanding. Morgause looked very disappointed as she lowered her arm. “She is here because I want her to be here.”

“Okay, then why am I here?”

“Please, Mr. Hunithson, sit. Let us speak like civilised men.” Cenred gestured to another chair at the table.

“Do civilised men tie each other up? Without consent, that is.” Merlin batted his eyelashes at him. Morgause shoved him toward one of the chairs, so he sat down.

Cenred crossed his arms across his chest. “I understand you’re looking for something that is mine.” Merlin was silent. Given Morgause’s apparent alliance, he assumed Cenred meant the dagger, but he saw no reason to discuss it. “Speak. What do you have to say?”

“You still haven’t told me if this is a yurt.”

“Good god man. Yes. Yes, it’s a yurt, for fuck’s sake.”

Merlin nodded. “Thank you. I thought so.”

Cenred’s brow furrowed even more. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“The dagger?”

“What dagger?”

“The dagger you’re searching for!”

“Oh, that dagger. Yeah.” He nodded.

“Tell me!”

“Tell you what?”

“Where is it, you imbecile?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“You’ve travelled to Scotland, to Buenos Aires, and now out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“To be fair, you’ve brought me to the middle of nowhere. I was staying with a friend at his lovely mountain home.”

“Planning some hiking, were you?”

“Only if absolutely necessary. I don’t want to be a rude guest or anything, but…” Merlin examined his fingernails and pushed at a couple of his cuticles. “It isn’t really my thing, if you know what I mean.”

Cenred made a look of distaste. “And you’re supposedly the best Camelot has to offer?” He looked
at Morgause. “I’m supposed to believe this one can find what my men and your… wizards—”

“Sorcerers,” she corrected.

“—your sorcerers have failed to find for so long on their own?”

Morgause’s hand clamped painfully on Merlin’s shoulder. “I told you, Cenred. This is the Chosen One.” Merlin felt a chill run through his body. “The Druids call him Emrys. He’s their John the Baptist, preparing the way for the high king who rules all the Five Kingdoms, the Druids, and with them, the world.”

Merlin snorted. “Yeah, right. And Chosen One implies leadership, so your whole metaphor is—”

“You’re telling me,” Cenred cut in, his glare becoming a pinpoint of anger, “that this fool is the most important… sorcerer of his generation?”

“Of generations. Possibly of all time.”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “Sure I am.”

“Silence, fool!”

“Why are you dressed like that?” Morgause had exchanged her usual business clothes for tight black leather and… lycra, maybe? “You look like a sweaty American biker.”

“I will fucking kill you, Hunithson.”

“With your Harley?”

Her fist connected with his jaw. The impact forced his head back with a quick snap. Merlin shook his head, tasting blood. “Sorry. Ducati, I guess, now that you’re…” He gestured to Cenred and watched her reel back.

“Enough!” Cenred said. He pushed in at the bridge of his nose.

“Headache, huh?”

“Do you ever shut up?”

“I could, but you’d have to untie me.”

“Your stupidity is astounding.”

“Oh you have no idea how stupid people can be. But I imagine we’re all going to find out.”

“Tell me about the dagger.” Like that, Merlin thought. “Now.”

“Perhaps you should ask me what you really want to know about it.”

“Where is it?”

“I already told you I don’t know. So what else?”

“What brought you here in the search?”

Merlin felt his magic simmer and pulse. He rolled his shoulders. “A symbol.”
“The bird,” Morgause interjected.

“It isn’t really a bird, but sure.”

Cenred steepled his fingers. “And where has that led you?”

“To here, where the people who created the symbol may be from.”

“And what have they told you?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I haven’t spoken to a single native person—no, wait, I haven’t spoken to a Mapuche person—yet. About that anyway. Chances are I have in a shop or, you know, on the street. You saw how many people were at the gala.”

“Do you realize how irritating you are to talk to?” Cenred looked from Merlin to Morgause and back. “I don’t know how Arthur has stood it. Uther must really be on his arse about this.”

“Morgana seems to think there’s something going on between them.”

Cenred’s eyes narrowed. He smiled and the effect was chilling. “Does she.” Merlin wasn’t sure if it was a question. “And why did you not gather Lord Pendragon as well?”

“Because you said—”

“It was rhetorical.”

Merlin glanced at Morgause. “It didn’t sound rhetorical,” he said. She didn’t seem to appreciate his reassurance.

“Where were you planning to go next, to find the dagger?”

Merlin shrugged.


“Arthur doesn’t know anything; are you kidding? He’s useless at this sort of thing. All brawn. Tiny brain.”

Cenred placed his hands on the arms of his chair. “He is annoying, but right. Arthur has never been particularly intelligent. He gets by on luck and charm.” Don’t argue, Merlin told himself. “New plan.” Cenred pushed himself to his feet in a swift, sleek movement. He strode quickly to the door and flung it open. “Pack up this… shit,” he called. After a pause he added, “The equipment, not the yurt.” Merlin snickered and received an angry glare. “We leave in one hour!”

Merlin leaned his head back and laughed. “You are such a tool.”

Cenred spun, walked to Merlin and gripped his throat. He squeezed. “You should learn more quickly, Merlin.” He leaned close. Merlin struggled to pull in any oxygen possible. “You are a tool, which I will use as I need, and then discard like the trash you are. You see,” he whispered in Merlin’s ear, “Without your magic, you are nothing. Meaningless.” Merlin’s vision tunneled. “And no one will miss you when you’re gone.”
Arthur climbed up from a dry stream bed, pulling himself onto a flat, rocky ledge. The landscape was inhospitable, but dry. He adjusted his backpack, checking the sword’s accessibility. He stood and studied the map, then listened. *Nothing.* He was close, and everything was still, save the birds and insects either waking or drifting to sleep in the cool dawn. The jagged ridge he’d hauled himself from slit the landscape, southwest to northeast. He knew it cut back west, deeper into the hills, and he followed it. He picked his way over boulders, and hurried across less difficult stretches of terrain. The brush thickened the further west he went, until there, in a nearly impenetrable mass of bramble and vine, a stone and timber structure jutted out from the rocky hillside.

Arthur pushed back at the twisted plants and pulled himself through to the entryway. The door was crumbling, and he shoved it free. Massive torches hung just within, and Arthur tugged one free of its sconce. He lit it with a lighter from his pocket, and held it up. The temple floor was dotted with collapsed and crumbled stone and rotted wood, but it had once been smooth and flat. Arthur marveled at its remaining shine, uncertain what stone could give off such a gleam, even after centuries of dust and disuse. On the far side of the room, an altar of some sort stood, alone in the muted light. Arthur’s footsteps were a soft tap on the floor as he made his way over, eyes sweeping the room. Nothing looked as if it had been touched in an age.

The altar was low and wide on a round pedestal. Arthur stepped close, holding up his torch. The top of the altar was flat and dotted with holes, as if someone had come through with a drill and gone to work on it. Arthur rubbed at the back of his neck. There were ten holes, he counted almost absently. He looked around. The altar stood in front of a fireplace. It was completely empty. Arthur held out the torch and examined it. There was no grate and, Arthur realized, there was no chimney. The smoke had nowhere to go, it seemed. “Okay,” Arthur murmured to himself. “Think.” He stepped fully into the hearth, standing in what was essentially a small chamber with a low doorway. His torchlight caught on a few of the stones, which reflected and glimmered like the floor. Arthur leaned in, wondering again about the composition. He held the light close to one and saw it had been polished—and it had been carved. He rubbed at it with his sleeve, dislodging dust and cobweb. “Huginn and Muninn.” Arthur blinked. “That… is impossible…” he whispered. He turned in a circle and considered the room, the architecture, and the past week. “Improbable,” he corrected. And then he decided to stop talking to himself. Another stone showed Yggdrasil, then the Valknut, before Arthur realized he knew exactly which symbols to expect. He slid his backpack free and awkwardly reached into it, still holding the torch. It was smoky and putrid, but it did the job well. He unfolded the papers he withdrew from his bag and revealed a printed photograph of the chon chon. He tucked it behind the next, which showed the bothy hearth. *Same symbols.* He looked at the floor. They were in the wrong place. He leaned in to inspect the nearest carving: the triskele. The stone was wedged in, awkwardly, among the rest of the structure. Arthur ran his fingers around it. As the dust cleared away, it looked even more oddly situated, as if it was sticking out from the wall. He pushed at it, but it didn’t go further in. He twisted it, and it moved a fraction. He pulled at it; it came free. It came free, and then continued to come. Attached to the back of the tile—or rather, part of the whole piece—was a sort of peg that had secured it to the wall. Arthur set it behind himself on the altar, and pulled out the next piece. It, too, had a peg. They each did—all ten of them—and he piled them on the altar. And then Arthur laughed. He laughed and said, “Thank god Merlin isn’t here.” He recalled the photograph and slid the first peg into a hole. Then he slid it back out, walked to the other side of the altar, so that he faced the hearth, and put it on that side. Then he placed the next. Something beneath his feet *clicked.* He paused and pulled on the backpack. He slid in the next peg, then the next, listening to each click and creak as they fell in place. He pushed in the tenth piece.
Nothing happened. The temple was quiet again, and he heard birds singing in the distance. Arthur sighed. He bit his lip. He looked at the stones; they were correct, he knew. He thought back to the other puzzles they’d solved.

In the castle, they need to push the tiles together. He gripped the altar and pushed it. One side seemed to give way. Arthur froze. He pushed that side again, and understood: it rotated. Arthur set the torch down on the dusty floor and gripped the altar. He twisted it. As it turned, a creak became a groan and a crack, and the room rumbled and shook. The altar grew taller with each turn and Arthur watched, awestruck, as the wall within the fireplace separated.

Arthur picked up the torch and crept forward. Then he felt for the sword. It was still there, still secure. The passage was narrow, and he crept forward. Thick spiderwebs crisscrossed before him, and he waved the torch in an attempt to burn them away. They singed and clumped and fell on his arms and shoulders as he passed, sticky and thick. The passage narrowed and turned and went down in a steep winding way that made Arthur’s heart race. The ceiling was low and he went deeper and deeper, closing himself into the mountain.

And then the webs cleared and the rocky pass opened into a cavernous room. The path led along an edge, and even with the torch, Arthur could not see the bottom. He saw only the path ahead, continuing into darkness, and a parallel path, opposite him, lower down, across the crevasse. He heard water and a flutter of bat wings, and something else he couldn’t identify. It was a clatter from somewhere else in the cavern. He focused on it, and even as his senses were able to pick it out, as if it grew louder, he could not identify it. He walked on, carefully keeping himself from the edge. He peered into the darkness before him, and then stilled.

Something in the darkness peered back. It was black and shiny, and the clatter was close. Arthur reached back and drew the sword.

Around him, the darkness shifted. Arthur’s blade reflected the torchlight, as did the glittering black. The clatter grew louder, nearer still. It was not singular, and Arthur watched the black and glittering reflection sway and fall back, and then surge. One piece came forward. The thing looked like a scorpion, giant and black-brown in the torchlight. Arthur pulled back in revulsion, nearly dropping the torch. He gripped his sword with one hand and shifted his feet, staring at the creature. Its tail looked vicious, but it also had a pair of pincher-like claws that clicked and snapped. That sound, multiplied, was the clacking. Arthur shuddered. He allowed himself to feel sick, and then he lunged. Arthur batted at the creature and sliced into its tail, kicking it as he did. It fell over the ledge, taking another with it for the fall. The silence as it fell was eerie and off-putting, but he had no time to consider it. Instead, the next bug was upon him. He drove the sword down, piercing its body, swaying his frame to dodge a sting. His other hand waved the torch at more of the things, which approached from behind on the narrow ledge. The clatter crescendoed: inescapable. There were so many of them. He kicked another over and slashed into a head, a body, another tail. The shells cracked beneath his blade, but only with a driving force that shook his arm and was impossible, he knew, to keep up.

There were too many. He felt a nip at his heel. He spun, nearly losing balance on the ledge, parrying another with it for the fall. The silence as it fell was eerie and off-putting, but he had no time to consider it. Instead, the next bug was upon him. He drove the sword down, piercing its body, swaying his frame to dodge a sting. His other hand waved the torch at more of the things, which approached from behind on the narrow ledge. The clatter crescendoed: inescapable. There were so many of them. He kicked another over and slashed into a head, a body, another tail. The shells cracked beneath his blade, but only with a driving force that shook his arm and was impossible, he knew, to keep up.

The quiet of the scorpions was chilling. They clattered at him, then dissipated, once more, into the black. Arthur rushed forward, lest they seek him out on this side.

The path was wider here, but uneven. Arthur climbed up, then down, then lower still. He longed to
leave the torch, but the dark was impenetrable outside the smoky haze of torchlight. He sheathed his sword and pulled himself up and then down with the free hand. The path narrowed again, and the sound of water grew louder until the path ended at a slow moving river, deep beneath the ground.

Arthur held his torch up and stilled. Far across the slowly churning water, he saw movement and, impossibly, a light. Something, torch-lit and desolate, waited for him. It turned, unfurling into the shape of a man. It turned and raised a hand.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

In which there is a Fisher King.

Chapter Notes

Finally! Sorry I'm so slow right now. It's the end of the semester, which means I'm swamped with work. I'll be past it soon, though!

The water was ice cold and stripped Arthur’s breath from his lungs. He stepped down onto a ledge and then kicked off into the churning flow. The current pulled him forward, and he kicked his feet and did some manner of sidestroke, attempting to hold up the torch. His boots would be completely sodden, and the thought annoyed him. Of course, who knew who awaited him? What awaited him here in the dark?

His hand struck another ledge, and Arthur pulled himself up. The rock was slick beneath a few inches of water. He stepped carefully, unable to see if it dropped off. He drew nearer. The man seemed to watch him. Arthur saw he stood by a stone table, like some sort of altar, or maybe another sarcophagus. The man stepped fully into the light.

Arthur stilled, watching him. The man wore a silver helm and robes over mail. His cloak was white and bore a crimson cross. He held a shield in one hand, at his side. The other hand held a sword. Arthur watched him swing the sword in a figure eight; he heard the swish of the blade as it cut the air. “Halt!” the Templar commanded.

Arthur raised his hands. “I mean you no harm,” he said, moving closer.

“What art thou?”

“I am Arthur, er, Lord Arthur Pendragon.”

“You are English. A Pendragon.”

“Yes.”

“You come for the dagger.” The Templar took a defensive stance. “You shall not prevail.”

“What? I mean, yes, but only to put it in a museum… or something.”

“Museum?”

“Library, rather. Camelot.”

“I know of this place, and of the Pendragon name. Thou hast committed untold ill in the name of greed. Surely you art a knave, and my blade shall see your end.”
Arthur gingerly set his torch on the edge of the stone table. The water was even more shallow here, running in a gentle flow, centimetres deep over the softly-eroded stone. He could see the Templar fully now: long white hair and beard neatly groomed; heavy, rough-looking robes almost glowing in the torchlight. “Who are you?” Arthur wondered aloud.

“I am the protector. The watcher in the night. And I shall be thy doom.” He lunged at Arthur, blade flashing. Arthur dodged. He dove beside the stone table and heard the blade strike its edge, unforgiving.

Arthur cursed to himself. “Can’t we just talk about it?” He launched himself up, away from the Templar.

“The time for words has long-since passed, Pendragon.”

“But when? I’ve never—” He dodged another lunge. This time he drove his body forward, toward the knight. He attempted a body check, but was slammed back by the shield. Arthur clutched his shoulder, wide-eyed. “I don’t even know who you are!”

“I hath told you! Your prattle grows tiresome.” He advanced. Once again, he swung his blade. Arthur leapt aside, rolling awkwardly in the shallow flow. His backpack encumbered him so he slid it free.

“I don’t want to fight you,” he pleaded. “Just let me pass.”

“Thou knowest not where the path leads.”

“It leads to the dagger.”

“It will lead you to perdition.” The Templar swung his sword, and as Arthur dodged, he followed with the shield. Arthur was knocked backward, body twisting as he reached down to catch himself. Again the Templar pursued him. Arthur crawled away, head ringing. His fingers reached for his gear. The Templar’s boot met his flank, sending him sideways. He pulled himself upright, only to be kicked again. Salty iron met Arthur’s tongue. He gasped and spat, bright red in the dim cavern. “You should not have come here, mortal.”

“I’m getting that,” Arthur grunted. Pain bit through him as he pulled himself backward, away from the knight. Water splashed at his face as the Templar threw down his shield. Arthur’s fingers reached. He watched the Templar grip his sword hilt with two hands. Arthur reached.

The Templar swung, and this time, Arthur met him. He parried, matching the Templar’s strength with his own. His sword met the Templar’s steel and it began to glow. The silver took on an ethereal ice-white shine. Along the fuller, gold symbols and letters appeared.

This time, the Templar gasped. He stepped back, his face a mask of awe and shock. Arthur lifted the sword higher, staring at it. The Templar dropped his own sword with a clatter and a splash. His voice was a raspy whisper. “At last…” He lowered himself to his knees in the shallow water. “My liege,” he said. “I did not realize…”

Arthur lowered his blade. “Right.” He looked around. The sword dimmed, but it looked brighter, still. It seemed alive in his hand, as if it had veins and energy. The Templar knelt, arms outstretched, beseeching. “Um, you may rise.” He watched the knight stand, his eyes downcast. Arthur squared his shoulders. “My… friend… was taken. He must be released.”
The Templar looked up, eyes sharp. “I know naught of this, Sire.”

“Your people then. These crane people. They’re the ones protecting the dagger, right? Preventing us from finding you?”

“The Order serves Gwyn ap Nudd.” He bowed his head. “Had they known, Sire, that you wield Excalibur, they surely would not—”

“Excalibur.” Arthur felt the sword hum in his hand. He shivered.

“The Order hast not taken thy friend.”

“Then who has?” Arthur felt panic rise. He felt heated. Just criminals? Human traffickers, maybe? Surely not. Arthur clenched his jaw, then released it. “No matter. I will find them. I will find him.” He would go back to Iseldir’s house and look for signs. They would call the bloody police like they should have to start. “You, though. Do you have the dagger?”

The Templar picked up his sword. He nodded once, and then stepped over to the stone table as he slid the blade into the sheath. He placed his hand flat on the stone table and closed his eyes. He pushed down, and it lowered, then lit. Silver and gold filigree unfurled across the top of the stone, and behind the Templar, a gap in the cave wall shimmered like glowing smoke. He turned, and Arthur followed him.

Beyond the doorway was a simple room. “My chambers,” said the knight.

“Where are we?” Arthur asked. The air smelled different.

“The demesne of Gwyn ap Nudd.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The beyond that is not Annwn and is not the earth.”

“Purgatory?”

The Templar looked around. The room was lit by oil lamps in bronze sconces. “I think not, my liege. I see no other mortal souls.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Time passes… differently here. It holds no power.” He removed his gauntlets and tossed them onto the table. “My hands were once spotted and marred with age. Now they show only strength.”

Arthur decided not to comment on the white hair. “You seemed to… dislike… my family.”

“Gwyn ap Nudd has long-since recognized the avarice of the Five Kingdoms. Their greed was met only by the foolishness and cowardice of the Druids.”

“Cowardice?”

“They removed themselves from the affairs of mundane humanity until magic has all but died out from your world.”

“Oh. Well, I’m looking for—that is, my… um.” Arthur cleared his throat. “My partner, the one I seek, who was taken, is Emrys.”
“Emrys is your protector, Sire.”

“You can call me Arthur.”

“Do you seek the dagger so you might save him?”

“Yes.”

The Templar slowly approached a bookcase. He reached up and clasped a sleek box, black onyx polished smooth. He laid it on the table. “This dagger,” he said. “It is not natural.”

“It’s cursed?”

“It was forged when the earth was young, in the darkest regions of Annwn.”

“You mean Hell?”

“Not as you mean.”

“But it is cursed?”

“If thou wieldeth the dagger, thou hast made the fool’s bargain.”

“Like a Faustian thing?”

“Thy life itself is forfeit, lest thou keep it forever. And it shall weigh on you, my liege.”

“Right. So, can I just like, keep it in the box?”

“I know not.”

“But you’re its guardian.”

“I guard many things.”

Arthur looked around the simple room. He saw little beyond the table, the bed, the bookcase. “Okay. And you’ve guarded it for so long, but you’d just let me take it?”

“The kings Beyond have spoken, long ago. The one would come, bearing Excalibur. He is the Once and Future King, to whom all treasures may be released, as all will be safe in his keep.”

Arthur was silent. He ran a hand over the onyx box. He looked at the Templar and felt his stare. He nodded and opened his backpack. He pulled out a dry bag, slid the box in, and twisted it closed. He nodded twice, then pushed it into his backpack and closed it tight. “Do you know who has taken Mer—Emrys?” he asked.

“I do not, but there is one who will. They see many things; they will see this.”

“They? Who are they?” The Templar turned and walked purposefully to a worn wooden door. “Was that there before?” Arthur asked. The Templar didn’t respond. He raised a fist and knocked twice. The boom echoed in the chamber and beyond, as if a vast cavern was outside. Seconds later, the handle twisted.

The door opened slowly and silently. Dense forest grew up to the threshold, and its rich aroma embraced Arthur. He heard the slow creak of ancient woods and stared. A woman approached. She was dewy and soft and she carried an apple. She took a bite. The light shifted, and she was wizened
and stooped. Her grey hair was gnarled and tied back, but the more Arthur looked, the less he could see. She stepped nearer and she was sturdy and hale with a kind face and calloused hands. Arthur turned to look at the Templar. His head was bowed. In Arthur’s peripheral vision were three figures, so he snapped his gaze back. Only one woman approached. She was youthful again, and dressed in a regal gown with flowing silk and an emerald-set girdle. Arthur tried to look at her face, but it discomfited him. He felt a twisting in his gut and his eyes lowered to her swollen belly, which was not swollen, but slack like a limp balloon.

“Arthur Pendragon,” her voices said. “The Once and Future King.”

Arthur braced himself and stared into her eyes. They were amber and blue and black, but unchanging. His stomach churned, but he did not look away. “My Lady,” he said, nodding to them.

“It is not yet your time.” Her voice was a brittle screech. “Avalon is closed to you.” It cleared, dulcet and crystalline. “Someday we will keep you in our bosom, sweet, but not yet.”

“No, I’m not ready for Avalon, either. It’s… It’s Merlin.”

“Emrys…” Her voice was husky and rich now. “He is troubled.” Arthur ground his teeth together. “Fear, Sweet. He is in fear.”

“Of what?”

“Failure.” She did not blink, but stared deep into Arthur’s eyes. “He fears for you.”

“Where is he?”

“Close… They seek you… They seek the cursed blade.”

“I have to find him.”

“You will find each other,” the voices said together.

Arthur pulled on his backpack and gripped his sword. He stilled. He stepped toward her. “Before I go…” He took another step. “My mother…”

“Ygraine… So fair… So young…”

“Is she there? Is she in Avalon?”

The woman smiled. She closed her eyes and stepped aside. Far in the forest, nearly hidden among trees and mist, he could faintly see another woman. She wore a white dress and Arthur knew. He felt his chin tremble. “Enough,” the voices said. “We seldom part Avalon’s mists,” she croaked. She was young, then, and giggled. “We like you.”

Arthur wanted to ask so much more. He felt himself step forward again. They could explain this prophecy, surely. They could tell him how he could be a king. “I—”

“Shh,” she said. “Not yet. Someday.” She reached out. “Someday.” She touched her finger to his forehead, and Arthur was filled with white light.

* * * * *

“If you’re leading us astray, Merlin, you will be dismembered before you are killed.” Cenred’s voice was a low growl.
“Untie my wrists and I’ll be a much better tracker.”

Cenred laughed. “At least you have spirit, I’ll give you that.” His face was bruised, and it added a rogoush quality Merlin couldn’t deny, but wanted to punch.

They had parked away from the hacienda and approached on foot. Merlin was pulled along by two hulking men in black tactical gear. One wore a gun on his belt like a cowboy. It was unnerving.

Cenred also employed a pair of magic-wielding mercenaries, it seemed. He recognized one as the attacker who smashed the window at Iseldir’s. The other was a small, weaselly-looking man with a pinched face and little hands. They descended on Iseldir’s home in a violent rush. Merlin was pinned between his guards, completely helpless and increasingly angry. His magic pushed at him like flood waters about to burst a levy. He stared at the cuffs. They were etched with runes that stung. He heard crashes and glass breaking, but the attack was anticlimactic. Cenred had more people and Aglain and Iseldir were not fighters. It was over quickly. The guards pushed Merlin into the house. Cenred had clearly been struck in the face—Merlin was profoundly sad he missed it. “Where are they?” he asked.

Cenred gestured to the sitting room, and Merlin panicked. Both Aglain and Iseldir were slumped on a sofa. He stepped forward. “Calm yourself. I didn’t kill them. They’re merely sleeping.”

Merlin took a steadying breath. “Too bad they’re the best bet you have of finding anything.”

“Oh, I doubt that.” Cenred ran his hand over Aglain’s head. “I think you’ll find a way to the dagger. You won’t want anything to happen to your friend here. And you surely won’t want anything to happen to Arthur.” He walked to the fireplace and moved a picture frame. “Would you?”

Merlin spent the next hour in Iseldir’s study, flipping through maps and photographs and journal entries. The sun was high when they struck out into the woods behind the house. Merlin led, with Cenred, Morgause, and the two wizards behind him. The made their way slowly. Merlin would be faster with his magic released, but even without it, he seemed to feel Arthur’s tracks. Cenred doesn’t need to know that, he thought.

Merlin stared at a dry creek bed. “Tell me again why you tranquilized the people familiar with the area.”

“If you’re saying you’re dispensable, I can dispose of you now,” Cenred responded.

Merlin shook his head. “It’s no wonder Arthur dislikes you so much.”

“Your job does not require a tongue,” Morgause snarled. “I can easily cut it out.”

Merlin opened his mouth to respond, then decided not to. “I think it’s this way,” he said, pointing.

The temple was shocking and intriguing, and Merlin wanted to explore and write extensive notes. Instead he could only internally marvel that Norse architecture could so seamlessly fit in the landscape of Patagonia. He approached the temple slowly, and then breathed deeply. Footprints tracked through the centuries-old dust, leading to the altar and beyond it, an open door.

“Excellent,” Cenred declared, like some B-movie villain.

Merlin stared into the dark passageway. His magic ached. “Untie me,” he said.
“I am no fool,” Cenred sneered. “And you will lead the—”

A pop echoed through the temple, and a white light flashed, momentarily blinding Merlin. Then it cleared, and Arthur stood by the altar. His eyes swept the room. “Cenred?” His voice was incredulous.

Cenred laughed. “What a lovely reunion.” He took slow steps toward Merlin. “What excellent timing. I take it you found the dagger.” Arthur stared at him. Merlin watched his fingers shift and his hand move toward his sword. “You found it and now you will give it to me.”

Arthur laughed, mirthlessly. “Why the hell would I do that?”

Merlin felt the blade on his neck before he realized Cenred had moved. His magic pulsed and throbbed. “Because if you don’t, I'll kill your boyfriend.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

In which there is a mighty battle and people die.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warning: character death(s) and blood and guts in this chapter. It's pretty violent and has swords and a gun.

Merlin watched Arthur take a slow, steadying breath. His eyes met Merlin’s. He looked pained. He looked at Morgause, then, and was obviously overcome with confusion. “Mor… uh…” He pursed his lips. “Sorry, what was it again?”

Merlin bit his lip and kept a straight face. He watched her, outraged, sputter and respond. “It’s Morgause, you absolute twat.”

Arthur looked taken aback. “I said sorry,” he muttered. “No need to be rude.”

“You illustrate perfectly the Pendragon arrogance,” she snarled.

Arthur made another face. “Pendragon arrogance? And you’ve taken up with him?” He pointed to Cenred. “Have you met him?”

Morgause smiled. It was unsettling. Merlin watched her clasp together her hands behind her back. She was small, but she looked bold and sure. Something nagged at him. He felt the knife press against his throat. Cenred’s henchmen stepped slowly toward Arthur. He was nearly flanked. Again, Cenred tightened his grip. “Give me the dagger, Arthur.”

Arthur’s eyes caught at Merlin’s throat. “Don’t—” Merlin whispered, but the knife pressed, cool on his skin. He felt it pierce, felt the wet trickle of blood.

Arthur’s expression changed. His voice was low and his eyes were clear. “Let him go. Now.”

Cenred pressed himself against Merlin’s back. He reached one hand up and gripped Merlin’s hair, then pulled his head to the side, exposing the unmarred side of his neck. “I don’t think I will.” Cenred leaned in and nuzzled at his skin. “Mmm,” he hummed. “I see why you like him.”


“Your body says otherwise. See how responsive you are?”

That’s not you, Merlin thought. His wrists burned; the bindings chafed. Arthur’s face was dark. They stared at each other, still and quiet. Somewhere, outside, a bird chirped. And then it was as if someone flipped a switch.
Arthur’s hands moved too fast to see. He reached back and pulled his sword from its sheath. The blade was bright, platinum-white with an inscription of gold. Merlin gasped as he realized what it meant, and again as he realized how unsurprised he was. Of course Arthur would bear Excalibur. Of course. Arthur drew the sword, and before he could take his stance, the henchmen were let loose.

Each of the warlocks shouted incantations, and Arthur was thrown backward against the altar. He scrambled to his feet, gripping Excalibur with both hands. He looked so natural, Merlin realized. Even more than before. One of the warlocks chanted again, but he was slow; Arthur dodged behind the altar as the pulse of energy shot toward him. Dust puffed up in a dry cloud and debris clattered across the stone floor.

The other warlock chanted in a low voice. His eyes glowed as he curled his fingers and seemed to pull at the dark entrance beyond the altar. Merlin heard a clatter and clicks from beyond the black threshold. He heard Arthur curse. The clatter grew louder and nearer, and Arthur dashed away from the altar.

Merlin watched the black of the doorway, and it seemed to pulse and almost shimmer, as if the darkness was shifting and glittering. Everyone paused, transfixed, save the warlock, who let out a terrible laugh. His pinched face was gleeful. Morgause hissed, “What did you do, Cornelius?”

Merlin took little note of the exchange, he was too busy watching the black, which watched back—as if something had paused at the threshold, hesitant to pass into the light—even the muted light of the temple. And then Merlin gaped as it did. Or rather, they did. “Serkets?” he gasped. He had seen pictures of the enormous scorpion creatures before, but he had thought and hoped they were one of the magical beasts long-since extinct.

“Again?” Arthur groaned. Merlin made a mental note to ask about that if they survived this. Cenred yanked Merlin backward as he recoiled in disgust. No wonder; the serkets were an abomination: unnaturally huge scorpions, clacking their gnarled pincers, black-brown body segments slinking across the floor like a nightmare come to life. Arthur did not wait to study the beasts, however. He swung Excalibur and sliced the tail from the first serket. The shell split with a resounding crack and dark slime splattered across the floor. Arthur followed the move by driving his sword into the creature’s back, barely stepping aside in time to dodge the next serket’s deadly stinger. Again, Merlin’s wrists burned and throbbed.

Arthur was at war, then, and it was awe-inspiring. Nearly a dozen serkets had swarmed out of the cave. One jabbed at Arthur but only made contact with his backpack. He leapt to the side, just as one of the warlocks sent another pulse of energy at him. The force caught him and sent him toppling into a pair of serkets, who recoiled and prepared to strike. Arthur rolled back to his feet and parried both of the beasts with his blade.

Merlin realized, then, that only a few of the serkets were attacking Arthur. The others, he saw, were advancing on the other humans. “Good plan,” Merlin murmured. Cenred let out a low breath, almost a growl.

“Idiots!” Morgause cried. She reached down and pulled a brutal-looking dagger from her boot. She backed away from an approaching serket, crouched low and ready to pounce.

Merlin felt Cenred grip his shoulder and shove him aside. Another serket advanced toward them, clicking its segmented body. Cenred threw his knife at it, and the blade stuck in the creature’s side. Brown ooze slowly leaked onto the floor, but it did not pause its steady movement. Merlin backed away.

Across the temple, another serket had the larger warlock cornered. He shouted an incantation,
struggling to find the right pronunciation. He cried out as the creature reached out with its black appendages, and he tried again to cast a spell. He failed. The serket pierced him with its stinger, again and again. He screamed with the pain and fell.

Arthur’s sword cut chunks from the serkets. His breathing was labored and he grunted with each thrust. The blade was covered with stringy viscera, and it splattered the floor, his clothing, and his face. A creature bat at his leg and he hissed as he recoiled, swinging at it. Again, Merlin’s magic throbbed. He groaned, body burning. The nearest serket stepped toward Cenred, who cursed, and then reached into his jacket. He pulled out a pistol.

The sharp report of the gunfire was unbearably loud in the temple. It rang in Merlin’s ears and seemed to reverberate. Cenred’s shots hit the serket closest to them, blasting its head apart in a splash of exoskeleton and guts. He pivoted and fired at the serket attacking Morgause next. Merlin watched her cool smile before turning to the smaller warlock, who Morgause had called Cornelius.

He was clearly more powerful than his fallen comrade, but still flanked by three enormous serkets. “No,” he shouted. “Get back! I command you!”

The creatures could not or would not listen. They crept nearer slowly, answering with their clicks and clatter. Pop! Pop, pop! Cenred fired the pistol. They stilled, and Cornelius sank to the floor in relief.

Only Arthur continued the fight. Merlin’s magic compelled him to step forward. He was still bound, but he ached to help. Arthur kicked at one, already bleeding. Merlin could see blood on a tear in Arthur’s trousers, too. He favoured his left leg, but did not pause. Only two serkets remained among the pile of corpses. Merlin sprinted forward and kicked at one, sending it flying. Arthur jabbed at the other. Before he could withdraw Excalibur, its tail curled and attacked, catching Arthur’s arm. The sword fell, sliding across the floor toward Cornelius.

The warlock stepped forward and reached for Excalibur. His face was a savage smile as he gripped its hilt and lifted it. “Mine!” he proclaimed. Arthur grappled the serket, clasping its tail between his hands and kicking at its head in an unrelenting barrage. It twisted and contorted, but he did not let go. The other monster came at Merlin. His wrists stung in an overwhelming burn. He lined himself up and kicked at it like a penalty shot. It rocketed toward Cornelius, who just looked up from Excalibur in time to see it career into him. The sword slid free again, as the serket took Cornelius in its skeletal grip. He shouted, as if attempting to cast, but its tail struck him in the throat. Instead of an incantation, a raspy gurgle was all he managed. His eyes went wide, then dim, just as a blade pierced the creature’s side. This time, Morgause held Excalibur. Brown blood leaked from the serket onto Cornelius.

“Fool,” she spat, twisting the blade. She shoved them both to the side with her boot and then turned to watch Arthur. He pinned the last serket to the ground and pressed his knee into its body. Its legs twitched, unable to find purchase with the pressure and weight. Arthur pushed again, and the creature’s body cracked and split like an egg.

Arthur withdrew as it twitched. His leg was soaked in his own blood and the brown gore. He rolled onto his side, panting and coughing as he struggled to even his breaths. Then he stilled.

Cenred held up the gun and sighed. “Impressive,” he drawled. “Even I will admit that. But it’s no matter.” He pointed it at Arthur. “Give me the dagger.”

“Never,” Arthur grunted.

“Fine, then,” Cenred said. His voice was low and sent chills down Merlin’s spine. His magic
Merlin screamed, and then everything stilled. The temple was silent, and he lifted his hands. The cuffs were small, brittle. He stared at them and they splintered. He pulled his wrists apart and the pieces fell to the floor. He could feel tendrils of magic reaching out from his body and filling the temple. He turned to Cenred, who stood, fixed and still, eyes wide and terrified. Morgause’s mouth was open, but silenced. Merlin looked at their weapons. He felt them. He could feel the gun’s smooth metal, hot where the hammer struck, the groove of the barrel—he felt every atom of the thing. He squeezed his fist, and then opened it. The pistol turned to dust. Cenred’s mouth moved, but it was still silent, save for a humming noise that Merlin realized was emanating from himself. He looked down and realized he was glowing, almost. The air and light shifted around him like heatwaves radiating off hot tarmac. It would be heady and intoxicating, but all the time, Arthur’s slumped form rested at the edge of his periphery. He felt a fresh surge of rage.

Morgause’s eyes widened as they met Merlin’s. He stared at her, watched her mouth fall open. She held Excalibur, and his eyes caught there. Merlin could feel the darkness of her heart, which was bitter and envious. Something black and cruel grew within her, and it made Merlin sad. He sent warmth to Excalibur. It heated. It burned, white hot in Morgause’s hand. Merlin watched her gasp in pain, still silent. “Let go,” Merlin said.

“No,” she replied. Her eyes sparked gold. Merlin felt the darkness grow, then, and push against him.

“You have magic.” He felt his own magic curl around hers, prodding at it, measuring it. She was powerful. “How have you kept it hidden?”

Her eyes narrowed into angry slits. “I’ve bided my time, waiting for Morgana, and then this fool, to do my dirty work.” She looked at Cenred, then. She took a step. Cenred was frozen with Merlin’s magic, still unable to make a sound. “Now it’s my turn,” Morgause seethed, and she plunged Excalibur into Cenred’s chest.

The blade ran him through with a sickening squelch. Blood poured from the wound as he gasped, then dribbled from his mouth. Merlin withdrew his magic, and Cenred collapsed. His body fell with a thud, and Morgause laughed. “Idiot,” she declared. She turned to Merlin. “Now, I am taking the dagger.”

“What? Why?”

She tossed her hair. “Oh, Merlin. There is so much you don’t know, especially for one who so prides himself on knowing.”

“You mean about the Five Kingdoms?”

“No, you fool. I care not for these small politics.”

“Small? The actual political order of the world is small?”

“I mean a new world order!”

Merlin couldn’t hold in a brief snort of laughter. “Oh gods. Seriously? A new world order? Please tell me it actually is the Illuminati.”

“Shut up!” A pulse of magic radiated from her in her anger. Merlin’s magic absorbed it. She stepped slowly toward Arthur. “Once I have the dagger, I will reveal my power to the Five Kingdoms, the Druids, and other tribes of magic. No one will be able to rival me. I will rectify the balance. No longer will magic be relegated to sideshow acts and cheap tricks.” She stopped beside Arthur.
“Magic will be recognized as the purest force of the universe. The mundane and powerless will fall at the feet of those with magic.” She looked at Arthur and Cenred with disdain. “See? See how easily I can end two dynasties? The future of two kingdoms, fell in one afternoon.”

Merlin’s chest ached. He looked down at Arthur’s slumped body. He couldn’t see his face. He couldn’t see any movement. Blood pooled at his side. Merlin felt empty. *It doesn’t make sense,* he thought. He thought Arthur was the one. “No,” Merlin said.

“No?”

“No,” he shrugged. “I’m not going to let you.”

“Not going to let me?” Morgause huffed. “Silly boy. You don’t have a choice.” She leaned down to pick up Arthur’s backpack. Merlin reached out with his magic. He stopped her. He could feel her strain against him. “I… haven’t kept hidden… for years… just to let you win now,” she gasped.

Merlin took a step toward her. He could feel the darkness in her. He followed it, the veins of it, until he felt its source: her heart. “I could stop you easily, right now,” he said.

“You won’t.” Her voice was tight. “There’s nothing for you now. And I can make you a king.”

It would be so easy. He could squeeze and her heart would stop. He looked down at Arthur’s body. His eyes stung.

“You know it—it’s true.” She strained to get free. Excalibur fell from her hand.

“Shh.” Merlin took a step toward her. “I could end you, Morgause. Send a bolt of lightning from the sky. I could burn you.” His magic flared, pushing at her. “I could stop your heart.” He glanced at Arthur again. “I could pull this building down on both of us.”

“But you won’t,” she snarled. “You don’t have it in you to kill, Merlin.” She leaned down. Arthur’s bag had spilled, somehow, on the stone floor. “You aren’t a killer, Merlin, especially not now, with your heart broken.” She pulled back her hand and in it, a smooth black box. She smiled. “Finally,” she whispered. The lid slid free, silent and easy. Morgause’s eyes snapped up. “Where is it?”

Merlin took a quick step forward. The box was empty. She leaned down. “Where is it?” she yelled. “Give it to—”

“Quiet.” Arthur’s hand was like lightning. He held the dagger to Morgause’s neck. Merlin breathed. He hadn’t realized how little he’d breathed since Arthur fell; now, he gasped, drunk on oxygen. His body shook. Arthur pulled himself up on his knees, blade tight at Morgause’s throat.

“No,” she whispered. She pulled back.

“I don’t know what went so wrong with you,” Arthur said. His voice was strained and weak. His face was pale. Merlin stared at the blood, thick on his shirt. “But consider yourself sacked.”

“Bastard,” Morgause hissed. Her hand reached down to the floor. She steadied herself. “Stupid, foolish bastard.” Her hand shifted. A glint—a tiny reflection—caught Merlin’s eye. Her arm swept up; she had recovered the sword. Merlin reached up and he *pushed.* Morgause’s body was blown across the temple. She crashed into the altar with a grotesque *thud* and collapsed. Excalibur clattered to the floor. Arthur sighed and fell back.

“Arthur!” Merlin rushed to him. He tore at his shirt, uncovering the worst of his wounds. The gunshot had caught his shoulder. He’d lost substantial blood, but the bullet had exited the other side.
Merlin stared at it, tried to visualize the flesh healed. His mind blanked—did he even know healing spells? Of course he did. Arthur was so pale. Merlin couldn’t think. He pressed his palm to the wound and bound it with his magic. “Stay awake, you big oaf,” he said.

“No fat,” Arthur murmured. His eyes were unfocused, barely open.

“No yet.”

“Is she dead?” Arthur asked. “Is Cenred?”

Merlin looked. He reached with his magic to check. “They’re… both dead.” I killed her, he thought.

“Thank you,” Arthur whispered.

“For what?”

“You saved me.” Blood soaked everything. His voice was weak. His eyes shut.

“Arthur?!”

“Just… hold me.”

“I will not, damn you! Wake up!” Merlin looked around, frantic. “No,” he whispered. “Please…” He rifled through Arthur’s gear, unsure what he even looked for. He picked up the dagger, turned it over in his hand, then shoved it back into the box. He stuffed it into a dry bag, and slid it all into the backpack. There was a mobile phone, but it was sodden—everything seemed wet for some reason—so it wouldn’t turn on. He shoved everything else in, too: trail mix, tarp, rope. “Of course there’s no bloody first aid kit,” he fumed. He shouldered the bag, and then gripped Excalibur. “Please, Arthur,” he whispered. “Don’t die.” He slid Excalibur into the sheath on Arthur’s back. “Don’t fucking die.” He hoisted him up. “Because I am never going to be able to explain that to the board.” He grunted and slung him over his shoulders. “Oh my gods,” he groaned. “This is never going to… Fuck… And Morgana’s going to kill me.” He turned and took a step. “Fucking… muscles…” Another step. Another. His legs felt like fire. There’s no way, he thought. No way I can go that far. He dropped to his knees. “No!” he yelled. “I will not let you die, damn it!” He let Arthur down.

“I’m okay…” Arthur’s voice was the barest whisper.

Merlin felt a shout in his chest; it seemed uncontrollable. He made an unnatural sound. He stopped, but it seemed to continue. Rather, something else reverberated, outside. Merlin looked up. He heard motors. They cut out. He smoothed Arthur’s hair back. Footsteps approached. He remembered the henchmen, the gunmen they’d left at the hacienda. He took Arthur’s hand. The footsteps stopped.

Iseldir stood at the door.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

In which Arthur wakes up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arthur was floating. He felt suspended in thick, cool air, like predawn mist after a hot, angry night. He wanted to run his hands over his face, and as he had the thought, he felt a cool palm push the hair back from his forehead. A hand was soft on his cheek. Arthur wanted to nuzzle at it, but he wasn’t able to move. He opened his eyes. It was dark; he couldn’t see whose hands touched him. Everything smelled of apples and soil.

“Arthur,” a voice said. It was a man’s voice, familiar, and it seemed far away. Arthur watched the mist shift, and the triple woman seemed to materialize from it. Her mouth moved, but a man’s voice spoke. “Arthur.” She reached out. Her fingers were so soft on his skin. He knew he was in pain, but he could feel nothing but her cool touch.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“Safe,” she said with the man’s voice. “I have you.” She smiled. “I’m never going to let you go.”

Arthur awoke to a body on fire. Every part of him ached. He forced his eyelids open and looked into the clear blue of Merlin’s stare. Merlin took a shaky breath and grinned that eye-crinkling smile that turned Arthur’s insides out. “Welcome back,” Merlin whispered.

“You almost died. Again,” Merlin said. “You’re really rubbish at collection development.”

“You’re supposed to be my protector.”

Merlin’s eyes flashed and he opened his mouth a few times, sputtering. “Well you’re not dead,” he managed.

“How?”

“Iseldir is a healer. He and Aglain were able to fight off Cenred’s goons.”

“Goons?”

“Yeah, goons.” His smile widened. “I’ve always wanted to say that, if I’m honest.”

Arthur chuckled, then winced. “Right.”

“You’re pretty tore up. It’ll take a while to heal, even with Iseldir’s magic.” Merlin pulled back a
bandage on Arthur’s shoulder. “Especially this one... But it already looks a lot better.” His fingers trailed across Arthur’s chest and his eyes trailed away, unfocused.

“Merlin?”

“Mm?”

“What’s wrong?”


“Were you hurt?”

“No, not really.”

“Good.” He shifted, then grimaced. “I can’t imagine what I’d do.” He stopped, unsure if he should say that. He remembered Cenred’s knife at Merlin’s throat. He caught Merlin’s hand with his own. “I...” He swallowed. “I don’t think I could bear...”

A throat cleared, and Merlin turned away. Arthur finally took in his surroundings. He was propped up in a broad bed. It was Iseldir’s home, he realized, the same room they had been in before the attack. Someone had fixed the window. Aglain stood in the doorway. “They have arrived, Emrys, to take your statements.”

The next two hours were onerous and long. Merlin had called the authorities and Morgana. The bodies had already been recovered from the temple. Arthur imagined his father had been notified as well, along with the rest of the Families. And Cenred was dead. That would wreak havoc on the balance of power. Arthur filled out paperwork rather than think about it.

“Thank you, Lord Pendragon.” The official was all polite smiles, seemingly unconcerned about the dead bodies and the two “goons” in lockup.

“Oh, thank—” Arthur stopped. The beat of a helicopter distracted him. The official nodded and left. Arthur was still in bed, but now he pulled himself up. “Merlin?” he called. No one responded. He staggered to his feet and shuffled, groaning, to the doorway.

No one remained in the house. The helicopter was loud. It landed near the house, but behind the hedgerow that surrounded the garden. Merlin was out front with the others, escorting the police and security officials to their cars. Arthur was barefoot, but he slid open a back door and stepped out.

He met his father halfway to the house. “Arthur,” Uther greeted him. “Thank god.” He placed a hand on his arm. “The helicopter is this way. We can be in London tomorrow afternoon. The council has been called.”

“What?”

“The council, Arthur. The Families. Have you been hit on the head?”

“No, Father.”

“Good. This way, then.”

“But—”

“But what, Arthur? We haven’t much time. You are at the center of a most unfortunate situation, and we must act quickly. I take it you have the dagger?”
“The dagger?”

“Yes, Arthur.” Uther made an impatient face. “The entire reason for this…” he looked around, nonplussed, “this trip.”

“I thought you said you’re going to London.”

“We are going to London.”

“But the dagger is going to Camelot.” Arthur was in a nearly unbearable amount of pain. His father was not helping.

“Arthur, we do not have time for this. Get the dagger, and let’s go. Now.”

“But Merlin is still with the police, and we need to return Aglain.”

Uther looked skyward, then glared at Arthur. “Your half-sister arranged for Merlin to return with Tyr. He doesn’t need you to escort him, Arthur.”

“So he knows I’m leaving?”

Uther stared at him. “Mhm. Get the dagger. We’re leaving now. You may ask questions later.”

“But—”

“But nothing, Arthur.” Uther sighed. “I’m relieved you are okay, my son. I am thankful I had arranged a flight after your… telephone call. I didn’t realize how much trouble you were in.”

“That isn’t—”

“Gaius will be waiting at the airport as well, to hasten your recovery. He has already been notified. It is imperative we not dally.” He grasped Arthur’s forearm. “I am proud of you, Arthur. You’ve done well. Now hurry.” Arthur’s eyes swam. He nodded.

As soon as he was buckled into the helicopter, Arthur slept. He woke briefly to board the plane. He did not wake again until they reached London.

Gaius rode beside Arthur in the back of the car. “It looks remarkable, My Lord, for so recent a wound.”

“A local Druid, named Iseldir, treated it.”

Gaius nodded. “We’re fortunate he did. And Merlin? Was he attacked as well?”

“He’s fine,” Uther declared from the front seat. “Now please, let me read this in peace.”

The ride to Kensington was slow. Arthur stared out the window. It wasn’t raining, but clouds blocked the sun. Spring had awakened the city’s green, but everything looked muted compared to Camelot and Scotland. I want to go home, Arthur thought. He didn’t know where home was. He pictured his Chelsea townhouse and felt nothing. Even Albion Hall, for all his halcyon childhood memories, felt lacking.

Uther’s townhouse was more accurately described as a block. Arthur didn’t count the cars waiting in the driveway, but he was not surprised to see a full parlor when the butler ushered them in. “May I
take your bag, My Lord?” he asked.

Arthur’s backpack—and Excalibur—were slung over his unhurt shoulder. “No,” he said. “But thank you.” Uther glared at him in disapproval, but Arthur didn’t want to part with it.

Ada Gordon stood when Arthur entered. She embraced him with a kiss to each cheek. “I’m relieved you’re well, darling.” She smiled.

“Thank you.”

Cosimo Mercia shook his hand. “Always a pleasure, Arthur. Now,” he spoke to the room. “Are we ready to begin? I have a gallery opening to get to.” They returned to their seats.

“Of course,” said Uther. “Now, you may notice we are missing a person.” Everyone nodded. “You also know Arthur was recently attacked. It was Cenred.” No one looked surprised. No one spoke. “Lot, do you have anything to say for your cousin or the Villarets?”

Lot crossed his arms across his chest. “I haven’t heard from him in a week. He was raving. Something about a dagger.”

“He’s dead,” Arthur said.

“Oh!” Uther stared him down like a naughty child.

“He is. Murdered by a power-hungry sorceress who shared his ambitions.”

“And where is she?” asked Cosimo.

“Also dead.” Arthur took off his bag and placed it on the table. Then he set Excalibur, sheathed, next to it.

Etienne Angevin leaned forward. “Is that… Where did you get that?” he asked. He looked at Arthur with shock and then, something like pride.

“From a tomb in Caithness.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Uther’s voice was tight and annoyed. “What matters is the Villaret have gone rogue. They sought to undermine the Pendragons—my heir—in a shocking and unforgivable manner. Arthur was shot and just barely survived.” He looked at each of them. “I move to dissolve the Villaret family stake and replace Cenred with Arthur in all formal and informal matters.”

The room was silent for a moment, until Ada unfolded the newspaper in front of her. “Arthur, where have you been for the past week?”

Arthur unfastened his backpack.

“Arthur, sit down,” Uther commanded. Arthur ignored him. He removed the dry bag from the backpack, and then slid out the onyx case. “Arthur!”

“I—or rather, Merlin and I—recovered this dagger from a cave in Argentina.” It was a massive oversimplification of the events, but it would do.

“And Caliburn, Excalibur,” Etienne observed. “You were appointed to the Camelot board, and a fortnight later, you’ve ‘found’ two talismans of great power.”

“Been given,” Ada corrected. “These items are not found. Destiny delivers them.”
“Arthur, sit down,” Uther said again.

“No, Father.”

“Perhaps you should sit down, Uther,” Cosimo suggested.

“Yes,” Ada agreed. “And explain why you saw fit to send your son to find this assassin’s blade.”

Uther was silent. “It wasn’t ever for Camelot, was it?” Arthur asked.

“Arthur, this is not the time or the place.”

“What were you planning to do with the dagger, Uther?” asked Etienne.

“Nothing! Put it in Camelot’s vaults, of course.”

“Then why the secrecy?” Arthur asked. Uther glared at him. The other members, the seconds and assistants, whispered to each other. Uther’s face was splotchy.

“Arthur, if you know what’s good for you—”


“Where is Mr. Hunithson?” Ada asked. She smoothed her hand over the newspaper.

“On his way home,” Arthur answered.

“For now,” Uther muttered.

Ada’s eyes flashed. “What was that?”

Uther’s face was sour with distaste. “My son,” he said, “has… bonded with this librarian.” He gave Arthur a hard look. “It will stop, though. I have every intention of uniting our family, as we’ve discussed in the past, with—”

“I doubt my niece will be interested in your son,” Etienne interrupted. “As strong and intelligent as he clearly is.”

Uther paled. “Excuse me?”

“Especially if she’s seen the… news,” Ada added. She slid the newspaper across the table. It was too gossipy to be a PDM rag, but it was a well-known paper, and respectable.


Arthur picked up the newspaper. The front page picture showed him and Merlin in a ballroom in Buenos Aires, staring into each other’s eyes. The caption read, ARTHUR FINALLY FINDS LOVE.

May 7—Buenos Aires . The Museo de Arte—Buenos Aires celebrated a 3500 sq. ft. expansion on Saturday. Local and international philanthropists attended an opening gala. The guest list included Cenred Villaret and Arthur Pendragon, among others. Lord Pendragon travelled with Camelot Library’s Merlin Hunithson, the renowned researcher and arcane historian. After touring the gallery, Lord Pendragon escorted Hunithson to an invite-only dinner for top donors and the gala. Mr. Hunithson called the expansion "a vital contribution to the cultural history of the area."
A Pendragon spokesperson declined to comment on the nature of the relationship but acknowledged an undisclosed donation had been contributed to the museum. Other guests noted Lord Pendragon and Mr. Hunithson had left the event early.

Lord Pendragon is known for brief, fiery relationships that have ended in attempted murder and tears, but he remains adored by legions of fans. “I hope it works out,” said curator Maria de la Vega. She added, “They were more interested in each other than the art.” The happy couple is expected back home any day, and will surely have to fight off a mob of fans eager to congratulate the new couple.

“I don’t understand,” Arthur said. He looked at the byline and headshot; it was the journalist from the gala. “But she’s… positive. Kind.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Why are they being nice?”

“Because people like you, Arthur,” said Cosimo. “They’re happy for you.”

“This is unacceptable,” Uther’s voice was raised. “Your first responsibility is to this Family, Arthur, and to the Five. To—”

“Since when does anyone care who Arthur marries?” asked Lot.

“You will be silent!” Uther shouted at him. “You are probably behind this assassination attempt, too!”

“I never cared about you or Cenred’s petty power struggle, Pendragon.” Lot’s voice was quiet. “Yet I’ve had plenty of time to observe it. So I ask why you really care about Arthur’s relationship.”

“Or is it just that you want him under your thumb?” Etienne asked. “And married to my niece.”

“Giving you influence over the Angevin-Plantagenet as well,” Ada pointed out.

“And you asked for Arthur to take over the Villaret,” added Cosimo.

“What are you implying?” Uther’s voice was breathy and quieter.

“How were you planning to infiltrate the other families, Uther?” Ada asked. “Is that why you needed the dagger?” Uther glared at them in silence.

“I will not allow the dagger to be used for any… nefarious end,” Arthur stated. “I will take it to the archive. And for that matter, I am not a pawn. I’m not playing this game. I’ve never wanted to.”

“Arthur!”

“No, Father.” Arthur straightened his shoulders. “I am finished with this.” He looked around the room. Every eye was on him. He looked at the dagger, and then at his sword. “I am going back to Camelot to work for the library, with Merlin.”

“Arthur, sit down!” Uther’s voice was tight. Arthur picked up his bag and began to repack it. “What are you doing?” Uther asked. Arthur was silent. He slid the backpack on and looked up. “Arthur!”

Ada stood. “Uther, be quiet. We’ve put up with your maneuvering for years because you’ve led PDM successfully. But I think it may be time for a change.” She smiled. “I move that Uther be replaced by his son, Arthur, for all of his voting stake in Family business.”

“I second the motion,” said Etienne. “All in favour?”

“Aye,” said Cosimo.
“All eyes turned to Lot. “Aye,” he agreed. Uther sat down, hard, at the table head.

“I told you I’m uninterested in the Five,” Arthur argued.

“That is exactly why you will be an ideal member,” said Ada.

“Agreed.” Cosimo stood as well. “And we must not ignore what lies before us—or in this case, what rests on Arthur’s shoulders. Arthur Pendragon wields the sword of kings, therefore he can unite the Five with the tribes of magic.”

“Indeed,” said Etienne. He also stood. “We have studied Merlin. We know he is Emrys, leader of the Druids.”

“Then it is as prophecy foretold.” Cosimo’s voice was low. “Arthur is the Sovereign.”

“No,” Uther gasped.

“You all know I have purposefully avoided all this,” Arthur argued.

Ada nodded. “And yet greatness found you, Arthur. You cannot escape Destiny.”


“Of course,” she agreed. “And then appoint your succession.”

“Right. Well,” he looked around. “I’m just going to call a taxi.”

“No, Arthur, you don’t understand,” said Cosimo. “You are the Pendragon. What was Uther’s is yours.”

Arthur looked at his father’s disgusted face. He refused to meet Arthur’s gaze. “I didn’t ask for this,” Arthur told him.

“Your lack of loyalty is unsurprising,” Uther seethed. “You have always been a disappointment.”

“Because I don’t follow orders?”

“You’ve never understood what we could accomplish. The power—”

“I don’t want power, Father. I want to help people.”

“That is power!”

“No. No it isn’t. Helping people is giving the power back to them.” He walked to the door. “I’ll be in touch.”

In the end, Arthur hired a car to drive to Camelot. His car was already there, and it seemed the fastest option, though the trip felt interminable as mile after mile passed. He tried not to think, but it was impossible. As Camelot drew nearer, his pulse sped.

They had made it back. Merlin would be at Camelot, waiting for him. They had found the dagger. Cenred was dead. Merlin was safe. Arthur smiled. He saw the abbey spire, high over the village, and beyond, the rooftop of the library. He felt himself relax. He pictured Merlin. I’m home, he thought. I think this might be home.
Chapter End Notes

Now we get to find out how Merlin really feels about Arthur vanishing.

I can't believe this is chapter 28 and this journey has almost reached its end.
THANK YOU to everyone who has commented or left encouragement and kudos.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

In which there is something of a climax.

Chapter Notes

I was planning to get this out sooner, but then I saw Endgame and was basically incapable of doing anything but read Stucky fic for about three days. I may end up editing some of this at a later date because I'm not sure about a couple of things, but here it is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~Two Days Earlier~

The last security official drove away in a black sedan as the helicopter whirred. Is it getting louder again? Merlin wondered. He turned to Iseldir. “I’m going to go see what that’s about.” He walked quickly up the path. He wanted to check on Arthur, but he knew he’d want to sit with him, to discuss the officers, so he bypassed the house and headed straight toward the tree line beyond. The helicopter was definitely growing louder, as if it was preparing to depart. Merlin’s eyes swept the garden; no one seemed to be there. Maybe they’re in the house. He squinted, trying to see through the hedgerow. The helicopter was red and gold, but Merlin could not see the windscreen or the windows. He felt compelled forward, inexplicably hurried and anxious to see who flew it, but it lifted. He emerged from the tree line just in time to see it soar over the trees, up and away. Merlin shook his head, lifting his arm against the blast of wind and dust. He trod back to the house. His stomach was unsettled.

Iseldir and Aglain were still in the front of the hacienda, talking. The house was quiet. Silent. “Arthur?” Merlin stilled. “Arthur?” He rushed forward. “Arthur?” Their room was empty.

Merlin walked slowly up the high street toward Camelot. His neck ached and his shirt was damp under his arms. He had sweated in the plane, and then more on the train, even with the relative comfort afforded by a private jet. His bags were heavy. He considered catching an Uber, but the walk helped him stretch his legs.

The village was quiet this time of day. Few people were about, and no one paid him any mind. He was tired. The fatigue ran deep. The sun set, and he crossed the street, making his way like an automaton, mindlessly following the path to the library’s side door.

Camelot was closing soon, and few people milled about the stacks and reading room. Merlin was silent. He went up the stairs quickly, without stopping to talk or check in. He wanted to shower and sleep in his own bed. The paper smell, ancient and ageless, told him he was home. Hushed voices made his shoulders relax. He didn’t stop until he reached his flat. He latched the door and then
leaned against it. He sighed.

The apartment had been cleaned, and it smelled of lemon and herbs. Light filtered through the blinds from the streetlights outside, even though the library towered over most of the village. It was quiet. He looked around. “Home,” he said aloud. He set his bags on the floor and switched on a lamp. He could see the vacuum tracks on the parlor rug and fresh cut flowers on the dining room table. The bookcases that housed his private collection were freshly waxed and polished to a shine. Everything looked perfect and in place. He picked up his bags and carried them to his bedroom.

The plumbing left plenty to be desired, but Merlin stood under the shower spray until the water ran cool. He soaped his hair twice and scrubbed himself until his skin felt clean—until the prior weeks had surely been lost to the sewers and the sea. Only then did he let himself think.

Arthur. He knew what to expect. Why had he been so surprised, then, when he left? I didn’t want to be right, he thought. I believed I was wrong. He let himself think, and he let himself feel. It hurt. It hurt so bloody much. He pulled on a bathrobe and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. He needed to do the shopping. “Maybe I should get a cat,” he said. His voice seemed loud. He grimaced. He stood at the sink and downed a glass of water. It wasn’t as cold as he’d like. He set the glass on the counter and rubbed his eyes. The apartment was so very empty. “Empty,” he whispered. And then there was a tap at the door.

Merlin paused and assessed himself. Did I just summon something? He didn’t feel it. The tap repeated. Merlin looked at the stove; the digital clock neared eleven. His stomach lurched. He looked down at his robe and frowned, but walked to the door nevertheless. The bolt slid free with a soft click. He opened it a crack and peeked out. His stomach turned again, and his pulse sped.

“Hey.” Arthur’s voice was soft.

“How’d you get in?”

“I have a key.”

“Since when?”

“Morgana gave it to me before we left. She said I might need it…” Merlin nodded. Arthur’s expression was painfully open. “Can I… Can I come in?”

“Why?”

Arthur’s brows knitted together. “What do you mean?”

“What do you want, Arthur? It’s late.”

“What do I… I want to see you, to talk to you…” He stared at Merlin’s mouth, and then into his eyes. “Just, let me…"

"I don't know." Merlin shook his head. He watched Arthur's eyes track down before stopping again at his. "I don't know."

"Please, Merlin…” Arthur's hands lifted, pleading. "Please."

"Fine.” Merlin opened the door and Arthur stepped through. His eyes tracked downward to Merlin’s bare feet, then up to his damp hair. He unshouldered his backpack and sword and laid them carefully on the floor. Merlin crossed his arms over his chest, watching him. They stared at each other.
“Nice place,” Arthur said. He didn’t look around, but continued to watch Merlin. “I—”

“What are you here, Arthur?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you not want me here?”

“Do I? You’re the one who left.”

“But… But you knew I…” Arthur’s eyes widened. “Did you not know about my father?”

“Your father?”

“That he came to take me.”

“Take you where?” Where have you even been for the past two days?”

“London. My father came. He said you knew, Merlin.”

Merlin squeezed his eyes shut. “No, I did not know.”

“You thought I just—”

“I was… I didn’t know what to think. I called Morgana, and she said you were safe, but that was it. She said that was all she knew.”

“Merlin, just… look at me.” Arthur took a step toward him. “Hey.” His hands found Merlin’s shoulders. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gone.”

“You were out of it. It wasn’t your fault. I shouldn’t have left you.”

“No, Merlin, it isn’t your fault. It’s my father. He called the Five together and tried to make a power play, but it backfired.”

“Backfired? What do you mean?”

“He was stripped of his power with the council and… I’m his heir.”

“So now you’re a part of the Five.”

“No.” He squeezed Merlin’s shoulders.

“No?”

“I told them I would need to talk to you first.”

“Me? But… Why?”

“Because, Merlin.” Arthur stepped toward him again. His boots were mere inches from Merlin’s feet. His eyes were bright and intent. One of his hands slid upward and caught Merlin’s jaw. His thumb stroked Merlin’s skin. “I told you already. Did you think I changed my mind?”

Merlin’s chest ached around his pounding heart. “Arthur,” he whispered. “I thought…”
“I won’t lose you, Merlin. I will not let this just… slip away. It’s… I can’t stop thinking about you, but I don’t want to. This—what we are—is—it is…” Arthur bit his lip. “It’s more.” His wide eyes were lost and terrified. “It’s just…”

“I know,” Merlin said. He closed the gap between them. Their lips met Arthur’s, certain and committed. Their lips opened almost immediately and Merlin felt the touch of Arthur’s tongue against his own. He chased the feeling, letting himself explore Arthur’s mouth. He tasted of cinnamon, and Merlin smiled.

“What?” Arthur asked, fingers sliding into Merlin’s hair.

Merlin clutched at Arthur’s hips, fingers hooking into his belt loops. “I told you you’d be begging to get inside here.”

Arthur’s eyes were melted sapphire. “Yes, you did.” He sucked at Merlin’s bottom lip. “Did you know how bad you’d want it, though?” He ran his tongue along Merlin’s neck, let his teeth track along the tender skin and then sucked at it. Merlin groaned and he pushed his hips forward. “I should’ve known you would beg me to come inside, if I’d just waited.”

Merlin rucked Arthur’s shirt up. His fingers pressed into Arthur’s skin as his hands found Arthur’s back. “I would,” Merlin admitted, breathless. “I—”

“I am desperate for you,” Arthur whispered against his neck. Merlin shivered as gooseflesh rose across his body. Arthur tugged at his hair. “When Cenred had you, at the temple, I thought I might lose you and I couldn’t control myself.”

Merlin moaned. He tugged the shirt over Arthur’s head. Arthur tossed it aside and lunged at Merlin, pushing him against the back of the sofa. His lips found Merlin’s Adam’s apple and slide to his collarbones. Merlin grasped the sides of his face and pulled him up for a kiss, wet and long. He stroked his fingers down Arthur’s chest and relished the feel of light chest hair. He trailed his fingers delicately across the fresh skin over each of his wounds, marveling at the healing speed. Relief flooded him and he deepened the kiss. He couldn’t hold in the noises coming from his throat, but then again, he did not care to try.

Arthur’s noises echoed his own, and when Merlin’s hands slid along the lean muscle at his sides, he sucked in a quick breath. “Easy,” he murmured against Merlin’s mouth.

“Ticklish?” Merlin asked, repeating the motion and eliciting another gasp.

“Hey!” Arthur’s mouth turned up in a smile.

“How did I not know you are ticklish?” Merlin asked.

“I’m just—hngh—sensitive—stop!”

“Make me.” Merlin scrabbled at him and Arthur struggled to capture his hands. Merlin was quick; with a laugh, he dodged around Arthur’s hands until Arthur launched himself forward against Merlin’s body. He pulled Merlin tight against him, hands pressed against Merlin’s shoulder blades, then moving down to grip his ass. Merlin felt Arthur’s hands knead his flesh through the thin robe as their bodies rubbed against each other.

“Mmm,” Arthur’s laughter turned into a moan. “Merlin—” he kissed him. “I—have—never…” He swept his tongue into Merlin’s mouth and nibbled at his lips. “Never wanted—anything—this—much.”
“Then take it,” Merlin gasped.

Arthur pulled back, stilled, and stared at him. He started to speak, then stopped and swallowed. “I…” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Merlin searched his eyes. “I love you.” Arthur’s lips were parted, and he bit down.

Merlin let the words hang in the air. He had avoided letting himself think about it. For days now, he had just cursed himself whenever the inconvenient thought emerged. Because it was so very inconvenient. Nothing would ever be easy with Arthur. Even this revelation felt laden with challenge, somehow, as if it were a competition, too. Merlin watched Arthur’s eyes widen, like panic was beginning to set in. Merlin blinked. He took a steadying breath as well. “And I love you,” Merlin admitted.

Arthur’s smile was keen and bright and Merlin felt it pierce something in his chest and take hold there. He felt his remaining breath had been stolen from him until Arthur cupped his cheek and whispered his name. “Arthur,” Merlin whispered back. He took Arthur’s hand and pulled him across the room.

The bedroom smelled of fresh linen and lavender. Merlin tugged Arthur close and he blacked out everything else. “I want lights,” Arthur managed to utter between kisses. “Want to see you.” Merlin let the room fill with lamp and candlelight, and he considered what a good idea it was. Arthur stood before him, jeans riding low on his hips. His torso was thick with muscle and seemed to shimmer in the light. Merlin turned him around and pushed him back onto the bed. Arthur shuffled himself back against the pillows. His mouth hung open as he watched Merlin slowly pull at the robe’s tie. He bit down on his lip, eyes transfixed as Merlin pulled apart the edges and revealed himself to Arthur’s gaze. He watched Arthur’s eyes make their way slowly down to his chest, to his hips, to his swollen cock, and on down to his feet before tracking back up his body to his face. “Oh…” he breathed. “My god, you are…” He reached out and Merlin took his hand.

Merlin crawled forward across the bed and then atop Arthur, astride him. The soft denim of Arthur’s jeans rubbed the sensitive skin of his thighs and he couldn’t help but thrust a tiny bit as his bare skin slid along the fabric. Arthur’s fingers gripped his waist, before sliding back to his ass.

Merlin’s fingers scrambled at Arthur’s belt. He pulled it free with a quick snap and tossed it to the side. He undid the button and the sharp sound of zipper made his mouth water. Merlin tugged at Arthur’s jeans. “Here,” Arthur said, tilting his hips upward. Merlin pulled them free, leaving nothing but black boxer briefs, obscenely tented and already damp. Merlin couldn’t stop himself from reaching out and running his fingers across the bulge. Arthur moaned and thrust upward, so Merlin pushed his hand against Arthur’s chest and pressed him back against his pillows. Another moan was Arthur’s response.

“Look at you,” Merlin whispered. He ground his hips against Arthur’s. Arthur reached between them and closed his fist around Merlin’s cock. Merlin met him for another kiss. It was wet and fierce and neither relented until Merlin was pressed against Arthur, hands ceaselessly caressing and stroking. Pre-come trailed from his arousal to Arthur’s stomach as Merlin pulled his body back to strip off Arthur’s pants. He refused to stop kissing, and Arthur lifted himself, straining his neck to meet Merlin’s lips and tongue. When Merlin had tossed their clothes to the floor, Arthur’s cock seemed to grow even harder. He stroked them together, then ignored Merlin’s “yes” in favour of gripping his shoulders and reversing them on the bed. Merlin ran his fingers through Arthur’s hair. He stared up at Arthur, whose jaw was set tight. Sweat dotted his brow. “You look pained,” Merlin murmured.

“Trying to… keep it together.” Arthur’s skin was flushed. His eyes squeezed shut and he leaned into
Merlin’s neck.

“Why?”

“Don’t want to lose it too quickly.” He kissed Merlin’s neck, and then across his chest. It heaved as Arthur dipped lower, tracing his tongue along the crease of Merlin’s hip. Teeth dragged across Merlin’s skin and every touch sent a pulse to his core. He felt Arthur’s breath along his groin and then a finger tipped his cock up, and Arthur met it with his tongue. He sucked at it and flitted his tongue. Merlin watched, enraptured, as Arthur looked up at him, lips stretched and slick with spit. Arthur’s hand shifted and Merlin moved his legs, encouraging the exploration.

“Gods yes, Arthur.” Merlin’s voice was breathless and desperate.

“Do you…” Arthur stared up at him. “Do you want…”

Merlin remembered the way Arthur had felt around his fingers. His cock twitched at the thought. Yet Merlin wanted something different tonight. He wanted to see Arthur wild above him. “Nightstand,” he whispered, reaching out to open the drawer.

Arthur looked awestruck as thick, clear fluid dribbled across his fingertips. “Merlin,” he said. He claimed his mouth for another kiss, then seemed to remember himself, and settled between his legs. His mouth was savage on Merlin, sucking and nipping. Merlin tilted his hips and felt Arthur’s fingers trace carefully back along his perineum until a soft press circled him. The first push of a fingertip sent shivers up and down his back. “Fuck.” Arthur shook as he watched gooseflesh rise across Merlin’s skin.

Merlin let his body relax as Arthur’s finger pressed in, then pulled out, and then in again, farther. He knew it must only be that one finger, hooked in and stroking, but Merlin felt it was pulling him apart. Arthur took him deep in his mouth, head bobbing in rhythm with each deliberate curve and thrust of his finger, until Merlin’s noises were incoherent. And then Arthur paused, looked him in the eye, and slowly added a second finger. “Fuck.” Merlin squeezed his eyes shut as Arthur moved.

“Yeah?” Arthur whispered. He stroked Merlin with his free hand. “Hey, look at me.”

Merlin nodded. “Yeah, mm…” Then Arthur’s fingers found a spot that sharpened and intensified and Merlin cried out. “Arthur, god, please…”


“Please, just, mmm. Want you… inside me. Fuck.”

“Are you sure?” His fingers rubbed the nerves.

“Yes, Arthur please—”

“Okay.” Arthur withdrew his fingers slowly, and Merlin shook with anticipation. He pulled Arthur back for another kiss. This time it was gentle. This is it, Merlin thought.

Merlin uncapped the bottle and slicked his hand. He stroked Arthur with it until he was coated and throbbing; ready. “Ready?” he whispered.

Arthur nodded and lined himself up. Then he pushed forward, a tiny amount. Merlin felt his own mouth fall open as he watched Arthur’s face. His brow creased in concentration as he pressed forward and withdrew, little by little going deeper until Merlin felt he couldn’t take any more—and then he went further. Merlin gripped at Arthur as he restrained himself, veins popped and skin
slicked with sweat, and slowly pushed in the remaining inch until he was fully sheathed in Merlin. “Okay?” Arthur managed to ask.

Merlin nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He felt every nerve in his body ready to convulse with the need for Arthur to move. His magic, too, seemed to hum and wrap them in a cocoon that Merlin thought he could almost see, soft gold and glittering. This surpassed everything physical it was possible to feel and transcended to something different, something on a different plane, almost metaphysical as Arthur pulled back, then, and thrust. Merlin keened and Arthur groaned, and then the levee crumbled.

Arthur pressed Merlin’s legs up to his chest to leverage against his body and go deep. Every stroke pushed Merlin closer to the edge with nearly unbearable pleasure and almost-pain until he surged up and flipped them over, taking over the pace as he seated himself on Arthur and rode him, wild and electric. Arthur’s hand found him, then, and gripped him until it pushed him over the final edge and, gasping and crying out, his body let go. He felt himself convulse around Arthur, who pushed him back upon the bedding and, with a final, almost-violent thrust, followed Merlin over the edge. Merlin felt the twitching pulse of Arthur’s body within him as his eyes lost focus and he panted. And then Merlin found Arthur’s lips with his own, once again claiming him with kisses.

Arthur rolled to his back and Merlin watched the slowing rise and fall of his chest. *Arthur Pendragon*, he thought. He looked at the fresh skin over his wounds and shivered. He met Arthur’s eyes. Arthur opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it as if dumbstruck. Merlin nodded. They just stared at each other and then, as if of single mind, their lips curved up. Merlin had never felt more exposed; he had never felt more safe. “That’s my side of the bed,” he said.

Arthur nodded. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

This is chapter twenty-nine. I can't believe it. Am I going to be able to wrap this all up in one? I guess we'll see!

I love you all--thank you SO MUCH for the comments and kudos and love.
Arthur was tired. His body ached, but he refused to drift back to sleep. He and Merlin had finally succumbed after four, talked out and bodies sated. Late morning sun filled the bedroom with ambient light as Arthur looked at Merlin, still asleep beside him. Arthur reached over and gently squeezed his hand, watching his eyelids and waiting for him to wake up. His muscles relaxed and he felt like he had melted into the bed. He thought back to a month before and realized the man he had been, the things he had done and people he lacked—he could not bear to return to that. He could not imagine a future without Merlin; how had he survived the past? *I found it,* he realized. Finally, he was home.

Arthur slid out of the bed without waking Merlin. He pulled on his pants and padded quietly into the kitchen. He opened a few cabinets before he found the coffee, a French press, and cups. The refrigerator was nearly empty, but Arthur found an unopened packet of biscuits in the back of the pantry cabinet. He had just peeled it open when Merlin appeared beside him in pyjama bottoms and a tattered jumper. “You’re overdressed,” Arthur softly teased, picking at a loose thread.

Merlin tugged at Arthur’s waistband. “Maybe *you’re* overdressed.”

Arthur backed him against the counter. “That seems reasonable.” He met Merlin’s lips for a slow kiss, which didn’t last long before Merlin reached over and pulled a biscuit from the packet. Arthur chuckled. “Time for coffee?”

“Time for coffee,” Merlin agreed. He moved their sad little breakfast to the table, and they sat across from each other and sipped.

“Not bad,” Arthur said. He placed one foot atop Merlin’s, and Merlin covered it with his own. “So, what are we doing today?”

“I don’t know what *you’re* doing. I’m checking in with my boss and taking the dagger to the vault.”

Arthur felt his heart begin to race as he wondered what Morgana would think about the business with the Five. Then he stopped. “Wait. What vault?”

Merlin took a crunchy bite, chewed, swallowed, and took another sip. “Don’t worry about it.” His mouth quirked up at the corner.
“What? No! I’m your boss, too, Merlin! What vault?”

“You are definitely not my boss.”

“I am too! I can sack you any time I like!”

“You can’t get rid of me. No one else would put up with you.”

“Excuse me?! I’ll see about that. I’ll promote Lance, or Gwen!”

“They’d quit after a day of working with you, My Lord.” Merlin spoke the last two words in an insolent tone, leaning forward and looking up at him in a clear challenge.

“That’s it, then.” Arthur pushed his chair back and stood (and no one needed to know if he flexed a little, did they?).

“What are you doing?”

Arthur took a few steps around the table, toward the door. “You can’t leave like that, you cabbage head.”

“That,” Arthur said, “is not a real thing.” And then he lunged at Merlin and grabbed him, picked him up (possibly kicking and screaming), tossed him over his shoulder, and carried him off to the bedroom.

Merlin was welcomed back to Camelot like a conquering hero—and maybe that’s what he was. Gwaine, the good-looking, floppy-haired bloke, almost smothered him with a hug. “Excellent progress on that grimoire, by the way,” he told Merlin. He lifted his eyebrows in a suggestive manner.

Merlin’s grin was wide and immediate. “I am delighted to hear it.” He shuffled toward Arthur and their arms brushed. Arthur tried to maintain a professional distance, but he couldn’t stop his body from leaning in, a little, on instinct. Gwaine’s head cocked to the side as he eyed them. “Gwaine, you remember Arthur Pendragon.”

“I do.” Gwaine took Arthur’s hand for a strong, brief shake. “How’d you like the fieldwork, Your Grace?”

“Oh, I’m not a duke.”

“Yet,” Merlin mumbled.

Arthur ignored him. “It was fun.”

“Fun?”’’ Merlin’s eyebrows shot up.

“I heard you nearly died. Twice.” Gwaine’s voice was amused and a little skeptical.

Arthur shrugged. “Beats sitting in a cubicle.”

“Which you would never have to do,” Merlin argued.

“Oh, that didn’t hurt.”

“Did too!” Arthur elbowed him back.

“Hey!” Merlin shoved him, and Arthur shoved back, and then Merlin went to push him again, but Arthur was expecting it, so he grabbed Merlin’s hands and held him still.

Gwaine cleared his throat. He raised one eyebrow. “It appears you’ve made more progress than I. More than I thought was possible.”

Merlin’s cheeks turned a lovely pink. “Have you seen Morgana?”

“Fourth floor.”

Morgana was standing beneath the Gorlias tree with a willowy brunette Arthur hadn’t met. Merlin greeted the young woman with a kiss on each cheek. “Hello, Freya,” he said. He looked up. “It’s flowering, then? Excellent.”

Arthur looked over to Morgana. She was eyeing him with a frown. They were both silent until Freya left through the conservatory doors. Then Arthur turned to her. “I cannot believe you would use the library—the one thing I thought was sacred in this bloody Family—to play Father’s games, manipulate me, and—”

"I did not—"

“Don’t lie to me, Morgana!”

“I’m not! Ada Gordon called me to discuss this… shit show last night.”

“You’re the one who sent us for the dagger,” Merlin pointed out.

“Because I wanted you to spend time together! Not because I wanted to assassinate someone!”


Morgana rolled her eyes. “I mean, Uther suggested there was tension about your appointment, and I knew this acquisition would change their minds. So if that’s a power play, then… sure.”

“You wanted us to…” Merlin looked between them, lips pressed together.

“Yes.” Morgana raised her hands. “First I had this dream about it, but when I woke up, I thought it was mad. Then after the first couple of months on the board, I got to know you, Merlin.”

Arthur took a step forward again. “But how did you know…”

Morgana just rolled her eyes. “Oh please. We may have different mothers, but I know you, little brother. Well enough to know when someone would be perfect for you.”

“A little presumptuous,” Merlin snipped.

“I’m not wrong.” Morgana crossed her arms across her silk-clad chest. Her brow and chin lifted in defiance, and she was right. Arthur sighed. Merlin rolled his eyes. “Now,” Morgana continued, “on to important matters. Our father is off the council. Banished from the Five Kingdoms. And I understand you are his replacement?”
“I don’t know; it hasn’t been decided.”

“Why not?”

“I, uh, wanted to discuss it with Merlin first, and—”

“And what? It’s been…” She looked at her watch. “It’s been well over twenty-four hours at this point.” She looked back and forth at each of them. Arthur felt his face heat, and then felt sweat prickle at the back of his neck. Morgana’s eyes narrowed. Merlin cleared his throat. “Ah,” she said. “Well then, I’m so glad you’ve appropriately prioritized the future of all the world’s governments.”

“All the world?” Merlin’s brows lifted.

“Well. All the… western world.”

Merlin scoffed. Arthur took a deep breath. “About that. I have a few ideas for the library that I’d like to discuss with you both.”

Merlin’s head cocked to the side. “Oh?”

“Yes. I was thinking, on the way to Buenos Aires, about what you said about the, um… classification of non-European systems of magic.” He waved his hands, then realized he was gesticulating more than necessary and clasped his hands behind his back. “And I want to, well, fix it.”

“You want to develop an ontology of magic?” Merlin asked.

“Not by myself. And not just Camelot, you know? Wouldn’t it make the most sense to, like, let the, uh, practitioners do it themselves? Together, though. Like a summit. Like Davos, but not for any sort of financial gain.” He watched Merlin quirk an eyebrow at him. “Okay, so, it would probably result in added revenue because Camelot’s profile would be boosted… But that’s not why we should do it!”

“Of course not,” Merlin drawled. He crossed his arms.

“What? That’s just a benefit! Come on. You can’t be mad about it. That’s why I was appointed!” Morgana pursed her lips. “Not entirely.” She looked meaningfully at Merlin.

“Am I wrong, though?”

Merlin stared at him through narrowed eyes. He sniffed. Then he slowly uncrossed his arms. “Honestly, you aren’t wrong. But organizing something like that, and paying for it…” He trailed off, and Arthur thought he heard the words "Dublin Core" murmured once or twice.

“Money isn’t really an issue.” Arthur spoke in a low voice. He swallowed.

“Like hell it isn’t,” Morgana argued.

“I wasn’t asking you,” Arthur insisted. He thought of his last bank statement. Merlin opened his mouth, closed it, and repeated the movement a few times. In the end, he took Arthur’s hand, silent.

Morgana rolled her eyes. “What have I done?” she asked. “Whatever. Just, let me know when you have a real plan. Meanwhile, what about the Five Kingdoms?”

Arthur looked at Merlin. “I don’t know.”

“It’s a full-time job. I don’t know if I want to commit—”


“No.” Arthur shook his head. “Partner.”

Merlin frowned. “But…”

“What?”

“The Druids say you will be king. Nothing about…”

“I’m not rejecting the title; I’m sharing it.”

Merlin slowly nodded. His lips turned up in a shaky smile. “You…” He sighed. “You’re never going to stop surprising me, are you?”

Arthur turned to him. He leaned his face forward, staring deep into the liquid blue of Merlin’s eyes, then down to the bow of his plump lips, to his ears, then back to that blue. His eyes were keen and focused, not missing a thing, as if Merlin already knew everything he was thinking. He probably does. “Not until you stop amazing me.”

Morgana huffed. Arthur assumed she was rolling her eyes, but he refused to look away from Merlin, whose smile had brightened. He licked his lips. “I’m leaving,” Morgana proclaimed. “Just, wait ‘til I’m gone before you start snogging, please, Brother.”

They didn’t.

Later, Merlin used the lift to take them to the basement. Dim fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed in the narrow corridor. The humming was strangely loud, as if something in the circuitry was just slightly off. Merlin led the way. “We have to go down to the subbasement before we access the vault entrance.”

“I still can’t believe no one ever told me there is a vault down here.”

“Very, very few people know it’s here.” Merlin looked briefly over his shoulder. “Like, three. Now four.”

“Who else?”

“Geoffrey, the archivist, and Morgana.”

“Oh.” Arthur pulled at his backpack. The air was stale and slightly musty.

“In here.” Merlin opened a storage room door. His eyes flashed gold as he shifted a cupboard to the left. Beneath it was a trapdoor, which he opened with another flash of gold. “After you,” he gestured.
Arthur crept down a narrow ladder to the stone subbasement. The floor was slightly damp, and he held his hand out to help Merlin down. Merlin didn’t let go. “What now?” Arthur looked around. The space was dark.

“Well, you should probably know… Um,” Merlin sighed. “Let me, uh. Okay, so, you know how we talked about magical creatures?”

Arthur felt his fingers go numb where Merlin was squeezing his hand. “Yes.”

“Okay, good. So it turns out that,” Merlin let out an awkward laugh. “It turns out that some creatures you would think are extinct actually aren’t.” He laughed again. “And also we can talk to them and I can, you know, more or less command them, because of my lineage.”

“What kind of creatures, Merlin?”

“Well, you see, it’s really—”

“Merlin. What kind of creatures?”

“Dragons.”

Arthur just stared at him. He tried to pick out any sign this was a joke. He was probably being pranked, right? Right? “Dragons.”

“Yes.”

“Okay…”

Merlin let out a big breath. “Oh I’m so glad you’re taking it so well. I was afraid you—”

“I’m not.” Arthur’s voice was pitched a bit high.

“Not what?”

“Taking it well.”

“Oh.” Merlin watched him for a moment longer, then squeezed his hand. “Well, no matter. We may as well get to it.” He whispered a bit under his breath and a white sphere of light appeared before them. Merlin smiled at Arthur and pulled him after it.

They walked for a long time. At least an hour passed, though Arthur didn’t keep track, just reveled in Merlin’s fingers intertwined with his, the touch of a palm on his back, the brush of an arm against his own. The room narrowed to a corridor, and the ground was flat and smooth, as if it had been worn down over centuries. The air grew thicker, wetter, and saltier. “We’re nearing the coast.” Arthur’s voice was low.

“Yes.” Merlin squeezed his hand, then let go. “He likes it, and it’s easier for him to remain undetected.”

“He?”

“Kilgharrah.”

“Kilgharrah?”

“The great dragon.”
“Right.” Arthur took slow, steadying breaths. He heard something move in the darkness ahead. “I didn’t bring my sword.”

“You won’t need it.”

“You say that, but…”

“You won’t.” Merlin grinned at him, eyes bright blue slivers in the pale, white light. “Here.” They had reached a door, which was massive and ancient. Runes were carved into its gnarled surface, which Merlin lightly ran his fingers over. His eyes burned gold as he whispered. Arthur heard a few clicks, and then Merlin rubbed at a spot in the center of the door. A keyhole seemed to materialize there. Merlin reached into his pocket and withdrew a large, bronze key. He slid it into the hole, turned it, and pushed open the door.

A dragon waited in the next room. Room was a misnomer. The vault was more of a cavern, vast and deep. Shelves lined the perimeter and cupboards were randomly placed on different levels of the space. And amidst it all sat a massive, leathery-winged lizard. “Dragon,” Arthur whispered.

“Well spotted, young king.” The dragon’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Bloody hell,” Arthur said.

“Is he always like this?”

“Mostly.” Merlin’s grin widened.

“Well, get on with why you came. I was sleeping.”

“Sorry.” Merlin shrugged. “We found—”

“You were given the dagger, young warlock.”

“Yes, and it’s here, so we’re going to put it… here.”

“You realize you removed it from the sacred hiding place in which it had rested safely for almost a millennium?” The dragon seemed to lift an eyebrow and glare imperiously at them.

“Well, yes,” Merlin answered. “But it wasn’t really safe, was it? Cenred nearly took it. Or Morgause.”

“Because you two found it!” the dragon boomed. Arthur winced. “I wonder that they let you.”

“The Templar said it was destiny,” Arthur explained. “We’re supposed to—”

“The Fisher King said you are destined to be a great ruler, Arthur Pendragon, not that you will carry the assassin’s blade. He has always been a fool,” he finished in a quiet growl. “Even before his long vigil.”

“You know there are artefacts more precious than the dagger hidden in this vault, Kilgharrah,” Merlin argued. The dragon lowered his head to Merlin’s eye level. For a moment, Arthur just took in the picture of his boyfriend talking to an actual dragon. *Dragon! Real!*

“If you’re both quite finished,” said Kilgharrah, “I’m ready for breakfast.”

Merlin sighed, then opened the bottom drawer of a cupboard. “Arthur?”
“Hm? Oh.” Arthur slid off the backpack and pulled out the onyx case. He handed it to Merlin, who gingerly placed it in the drawer. The drawer closed on its own and made a few ominous clanking sounds. Kilgharrah made a low growling noise, and then made a quick leaping glide to the far side of the cavern. He disappeared around a corner. “Where’d he go?” Arthur asked.

Merlin turned to him and smiled. “I’ll show you.” He took Arthur’s hand and pulled him after the dragon. They scurried across the cavernous chamber to a wide corridor off the far side, just glimpsing Kilgharrah as he disappeared around a corner ahead of them. Merlin laughed and began to run, so Arthur ran too. They raced, panting, until they rounded another corner and Merlin yanked Arthur to a sudden stop.

The cavern opened to the coast, rocky and wildly churning hundreds of feet below. The sun was fierce red and violet in the western sky, with only a few wisps of cloud punctuating the horizon. The dragon had leapt from the ledge and was gliding up, to the northwest, becoming smaller and smaller as he flew.

Merlin turned, and Arthur met his gaze. “Hey,” he whispered.

“Hey,” Merlin replied. They clasped hands. Merlin turned back to the sunset. His face was awash in the red violet light and his eyelashes glittered and cast shadows on his face.

Arthur swallowed and he smiled. He started to speak, but stopped. It wasn’t necessary, he realized. Merlin turned back to him.

Their lips met, and the sun set.

But the sun would be back again.

The end (is always a beginning).

Chapter End Notes

Oh my word, guys, I cannot say enough THANK YOUs for everyone who has come along on this little journey with me. This has been one of the most challenging and rewarding things I’ve ever done, and I know that would not have happened were it not for the incredible comments and people who were kind enough to leave kudos or make a bookmark.

You are each a miracle and I love you more than I can say.

This story has honestly gotten me through one of the most difficult years of my life, and that means that you, reading this, have gotten me through one of the most difficult years of my life. I cannot adequately express my gratitude.

As always, I’d love to know your thoughts on the whole thing, now that it's finished. I hope this ending wasn't too rushed (didn't want to Game of Thrones it). I hope my attempts to write smut weren't too cringey. I hope you're having a wonderful day or night, whoever and wherever you are.
All my heart and my love,
Liz

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