When the Dawn Breaks

by Polomonkey

Summary

Merlin is captured by a sorcerer intent on stealing his magic to defeat Camelot. Can Arthur find him in time to bring his husband home?

Notes

Tayathestrange, I loved your prompts and this one immediately called to me. I really hope you like the fic and a very happy holidays to you!

Huge thanks to the mods for their patience and for running this wonderful fest so well <3

Warnings: this fic contains violence, restraints, derogatory language and several graphic rape threats. Please proceed with caution.
Chapter 1

“Aëceni!”

Merlin howled with pain, limbs taut against the chains that held him in place.

“If you know of a way, speak it now and ease your misery Emrys.”

Merlin couldn’t think beyond the agony in his head; it felt like someone was splitting him apart, breaking him down into tiny little pieces. When he felt as if he could hold out no more, that surely he would die of the pain, the spell lifted.

Panting, half-sobbing, Merlin hung limp in his restraints.

“Very well. There are rituals yet untried, many of them. We will resume shortly.”

Aran’s cruel face was very close to Merlin’s, his breath sour on Merlin’s cheek.

“I will be victorious, Emrys, and your magic will be mine. Your suffering is simply an added boon.”

Merlin turned away, eyes slipping shut.

It had been a week, or thereabouts. He had been returning from a visit to a druid outpost on the border of Deorham when their party had been attacked. He’d readied a spell to blast away the bandits that surrounded them when a blow to the back of the head knocked him senseless. When he came to, chained to the wall of a damp and sunless cell, there were cold iron cuffs upon his wrists. He could not reach his magic.

And magic was exactly what Aran wanted from Merlin. An exiled sorcerer whose brother had been put to death by Uther, Aran sought only vengeance. He cared not that Uther was long dead and that Arthur’s first act as sovereign had been to lift the ban on magic. To him, Arthur was the same as his father and both deserved to suffer for their crimes. He’d taken great delight in outlining his plans to Merlin; reciting with relish how he intended to harvest Merlin’s power and use it to bring down Camelot and rule in Arthur’s place.

Merlin had railed at him, had told him in no uncertain terms that he would never succeed and he would pay dearly for kidnapping the court sorcerer of Camelot.

Aran’s men had beaten him until he’d seen stars.

But worse than the beating was that which came after. Each day since then, Aran had tried a different spell or ritual to take Merlin’s magic from him. Merlin would be glad that all had failed so far, were it not for the fact that each new failure came with a vicious beating as punishment. Aran hated Merlin for being what he called a traitor to magic, for siding with the Pendragons against his own magical kin. He seemed all too thrilled to have a chance to slake his rage on Merlin’s body and each new day brought new torments. Merlin was in a bad way and he was acutely aware of it. He had several cracked ribs, two broken fingers, his right eye had swollen so large that he couldn’t see, and he was having trouble drawing breath. His whole body ached and he was growing feeble by the hour. If Arthur didn’t find him soon, Merlin wasn’t sure there’d be much left to rescue.

The thought of his husband was the only thing that kept him going. He knew Arthur would be searching for him; that every knight, sorcerer and seer in Camelot would be working for his safe return. Arthur would never ever give up on him.
But Merlin was weakening day by day. He could only hope Arthur found him in time before he succumbed to his injuries – or worse, lost his magic to the cruel ambition of Aran. It would almost be better to die than to see his powers used against his beloved Camelot.

In the few hours he was left alone to rest, he would picture his husband’s dear face in his mind’s eye, and imagine the soothing touch of Arthur’s hand on his. He couldn’t give up, not while there was still a flicker of hope. Arthur had never let him down before. He needed to stay strong for his sake.

It was hard to remember that in the face of Aran’s malice but Merlin was loath to give him the satisfaction of submitting. He opened his eyes again and gathered up the blood in his mouth. Then he spat it in Aran’s face.

The answering blow was swift and sudden but Merlin didn’t care. He wanted Aran to know that there was fight left in him yet.

He met Aran’s look with as much defiance as he could muster, and watched as the man turned red.

“I should cut your tongue out for that,” he hissed. “Or break every bone in your body, you insolent little cur.”

“Do your worst,” Merlin said, and was pleased to hear his voice was steady. He was Emrys and he cowered before no man.

He expected another blow but instead a strange expression stole across Aran’s face.

“Oh I can do that, Emrys. You haven’t been well acquainted with my men yet, have you? Each and every one of them loyal to me… because each and every one of them had their lives made miserable by Uther Pendragon and his bastard dynasty.”

He took a cloth from his pocket and began to wipe Merlin’s blood from his cheek.

“You can imagine how angry they are, you’ve felt the fury of their fists often enough. But I believe they’d inflict greater punishments if given the chance.”

He leaned in close, each word slow and deliberate.

“I think I’ll let them defile you.”

Merlin reared back, blood running cold.

“You… I can't...”

“That sickens you, does it?” Aran mocked. “I’d have thought a whore who opened his legs to Pendragon would open them to anybody.”

Merlin couldn’t breathe. Of all the tortures he could have imagined, this was one horror that had not crossed his mind.

“Please...” he said, desperate enough to beg, and Aran’s face twisted in a sneer.

“Don’t look to me for sympathy, Emrys. The day you pledged allegiance to Camelot was the day you turned your back on all of us. You deserve everything you get.”

Then he was gone, leaving Merlin trembling in the pitch black cell.
Scarcely a candle mark later, Merlin heard the sound of footsteps at the door. He curled in on himself, terror racing through him. Had Aran’s men come for him?

But it wasn’t the usual slow steps of Aran or the heavy ones of his men; instead it sounded like a small scuffle was taking place. He strained his ears to listen and heard a shout of indignation.

“Unhand me at once!” cried an unfamiliar female voice.

“You heard the lady,” Aran’s voice came in reply and more scuffling noises were heard. “I can only apologise for the uncouthness of my men. We bring you here as a guest and counsellor.”

“A guest tends to have a choice in the matter,” the voice bit back. “And why exactly am I here, Aran? You’ve never sought my counsel before.”

“A mistake remedied today, my dear Clorr,” Aran said unctuously. “I have great need of your wisdom, and you may rest assured that your advice will be well remunerated.”

“Your sycophancy strains my patience, Aran,” the female voice replied. “Hasten to the heart of the matter.”

“As you wish. It may be quicker to show you rather than explain.”

The lock on the door clanked open. Through half lidded eyes Merlin watched as Aran entered the cellar, followed by a plump, pretty woman of about forty summers, with dark skin and tightly braided black hair.

Her keen gaze swept the room immediately and stopped on him, eyes widening.

“Is that-“

“The mighty Emrys,” Aran confirmed, with a grin that showed the points of his teeth. “And how the mighty have fallen.”

The woman – Clorr – took a step closer to Merlin, expression inscrutable.

“How is he contained?”

“Cold iron manacles, beset with runes. I took no chances.”

Merlin felt the heat of Clorr’s stare as she examined him. He didn’t recognise her but something about her presence whispered magic and he dared to dream that perhaps she might bring salvation in some form or another. He had forged ties with most every magical sect in Albion in the past few years; there was a good chance she knew of the new Camelot he and Arthur had been building, where sorcery thrived and people like her were welcomed as old friends.

But any hope he had that she might prove an ally died swiftly with her next words.

“So you captured Pendragon’s bitch. Of what interest is this to me?”

“Your mother was killed by Uther, was she not?”

“You know she was,” Clorr stated coldly. “But if you brought me here to take my revenge on his
son’s whore, I’d say you seem to have the situation in hand already. He looks more beaten dog than man.”

“My men have had their fun,” Aran said easily. “Though I’ve promised them more fun yet.”

Merlin cringed away, trying to retreat into his own mind, to pretend he could not hear those horrible words and what they meant.

“But you are not here for revenge. Or at least, not physical revenge. I seek your counsel on a greater plan.”

“Yes?”

“I wish to strip Emrys’ magic from him and make it my own,” Aran said simply. “Then I will have the force and power to end the reign of Pendragon once and for all, so that sorcerers can take their rightful place as masters of Albion.”

Clorr was silent a few moments.

“And where do I come in?”

“We have tried many ways to siphon his magic, but none have prevailed. You know the old ways; know how such things can be done. I humbly request your help.”

“And what do I get in return?”

“Gold, for now,” Aran said, producing a small bag from his pocket. “And once the deed is done… a share in the power we will glean. I have no doubt you will use the magic better than this traitor has.”

He aimed a kick to Merlin’s side and the impact on his cracked ribs was so agonising that Merlin blacked out for a moment. When he was aware again, he saw Clorr counting out the gold pieces, head nodding slightly.

“I will help you.”

Merlin’s heart sank. He’d been counting on the fact that Aran would fail to discover any suitable spell before Arthur rescued him. But from Aran’s words it seemed this Clorr was a skilled practitioner of the old religion. If she knew how to harvest his magic…

“I will need to collect some materials. It’s a complex ritual and preparations will be exacting.”

Aran moistened his lips, eyes eager.

“You shall have whatever you need. How long will it take you to gather?”

“A day at the most.”

“Then we shall convene tomorrow,” Aran said, pleased.

“Hardly,” Clorr said with a snort. “We shall convene in five days’ time.”

“Why?” Aran said, face twisting in anger.

“This ritual can only be performed at the full moon.”

“Very well,” Aran snapped. “Though the longer he is here, the more chance Pendragon and his band
of merry men have of stumbling upon us.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Clorr said, waving a dismissive hand. “I can cast a concealment charm around this place to hide it so well Pendragon could be a hair’s breadth away and still see nothing.”

Merlin hung his head, the full weight of this development bearing down on him. The ritual was now known to Aran. He had expert help to perform it. And Clorr would make their hideout undiscoverable so Arthur had no chance of finding Merlin before it was too late.

A tear trickled down his cheek unbidden. He had kept hope alive, nursed the flame of it in his chest all this time, and now it was dying. He could see no way forward. His magic would be taken, and used against Arthur, and he would be powerless to stop it.

“I would be most grateful,” Aran said, obsequious good humour restored again. “And five days isn’t so long, I suppose. I’m sure my men will be able to make good sport with Emrys in that time to keep him occupied.”

Merlin’s stomach lurched in horror.

“They will not,” Clorr said sharply. “The ritual works best with a sorcerer at their full strength. I can hardly ask for that seeing how you’ve beaten him already, but there’s to be no more damage done. He needs to recuperate as much as possible now.”

“No more damage, then,” Aran said, holding his hands up. “My men can be gentle when they take their pleasure.”

He directed a leer at Merlin that numbed him all over.

“A sorcerer at their full strength, Aran, or did you not hear me?” Clorr said irritably. “That means a sorcerer at full sexual potency too. If he spills his seed close to the ritual, we may find his power much diminished.”

“My men will be taking pleasure, not giving him any,” Aran shot back.

Clorr shrugged.

“Very well. If you care to risk it, I cannot dissuade you. Let us hope you do not sacrifice a lifelong power for a temporary satisfaction.”

There was a pause in which Aran ground his teeth and Merlin prayed with every fibre of his being.

“Alright,” Aran bit out. “He’ll stay untouched. But once the ritual’s done-”

“He’ll be yours for the taking, if you wish it,” Clorr said carelessly. “I daresay you’ll find him even more amusing with his powers gone.”

Aran turned back to Merlin then, the beginnings of a smirk returning to his face.

“I confess I find a certain delight in the idea of riding into Camelot with the legendary Emrys speared upon my cock. Imagine the little king’s face…”

Merlin retched suddenly, leaning forward to expel what little was left in his stomach. Clorr barely reacted and Aran’s smile grew even wider.

“Something to look forward to, eh, Emrys? Perhaps I’ll keep you as a mascot in the new Albion, a little remnant of the old era to be shared among the eager. It won’t be much of a transition to go from
Merlin gagged again but there was nothing left to come out. Fear was stealing his breath away, turning his body to ice. It would be better to die here and now than submit to that.

Aran’s hand fisted in his hair, pulling his head back. His voice was a harsh whisper next to Merlin’s ear.

“The last thing your bastard king will see before his life ends will be you bouncing on my cock and there’ll be nothing he can do to—”

“Aran!” Clorr said. “What did I just say?”

With great reluctance, Aran released his grip on Merlin’s hair.

Clorr tutted.

“Take him down, clean his wounds, feed him and let him sleep. The stronger he is on the full moon, the more we’ll get out of him.”

“Of course, my dear Clorr,” Aran said, clicking his fingers at his henchmen. “What’s five days in a lifetime?”

Merlin closed his eyes against the tears.
Chapter 2

Arthur had barely set foot in his chambers when the message came.

He had not stayed more than a few hours in the citadel since Merlin was taken. Every day and night was spent scouring the country in search of some trace of his husband. He ate only enough to sustain him, slept only enough to ensure he did not fall from his horse in exhaustion. Every other moment of his time was devoted to bringing Merlin home.

It had been nine days but to Arthur it felt more like nine months – each hour without Merlin passed torturously slow, each waking second filled with a cold numbing fear that his love would never be found, that he was lost to Arthur forever. Morgana had begged him to rest awhile and let the knights take up the hunt, but Arthur refused. He couldn’t even countenance lying down in the same bed he and Merlin had shared for the last four years. He was afraid he might start to weep and never stop, and he had no time for tears or self-recriminations.

The bed was too large without Merlin in it. Not just the bed but their chambers too. And the castle, and the courtyard, and the lower town, and any place in the whole of Albion that didn’t have Merlin in it. Arthur didn’t know how to breathe anymore, suffocated at every turn by the loss. Arthur could almost be terrified at how little anything that wasn’t Merlin meant to him. He’d never seen so starkly before how lost he was on his own.

When Morgana appeared at his door, Arthur held up a hand to forestall her words.

“I will not stay the night, sister, please do not ask it of me. I have returned only to replenish my supplies—”

“I’ve had a vision,” Morgana cut in, her eyes wide.

Arthur was striding across the room in an instant.

“Of Merlin?” he said, hope leaping into his chest.

“No, still nothing of him,” Morgana said and his heart sank. All the seers in the kingdom had yet been unable to scry where Merlin was.

“What was the vision?” he said quietly, swallowing his disappointment.

“It was less a vision than a message,” Morgana said quickly. “From a sorceress, one I do not recognise. She is riding towards Camelot and asks us to meet her near the Mountains of Andor. She claims to know where Merlin is.”

“It could be a trap,” Arthur said but he was already reaching for his armour. They had nothing to go on and he was desperate enough to try anything.

“She acknowledged the risk in trusting a stranger and said she would allow me to share her vision if I wanted.”

“Share her vision?”

“If a sorcerer is powerful enough, they can invite a seer to glimpse a memory within their mind’s eye. I could see what she has seen, to put it simply.”
Morgana had crossed to the armoire and was pulling out fresh clothes for Arthur to pack.

“Can these memories be falsified?”

“I believe not.”

Morgana handed Arthur his cloak and met his gaze.

“She seemed sincere. It is up to you brother, but this is a risk that I would take.”

Arthur had known he would from the beginning. He nodded his assent.

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The knights assembled quickly to ride out – Arthur wanted only his most trusted around him. Elyan and Percival had been on the last search with him, but they made no objections to saddling up again. Each and every one was as committed to finding Merlin as Arthur was.

It was a sombre party that journeyed towards the mountains. Gwaine’s usual chatter was nowhere to be heard, he had not smiled once since Merlin’s kidnap. Leon flanked the group, watchful as ever, while Morgana rode up front with Arthur, lest her magic be needed.

It took the best part of a day to reach the edge of the mountains and Arthur saw the lone figure first. He called to the knights to scan the horizons for any sign of a hidden ambush. None found, they approached cautiously, hands on their swords and Morgana tensed and ready to cast.

“I come in peace, Arthur Pendragon,” the sorceress said. She was a large, attractive woman swathed in a green cloak. Her hands were spread out, palms flat to show no weapons were concealed.

“Who are you?” Arthur said, remaining on his horse.

“I am Clorr of Deira. I am a priestess of the old religion as my mother was before me.”

“I do not know you.”

“No. But your father killed my mother many years ago, when she passed through Camelot on business.”

Arthur’s hackles rose.

“So you come for vengeance?”

Clorr met his eyes steadily.

“I do not. Your father’s crimes will never find my forgiveness. But I know of the new Camelot you have built and I do not believe the iniquities of the father should be visited upon the son.”

To his surprise, she sat down on a flat rock, settling in place.

“I tell you my background so you know why I was approached by the man who has Emrys.”

“What man?” Arthur said, clenching his reins.
“His name is Aran. He is a sorcerer from Deira, one whose brother was killed by your father. His plan is to take Emrys’ magic from him and use it to defeat you.”

Arthur felt sick. What had this man done to Merlin to try and take his magic?

“Has he succeeded?” he asked, voice strained.

“No. Which is why he has sought my help. I told him I would return on the night of the full moon and we would complete the ritual.”

Arthur regarded her a moment and then dismounted.

“But you will not help him?”

Clorr smiled then, sadly.

“Once my heart was full of hate, as his is, and I might have said yes. But I have lived longer now and know that violence only breeds more violence.”

Arthur felt Morgana dismount at his side.

“And you believe in the new Camelot?” she asked.

“I am slow to hope, after all that has passed before,” Clorr said honestly. “But I wish to wait and see. Not instate Aran as a new tyrant to persecute non-magical people the way Uther persecuted sorcerers.”

Arthur nodded. The explanation was good enough for him. Or it would be, once they had made sure Clorr was all she seemed.

“This is my sister Morgana, the one you reached out to,” he said.

“I willed my message to find the strongest seer in Camelot, so you must be she,” Clorr said, turning to Morgana.

“Will you let me see what you saw?” Morgana said softly.

“I will.”

Clorr beckoned Morgana to sit beside her.

“Are you friend to Emrys?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Clorr sighed.

“Then brace yourself for what you are about to witness.”

Arthur’s heart lurched.

“Is he hurt?” he said, and his voice cracked.

“Yes,” Clorr said directly. “I cannot lie. He has not been treated well.”

Arthur fought to keep his breathing even.
“Will he live?”

“I believe so. I told Aran the ritual required Emrys to be as healthy as possible. They should not have harmed him since I took my leave.”

It was the only small mercy Arthur could cling on to. He steeled himself as Clorr took Morgana’s hands and directed them to rest lightly on the side of her temples.

Then she spoke a few words and both women were engulfed in white.

Arthur forced himself to take a drink of water, then to look round and make sure the knights were doing the same. He could not afford to fall apart now, when they were so close to getting Merlin back.

After a minute or two, Morgana jerked back, fingers falling from Clorr’s temples.

“Gods,” she said and her eyes were wet, her hands shaking.

“Morgana…” Arthur said but he could not finish the sentence, not sure he could bear to know what she had seen.

He watched his sister compose herself.

“He lives, Arthur, and his wounds are not life threatening,” Morgana said determinedly. “We have no cause to despair.”

But he saw the shock and sorrow in her eyes.

“The full moon is in three days,” Elyan said gently from behind them, and Arthur welcomed the distraction.

“Indeed,” he said. “There is no time to waste.”

Waiting outside the abandoned castle where Merlin was kept might have been the hardest part. Every fibre of Arthur’s being longed to rush in and slaughter every man who had laid a finger on his husband. Yet he knew the plan and he would not jeopardise it. They were to wait for Clorr’s signal.

His knights were close at hand, and Morgana was ready with the enchantment to break Merlin’s manacles. Clorr would subdue Aran as best she could while the knights took out the henchmen. But she warned that Aran was strong, that she would not be able to hold him alone for long.

Arthur wanted nothing more than to slice the sorcerer from nape to guts. However, Merlin came first. He would rescue him before he did aught else.

When the signal came, Clorr’s magic setting a green glow about Arthur’s sword, they moved towards the cell where Merlin was kept.

Two men met in the corridor were dispatched easily. The guards at the cell door were better trained and Percival and Leon leapt forth to parry their swords. Gwaine threw the cell door open and the remaining party burst in.
Arthur counted three more men lining the walls before his gaze found the man who must be Aran; a broad fellow with a ruddy beard and a cruel aspect to his mouth.

Aran turned with a bellow of rage and his henchmen immediately sprang forward. Elyan and Gwaine were there to meet them and Arthur pushed forward to see… to see…

Merlin was chained to a stone table, unconscious, chest bare and covered in freshly painted runes. Time stood still as Arthur noted the swollen eye, the blackened fingers, the bruised torso, the skeletal body.

His husband. His Merlin.

Arthur’s heart broke.

Then a weight hit him in the back and he crashed to the ground, turning to see Aran’s arm outstretched.

“Help me!” Aran shouted at Clorr, before turning back to Arthur to ready another attack. Arthur barely had time to reach for his sword before Aran flew off his feet, hitting the wall with a thud.

“I will not,” Clorr said, face like thunder.

“You traitorous bitch!” Aran screamed, shooting a spell at her that knocked her backwards.

“Arthur,” Morgana said frantically and he clambered to his feet and ran to her side. She’d managed to crack the cuffs on Merlin’s wrists and was trying to tug the tight metal apart.

Arthur reached over to help. It took all his strength to break the left one off but the right didn’t yield.

“Cast it again,” he said and Morgana nodded. Arthur risked a glance behind him and saw one henchman lying on the ground. Elyan had another cornered but the one fighting Gwaine seemed to have the upper hand.

Morgana whispered a spell and the right cuff splintered a little more.

“Go to Gwaine,” Arthur said and she left his side. He pulled at the cuff again, muscles straining. He almost had it…

Then his body froze. He could move his head a little but the rest of him was locked in place, magically immobilised.

“Morgana-” he cried out but a cold hand fell on his shoulder.

“I think not, Pendragon.”

Aran appeared in front of him. From out of the corner of his eye he could see Clorr lying motionless on the ground. The two final henchmen were lying prone too, but Gwaine, Elyan and Morgana had been frozen in the same way he was, faces cast in desperation.

Aran surveyed the scene, a smile curling his lip.

“I planned to kill you on your knees in front of all of Camelot,” he said at last. “But I suppose here and now will do, in front of your little dog.”

“Don’t call him that,” Arthur hissed, incensed.
“You’re right, I suppose he’s *my* little dog now,” Aran sneered. “Once you and your knights are dead I’ll have all the time in the world to take his magic.”

He made a show of licking his lips.

“And take his body too.”

Arthur’s vision went white with rage.

“If you dare to touch him-”

“How will you stop me?” Aran said in triumph. “The line of Pendragon ends here, boy.”

Arthur’s own sword leapt from his hand, coming to hover in front of his heart. Arthur willed his body to move, to break Aran’s hold. It couldn’t end like this, not with Merlin still in the hands of this monster…

“Don’t worry,” Aran said, baring his teeth like fangs. “I’ll take good care of Camelot. And your whore too.”

The sword swung forward.

And… stopped.

“Get the hell away from my husband,” a voice croaked out.

*Merlin.*

There was a clunk as the right cuff dropped off. Arthur watched as Merlin raised one quivering hand.

Then a red light flashed and Aran fell dead to the ground.

Merlin immediately slumped back to the table and Arthur raced to his side, limbs finally freed.

“Darling,” he choked out, so full of love and fear and relief that he could barely speak. “I’m here, Merlin. I’m here. I’ve got you now.”

And he gathered his husband into his arms.
Chapter 3

Yule crept up on Arthur. It had been five months since Merlin was found, and his time had been fully occupied with taking care of his husband. It was a shock to look out of the window and see preparations for the lower town’s Yuletide celebrations, as well the charms and poppets sold in the courtyard for Yule decoration.

“The jugglers are back,” he said to Merlin, hoping to tempt him to the window. But Merlin did not stir, as if he had not heard Arthur at all.

Five months he’d had Merlin back and yet in some ways Merlin hadn’t come back at all. His physical injuries were all but healed, with only a slight unnatural bend in one of his fingers to show for them. But his mind…

Merlin could make a good show of it in the daytime; share a joke with Gwaine, greet Gwen with a smile, assist Gaius with his potions. It was in the night that Arthur saw the full extent of Merlin’s anguish.

The nightmares were vivid and all consuming. Arthur could only guess at the horrors that gripped Merlin’s unconscious mind, but he knew they must be awful indeed to provoke such reactions from his husband. Merlin would wake in a cold sweat, shaking all over and sobbing like he’d never stop. On particularly bad nights he would scream in terror, clawing at his own skin while Arthur tried desperately to rouse him.

Arthur had grown adept at seeing the warning signs, at waking Merlin before the dream became too potent. But he was exhausted too, and sometimes slept too deeply to wake Merlin before it was too late. At that point he could only hold his husband, stroking his hair and murmuring soothing words in his ear until Merlin subsided, limp and drained.

Sleeping potions did not help; they only trapped Merlin deeper in his nightmares. Arthur had privately asked Gaius if anything would.

“Would that I had something in a bottle that could make it all better,” Gaius said ruefully. “I can only prescribe patience, sire. And love.”

Love and patience Arthur had. He just didn’t know if it was enough. It was not just the physical torture that plagued his husband’s thoughts. Arthur knew what Aran had threatened all too well. Merlin flinched from strangers and froze if any man came too close to him, even the knights he’d known for years. Arthur was grateful that at least Merlin did not fear his touch, but he was one of the few still able to get close to Merlin. He knew it pained Gwaine and the other knights to see Merlin cringe from them, even if he tried to cover it up with jests.

The worst nightmares were the ones in which Aran had made good on his threats. Merlin would be paralysed with fear when he woke, and it would take Arthur long hours of cuddling and coaxing before Merlin could even speak again. Occasionally his magic would lash out – never at Arthur thankfully, but at the windows, the mirrors, the paintings on the wall. Merlin always repaired the damage the next day, until the room was as good as new. Arthur longed for a spell that could do the same for Merlin’s mind.

But there was none and Arthur was practical above all else. Merlin had done so much for Arthur and the kingdom over the years. Now it was Arthur’s turn to take care of him. It didn’t matter how long it took.
That in mind, he made his way over to the chair where Merlin sat.

“There’s acrobats too, love, come and look.”

“Maybe later,” Merlin said, head down.

“Alright,” Arthur said. “Shall I read to you?”

“You should go out there, don’t mind me.”

“I prefer to be in here with you,” Arthur said lightly.

Merlin looked up then, his eyes filling with tears.

“I’m sorry Arthur, I’m so tired today-”

“Hush,” Arthur said, placing his hand on Merlin’s leg. “You need never explain. I meant what I said. A hundred acrobats could be juggling a naked Gwaine in the air out there and I’d still prefer to be by your side.”

Merlin laughed a little then, as Arthur hoped he would.

“I think Gwaine would enjoy that.”

“Yes, too much I fear. We better pray he doesn’t get any ideas.”

Merlin looked to the window and his smile turned wistful.

“I loved Yule as a child.”

“The festivities will still be there tomorrow. We can take a walk out then.”

Merlin nodded and Arthur picked up a book from the side.

“Right, where were we?”

“The bard had just returned from the war.”

“Ah yes,” Arthur said, finding the page. A hand reached out to touch his gently.

“Thank you, Arthur,” Merlin said, eyes bright.

Arthur squeezed his husband’s knee and began to read.

Merlin was not well enough to walk out the next day, and it held little appeal for Arthur on his own. He went out for a short while anyway to wish the town folk well and watch Morgana put on a little magic display for the local children. Balancing the duties of being king with caring for Merlin had been difficult. He didn’t want to become a stranger to his people so he tried to keep making trips to the town, even on days when he’d rather stay with his husband. However he was always touched by the way Camelot’s citizens sent their good wishes to Merlin, often pressing little trinkets or sweetmeats on Arthur to give to “their” court sorcerer; with the hope that he was recovering well.
Today was no exception and he’d received a pocketful of remembrances from the town folk to take to Merlin. He was making his way back to the castle steps when a familiar voice called his name.

It was Clorr and his heart gladdened to see her.

“You are most welcome in Camelot,” he said, walking forth to meet her. “To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?”

“I sensed Emrys may have need of me,” Clorr said, as direct as ever, and Arthur nodded.

“Then let us go to him.”

Merlin greeted Clorr warmly when they entered their chambers, and Arthur was pleased to see there was no trepidation in Merlin’s eyes. It seemed the lingering trauma of Clorr’s apparent compliance with Aran had been dispelled. Merlin had often talked since his rescue of what he owed her, and how grateful he was.

“How are you?” Arthur said solicitously once they were sat and settled with a jug of wine. She had been badly hurt by Aran’s attack and he had thought of her often after she had returned to the healers in Deira.

“Better,” Clorr said. “My leg is somewhat lame but I get along well with this.”

She held up her cane.

“I could try to heal-” Merlin began and Clorr waved him away.

“Nonsense. I don’t believe in pretending the past never happened. The hurts we sustain make us who we are.”

She tapped her cane on the ground.

“Better the mind heals and the body carries the scars, rather than the other way round.”

Clorr looked closely at Merlin.

“I see it is your mind that cannot heal, Emrys.”

Merlin’s face crumpled slightly and Arthur placed a protective hand on his arm.

“You don’t have to talk about-”

“It’s alright,” Merlin said, to Arthur’s surprise. “I have… struggled. Especially with nightmares.”

Clorr nodded sagely.

“Understandable. The mental wounds are fresh. Your sleeping self would soothe them but it does not know how. It can only relive them.”

She held out her hand to Merlin.

“This too will pass.”

Merlin took it, with a hand that trembled.

“I can’t seem to move on,” he confessed, voice small.
“When my mother was killed, I thought the pain would never cease. I was consumed by it,” Clorr said steadily. “But one day I woke up to see the sun shine down and heard the lark sing in the tree and found the new buds coming up in the fields. And I wanted to be a part of life again.”

Merlin bowed his head.

“I’m not there yet.”

“No,” Clorr said. “But you will be. It takes time.”

After Clorr had retired for the night, Arthur helped Merlin into his sleep clothes.

“I used to dress you like this,” Merlin said, eyes crinkling a little.

“I loved you even then,” Arthur said.

“Even when I dressed you wrong?”

There was a hint of mischief in Merlin’s eyes and Arthur reached out to give him a poke in the ribs.

“Especially then.”

Merlin smiled and Arthur couldn’t help but drop a soft kiss onto his lips.

“The most useless manservant in the five kingdoms. Every day I thank the gods I got stuck with you.”

“Do you mind being stuck with me now?” Merlin said quietly. “With the nightmares and the melancholy and all?”

“Especially now.”

Arthur pulled his husband to him, burying his face in Merlin’s soft hair.

“And always, my love.”

Merlin’s arms came up around Arthur’s waist and they stood like that, breathing each other in.

“I want to get better,” he murmured. “But-”

“It takes time, as Clorr said.”

Arthur pressed a kiss to Merlin’s hair.

“And time is something we have plenty of.”

They slipped under the sheets and lay intertwined, face to face.

“If I dream tonight…”

“I’ll be here,” Arthur said. And he watched as Merlin drifted off to sleep.

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