For Want of a Nail

by OhHeyThereBigBadWolf

Summary

Fleeing from Essetir in the bloody beginnings of the Purge, Hunith finds herself on the doorstep of old friends. That's all it takes to untangle the skeins of destiny and weave a new tapestry.

Notes

My first multichapter fic in this fandom, so bear with me.
A Dainty Little Bird

Leon wakes up to a commotion in the house.

He hears raised voices, his father's, a woman's, a man's, coming from downstairs. He looks out the window, sees glittering stars and a fat yellow moon still high in the sky. Rubbing at his eyes, he climbs down out of his bed and peers out of his room, then heads down the corridor to the stairs, peering through the bannisters.

In the foyer, he sees his father still in his bedclothes, sword belt hastily buckled around his waist. One of the nightmen, holding up a lantern and grasping the arm of a peasant woman. In her other arm, she's clutching a bundle to her tightly. The woman's bleeding, he sees with alarm, a cut on her brow oozing blood down the side of her face. Her eyes are wide and terrified. The nightman gives her a rough shake, barking an order at her, and a high, terrified cry rises sharply.

"Enough!"

Everyone goes quiet as Mother sweeps into the foyer. Leon smiles, relaxing; Mother will know what to do. She's put on one of Father's coats over her nightdress, her hair in a long braid. "Now, what is going—? Hunith?" she exclaims in surprise.

"Evaine," the woman says, relieved. "Please, I need your help."

"Of course. Cadmar, release her. We'll handle it from here," Mother orders, and the nightman lets go of the woman, who must be Hunith. "My dear, what's happened to you? Who's done this?" she asks. "Come into the hall, sit down." Mother puts an arm around the woman and guides her in, Father following behind.

Leon hesitates for only a second. Eavesdropping isn't a nice thing to do, and Father says that he's not old enough to attend yet, even though he's already eight winters. But maybe if they didn't want him to wake up and listen, they shouldn't have all been so loud.

He sneaks down the stairs quickly, avoiding the ones that squeak, and darts over to the door of the hall. The hearth there is kept lit all the time in winter, to keep the house warm, so there's light enough for him to see when he peers around the door.

Hunith is sitting in Father's big chair at the head of the table, closest to the fire, with the bundle in her lap. Mother's using a napkin to wipe the blood off her face. "Who did this to you?" she asks.

"One of King Baudouin's men."

"Baudouin?" Father sounds surprised. "Why would he send his men to a little border village like yours?"

"It's not him who sent them. It was his son."

"Cenred? That vicious little mongrel?" Father scowls. "Baudouin's letting him command his soldiers? Prince or no, the boy's scarce four-and-ten."

Hunith shakes her head, still looking pale and sick. "Boy or no, vicious doesn't come close to describing him. He's heard about what's happening in Camelot, the purging of magic," she says, lowering her voice slightly, and there's a nervous whimpering sound. "Apparently, he's convinced his father to take a similar route, but they're not executing sorcerers. He's capturing them. Putting
them in iron binds and conscripting them to the army."

"Gods' mercy," Father mutters; Mother shakes her head.

"They're everywhere," Hunith goes on softly. "Cenred's sending men to turn over every village from the citadel to the borders. Anyone who tries to resist or flee gets cut down. That's why I'm here. I—we—couldn't stay in Ealdor. It was too dangerous. I couldn't let them take him from me."

She pulls at the bundled-up blanket in her arms, and Leon sees that she's not carrying any clothes or food, but a child, a little boy. He's clinging tightly to his mother, eyes wide and fearful, like a scared rabbit. Hunith strokes his black hair gently, hugging him against her.

"Oh, my dear," Mother breathes softly. "He's not…?"

"He is," Hunith replies. "Since the day he was born, Evaine. It's a part of him. Half the time, he doesn't even mean to do it."

Father runs a hand through his hair, rising from his seat and pacing back and forth.

Hunith grasps Mother's hand in hers, pleading. "Evaine, please. I beg of you. Help me hide him. Never speak to me again if you must, bar me from your home forever, just help me keep him safe," she implores. She swallows hard a few times, then adds in a quieter voice, "I would never hold what happened against you, Evaine, but that debt still stands between us. I'll claim it now if I must."

A debt? Why would Mother owe a peasant woman a debt? Leon shifts a little closer to the door, trying to tilt his head to see better; the floor creaks.

The boy sits up, his head turning sharply towards the door; his eyes turn all golden-yellow. The doors slam open with a crash, and Leon tumbles forward, something invisible shoving against his back.

"Leon!" Father crosses the hall in three strides and curls one big hand in the back of his nightshirt, lifting him to his feet. "What in the name of gods are you doing?" he demands.

"That was magic," Leon mumbles, staring at the little boy. "He—he did magic."


Father clasps his rough hand over the nape of his neck and pulls him over; Leon stares at the tiny boy in Hunith's lap. His eyes are blue now, still scared, so scared.

"How much of this have you heard, Leon?" Mother asks solemnly.

He scuffs his heel against the rushes. "I woke up when Cadmar brought her in."

"Gods' mercy," Father sighs, pinching his nose.

"If he has magic, aren't we supposed to tell the King?" Leon asks.

Hunith clutches the boy closer to her, and he whimpers fearfully. Mother puts a hand on her shoulder.

Father turns to face him, going down to one knee so Leon can look at him straight-on. His dark eyes are grave, his mouth firm. "Do you remember what I told you about duty and doing what's right?" he asks solemnly.
Leon nods. "Yes, Father. A knight's duty is to honour the King, the code, and Camelot, but when the choice is between doing one's duty and doing what's right, there is no choice at all," he recites obediently.

Father nods. "That's right. This is one of those choices. My duty is to tell the King, but you know what will happen to them if I do that. Do you think that's right?"

He does know. Everyone knows what happens to sorcerers. The pyre. The noose. The axe. And that's if the King is feeling merciful enough for a swift death. He remembers when an old woman was burned for sorcery just a fortnight ago, the smell of it. They'd had roast for dinner that night, and he couldn't eat a bite of it. Leon looks at Hunith, so pale and harried, the cut on her brow still oozing a little, bright red against her skin. The little boy, trembling all over, clutching his mother's kirtle so hard his knuckles are white. They're both so afraid. And Hunith had said that the boy was born with magic. He didn't learn it on purpose, he wasn't trying to do anything wrong, and nobody is actually born evil, right?

"No," he says at last. "It's not. They're here to ask for our help. We can't betray that trust."

Father smiles and plants a kiss on his brow. "Good lad." He straightens up, looking at Hunith, one hand clasped firmly over Leon's shoulder. "Well?"

"I have an uncle in Camelot," Hunith says quietly. "I can stay with him unquestioned, but...I don't dare take him with me, not now."

"As you shouldn't." Mother is quiet a moment, fingertips pressed to her mouth. "We could foster the boy," she murmurs. "Say he's some distant kin of ours, perhaps?"

"And never have him see his mother again?" Father interjects; the boy whimpers and burrows further into Hunith's arms in protest. Leon couldn't imagine never seeing Mother again and shakes his head, too. They're all quiet for another moment, but then Father huffs a little breath. "Well...there is one way. But I'm not certain it's best discussed in front of—"

"I want to stay!" Leon protests, already knowing what he means to say.

Mother smiles a little and touches the top of his head. "The lad's already heard enough tonight, Lionel. Out with it."

Looking downwards, Father shifts his weight. "I could claim him as my natural son," he says a little helplessly.

Hunith shakes her head. "Oh, no, I couldn't—"

"Nonsense," Mother cuts her off, not unkindly. She looks back up at Father. "You're certain, Lionel?"

He nods again, reaching up to run a hand through his hair. "How old's the boy?"

"Four," Hunith replies.

"That's about when we were at the borders, the skirmish with Baudouin's men. Near enough to Ealdor. It's not unheard of," Father says. "And then when I take Leon to Camelot to begin training, I can take the boy with me to see Hunith without suspicion."

Leon knows what it means to have a natural child. It means that Father would've been disloyal to Mother when he was on campaign for the King, broken his vows. It's not unheard of, but he knows
that knights are expected to be better than that, and that Father takes pride in being honourable.

Mother reaches over and takes one of Father's hands in hers, smiling a little. "If you're certain, my love, then I trust you," she says with a little smile. She looks back at Hunith and touches her shoulder. "And this is hardly an inconvenience to us, my dear, not after all you've done for me. So, what say you?"

Hunith sighs, shaking her head a little. But then she squares her shoulders and nods. "Alright."

"Good. It's done, then." Father looks down at Leon, resting a hand against the top of his head. "You understand, then, lad, that this means the boy's going to be your brother? You'll need to look out for him, protect him? He'll be part of our family."

Leon nods. "Yes, Father. I understand, and I'll look after him." He turns his gaze to Hunith. "I will, my lady, I promise."

She gives him a smile, her eyes wet. "I believe you. Thank you."

"Alright, well, now that is settled, it is time for you to be in bed," Mother announces, placing a hand on his shoulder; he opens his mouth to protest, but she holds up a finger, quieting him. "It's time for all of us to be in bed. We can talk more of this tomorrow, after some well-needed rest. Hunith, you can sleep in the guest chambers." She wraps an arm around Hunith and guides her out of the hall.

Father leans down and grabs him under the arms, hefting him up. "Let's go, cub. Bed for you," he grunts. He carries Leon upstairs and back to his room, dumping him on the bed unceremoniously, and pulls the blankets up over him. "I'm proud of you, son. You'll be a good man one day. I can see it already." He leans down and presses a kiss to Leon's brow. "Get some sleep."

"Goodnight, Father."

Hunith leaves the next day, early in the morning. Mother and Father both insist that she should stay at least another day or so, rest before going on, but she insists upon going as soon as she can, to find her uncle in Camelot and get as far from the borders and the reach of Esetir's soldiers as she can.

Leon rubs the sleep grit out of his eyes, standing beside Father and watching as Hunith gathers her son to her in a fierce, lingering hug. The boy clings to her just as hard as he had last night, sniffing, trembling all over like a leaf, and she murmurs something in his ear, too quiet for them to hear. He's sure that they don't need to hear it anyways. But whatever she says to the boy, it must give him strength.

Hunith uses the edge of her sleeve to dry his face, cupping his small face between her hands and kissing his brow before she straightens, looking to Mother and Father. "Thank you. All of you." She looks down at her son and touches his hair with a small smile. "I'll write, love. I'll see you soon." With that, she turns and heads out the gate, pulling a borrowed cloak close around her; Philip, one of Father's men, goes with her as an escort. She would've gone alone, but Mother refused to hear it.

The boy watches her go, small hands clutching something that Hunith had given him, standing in place until she and Philip go over a hill and are lost to sight. Once she disappears over the slope, he whimpers once, very softly.

Father gives him a gentle nudge, and Leon steps forward, coming up to the boy. He's very small
and skinny. Bird-boned, Mother would say. His hair is inky black and curly, flopping in his blue eyes, and he has some ears, too. "Hey," Leon murmurs.

The boy looks up at him, blinking big, tearful eyes. "Mummy says I'm living with you now."

"Yeah, you are. We're going be brothers, you and me. I've always wanted a little brother."

"Really?"

"Really. But we can hardly be brothers if I don't know your name. I'm Leon."

The boy sniffs and swipes his sleeve over his face. "Merlin."

Merlin. It fits him. A dainty little bird for a skinny little boy. Mother has one, she likes to go hawking with it on the estate. Maybe he'll take the boy up to the mews and show him later.

"Did I hurt you when I pushed you over?" Merlin asks.

Leon remembers last night, the feeling of being shoved into the hall when the doors slammed open, and he laughs. "No, but that was really impressive, Merlin. Those doors are heavy."

That gets him a tiny smile. "Really? You weren't scared?"

"Nope," he lies.

Merlin's smile fades. "You're not gonna tell the King, are you? Because of my magic?" he asks, lowering his voice to a furtive whisper.

Leon shakes his head again. "I promised your mother I'd look out for you, and a knight doesn't break promises. And brothers don't tell on each other. So we'll just have to be a pair of criminals together," he replies.

That gets a laugh from Merlin, loud and piping, and it makes his whole face look brighter.

Leon throws an arm around Merlin. "C'mon, little villain, let's go find your room."
Merlin first meets the Prince Arthur during the summer of his tenth year, visiting Silverpine.

The estate of Silverpine is beautiful. It lies in the province of Brechfa, nestled in the low mountains that divide Brechfa from Ascetir. The valley holds mostly gardens and pasturage for the sheep that are the estate's primary source of income; the lower slopes are terraced and given to apple and pear orchards which make cider and perry. Beyond that, the mountains grow wild, forests of pine trees which give the estate its name, with unexpected meadows filled with flowers. There's a spring-fed lake near the manor house, clear and perfect, and there are caves tucked away in the mountains, too. It's a small holding by most standards, but it's deep enough to hold secrets.

Merlin is given near free run of the place, and though a part of him always aches for his mother, he finds he can breathe here in a way he couldn't in Ealdor. His memories of his birth village have grown vague and fuzzy, but he remembers people turning away from him and his mother, remembers other children fleeing from him, remembers a distinct feeling of coldness and distance from everyone around them. Not here.

Lionel and Evaine set chores for him, of course, and he had to attend lessons with Leon, but whereas Leon learned swordplay and combat skills, Merlin didn't. He had no need of them, given that a bastard couldn't be a knight as per the King's Code. It suits Merlin perfectly fine. He has no desire to be a knight. He's far more content spending his days climbing the fruit trees in the orchards, wrestling with the pups in the kennels, and practicing his magic in the secret caves and groves in the forest. Mum had sent him a book of magic, a gift from his great-uncle in Camelot, and he keeps it hidden in a small cave that only he knows of. He's never even shown it to Leon, liking to think of it as his own private magical sanctuary.

It's a fine spring day when he first hears word of the Prince's visit.

The Prince is to become a squire next spring alongside Leon, even though he's two winters younger, so the King finds it wise to allow his son the chance to become acquainted with his soon-to-be fellows and one-day subjects. Which meant the Prince was to be fostered at Silverpine for the summer. Apparently, it's a great honour, one that Lionel and Evaine can't refuse lest they rouse the King's suspicion. Anyone else would be honoured.

Merlin's furious.

He loves summer, loves the feeling of the earth growing rich and ripe around him, loves spending the long days outdoors, indulging in what he knows will be his last summer of carefree play with Leon before they move their household to Camelot for Leon's squiring. And now, now it'll all be spoiled with some arrogant little princeling hanging about. No magic. It's only a summer, but to a boy of ten winters, it's akin to telling a bird 'no flying.' He hates his cage already, though it hasn't yet been shut around him.

He sprints from the manor house in a fury, fleeing to the forest. He weaves around the pine trees to his yew. It's the only yew tree in the wood, and it is old, so very, very old. Merlin wonders if perhaps the yew was here first and the rest of the forest grew up around it. He doesn't think it's impossible. Every lord of Silverpine has left it untouched, and even in the frenzy of superstition and persecution of the Purge, Lionel had ordered it left alone. Yew is for warding, protection, and Merlin feels safe in the deep forks of its enormous, twisted branches, listening to its slow thoughts and deep pulse. He presses his brow to the ridged bark and breathes in the clean, pure forest air.
He's not sure how long he sits there, folded in the cradle of three spreading branches, but soon enough he hears the sound of Leon coming to him, tripping and stumbling through the undergrowth, newly clumsy. Despite his fouled mood, Merlin smiles. Over the winter, Leon had grown rawboned and lanky, and unused to it, he constantly falls over himself, careening off-balance and tipping into things. Colts' Years, Lionel had laughingly called it. All young men went through it and eventually grew out of it.

"Merlin!" Leon calls from the knotted roots of the tree, tilting his head up. "Merlin! Are you going to come down, or do I have to come up to you?"

A part of him desperately wants to see Leon try to climb up with his new long, awkward limbs. However, knowing better than to trust his off-kilter balance, Merlin reluctantly uncurls and clambers down onto one of the low, drooping branches that comes so near to the ground he can sit upon it and brush the grass with his toes.

Leon walks over and sits beside him; his feet are flat on the ground. "Look, it's just for this one summer. Then he's going back to Camelot."

"And then we'll go to Camelot," Merlin points out unhappily. He's torn about that. Half of him misses his mother, aches to see her again and have her hug him and call him her little bird, as well as meet his mysterious great-uncle of his who apparently practiced magic once, who gave Merlin his book. The other half of him wants to never leave Silverpine and its cool lake and secret caves and comforting forests, to never set foot in Camelot where the King would snip his head off like a daisy if he knew about Merlin's magic. He wishes his mother could come to Silverpine but knows she can't. It's one thing for a lord to keep his natural child in his household, especially another son, but to keep his mistress under the same roof as his lady wife... Even if there isn't a whit of truth to it, the lie is his protection and he cannot risk it.

"I know, and if I could change it, I would," Leon says. "But I can't. These things are expected of me, and I can't just say no."

Merlin glances at his brother sidelong, smirking. "I know you can't, and you're a wretched liar, too, Leon. I know you want to be a knight. You've always wanted to be a knight." It's been Leon's ambition to be such since the day they met, eight winters old. A knight doesn't break promises.

The boy laughs a little and shrugs his shoulders, the movement sitting odd and gawky on his changing frame. "Yeah, I do. Can't help it, I guess." He slings his long arm around Merlin's shoulders. "Here, think of it this way. When I'm a squire, that means I'll be with the Prince all the time. And when I become a knight, too. Maybe we can change his mind, you and me."

"What, about magic?" Merlin scoffs. "Like anyone raised with the King as a father is gonna change his mind about magic."

Leon shrugs again. "Never can tell, you know. You changed my mind."

"You were eight."

"And Prince Arthur's only two-and-ten. Do you think that Father still thinks all the same things he did when he was two-and-ten?"

Merlin picks at a whorl in the bark. "No," he mutters.

"Alright, then." Leon stands up and dusts off his breeches; they're inches too short for him, as are his shirt sleeves. "C'mon, Merlin. Just give him a chance. Try to be friends with him. Maybe he's
not much like the King at all."

"Mayhaps." He doesn't budge from his perch.

Propping hands on his hips, Leon smiles at him and says coaxingly, "You know, you are ten winters now. Father said you could have one of the pups from the spring litter when you were ten. I'm sure he'll let you pick now, knowing you're upset."

Merlin laughs and leaps off the branch, running to catch up to Leon. "You might be a wretched liar, but you're a good manipulator when it takes you to be."

"Of course I am, living with you. It's a necessity if I want you to do anything, since you seem to enjoy being contrary just for the sake of it."

"I am not!"

"Whatever you say, little villain."

He shoves against Leon's side, tipping him off-kilter. "Stop calling me that, it's silly!"

Leon grins from his sprawl on the grass. "Alright, villain."

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Merlin does get his pick of the spring litter, as Lionel promised him. The wolfhounds of Silverpine are huge, shaggy grey beasts with loping gaits and wiry fur. Fully grown, they stand near waist-level on a man and will hunt near any game, wolves included. After careful consideration of the tumbling balls of grey fluff, he chooses a small hound-bitch he names Allegra. For a while, he manages to forget about the upcoming royal visit as he spends his days learning the finer points of rearing a dog from the kennel master, keeping Allegra near to him as often as allowed; the Lady Evaine did not allow dogs inside the manor house, as they made her sneeze something fierce.

The Prince wouldn't arrive until after Midsummer, and he'd only stay a month. Merlin's glad of that, at least, for Midsummer is when he goes out into the forest to the old yew tree and greets the Old Ones, those who had no voices but for the susurrus of leaves and the sigh of wind and the burble of water, no form but for those of stone and sea and sky. He pours a libation of perry brandy on the roots of the yew and conjures an entire swarm of butterflies in all hues of colour from his hands to hear the forest around him shiver in delight.

He tries to hold onto that feeling when the Prince arrives. It's raining, which seems fitting to him. Not a hard rain, scarce more than a light mist, true enough. The Prince comes with two knights as his guard and an escort of Silverpine's guardsmen, who are all chosen by Lionel.

Merlin stands around the edges of the courtyard, sulking back as far as he dares with one hand curled on Allegra's collar. It's more comfort to him than restraint for her; she's obedient and stays when he tells her.

At two-and-ten, the Prince is only two winters older than Merlin, two younger than Leon. His hair is so fair it almost looks white, the palest gold that Merlin's ever seen, the only thing that's at all remarkable about him. He hasn't come into his own Colts' Years, yet, though, from the look of him, riding comfortably in the saddle of his richly caparisoned pony. He halts in the courtyard, a stable boy darting forward quick to take the reins, and he dismounts with some grace.

"Sir Lionel, Lady Evaine." He inclines his head respectfully to Lionel, then takes Evaine's hand and kisses her fingers. "I thank you for your hospitality."
"We are most honoured to have you with us, Prince Arthur. Silverpine welcomes you," she replies with a smooth curtsey.

"Prince Arthur. Kay, Bevidere," Lionel greets the Prince's guard, and the knights salute him from their saddles. "May I present my son, Leon? He'll be squiring with you in Camelot next year."

"Leon." The boy extends a hand and clasps his forearm.

"Prince Arthur." Leon is inches taller than the Prince; Merlin smirks a little.

He isn't introduced, not officially, anyways. He doesn't mind it. There's something haughty about this white-haired little princeling, a proud tilt to his chin, an arrogant lilt to his tone, that prickles Merlin. He grips Allegra's collar tightly.

"Well, Leon, I'm sure your parents have else to do than stand around with us, so tell me, what do you do for fun here?" Prince Arthur asks.

Leon beams at that, and they leave the courtyard, heading out behind the manor house and in the direction of the lake. In the heat, the cool water is a blessed relief, and they often make a game of trying to catch fish with their hands. Merlin follows a pace behind, listening with half an ear as Leon tells the pale-haired boy about going hawking in the outer fields if the weather held.

 Abruptly, the Prince stops walking and turns to face Merlin with a scowl. "What are you following us for? Don't you have duties to attend to?"

Leon steps forward quickly, throwing an arm around Merlin's shoulders. "Ah, Prince Arthur, this is Merlin, my half-brother," he introduces.

The boy's pale eyebrows lift. "Oh," he says with some distaste. "I see."

No. Merlin doesn't like him a bit.

He tries to make friends with the Prince. It's not an easy thing to do. Merlin's very skin itches sometimes, holding in his magic so often, constantly biting his tongue to keep from mentioning it, and it does no good for his mood. He sulks. It doesn't help that the Prince has this ever-present air of superiority about him, as if he is so very better than they are and only deigns to share his company. He doesn't know how Leon stomachs it, but perhaps that's because most of it is saved for Merlin. Even if he is a knight's son, he's still a bastard and therefore lesser company. Merlin has still never grasped how it is that the circumstances of one's birth makes any such impact on their worth as a human being. That riles him, too, curdling in his stomach like soured milk.

So he sulks and spends time teaching Allegra to course game.

Like a lymer on a blood-trail, though, the Prince seems to scent out Merlin's dislike of him and makes another pastime of taunting him whenever Leon's not within earshot.

It comes to a head three days before the Prince is due to return to Camelot.

"Aw, come on, don't run away," the pale-haired boy drawls when Merlin makes to leave. They're sitting on a slope near the lake, and Leon's further down by the water, seeing if it was too cold to swim; summer or not, it could get frigid. "What's the matter? Have I hurt your feelings? Shall you go cry in your mother's skirts now? Or is she not here?"

Merlin grits his teeth and whirls to face the other boy. "Don't speak of my mother," he snaps.
The Prince bares his teeth in a grin. "No? Why? Do you miss your mummy?"

He thinks for the briefest of seconds if it’d be worth it to give him donkey ears. A royal ass, indeed. Instead, Merlin clenches his hands behind his back to contain the magic tingling in his fingertips and snipes back, "You don't know me or my mother. Don't think you do, mewling little princeling."

A flush rises in his face like wine in an alabaster cup. "Better a princeling than a whore's unwanted get."

A retort leaps to mind—at least my mother is still alive—but his own magic chokes it off, probably saving him from doing irreparable damage. So instead, he does the next most satisfying thing. He lowers his head and charges the prince.

The boy grunts at the impact, and Merlin bears him down hard. They roll over and over in the grass, swearing and thrashing. One of the prince's arms tries to get around Merlin's neck in a chokehold, and he sinks his teeth into the limb hard, biting the exposed flesh where his sleeve rides up. The boy yowls in pain.

"Merlin!" Leon's arms wrap around his middle, hauling him away from the Prince by main force until Lionel strides over and seizes him by the collar, yanking him right off his feet.

"What in the name of the gods is going on over here?" he thunders.

"He bit me!" the pale boy exclaims in a fury, spots of colour standing out on his cheeks. There's a bright red impress of teeth on his arm, already starting to bruise.

"He called Mother a whore!" Merlin shouts back.

"Enough!" Lionel sets him down hard on his feet, sword-callused hand gripping the scruff of his neck. "Will you disgrace the hospitality of Silverpine?" he asks of Merlin, hard and intent. "He is our guest, and that means you are responsible for upholding the rules of hospitality, none of which include throttling visitors, no matter what was said."

Merlin ducks his head. "Yes, my lord," he murmurs, voice small; the Prince smirks.

"And you, Prince Arthur." Lionel's stern dark gaze falls on the boy, and his smug look gives way to one of surprise. "Will you offer insult as well, to Merlin and to me? Speaking of things you know nothing of?" he asks in a stern, foreboding tone.

The Prince opens his mouth, closes it again. "No, Sir Lionel," he replies with awkward ill grace, cowed.

"Very well. Now. Boys your age squabble. I did the same with other knights when we were squires as well. Aye, even your father," Lionel adds with a pointed look down at the pale-haired boy. "We will mark this up as such and leave it there. It will not happen again. Will it?"

There's a round of muttered negatives from all three of them. Lionel nods. "Good. Prince Arthur, accept our apologies on behalf of House de Galis."

"Yes, of course. It…it was a…misunderstanding," the Prince says awkwardly.

Merlin nearly rolls his eyes. He imagines that's about as close as the pompous little brat got to saying 'sorry' like a normal person. Lionel's hand tightens on the nape of his neck, and he gives a stiff little bow, forcing a passably cordial tone. "My apologies." You snaggletoothed, white-haired
"Good," Lionel repeats. "Now, come with me, highness, and we'll have your arm looked at." They walk back up towards the manor house together.

"Merlin…" Leon says.

"I'm sorry!" he exclaims helplessly, then turns and heads towards the trees, Allegra trotting at his heels. He heads directly for the yew tree, climbing up as high as he dares into its branches. It doesn't rise above the tops of the pines, doesn't even come close, but he knows Leon's afraid of heights and won't pursue him. Allegra sits on her haunches at the roots and gazes up at him.

"I hate him," he mutters, digging his nails into the bark hard enough to push slivers under his skin.

The wind eddies past him, whispering through the leaves, and it sounds for all the world like laughter.

He wishes he understood the joke.
"Mum!"

Dropping his bag on the floor, Merlin throws himself into her arms, laughing and crying both in sheer delight at seeing her again. It seems she's not changed a day since he last saw her, except he recalls her being far taller than him. Now he comes up to her shoulder. He buries his face against her and clings tight.

"Oh, my little bird, you've gotten so tall," his mother laughs tearfully, running a hand over his hair. "Look at you, you're near a man grown. And you, too, Leon. You'll be as tall as your father one day."

Leon flushes up at her words, fumbling as he picks up Merlin's bag.

"I see you got my message," Evaine laughs as she sweeps over to embrace his mother warmly; Merlin shuffles to the side, ducking beneath Mother's arm. "And a good thing, too. Your boy looked wretched the whole way here."

Merlin ducks his head, somewhat abashed. He had sulked for most of the journey to Camelot, but he felt he had a certain right to do so. He was about to walk into a pit of vipers barefoot, after all. The city of Camelot is beautiful, the white walls of the citadel shining bright under the sun, visible from a league away, but it is also loud and crowded, and Merlin feels as though the buildings are closing around him sometimes, used to the open expanse of Silverpine. But upon coming into the de Galis house, his nervous anger had evaporated, seeing his mother waiting for him inside.

"Merlin, I want you to meet someone. My uncle Gaius," Mother says, turning towards the old man standing beside her; Merlin hadn't even noticed him in his joy. "He's the one who sent you your book."

"So you're the Merlin I've heard so much about. It's good to finally meet you, my boy," the old man says in a kindly voice, hands folded in the wide sleeves of his robes. "I trust you've been studying?"

"Yes, sir," he replies. His magic book is currently at the bottom of his bag; he's cast a simple glamour over it so nobody would really look twice at it if they decided to search his things. "Are you going to teach me?"

Gaius hums. "Your mother and I have been speaking about that. It's a dangerous thing to learn here, you understand? As the Royal Physician, I am required to live inside the castle, which makes it even more so, and I'm afraid that my study of the subject was limited to a rather small field," he explains; Merlin blinks. Royal Physician? "So I would make quite a poor teacher indeed. But I will help you where I can, my boy."

He nods, somewhat disappointed but not overly so. He knows that finding anyone knowledgeable enough to teach him properly is a nigh impossibility, at least in Camelot. But at least he has one other person who understands the feeling of magic; it's not something that can be put into words and anyone without magic can't truly grasp the sensation of it. "Thank you for the book, Gaius. I'll keep studying," he says politely, bowing his head.

The old man nods sagely, a small smile creasing his face as he rests a hand on Merlin's head, his aged skin thin and soft. "Good lad."
The next few hours are spent settling into the townhouse. Gaius takes his leave, having to attend to his duties, but to Merlin's relief, his mother stays, and he chatters on to her about the past six years and living in Silverpine. She's set herself up as Gaius's apprentice, living in the castle with him, and she explains to him some of the finer points of living there, how to behave if he didn't want to draw trouble. Merlin frowns but listens all the same.

When he's upstairs with Leon, unpacking their things, Merlin glances out the window and sees a crowd of people gathering in the square. "Hey, what's going on?"

Leon peers out the window and swallows hard, his face paling. "Oh, Merlin..."

A chill wriggles into the pit of his belly. "What is it?"

The older boy glances at him with a terrible kind of sympathy in his gaze, and Merlin doesn't ask again. Instead, he backs away from the window and heads downstairs, slipping past the servants. Mother is in the dining hall with Lionel and Evaine, the adults speaking in low but laughing tones. He opens the front door and steps out onto the street, following the people towards the square, slipping between the milling bodies.

There's a raised platform in the middle of the square, with pike-wielding guards surrounding it to keep the crowds back. As he watches, two guards enter the square, pulling a woman between them, no older than his mother, with her ankles and wrists shackled together, clinking as she stumbles along. They pass so close in front of him he could have reached out and touched the guards' chainmail. Her chains drag against the cobblestones. Cold iron. The chill of it skitters across his skin, and he shies back, pulling his limbs in tight.

The guards pull her up onto the platform. She doesn't fight them, doesn't plead or scream or rage. Her face is empty of everything but resignation, as if all that had once been her has been scraped out and scoured away.

"Citizens of Camelot," a man's carrying voice intones from the balcony above. The King. Merlin doesn't look up, only gazes at the hollow woman standing there on the platform. The King says somewhat else, something about sorcery being outlawed and saving the kingdom from the evils of magic. He could very well have been reciting torrid love poetry for all Merlin could hear him over the sound of his own heartbeat and the blood rushing through his ears. The woman's face doesn't change; she doesn't move but for the rise and fall of her breathing. Tears began to slip down her cheeks, leaving faint lines in the grime on her skin, dripping from her chin to leave small dark spots on her kirtle.

The last words fall into him like an anvil dropped into a still pond.

"...sentence of death."

The guards place their hands on the woman's shoulders, bringing her down to her knees, leaning her forward over the block. A black-hooded man comes to stand beside her, holding a great axe in both hands, the blade gleaming so sharp and bright it hurts to look upon directly. The King raises his arm, and the axe comes up with it. The woman's sad, defeated eyes close. Dimly, he's aware of Leon pulling at his arm, hissing his name. "Merlin! Merlin, come away," he insists, eyes darting. "Please, please, don't look, Merlin, please, come away."

He doesn't.
The King's arm lowers.

The axe swings down.

Merlin turns his gaze around the square and sees only dark grimness in the faces of the guards and knights, jaws set and eyes hard. And in the people, fear, revulsion, even some satisfaction and approval. He can smell the blood, thick and coppery and sweet enough to gag. A gleam of sunlight on bright hair draws him upwards, and Merlin looks at the King of Camelot for the first time, tall and stern in his rich attire, crown gleaming in the weak sunlight. Still, it's only secondary. Merlin is staring at the smaller figure beside the King.

Prince Arthur.

Looking pale and blank, like an ill-made doll, sunlight gilding his hair silvery-white.

Broad, callused hands land on his shoulders, and Merlin lets out a strangled gasp, looking up into Lionel's face. The knight's dark gaze holds a terrible mix of sorrow, regret, and compassion. "Come on, boy," he murmurs, voice rough. With one arm around Leon and the other around Merlin, he guides them out of the square and through the dispersing crowds back to the townhouse.

Mother is standing in the foyer, but he ducks her hand when she reaches for him. A part of him wants nothing more than to embrace her hard, but he has the distant notion that it's an unwise idea to be handled at the moment. Instead, he goes back upstairs to the bedroom and sits down on his bed, putting his back to the corner and pulling his knees up to his chest. How long he sits there, he doesn't know, but he sees the sunlight move through the room before fading away. Leon tries to coax him to dinner; he doesn't move.

Eventually, he moves to lay down instead, pulling the blankets up around him, but sleep doesn't come, and instead, he listens to the sounds of the servants moving through the house and his own heartbeat, imagining he can almost hear the blood moving through him.

It's been dark for hours when his bedroom door whispers open, and a soft hand touches his hair. Mother murmurs his name. Merlin lowers the blanket from his head and turns over, squinting in the light of the lamp she holds. "Come downstairs. Lionel wants to speak to you," she says in scarce more than a whisper.

All the lamps have been snuffed, only the low-burning fire in the hall giving them light. Lionel is sitting at the table alone, his gaze fixed solemnly upon what lies on the table: a quarterstaff of ash, capped in metal at both ends, and a set of small knives, no longer than Merlin's hand, laid out in a gleaming silver row. "In the lower town, peasants are not allowed to own swords," he says when Merlin sits down in the chair Mother pulled out. His eyes are so very dark, like polished black mirrors reflecting the firelight. "Only the knights and guards may possess those kinds of weapons. But knives and staves are a different matter."

Merlin blinks a few times. "You want me to use those?" he asks. Mother's hands rest gently on his shoulders.

"Leon will be starting his training in a week. As his father, I'm not meant to be involved in his training, to avoid bias. I'll have the time." Mother tightens her grip on his shoulders; Merlin can't see her face, but whatever expression she wears, it makes Lionel raise his gaze to her. "Say aught against it, Hunith, and I won't teach the boy," he says in a low voice. "But I was of the mind that he should at least know how to defend himself in case."

In case anyone finds out about me, Merlin thinks, clenching his hands into fists against his legs. He
knows there are ways to bind a sorcerer from their own magic: cold iron, silver chains, even twisted enchantments that cause any spell cast to double back onto its caster.

"No mother relishes the idea of placing weapons in the hands of a child and teaching him to use them. If you are asking for my blessing, you'll not get it." Mother lets out a shaky breath, her hands loosening on his shoulders once more, and Merlin cranes his neck to peer up at her face. She gazes back down at him with sad, loving eyes. "But it's your choice, too, Merlin. I won't take it from you," she murmurs, smoothing a lock of hair back from his brow.

The day's memories drift back up onto him, the silently weeping woman being led to the block, the heavy smell of her blood and human fear. The fearful faces of the crowd, the hard eyes of the knights and guards. The cold, unremorseful gaze of the King on the balcony, his pale-haired son standing blank-faced beside him. Beneath them, an older memory stirs, blurred with years, his mother's words: not executing sorcerers. Capturing them. Putting them in iron binds and conscripting them to the army.

"I want to learn," he murmurs.

Mother sighs and wraps her arms around him, drawing him close against her, and he turns in the chair to embrace her properly. He buries his face in her kirtle, breathing the scent of herbs and woodsmoke. It doesn't erase the lingering blood-smell haunting him, but it helps. "Merlin mine," she whispers, lips brushing the top of his head. "Very well."

Lionel inclines his head gravely. "We'll start tomorrow."
“All bow to Sir Leon, Knight of Camelot!”

Leon flushes up and thumps Merlin’s shoulder at the exclamation, smiling broadly and all aglow with pride.

Lionel steps forward to embrace his son tightly, clapping him firmly on the back. “Good lad. I always knew you’d make it,” he says, voice heavy with emotion, black eyes sparkling. “You’ve done us all proud.”

“Thank you, Father,” Leon murmurs thickly, then turns to embrace Evaine, able to pick his lady mother up with ease and whirl her once around. Lady Evaine laughs high and bright as a girl, standing on her toes to kiss his brow.

“So, what do you say, brother? Shall we go down to the Cockerel and get disastrously drunk before that uptight code of yours sinks in?” Merlin asks, slinging an arm around Leon’s shoulders. Evaine throws them both a look of mock-disapproval, knowing full well that he’d only said as such to get a rise from her.

Lionel chortles and claps Merlin’s shoulder, looking years younger in his joy. “Ah, before you go, lads, come with me. I’ve a gift needs giving before you get to carrying on.” With that, he leads them through to the back of the townhouse, opening the door that leads out to the small, narrow courtyard.

Merlin whistles through his teeth, and Leon makes a sound of awe.

The gift is a horse, a mare unlike any of the mounts to be found in Camelot. Her coat is largely white and speckled generously all over with reddish spots the colour of old blood. Secured on a lead-line, she glares and snorts, rolling white-rimmed eyes, stamping her striped hooves. Her particolored mane flashes as she tosses her head, strong neck arching, and as they come closer, she wrinkles her lips, showing her teeth.

“A beauty, isn’t she? Aragonian, a gift from the gypsies in Silverpine. Her name is Hierax, but the caravan what gifted her called her the Hellion,” Lionel remarks; the gypsy caravans, though often turned away elsewhere, had always been welcomed in Silverpine, known to be amongst the finest horse breeders in Alba. “Two years old, broken to saddle. A touch green with it, though. She bites, so watch your hands near her head.”

“Name of the Mother, she’s something!” Leon takes Merlin by the shoulders and gives him a shake. “Look at her! Nothing like those other little saddle ponies.” In an excess of excitement, he turns and embraces Lionel once more, nearly lifting his father from the ground in his exuberance. “Thank you, Father. She’s a fine gift!”

“Nothing less for the sons of Silverpine,” Lionel chortles. “What do you think of her, Merlin?”
Merlin reaches up and grabs two fistfuls of her coarse mane, bowing his head against hers, pressing his brow to the hard, bony plate of hers. He blows softly into her nostrils, letting her get the scent of him. “Hello, Hellion,” he murmurs; she huffs at him hard, flicking her ears. Leaning back, he turns to Lionel. “She’s lovely. And she’ll take your fingers off,” he adds with a chortle.

Leon comes closer and reaches out to pat her neck, chuckling as she stamps her hooves again, making the narrow courtyard ring. “I’ve heard these Aragonian horses are near tireless and have a gait smooth as silk. She’ll be perfect for the hunt.”

“How?” Merlin repeats.

“Ah, yes, that’s what else I was going to tell you. Prince Arthur’s leading a hunt in the woods to celebrate our knighting.” Leon grins at him. “Would you like to come?”

Merlin snorts. “As if I’d be allowed.”

“Of course, you would, you’re my brother.” He nudges Merlin with one elbow, smiling. “I know you don’t like blood-sport, but it’s scarcely a hunt, villain. We just go out there to ride and share company. You and I have hardly seen one another in the past few weeks. I’d like you to accompany us. You can bring Allegra, too.”

“Ah, alright. I’ll come. I can hardly refuse an order from the great and mighty Sir Leon, can I?” Merlin ducks Leon’s swat with expert practice, laughing.

Leon has the right of it. It isn’t so much as a hunt as an excuse for the newest knights and other young nobles to be out in each other’s company, laughing and jesting, carrying light crossbows suited for small game and deer only as an afterthought. Admittedly, they did make a rather pretty picture, all in fine fettle and spring finery. The Master of the Hunt and his men scout out ahead unobtrusively, carrying beaters and holding the leads of lymers.

Merlin walks towards the rear of the party, carrying his oak staff in the place of a beater, Allegra trotting along beside him. The trees have yet to regain their full foliage, still opening tender new leaves; broad shafts of sunlight pierce through, dappling the forest floor with splotches of golden warmth. He closes his eyes for a moment as he walks, letting his ears guide him instead, feeling the forest come awake around him after winter’s dormancy. Extending new shoots towards the sunlit skies, sinking new roots deep into the damp soil, a joyous flush of growth and rebirth. Had he been on his own, he’d have taken off his boots and walked barefoot to better feel it.

He opens his eyes and picks Leon out of the assorted gentry, smiling at mop of curly hair. He has no taste for blood sport, but this…this is almost like being home.

“A lot of mindless savagery,” a melodious voice remarks, and Merlin glances up. Riding more to the rear of the party on a grey palfrey is the Lady Morgana, the King’s Ward, her maidservant on a sturdy pony beside her. “But of course, Arthur insisted I accompany them, and Uther thinks it’s ‘good company’ for me. I scarce see what’s good about hunting some innocent beast for sport.”

He chortles quietly, appreciating the sentiment. He and Leon had gone hunting with Lionel as children and hawking with Lady Evaine, but though it was done somewhat in sport, nothing they ever killed went to waste. More often than not, it went to feeding the shepherds and crofters of Silverpine.

Lengthening his stride, he makes his way up to Leon and hears the envious murmurings of the
other knights and lordlings admiring the Hellion. He extends his staff to tap his brother’s thigh, grinning, and Leon returns the grin, raising his brows in that smug ‘I told you so’ way of his.

Despite the clamour, they still find game.

A huntsman’s horn sounds, and at the head of the party, Prince Arthur lets out a joyous whoop, clapping heels to his horse. Leon thrusts an arm out, and Merlin lets himself be yanked up onto the saddle, gripping his waist as they take off in a mad, scrambling dash.

There are two of them, a pair of young bucks engaged in contest, antlers clattering. By the time the party comes up on them, the stags disentangle and flee in separate directions. The party splits, half going left, half going right, pursuing them both.

“Allegra, hunt!” Merlin shouts as the Hellion veers to the left, following the Prince. Ahead of them, the stag gains ground, leaping through shafts of sunlight like a fleet-footed shadow, and Allegra streaks near after it. The huntsman’s horns sound again, gleeful and clear, urging them onwards…and then the sound changes, becoming an alarm.

Leon brings the Hellion to rein hard, whispering a hoarse curse beneath his breath, and Merlin slides off the mare’s back, peering around.

He sees the glade, sees the Prince well ahead of them in it.

There isn’t a deer.

There's a boar.

It's a monstrous boar, massive and irritable. It eyes the hunting party up with its small, beady gaze; the huge bristling head lowers, presenting its tusks. Allegra growls low in her throat, crouched and tense.

"Sire, don't move," Leon says in a strained whisper, carefully dismounting and drawing his sword. The other young knights do the same; none of them have boar-spears.

Prince Arthur nods stiffly, his hands working around the reins so hard the leather creaks in his gloves. Beneath him, his fractious young filly trembles, eyes rolling white, ears pinned back.

The boar scrapes the ground with one trotter, snorts loudly, and charges. Allegra snarls and snaps at it as she leaps out of its way.

The Prince's filly lets out a terrified squeal and bolts, crashing away through the undergrowth; the boar rounds for another turn, eyeing them up.

Indecision grips him for a burning second. But he knows his staff will be of no use against that moving mountain. Instead, Merlin snatches the reins of the Hellion and swings himself up into the saddle, turning the young mare. A spitfire she might be, but she goes easily for him, at least this once. "Go!" he shouts, leaning over the Hellion's neck and flinging the thought into the mare's mind as he puts heels to her flanks.

She responds. Merlin gives the Hellion her head and clamps down tight with his thighs, saying a prayer of thanks to the Aragonians for breeding such splendid beasts and to the gypsies that had gifted her to them.

"Prince Arthur!" he exclaims.
The Prince is upright in the saddle, sawing at the reins of his runaway mount, trying to force her back under control. There's a deadfall directly in their path. Merlin sees the skittish mare check hard, planting her forelegs hard and refusing the jump; the young man goes launching over her head, crashing down hard on the far side of the deadfall.

Merlin yanks on the reins, veering to the right, coming up on the deadfall. The Hellion gathers her haunches and leaps, tucking her striped hooves neatly as a dancer. She clears the fallen tree with ease, and Merlin turns her about, leaping down from the saddle.

Prince Arthur is sprawled on his back, coughing and wheezing, the breath knocked from him with the force of landing. Merlin hears something rustling through the underbrush, coming towards them at a quick pace. The boar? He can't know for certain, and though a part of him wants to fling his magic out at it, he doesn't dare, not even now with the Prince knocked half-senseless and unawares. Instead, he flings himself forward, putting himself square in front of the Prince. "Stay down!" he shouts. He might not have much meat to him, but he could stop a set of gouging tusks. Protecting the royal heir from a furious boar is at least a somewhat noble way to go.

And then he hears Prince Arthur laugh, a full, deep-throated laugh, unwontedly delighted.

Merlin gapes at him in disbelief, then turns around.

It's a deer. Only a deer. A young buck, like as not the one they had originally given chase to. It had bounded out of the undergrowth and frozen when it saw them. For a moment, it stares at them, ears pricked in alarm, then bounds away, making a prudent retreat through the trees.

"Your face," the young prince laughs. "Oh, your face! You should've seen it!"

Merlin leaps to his feet, feeling hot and embarrassed and foolish. He tries to protect his useless royal hide, and the blond prat has the audacity to laugh at him. "I'm so very glad to have amused you, sire," he bites out angrily, hands clenched in fists so he doesn't bash the git in his stupid snaggletoothed face. "I'm sure you won't mind catching your own bloody horse, if you can manage to contain your humour that long."

“No, wait—” Prince Arthur says, but Merlin ignores him.

Turning on heel, he strides back towards the Hellion, snatching her reins and leading her back towards the hunting party on foot. She snuffles at his hair curiously, and he pats her strong neck, trying to blink the stinging out of his eyes. He's not gone more than a few dozen paces when he hears voices calling. “Here!” he shouts back, hands cupped around his mouth.

Luckily, it's Leon who finds him first, crashing through the underbrush on foot, sword naked in hand.

“By the goddess!” Merlin exclaims; Leon's face is spattered in blood, both sleeves splashed thickly with it. His sword is bloodied. “What happened to you? Are you alright?”

“Yes, yes, of course, it’s not mine. Where’s Prince Arthur?”

“Trying to catch his horse, I imagine,” he replies, trying not to sound as bitter and angry as he feels. “Was anyone hurt?”

Leon hesitates. “Ah, Merlin…”

“What? What is it?” He passes the reins to Leon and starts running back in the direction of the glade without waiting for an answer.
In the clearing, he sees the other knights and young nobles, most trying to calm their mounts. The boar lies dead in an enormous mound, scored all over with wounds and bristling with crossbow bolts. And kneeling upon the ground with no care for her gown is the Lady Morgana, cradling a grey shape in her lap.

“Allegra!” Merlin cries. His loyal hound rolls her eyes up to look at him, beating her tail feebly at his approach. She’s been gored down her flank, a long gash opening her rib cage near down to the bones.

Guinevere, Lady Morgana’s maidservant, tells him the whole story later. How the boar had charged them again and again in a mad fury, scattering the horses. How the few bolts the hunters managed to fire had succeeded only in enraging it further, the quarrels too small and light to do more than prick it. How it had charged for the Lady Morgana, and Allegra had come between them, snarling and fighting and being gored in the process. How Leon had been the first to lunge forward and drive his sword into the boar’s breast, holding it as the others came forward to strike it down.

None of it much matters to Merlin. “Needle and thread,” he snaps, turning his gaze around the ring of quiet, pale faces. “Name of the Mother, does no one carry it?” Magic tingles in his fingertips, but he chokes it back so hard it near hurts to do so.

“Here!” Guinevere hurries over to them, producing an embroidery kit from somewhere in her pony’s saddlebag. A bit of fumbling, and she hands him a threaded needle. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“No, not really,” he admits, swiping the tears from his eyes impatiently. He’s seen Mother and Gaius bind up patients on rare occasion, and he’s seen Lady Evaine and seamstresses doing stitches, but he himself? Never.

He stitches up his dog.

It’s a messy business. Guinevere kneels beside him, using a wadded bit of finely embroidered cloth to blot away the blood as he goes, and the Lady Morgana holds Allegra’s head, murmuring nonsense and stroking the hound’s neck. For a mercy, the wolfhound’s too weak to struggle much.

“Will she be alright?” Lady Morgana asks, sniffling as she strokes Allegra’s fur.

“I don’t know,” Merlin replies, wiping a hand over his brow. If she can hold out until they get her back to the city, he can use his magic to heal her. Mother will give him whatever medicine he needs. “I’d have to get her home to be sure.” Strong hands clasp over his shoulders, and he peers up into Leon’s face, blinking back tears.

“She’ll be alright, little villain,” Leon murmurs, kneeling to embrace him tightly; Merlin leans gratefully into his brother’s strong comfort, pressing his brow against cool chainmail. “Come on. Let’s get back to Camelot.”

Allegra lives.

Merlin uses somewhat of his magic, but not much. He has no real talent for healing magics, except in the direst of situations, and that is more panicked instinct than skill. Still, he knows enough to draw out infection and staunch bleeding. Most of it is thanks to Mother. She had tended to the shoddy stitches Merlin inflicted, packing the wound with an allotment of bread-mold and
spiderwebs. It looks hideous, but it works.

“Allegra will be up and about soon, I imagine. She’s been restless,” Merlin observes as he curries the Hellion. The mare’s bitten two of the stable boys already and nearly kicked another, but she behaves herself for Merlin, at least enough so he doesn’t have to worry about the loss of his extremities. He does keep an eye on her legs, though, aware of the strength they carry. She could probably kick him clean through the stall door if she had a mind to. He’s seen men bigger than Leon laid low by a well-aimed kick from a fractious horse and has no desire to experience it for himself.

“That’s wonderful, Merlin. I know you love her a good deal. She’s a fine dog.”

“She is, isn’t she?” He sets aside the brushes and climbs over the stall door rather than try to open it; the Hellion sees the open door as an invitation to leave, even if it is only to mill about the courtyard and sample the Lady Evaine’s garden. “Almost as fine as you, you spotted menace,” he remarks, patting the mare’s strong neck.

“You should have her,” Leon says abruptly. “The Hellion. You ought to have her.”

Merlin jerks his head up in shock. “What? No, she was meant for you,” he protests, shaking his head.

Leon gives him a flat look. “She was given to Father as a gift to the sons of Silverpine. That includes you,” he says in a tone that brooks no argument.

Merlin swallows hard. He doesn’t often think of the fact that there is no blood shared between them, but there’s always moments like this which remind him that it scarce matters anyways. “Thank you, Leon,” he murmurs.

The other man reaches over and tousles his hair. “She likes you far more than she likes me, anyways. Nearly took off one of my fingers the other day.”

“Well, I’m not surprised. You never did have a way with women.”

“Oh, shut up, would you?” Leon throws a bit of straw at him, and Merlin retaliates with a handful of his own. The Hellion pokes her head over the stall door and watches bemusedly as they pitch hay at each other like children, swearing and laughing in turn. It likely would’ve turned into a wrestling match had the cook’s daughter Beryl not interrupted, clearing her throat nervously from the stable door.

“Yes, Beryl?” Leon brushes bits of hay from his clothing and hair.

“Ah, it’s probably Aislinn.” The young woman was a serving girl at the Cockerel and a kind friend. She’d promised to make him berry tarts in exchange for him clearing out some rowdy and overly-forceful patrons a few nights ago. Getting to his feet, Merlin gives the Hellion a pat and heads back inside the house, ruffling Beryl’s hair in passing.

However, the ruddy-faced Aislinn isn’t waiting in the parlour with berry tarts. It’s the Lady Morgana, the King’s ward, and her maidservant.

“My lady!” Merlin makes a low bow, realising with some horror that he still has straw clinging to his breeches and no doubt smells of horse as well. “Forgive me, I didn’t realise—”
“Oh, please don’t, I don’t mind it. It’s my own fault, springing on you without warning,” she insists, flicking dismissive fingers as she comes a step closer. “I wanted to know how your hound fares.”

Merlin blinks. “Allegra?” The King’s ward has come to see his dog?

She smiles a little self-consciously, shrugging her delicate shoulders. “She protected us from the boar. Some might call it foolish, but I’m of the mind to pay respect to my saviours, even the four-legged ones.”

“I, uh, yes, of course, my lady,” he stammers. “This way.”

The Lady Evaine didn’t allow dogs in the house due to her allergy to them, but she’s made exception for Allegra, allowing the hound to be laid up in an empty stockroom of the kitchen, up against the warm wall where the ovens lay on the other side. Allegra rolls her eyes up to look at him, her plumed whip of a tail beating weakly against the thick blankets she lay on.

“It festered a bit, but we treated it. She’ll heal clean, like as not,” Merlin says, kneeling down to stroke the hound’s ears. “I have you to thank as well, my lady. I owe you an embroidery kit.”

“No, you don’t.” Lady Morgana kneels on the floor beside him with no care for her fine gown, extending one hand for Allegra to sniff. She smiles when the hound licks her proffered fingers, and she strokes the top of Allegra’s head gently. “She’s a fine beast. No breed of lymer, though.”

“Ah, no, my lady. A wolfhound. We keep a number of them in Brechfa.”

“Are wolves so great in number there?” she asks.

Merlin chortles, scratching along Allegra’s ruff and shoulder. “Not precisely, no, but the forests and mountains are largely wild, and Silverpine keeps itself in sheep, which make for easy prey to most predators. They’ll course most any game, hare to bear, as our kennel-master says.”

Lady Morgana smiles again. “She’s lovely. Brave, too. As brave as her master.” Her eyes lift to his face, a pale grey-green like frost-touched leaves. “The knights led us away, but I heard about you going after Arthur.”

Merlin presses his lips together and doesn’t speak, a faint spark of anger stirring at the memory of being laughed at by the golden prince himself.

She touches his wrist with soft, cool fingers. “I’ve known him since he was a child. He’s insufferable, I know, but he does mean well, and he’s a soft heart underneath it all.”

_Must be buried awful deep, then_, he thinks. The prat couldn’t even be bothered to remember his name. “As you say, my lady,” he says instead.

Lady Morgana chuckles lightly and gives Allegra another gentle pat. “I’d like a dog, I think,” she remarks. “Something to love and be kind to without expectation, loyal and true.”

“Could you not ask for one, my lady? Surely the King wouldn’t deny you?” Merlin proposes. Lady Evaine sneezes near dogs, but she hadn’t begrudged any of them keeping their hounds.

“He wouldn’t, and that’s exactly why I dare not ask. He’d likely gift me one of those…trembling little yapping beasts,” the lady replies, her lip curling in distaste, speaking of the small lapdogs that were the order of the day amongst other ladies at court. “No, I’d much prefer something like one of these, but that would not be ‘ladylike,’” she says wryly, looking back down at Allegra. She starts to
her feet, and Merlin quickly scrambles up to offer her a hand. She dusts the dog hair and soot from the front of her gown. “Well, it’s best that I return to the castle soon. The King’s having a small feast for the new knights that I’ll have to attend. They’re to be served boar, I hear.”

“Naturally,” Merlin remarks, offering his arm and escorting her to the front door. “Thank you for visiting, my lady. Your kindness is…appreciated, to say the least of it.”

“It’s nothing, truly.” She turns to him with a small smile and touches his wrist. “The next time we see each other, Merlin, I’ll take it as a kindness if you address me as Morgana.”

Merlin flushes up despite himself, mouth abruptly dry. “I, uhm, of—of course, but…you know my name?” he says at last, feeling a bit slow.

She smiles at him. “Of course, I do. Sir Leon sings your praises often. He loves you very much, you know.”

“I do. Betimes more than I deserve, I think,” he mumbles, reaching out to open the door for her.

“Nonsense,” she dismisses with a flip of the hand. Releasing his arm, she inclines her head slightly. “Good day, Merlin.”

“Good day, my lady,” he replies; her eyebrow arches. “Ah, Lady Morgana.”

Her lips twitch upwards slightly. “Better.” With that, she turns and heads back towards the citadel, Guinevere following behind her and guards flanking her on either side.

Merlin leans against the doorway, watching her go, and hears the floorboards creak behind him.

“Was that the Lady Morgana?” Leon asks incredulously, peering past him. “Why in the seven hells would the King’s ward come calling on you?”

It’s too easy. Merlin smirks. “I told you, Leon. You have no kind of way with women.”

Leon punches his shoulder.
Gifts and Rewards

"I swear, Leon, if this is some jest of yours, I'm going to ring your head like a damned bell," Merlin chortles, reaching up to pluck at the blindfold tied around his head. He swears aloud when Leon swats his hand reprovingly.

"Stop that. And you'll not be ringing anything. This is just to make sure that you don't spoil the surprise since I know you're incorrigible."

He aims a kick in the direction of Leon's voice and is satisfied when he makes firm contact with his boot and hears a corresponding yelp from his brother. Sitting back in the chair, he listens to the sound of Leon shuffling around. A part of him very much wants to lift the edge of the blindfold to see what the great clod is doing, but he folds his arms across his chest and waits. Incorrigible, hm.

Finally, though, Leon makes a victorious sound and lightly taps his knuckles against the top of Merlin's head. "Alright, little villain, take a look."

"Maiden's mercy, Leon, I'm nine-and-ten, not a child. Will you stop calling me that silly—" He lifts the blindfold and gasps softly, staring at what lay on the table in front of him.

The quarterstaff is made of polished white ashwood, capped in steel at both ends, narrow steel bands reinforcing along its length with space enough between for handholds. Spread out on a soft cloth beside it is a gleaming row of small throwing knives. Merlin picks one up and feels the weight of it, made to be thrown hard and fast, the blades narrow enough to be hidden with ease. The flat of each blade is etched with subtle, delicate patterns. "Leon..." he murmurs, then stops. He doesn't know what else to say.

"Like you said," Leon says, lips curling up slightly. "You're not a child anymore. You deserve a set of proper weapons, especially now that Mother and Father have gone back to Silverpine."

Merlin stands and takes up the quarterstaff, spinning it lightly from hand to hand so the ends whistle in the air, feeling the balance and weight of it. It's the perfect height for him—he'd outgrown the shorter oak staff three years ago, when he'd grown almost two handspans over the course of a summer. He had quietly despaired of being as small in stature as his mother when he was younger, but to his delight, he now stands almost of height with Leon, who is easily the tallest of the knights. "It's perfect, he remarks, spinning the staff quickly and then slinging it over one shoulder, settling it across his back. It's got more heft than the oak staff, being longer and reinforced with steel, but not so great a difference to unbalance him.

Leon watches with an indulgent smile as Merlin fits the knives into their sheathes and starts stowing them in his clothing. The only blade he actually wears openly is the dagger that had been his six-and-tenth natality gift from Lionel, hooked on his belt. The others, he keeps hidden, up his sleeves, in his boots, under his shirt. One could look at him and not see any of the weapons he carries, and many are foolish enough to not consider the quarterstaff a proper weapon. Leon knows it is. At best, it'll leave a bruise to remember. At worse, it'll crack bones like a kindling twig.

"There you are," the knight remarks once the blades are all stowed away, vanished neatly beneath Merlin's loose-fitting attire. "Prepared to cause trouble to fullest ability, aren't you, villain?"

"Oh, hush, you." Merlin steps forward and embraces his brother tightly, smiling; with Leon sitting down, he's tall enough to rest his chin atop the other man's curly head. "Thank you."
"Yes, yes, get on with you. Go see your mother. I have to go prepare with the rest of the men. The Lady Helen of Mora is coming to sing for the King tonight, we're to escort her to the castle," Leon says, giving Merlin a light push towards the door.

Laughing, he leaves the townhouse and makes his way up to the castle. He knows his way to Gaius's chambers by heart now and has even counted the number of steps from the castle to the townhouse. When he ducks inside, Gaius is already out, but Mother is seated at one of the work benches. Some of her colour is back, mostly in the form of a fever-flush in her cheeks. At least she isn't coughing like she had been the past few days. "Mother, how do you feel?" he asks, leaning down to press his lips to her brow.

"I'm alright." She swats at him lightly, a faint smile playing at her lips. "You and Gaius, the two of you fret worse than I ever have, I swear."

Merlin smiles. "Of course we do, Mother, you're our favourite. Now tell me what all this is and where I should take it," he says, looking at the assorted medicines on the table.

Mother names each one, who it needs to be delivered to, and instructions for taking it as she packs them into the small padded bag made to keep the bottles from breaking against one another. "Oh, here, and this one. This is for the Lady Helen. She'll be performing tonight, it's for her throat," she adds, holding up another vial. "Remember all that?"

He slips the tincture into his pocket. "Yes, Mother. I'll remember it." He slides the bag over his shoulder and leans down to kiss her flushed cheek. "Take your feverfew."

She chortles and tweaks his hair. "Go on with you, nanny goat."

He's only been in the castle itself a handful of times, and usually, he only ever went directly to Gaius's chambers to visit Mother. Still, he manages to find his way around, delivering various remedies to the appropriate nobles and imparting the directions Mother had given him. Some are only meant to be taken in small doses or at certain times, especially when they make a person drowsy or somewhat out of sorts. He saves the sleeping draught for Morgana last.

He's made an unlikely sort of friend in the King's ward and her maidservant. As a knight's bastard, he's not really meant to interact with a highborn lady of Morgana's station. However, a servant like Gwen is far more acceptable, and since Morgana is rarely ever long without her maidservant... Well, some things can't be helped. Merlin wonders if Lionel has received his letter.

He raps his knuckles against her chamber doors. "Lady Morgana?" They've come to a compromise on Morgana insisting on being addressed by name and Merlin needing to follow his ingrained manners.

"Come in, Merlin."

Gwen is setting out two gowns when he enters, and he hears movement from behind the dressing screen. "I've brought your sleeping draught for you," he says, setting it on the table.

"Thank you. How's your mother faring?"

"Recovering. She's stopped coughing, and her fever's down."

"Wonderful news." Morgana's head appears from behind the screen, her shoulders bare and hair hanging loose. "Settle a debate for us, too. Which do you think I should wear to the feast tonight?" she asks, nodding towards the gowns that Gwen has laid out.
Merlin surveys them. One is a deep violet with voluminous sheer sleeves; it'd make fine contrast against her fair skin and dark hair. The other is a deep wine colour with golden embellishment around the waist, without sleeves or shoulders at all, attached to a golden chain that'd clasp around her neck. He isn't going, but he can only imagine some of the other young nobles ogling her with jaws on the floor, falling over each other for the chance to catch her eye.

"Red, my lady," he decides. "Make a night to remember."

Morgana grins. "Excellent answer. Red it is."

He is practicing forms in the courtyard of the townhouse with his new quarterstaff when he recalls the weight in his pocket and curses aloud. The tincture for Lady Helen.

Slinging the staff over his shoulder, he takes off in the direction of the palace, swearing under his breath all the while. Hopefully she'd still be in her chambers, readying for her performance, Maiden have mercy on him. He takes the stairs two at a time up to the guest chambers, nearly tripping himself coming around a corner. "Lady Helen! Lady Helen, I have something..."

No such mercy.

Merlin swears again, kicking at the wall when he sees the chamber empty. Mother's going to have his hide for this. Saying what are surely to be his final prayers, he leans against the wall and catches his breath for a moment, glancing around the lady's chamber. A chill crosses the nape of his neck. His gaze falls on the vanity.

Amongst the Lady Helen's cosmetics and brushes, there is somewhat else, things that don't quite belong in a lady's chamber. Or anywhere in Camelot. Frustration forgotten, Merlin walks further into the chamber, picks up a straw mannikin, and goes entirely still. Magic. He can feel it, prickling over his skin like he's handling stinging nettles with too-thin gloves on, which means its been cast with no kind of good intention. Scowling now, he tugs the twine off the battered journal lying beside it the mannikin and flips it open. It's a spellbook, but it's not like his own. The anger and hatred clings to his fingers when he drags his fingers across the writing, as if it's been absorbed into the ink, and he snatches his hand back, shaking the sting out of his fingers.

He turns and freezes halfway with a jolt when he sees a serving girl, sprawled on the floor where he couldn't see her when he came in. She's unnaturally still and deathly white, but he still bends to touch her throat, seeking a pulse. Her skin is waxy and cold, long-dead. A frigid realisation grips him. Whoever that woman is singing for the King tonight, she is not the Lady Helen of Mora.

He bolts towards the dining hall.

Even as he takes the stairs, he can hear the music, singing in the Old Tongue, and the magic of it sweeps across his skin. This isn't the stinging, seething hatred in the mannikin or the journal; it's thick and warm and coaxing, gentle almost. The thought occurs to him that he should sit down on the stairs, rest for a minute. He's worked hard enough, he deserves to rest. He nearly misses a step and shakes his head hard, dispelling the idea, and his magic coils up through him, pushing back against the deceptively soothing warmth, like sinking into a hot bath...only to be drowned in it.

The hall is dark and full of ringing song when he bursts into it, silvered cobwebs draped across the sleeping nobles. Merlin sees the Not Lady Helen slip a dagger from her sleeve, sees her fixed gaze on the sleeping Prince Arthur. His gaze snaps upwards to the chandelier overhead, the heavy wrought iron directly above her, and raises his eyes just slightly to the chain above it. "Gebrecan,"
he whispers.

The links burst apart in a shower of iron fragments. The chandelier drops with a crash onto the Not Lady Helen, taking her to the floor; he can hear her bones breaking even despite the clamor of metal on stone. All around, the nobles start to stir and rouse, murmuring in confusion as they glance around the dark hall, pulling the cobwebs from their hair and clothing and pointing at the Not Lady Helen. The glamour she's cast dissipates, a ragged harridan appearing beneath the image of a lovely woman.

She lifts her grey head, her hateful glare seeking out the Prince once more, and Merlin knows what she means to do almost before it happens.

His magic spills out of him in a rush, thunder without sound. Time oozes along like cold honey.

The harridan snatches up the dagger and hurls it with a force belying her age, part rage and part magic, a last outburst. He sees the silvered flash of it, spinning end-over-end towards Prince Arthur.

Merlin gets to him first. Lunging forward, he snatches a handful of the prince's cape and yanks, dragging him clean out of his chair to the floor just as time snaps back into place with a rush of motion and sound.

The dagger slams into the chair, right where the prince's chest would have been, striking so hard that the blade punches clean through the wood, the deadly point protruding from the chairback. Stepping clear of the prince, Merlin's fingers twitch towards one of his knives, but it's redundant. The Not Lady Helen has already collapsed, eyes blank. A bit of blood oozes from her mouth.

"You saved my life," Prince Arthur says as he gets to his feet, staring at Merlin and sounding more confused than thankful.

"So you did," the King says. "A debt such as that must be repaid."

*The ban of magic repealed would be pleasant,* Merlin thinks but bows his head, murmuring somewhat about it being unnecessary.

Uther's gaze is insistent, almost benevolent; his eyes are blue and green together, Merlin notices absently, marked with brown in the one. "Come now, don't be so modest. You shall be rewarded."

"It is unneeded, your highness, truly," he murmurs. He's never been this close to King Uther before, and he finds it unnerving to say the least, as if he's standing barefoot beside a viper, uncertain if it is sleeping or eyeing up his ankles.

"No, absolutely. This merits something quite special. You shall be awarded with a position in the royal household," the King says, and Merlin goes still in dawning alarm. "You shall be Prince Arthur's manservant."

What? *What?* Merlin turns his head, gaze seeking out Leon; his brother's near enough to have heard and looks as though someone has just struck him upside the head with something quite heavy, mouth agape.

"Father!" the prince hisses, but the King's already stepped away. People are *applauding.*

Merlin blows out a breath. "Well, fuck."
It takes all of a week for Merlin to decide that Arthur Pendragon is the biggest prat in all five kingdoms and would benefit enormously from a good lashing with a riding crop.

It isn't just that he's a pompous, arrogant upstart with more ego than sense, it's that he is just annoying. Merlin can't quite put his finger on it exactly, but something about the Prince just chafes him entirely the wrong way. There are times when there is nothing he wants to do more than find the nearest suitably heavy object and smack it right across that golden head.

One would think that after Merlin helped him with Knight Valiant and that enchanted shield of his that he'd get some kind of respect, the smallest smidge of gratitude, or at least some attempt at an apology. Instead, Arthur just gets a smugly pleased way about him whenever he gives Merlin a list of duties every day. And there are quite a lot of them.

He's hardly a stranger to physical labour. Lionel had trained with him for hours and hours with quarterstaff and knives, and before that, he had his own little duties to attend to in Silverpine before being allowed to play. But what Arthur demands of him is certainly excessive. Granted, Merlin does use his magic to get a large part of it done, but if he didn't, he likely wouldn't finish before moonrise every night. It's ridiculous, and he has the very distinct impression that the royal prat is trying to run him off somehow.

If Leon had known, he could have warned the Prince about trying to engage Merlin in a contest of wills.

If Prince Prat wants to be rid of Merlin, he'll have to bloody well work for it.

The training sessions are the prince's main tactic. And they very nearly work, too.

"Come on, Merlin!" Arthur drawls, circling around him, slashing at the air with a dulled practice blade. "This is meant to be good practice, and I'll hardly get it with you just standing about!"

I wouldn't be standing about if you didn't insist on this ridiculous damned outfit, Merlin thinks, getting awkwardly back on his feet in the padded, dented practice armour. He picks up his own dulled blade with a scowl. He's hardly of use with a sword. He's never been of use with a sword. Give him his knives or his quarterstaff, he would take the perfect golden prince in a bout anytime. And the armour. He hates the armour. It's heavy and awkward and makes moving his arms difficult. He's never sparred in anything heavier than a gambeson.

"Do I have to wear this?" he asks instead, swatting aside the Prince's sword when Arthur taps it atop his helmet. Maiden's mercy, this is almost worse than the first day with the damned tourney practice; he'd gone limping home bruised stem to stern after those bouts. Perhaps he should have just let Valiant's serpent-enchanted shield bite the Prince. It'd serve him right for not clearing the ego out of his ears every now and again to listen.

Arthur laughs as he circles around him. "I'd rather not kill you just yet. I'm certain Leon wouldn't be happy with me. Now come on!" He raises the sword again and comes at Merlin with it.

He manages to block the first two blows, and then Arthur turns neatly and lands a ringing blow against the side of the helmet. Merlin staggers back a step and falls on his arse, feeling as though iron wings are buffeting the inside of his skull. He'd seen it coming, but he couldn't get the damned sword up in time.
Arthur plants the tip of the blade into the ground and folds his hands over the pommel, leaning over to smirk down at Merlin. "You're braver than you look. Most servants collapse after the first blow," he remarks.

For a moment, he gives serious thought to giving the royal arse a thorough routing with his quarterstaff. It'd certainly be satisfying, if nothing else, but he tamps down on the urge. If the arrogant twit couldn't be bothered to ask him for a proper bout, then Merlin wouldn't give him one. Instead, he takes off his helmet and chucks it at the Prince's shins.

Perhaps Leon is right about him being contrary just for the sake of it.

"Will you be escorting the Lady Morgana to the feast tonight?" he asks, hoping to get the Prince's mind elsewhere. It's not hard to do, actually. Bit like dangling something shiny in front of a small child.

Arthur arches one brow, resting one boot on the helmet Merlin threw. "No, Father will. She's his ward, after all, and it's her natality." he says.

"What have you gotten her?"

"A dagger." A laugh leaps from Merlin's throat unbidden, and Arthur draws upright, insulted. "What's wrong with that?"

Merlin snickers as he flops back on the grass, letting his aching everything rest. Even with the salve that Mother had given him for his aches and bruises, he still hurts. "You don't know her very well, do you?"

The Prince kicks one of his legs. "I've known her longer than anyone!" he counters, scowling down at him. "What's wrong with a dagger, then? And what makes you think that you know her so very well, anyways, Merlin?" There's a subtle gleam of warning in Arthur's tone. For all he likes to act indifferent towards the Lady Morgana, he is inclined to be protective of her. Any young knight unwise enough to admire her too overtly within the Prince's hearing is courting extra training rounds and long-distance patrols.

"Gwen and I are good friends," Merlin answers, putting pointed emphasis on her name. "A maidservant is expected to know her mistress, and young women speak to each other more openly. I asked her." He could've laughed at the look of dawning surprise on the prince's face, as if it has never actually occurred to him to perhaps speak to the one person Morgana spent more time with than anyone else.

"Ah. Well. Did you and Leon conspire on it, then?" Arthur asks.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Merlin smirks. "Oh, wouldn't you like to know."

Again, Arthur's eyebrows lift. "Tell me, Merlin. Do you know how to walk on your knees?" he asks, pulling the sword up from the ground and prodding Merlin's middle with the tip, just hard enough to hurt.

"Not at all, sire."

It might be his imagination, but he thinks the corner of the Prince's mouth twitches up. "Would you
like me to teach you?"

He grins with all his teeth and swats the flat of the blade away with his vambrace. Aching though he might be, Merlin gets to his feet. "You're certainly welcome to try it."

The King doesn't spare anything for the Lady Morgana's natality. There are performers of all ilk, a feast that could make strong men weep, and gifts in all size and shape. Merlin, in his splendid new position of royal servant, is required to stand attendant the entire time, cradling a jug of wine and making sure the Prince's cup didn't run dry. Again, he has the brief, flickering temptation to use his magic and sour the wine into vinegar. He'd learnt *that* trick when he was four-and-ten.

Merlin glances around the hall, picking out the knights he knows, idly counting the different colours of ladies' gowns, and spotting his brother amidst the lot. As one of the higher-ranking nobles, Leon is attending as well, sitting with his fellows. He shifts his weight slightly, envying Leon the chance to sit down, and curls his aching toes against his boots. It'd be lovely to go and join them. The stuffed goose looks spectacular...

"Merlin," Arthur hisses under his breath, and he glances down. The Prince levels an unimpressed look at him, tapping one finger against the side of his empty cup.

Rolling his eyes, he reaches over to fill it, and as he leans down, he murmurs, "Careful with the wine, sire, because if you think I am going to drag you to your chambers if you overindulge, you are quite sorely mistaken."

Arthur arches one brow. "You'll do as you are told."

Merlin tilts his head in response. "Perhaps."

Shaking his head, the young man turns away and instead strikes up conversation with the King. Taking advantage of the distraction, Merlin carefully backs up from the table and shuffles sideways, making his way to the other side of the table where Lady Morgana is seated. Her gifts have all been cleared away and taken back to her chambers, which is likely where Guinevere is, and she's watching the tumblers perform with rapt attention. "Enjoying the entertainments, my lady?" he says quietly.

"They certainly are very talented. How is being a royal servant treating you?" she asks.

Merlin hums. "What price would I pay for upending a pitcher of wine over his head?"

"Ah, that well?" She chuckles softly and glances up at him, propping her chin on her fist. "You know, I did not see a single gift from Silverpine, nor do I recall speaking to your brother at all tonight."

"No?" he says, assuming a tone of perfect innocence and an expression to match.

"Why, Merlin, have you forgotten to get me a gift? I believe I shall fair perish from despair," Morgana says with a teasing smile.

"Why, Lady Morgana, how could you ever think such a thing of me?" Merlin replies in the same lilting tone of voice, lips twitching. He turns slightly and nods his head towards Leon, standing a few paces away from the King's table with said gift: a wolfhound pup, squirming eagerly at the end of a braided silk lead. He'd taken the opportunity of the performing tumblers to quietly slip away and return unnoticed with it.
Morgana lets out a delighted gasp and opens her arms without thought for her gown. Leon drops the lead, and the pup bounds forward eagerly. The guard standing nearest to them gives a belated start, grabbing at his sword hilt, but the dog only springs to her arms and laps at her face with a long red tongue. "Oh, Merlin, she's beautiful!" she exclaims joyously, scratching the pup's ears and kissing its furry head.

"Her name's Celeste, and she's been brought up indoors, so she'll behave herself," he chortles, stooping to pick up the end of the lead. At six months, Celeste is near half her full size, long-toed paws promising further growth. The mental image of the King's ward appearing at court with a Brechfa wolfhound amidst the other ladies and their trembling lapdogs still makes him laugh.

Merlin had sent a letter to Silverpine months ago, and Lionel had sent one of his pages back in reply with a newly-weaned pup from the latest litter, her dam one of Allegra's littermates. He had conspired with Gwen, too, to procure an old gown of Morgana's so the pup would know her scent, and with Lady Evaine in Silverpine, he had been able to rear Celeste in the townhouse. He had fitted Celeste with a new collar before the feast, a wide band of fine leather studded with seed pearls; it's much like the ones that other courtiers adorn their lapdogs with, only much larger.

"Daresay the best gift I've ever received, Merlin. Thank you. And you as well, Sir Leon," she adds, glancing over at the tall knight; he salutes her with an amused laugh. She loops the end of the lead around one wrist and feeds Celeste small cuts of venison from her plate, giggling as the rough tongue curls around her fingers.

Arthur's face is a study in confusion and dismay when he sees Celeste. The King's eyebrows lift, a somewhat bemused glance thrown in Leon's direction; however, he looks at Morgana's pleased, beaming face and gives an amused chuckle, shaking his head. Merlin catches his brother's eye and mouths 'I told you so,' grinning smugly. Leon had doubted the wisdom of their gift ever since Merlin proposed the idea. Rolling his eyes, Leon waits until Morgana isn't looking and makes a rude gesture with one hand before returning to his seat.

Quietly, he sidles back around to his post at Arthur's side, reaching over to refill his cup. Merlin notices the prince casting a puzzled glance at him, brows knitted slightly, and he raises his own in turn, giving a neat little bow with everything but deference in his expression.

To his surprise, Arthur actually smiles, chuckling under his breath.

*He's not so bad when he smiles,* Merlin thinks absently and resettles the wine jug in the crook of one arm. *If only he weren't such an ass.*
"You truly never do as you're told, do you?" Arthur asks, arms folded across his chest as he surveys his pathetic excuse for a manservant, sitting on a bench in Gaius's chambers instead of attending to his duties as he should be.

The young man glares at him unrepentantly, turning an unkind eye on the soldiers who are looking through the physician's chambers as well, examining the room for evidence of sorcery. Though he would never admit it, Arthur believes it's a waste of time to search here as well, that there are other, more useful places to start looking for the cause of this sickness. His father isn't inclined to listen to such things, however, not after hearing the word 'magic.'

He looks to Gaius, trying not to stare at the still form beneath a winding sheet on the examination table. "How long until you have found an answer for this?" he asks, eyeing the marble-white hand veined in ghostly blue dangling over the edge of the table.

"That depends on how many interruptions we have," Hunith replies, then turns and impatiently brushes aside the hand of a soldier rummaging through bottles. "Have a care with those! They are dangerous if handled incorrectly."

"Be cautious," Arthur orders sternly. He remembers the first lesson he'd ever learned visiting the physician's chambers—to never touch anything unless explicitly told to do so. He still has a faint burn scar on his wrist from the first and only time he'd disobeyed that rule. "We're done here," he calls to the soldiers when he sees Gaius flinch at another stack of books being overturned. "They'll hardly find a cure for this if we set this place to ruin. Out, all of you. Merlin, with me."

The young man scowls, straightening up a scattered stack of parchments. "I'm well occupied here."

"Now!"

"Oh, alright." Merlin turns and embraces Hunith, bending slightly to kiss her cheek. "I'll return later, Mother. Let me know if you need anything," he says, then turns to Arthur. "Very well, sire, let's go."

As they stride down the corridor, the soldiers following behind them, Arthur casts a sideways glance at his manservant. "Mother?" he repeats.

Merlin gives him a look as though he's just looked up at the sky and asked if it was blue. "Yes. Hunith is my mother." The corner of his mouth twitches up. "Did you not know?"

They stop outside another set of chambers, and he sends the soldiers to inside to search it. Arthur folds his arms across his chest. "I knew Hunith had a son, I didn't realise it was you," he replies shortly, then throws a narrow-eyed look at him. "Why were you even there anyways? You're meant to be staying out of trouble and attending your duties. Haven't we gone over this already?"

The young man mimics his posture, narrowing his eyes right back. "Mother asked me there to look at the victims. I thought that took precedence over your laundry, sire."

"Why you?"

"Because I know somewhat about medicine, and fresh eyes can notice different things."

Arthur hums. "And have you?"
Merlin frowns and shakes his head, brows knitting together. "No. Some of them have never met, don't even live near each other, so it's hard to find how they could have gotten sick," he mutters. "Not to mention the lower town isn't exactly an organised place, so anything could have—"

He cuts off sharply as two men come around the corner carrying a woman's body on a stretcher, bound for Gaius's chambers. The woman, however, isn't a peasant, wearing a rich gown and jewelry. A courtier.

"That…is not good," he mutters.

"What? What's wrong?"

Merlin takes Arthur by the arm and pulls him aside into one of the alcoves, lowering his voice; the King had warned them not to start a panic. "We've been assuming that the sickness is sourced in the lower town, but if courtiers are getting ill, then that means it's something else."

The prince scowls. "How do you know that?"

"Think! How many courtiers do you know that visit the lower towns in the midst of an outbreak? That means it isn't spread through contact. They're hardly breathing the same air, and they're certainly not eating the same foods, and…" His face goes white, eyes widening.

"What? What is it?" Arthur hisses, grabbing his shoulder.

"Water. It's in the water." He twists out of Arthur's grip and sprints down the corridor.

With a muttered curse, Arthur takes off after him. He might be a lazy clout, but he can run like a deer, long legs taking the stairs almost three at a time. "Damn it, Merlin, slow down before you knock someone over!" he snaps, rounding a corner and seeing a serving girl pressed to the wall, wide-eyed and startled at their passing.

The manservant doesn't slow down until he reaches the pump. He'd snatched a vase from somewhere, probably from a passing maid. Without ceremony, he turns it upside down, dumping the flowers on the cobblestones, and fills it with water, his face drawn. "Please be wrong," he murmurs. "Arthur, is there any other water in the city? That doesn't come from the aquifer?"

"Yes, some, in the emergency stores." Not enough, his mind whispers. Not enough for the entire city, not for long. Arthur stares into his sharp-boned face, a knot forming in the pit of his belly. "You don't truly believe this is in the water?"

Merlin gazes down into the vase, holding it carefully between his hands. "I devoutly hope not, but I scarce see how it could be anything else. Come on, I need to get this to Gaius and Mother."

Arthur feels as though he might be sick, though hopefully not in the life-threatening way, on the walk back to the physician's chambers, staring at the vase in Merlin's hands. Not the water. Please not the water. If a sorcerer truly wanted to strike at Camelot, they could not have chosen a better vein of attack. He thinks of all the people in the city, the castle, relying on the water from the aquifer, and swallows hard.

The courtier's body is already laid out on the table when they arrive in Gaius's chambers. Hunith is examining her as Gaius makes notes upon a piece of parchment. "What is it, little bird?" she asks without looking up.

"I believe I know the cause of this sickness, Mother," Merlin replies quietly. "The water, from the city wells."
Both heads turn towards them quickly; Arthur hates the grim lines in their faces. Hunith pours a measure of water from the vase into a clean glass, holds it up to the light to inspect it, then turns and pulls a sprig of lilac from a bundle of fresh-plucked herbs and flowers. "I pray you're wrong, my boy," she murmurs, gently pushing the flowers down into the water, submerging them entirely.

"If this is in the water, if that is how this is spread, is there any way to stop it?" Arthur asks of Gaius. "A way to cleanse the water somehow? Boil away the impurities, anything?"

The old man spreads his hands. "It would require study to find out, sire. There are many kinds of malignant magic, and each one is different from the next. However, if the sickness kills so quickly, then it is the work of a very powerful sorcerer. Nothing could remove it from the water but to eliminate it at the source."

"The sorcerer?" he hazards.

"Perhaps. Some kinds of magic can be wrought separate from the self, given life of their own. Executing the one responsible might not break the enchantment at all."

"Maiden's mercy."

Arthur turns at Merlin's quiet exclamation and moves closer, the knot in his stomach growing heavier. The sprig of flowers they had stuck in the water has gone entirely white, even the stem of it, the petals milky and translucent, veined with spidery blue lines. "Gaius," he says quietly. "Take that and come to the council chambers. We need to tell my father."

Apparently, the fates have not only seen it fit to bestow an entirely useless manservant upon Arthur, they've given him a suicidal one as well.

Arthur doesn't believe that Guinevere is the source of any enchantment. If there was a single person in Camelot upon whose goodness he'd wager his own life on, it would be Guinevere. He doesn't believe she used magic to heal her father, either. He has never been much good at dissembling, but he knows the nine tell-tales of a lie and the game of faces is one he plays well. She truly does not know how her father came to be healed, only that he was. The real trick of it is to convince his father of the same truth. Uther scarce listens to reason once magic is involved, but the right words can bring him down to a more manageable temper. Morgana only serves to provoke him most days, especially once she gets more indignation in her than sense. Which means the task falls to Arthur.

He very nearly has it when that thrice-damned Merlin undoes it all in a single stroke, flinging himself into the council chamber and proclaiming himself a sorcerer.

In any other situation, Arthur might have called it admirable, doing something so foolhardy for the sake of a friend. Now he just wants to wring the little wretch's neck. Instead he lies. Not very well—there is a reason he writes his speeches ahead of time—but well enough that his father believes it. Arthur would be hard pressed to even say why he bothered. A part of him would like to say it is only because Leon is a close friend and would never forgive the execution of his half-brother. That's not the entirety of it, surely, but it's all Arthur can bear to admit at the moment. So he digs his fingers into Merlin's shoulder hard enough to bruise and silently wills the idiot not to speak, smiling with all his teeth and forcing the words out.

There's a horrible moment of silence, but then for a miracle, the King chuckles and makes
amusement of it. Arthur lets his breath out slowly; fools had been sent to the whipping post for less. Keeping his grip firm, he steers Merlin towards the doors and lowers his voice to a hiss, loud enough for only the two of them to hear. "I am struggling to keep him from sending Guinevere to the pyre as it is, I do not need you mucking about making it worse. Now get out." With that, he gives the young man a shove out into the corridor; Merlin throws him a positively mutinous glare, looking as though he means to charge right back into the council chambers and knock the prince over to do so.

He might very well have done it, if not for Leon. The knight strides up and catches him none-too-gently by the scruff of the neck, yanking him back a step as if bringing a lymer to heel. "I'll take him, sire," Leon grits out. "You needn't worry about being interrupted again."

"Good. I expect you to attend in my chambers when this is over, Merlin," Arthur orders but gets no further before the tall knight turns about and strides away, hauling along his half-brother. He almost pities the idiot.

Leon twists a hand in the back of Merlin's scarf, dragging him down the hall and well away from the King's council. He flings open a door and finds a chamber empty but for a servant cleaning the windows. "Out!" he barks sharply, and the servant bolts like a startled rabbit. He shoves Merlin inside and slams the door shut so hard it rattles the hinges. "Have you completely lost your mind? What in the seven hells were you thinking?" he thunders.

"I was trying to help!" Merlin shouts back, rubbing at his neck indignantly.

"No, you were being a fool!"

"I could not sit there and do nothing while people are dying! Not when I could do something about it!"

"Name of the Mother, Merlin, you cannot be this reckless!"

"I am not a child! My choices are my own, you cannot make them for me!"

"It isn't just you!" Leon shouts, shaking him by the shoulders so hard his teeth rattle. "If you were found guilty of sorcery, do you think the King wouldn't suspect me? Or Mother and Father? Hunith? Gaius, even? If a sorcerer were to be found in the royal employ, then not a single one of us would escape his suspicion. Guilty or not, he would line us up on the block just to make himself feel better for being played a fool!"

"I'm sorry!" Merlin shouts back, then presses a hand over his mouth, guilt coiling in the pit of his belly. He forces a hitching breath, a stinging in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he repeats softly.

Ire vanishing, Leon folds his arms around him, pulling him in close; Merlin buries his head against the taller man's shoulder. "It's alright. Shh," he murmurs, resting a hand atop Merlin's head. "I love you too much to lose you, little brother. I don't think I could ever bear it."

He nods into the knight's shoulder. "I couldn't just do nothing. I didn't want her to lose her father," he whispers hoarsely.

"I know. I know." Leon runs a hand across his hair. "It's harder to bear the suffering of others than it is to bear your own. But as strong as you are, Merlin, you can't save everyone. Children lose their parents eventually, and there's nothing to be done about that." He gently grasps the young man's shoulders and gently pushes him back, holding him at arms' length. "But what we can do
now is to find whatever it is that's doing this and stop it before anyone else dies."

Merlin nods shakily, using the edge of his neckerchief to dry his eyes. He stares up at his brother, jaw getting that obstinate set again. "I won't let Gwen burn."

"How else can we explain Tom recovering, then?" Leon runs a hand back through his hair, pacing across the chamber. Abruptly, he stops. A smile starts to form on his face. He turns to Merlin. "I have an idea."

"Iron?"

Arthur picks up the piece of ore, turning it over in his hands curiously.

"Yes, sire." Standing before the prince in his chambers, Leon doesn't have to force a note of annoyance into his tone when he explains, "I didn't want Merlin causing a spectacle in another ill-thought attempt to rescue Guinevere, so I thought to look into it myself. Cold iron can bind a sorcerer from their magic, but it can drive away harmful magic in almost any form. As the blacksmith for the lower town, Tom is surrounded by it constantly, even breathes it in the forge. I don't believe that he was healed by magic, sire, I believe the magic was repelled from him."

The prince leans back against his desk and gazes at the ore in his hand. His other hand toys idly with the amulet around his neck, rolling the pendant between his fingers. "Iron. Of course. Do you think it might keep others from becoming ill if we were to distribute it amongst the people?"

Leon spreads his hands. "I don't know, sire. Gaius and Hunith both agree that this magic is the work of a very powerful sorcerer. Who knows how much it would take to protect every person? No, sire, I believe the only thing for it is to destroy the sickness at its source."

Arthur's gaze sharpens, turning the ore over in his hands. "In the aquifer. It must be in the aquifer. That's where the wells all draw their water from." With the search for the sorcerer continuing to yield no results, he suspects they have long-fled and left only their work behind, as Gaius had said. A magic that has taken on a life of its own, separate from its caster. Nodding, he straightens up. "Leon, go down to the dungeons, stay with Guinevere, don't let the guards take her anywhere, and if you see Merlin, tell him to get my sword and meet me outside the council chambers. I'm going to speak to my father about this, see if perhaps he will see reason."

"Yes, sire."

Arthur swears aloud when he rounds the corner and collides full-on with his manservant, staggering back half a step from the impact. "Seven hells, Merlin, what are you doing? Where have you been?" he demands, grabbing the boy by that silly neckerchief of his.

"I know what it is," Merlin replies breathlessly, as though he's sprinted the entire way and grinning like a fool.

"What what is?"

"The source of the sickness." It's then Arthur notices that the other man's carrying a book in his hands. Merlin flips it open and rifles through the pages quickly, then turns it around to show him the illustration of a strange, misshapen beast with a mouth full of very sharp-looking teeth. "It's called an afanc. It is a beast formed of clay and brought to life in water using magic. Whatever it lives in stagnates and festers."
"Huh. I'm impressed. If it lives in water, then it has to be in the aquifer. I'm going down there as soon as I speak to my father, so go and fetch my sword and—"

"You can't kill it with a sword."

Arthur blinks. "What?"

"It's an elemental. It was made with water and earth, so in order to unmake it, you will have to use fire and air. Your sword will be of no use, you'll need a torch."

"A torch." He lifts a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, forcing a deep breath. "I am expected to kill this…afanc, as you say, with a torch."

Merlin closes the book and tucks it under his arm. "Yes. I'll help you."

*How wonderful.* "Very well, we'll go and see my father and—"

"Arthur, we can't wait," the young man protests, interrupting him. "This creature grows more powerful the longer it is left down there, and the more the sickness will spread. If we tell your father, it will just be a waste of time. You and I can handle this."

He arches an eyebrow, staring at him. "You are aware that I could have you beaten for speaking to me thusly?"

Merlin shrugs. "I'm certain you could, sire. Do you have keys to the aquifer?"

"Of course I do."

"Then let's go."

Arthur stares after him in disbelief, shaking his head. How this coltish lad has managed to live this long without being laid out…. He strongly imagines that Leon has something to do with that. Unhooking the keys from his belt, he follows after his manservant, musing on the knowledge that it should be the other way around.

The aquifer is a part of the natural caverns that lie beneath the city and are therefore dark and quiet, broken only by the faint dripping of water and the distant scuttling of vermin. The path to the aquifer itself is lit by staggered torches, and Arthur moves further into the cavern holding one out in front of him, wishing deeply that he had his sword with him. Useless or not, he would have felt better with it.

Merlin follows close behind him, holding a torch of his own aloft. Truly, Arthur hadn't expected the servant to follow him, but the fool boy did. He's braver than he looks; granted, he does look like an idiot.

"Here." They come up to the deep pool at the edge, the waters deceptively calm, a thin sheet of wispy fog swirling over the surface. Arthur crouches on his heels to study the soft earth but sees no tracks aside from the faint, smudged footprints of whomever was last down here, however long ago. "I see no spoor. Are you certain of this?"

"It will be in the water, Arthur. We have to lure it out," Merlin replies. "Fire and air. It must be out in the open." Without a moment's pause, he peers about, picks up a stone from the ground, and walks up to the edge. He cocks his arm back and hurls the stone into the water.
"Merlin!" he hisses, glaring at the young man.

"What? We can hardly do any vanquishing if we stand here looking at nothing." Merlin picks up another stone and throws it; the splash of it landing is remarkably loud in the stillness of the caverns.

"I hardly see how this is going to help—"

The surface of the water breaks as a dark shape surges up out of the pool, an enormous, misshapen jaw open wide in a gurgling roar. Arthur grabs hold of Merlin's jacket and hauls him away from the water, brandishing his torch at the afanc.

The creature crawls up out of the pool, growling with a sound like rushing water underground. It moves on all fours, loping and awkward, and it has no eyes that Arthur can see at all, only a yawning jaw that could swallow a man's head whole. The smell of it makes Arthur gag, covering his mouth and nose with his sleeve. Like stagnant water and rotting vegetation, putrid and rank. He swings his torch at its head; the afanc roars and swings one huge claw at him. He brandishes the torch again…and meets only empty air.

"Where did it go? Where is it?" he barks.

"I don't know." Merlin's hand clenches around his jacket. "Stay near, we can't let it separate us."

Arthur turns in a slow circle, holding the torch out before him. "Do you see it?"

"No."

He turns again and takes a startled leap backwards scarcely in time to avoid the swipe of the afanc's claws. For something so large and misshapen, it is uncannily agile. Beside him, Merlin swears an impressive streak, swinging his torch at its head, and it lashes at him as well, sending him leaping aside. When Arthur tries to land another blow against it, the beast shies away and is in the next instant gone again.

"Name of the Mother, how does it do that?" Merlin mutters from behind him, swearing quietly.

Arthur ignores him, trying to listen for any sound of it, the shuffle and scrape of claws on the ground, the dripping of water, and hears nothing but their own ragged breathing and the crackle of the torches. The rank smell is everywhere, permeating the air. Aware of Merlin's shuffling footsteps behind him, he turns.

The afanc rears up between them with a roar, lunging towards him.

On startled reflex, Arthur shoves the torch into its open mouth.

He might as well have thrown a lit taper into a dish of lamp oil. The creature's bellow turns into a shrill shriek as it rears back, twisting and thrashing; flame courses over its hide, consuming it entirely. It spits and hisses and stinks like a wet coal, pungent steam filling the air. When the fumes clear, the noise dying into silence, there's nothing left of the afanc except a handful charred black clay, crumbling to the touch.

Stunned, Arthur looks over at Merlin. The young man's still holding his torch, an expression of awed glee on his face as he stares at the ruins of the afanc. He laughs aloud despite himself, brushing the greasy soot from his hands. "Come on. I need to tell my father. Guinevere's been sitting in the dungeons long enough." As they make their way back up to the surface, he glances over and laughs a little. Merlin's face is smudged with soot and dust, no doubt from being too close
to the burning afanc, and Arthur's certain he looks no better. "It near pains me to admit it, Merlin, but I must admit you have done...very well today," he says, then catches his arm. "Do me a kindness, though."

Merlin arches his eyebrows a little warily. "Oh?"

"Don't ever admit to sorcery again."
"What the hell kind of servant drinks poisoned wine?" Arthur mutters under his breath as he glances at the map, reassuring himself he still has his bearings. The Forest of Balor should be another half-day's ride, and if the map is right, it should be large enough that he can't possibly miss it. However, if Merlin's condition is as bad as Gaius had told him, then it will do no good for anyone to have him delayed. He isn't sure he can stand ever facing Hunith again if her son dies to save him, to say nothing of Leon. "Are you ready, Llamrei?" he asks of his mare, and she flicks her ears at him with a soft whicker. A short respite seems to have done well for her. "Good. I have an idiot to save."

As he reaches for the reins, however, he hears the snap of a twig from behind him, hearing the sound of someone approaching him. Arthur draws his sword, whirling to face the source of the sound…and swears aloud. "Gods be damned, Leon, I told you to stay in Camelot," he says, sheathing the blade once more.

The knight gives him a wry smile as he leads along his odd spotted horse on foot, drawing up besides Llamrei. "Actually, you asked me to stay in Camelot, you didn't order me to," he remarks. "And while I understand you made the decision to go alone, you should understand you made an idiotic decision which I have elected to ignore."

Arthur gapes for a moment. None of his knights have ever spoken to him like that, least of all Leon, usually the very picture of decorum. Come to think of it, nobody has spoken to him like that…except Merlin. He closes his mouth and shakes his head. "That brother of yours is a terrible influence."

"Always has been. Are you ready?"

"Yes. How did you manage to catch up anyways? I had the lead on you."

Leon chortles, patting his horse's neck. "Aragonian bred, sire. No better mount. I'm just grateful she hasn't bitten me yet," he says, swinging himself up into the saddle; the mare snorts and stamps one hoof impatiently, tossing her particolored mane.

"You do realise that you'll be in a great deal of disfavor when we return?" Arthur prompts as he mounts up as well.

"Perhaps." The other knight smirks a little. "There are more subtle ways out of the city than riding full-tilt through the guards at the front gates. If one knows where to look and whom to speak to, there are even ways that callous father of yours doesn't know about."

The backhanded reproof coupled with insult to his father in the same breath makes Arthur wonder if perhaps the half-brothers are far more alike than one would think. "Careful now, Sir Leon," he warns.

Leon turns in the saddle to give him a perfectly cordial smile. "I was carried away by strong emotion, sire. Shall we go?" He puts heels to his horse without waiting for an answer.

Staring after the knight, Arthur shakes his head and urges Llamrei on.

The Forest of Balor is indeed far larger than he had thought, seeing it on the map. It spreads vast and dense, stretching from horizon to horizon up against the mountains; the trees grow close and thick in a coat of deep green armour. Cold mists seep down off the mountains to mask the trees in
thick fog. There's a deep feeling of unease emanating from it. Arthur tries to shake himself of the feeling, scowling at his own foolishness. Superstition, nothing more.

"Almost like being home," Leon remarks beside him, sounding braver than Arthur feels.

"Oh?" he says as they ride for the treeline.

"Silverpine is called as such from the constant mists that form in the forests on the mountains. Show me a lake and a valley of pasturage for sheep, I'd be perfectly at ease." As they reach the trees, Leon dismounts and takes the reins of his horse. "Trees this old will have a great deal of low branches. It'll be easier to walk."

As they walk through the close trees, having to take care to pick their way over the thick sprawl of roots, Arthur hears a thin, human sound coming from ahead of them. A woman, weeping. He glances to Leon, wondering if he's imagining it, but from the look of confusion on the other knight's face, he doesn't think so. Moving towards the sound, he spies a young woman, sitting against a tree and crying. She's cut and bruised all over the place, trembling.

"Are you alright?" Arthur asks as they approach her.

She starts at the sound of his voice, glancing up to them. Her gaze slides past Arthur, and she screams.

The beast from Gaius's book, the cockatrice, in full living colour and hideously large. It advances down the ridge towards them with uncanny speed, its body held low to the ground. Leon swears aloud, and they quickly draw swords, moving to stand between the cockatrice and the young woman. It hisses and growls, shifting its weight on its short, bowed legs, glaring at them with cold slitted eyes. A forked tongue flickers in and out like a whip, sharp teeth bared in warning.

They both circle the cockatrice. Arthur moves to the left, and Leon to the right. He knows that the beast is far too fast and no doubt stronger than both of them, so if they can keep its attention divided between the two of them, they'll have an advantage. The cockatrice lunges towards Arthur, jaw open wide. Its long tail whips past, and gripping the sword hilt in both hands, Leon plunges the blade straight down into the ground through the beast's tail, pinning it neatly. It shrieks loud enough to be heard a league away, surely, rearing up on its hind legs in a fury. Arthur raises his arm and hurls his sword like a spear, right into the cockatrice's exposed underbelly. A final gurgling roar and it collapses in a heap, twitching fitfully.

"I recant what I said before," Arthur remarks as he carefully retrieves his sword, using a handful of leaves to wipe the off-color blood from the blade. "I am grateful to have you here, Leon."

Leon snorts a little, then turns to look at the young woman, watching them with enormous, fearful eyes. "Are you alright? Who did that to you?" he asks, nodding towards her darkly bruised arm, marked with cuts that are too small to have come from the cockatrice.

"My master," she replies in a trembling voice. "...I ran from him, and then I got lost, and I don't know where to go. Please, please, don't leave me here."

They exchange a small glance, silently agreeing. Servants who tried to flee their masters were punished most severely, and if the one she had already treated her so abominably...it wouldn't be a good idea to leave her alone and unarmed. "We won't," Arthur reassures, offering a hand to her. "We'll take you from this place, but not yet. There's something we have to do first." His gaze slides towards the yawning gape of a cave, just past where the cockatrice had appeared.
The girl follows his glance. "In the caves? Why in there?" she asks.

"We...need something. A plant. It grows in the caverns," Arthur replies after a moment's hesitation; Leon frowns, seeming suspicious, but of what, Arthur doesn't know. She's only a girl, an injured one at that, and they are both armed knights.

"The mortaeus flower? I know where they are," the young woman says, holding her injured arm close to her. "Here, I can take you to them." She turns and walks towards the caverns, glancing back at them expectantly.

Arthur leaves the horses tied to a nearby tree, pausing to fashion a pair of makeshift torches for them. Staring into the darkness of the cavern, he turns to Leon. "Wait here for us. If there are any more of those beasts about, I don't want them coming in after us."

The taller man frowns slightly, casting another glance towards the girl, but then he nods, standing at the mouth of the cavern; Arthur looks to the young woman and hands her one of the torches. "Lead the way."

He doesn't like this.

Something about that girl unsettles him. The mortaeus flower is supposedly so rare that they aren't common knowledge, yet she had known exactly what they were the moment Arthur mentioned the caverns. Perhaps the locals had more knowledge of the area, but he doesn't see how anyone could get past the cockatrice with any sort of ease. Resisting the urge to follow them in, Leon rakes his gaze around the forest, listening for the stirring of any other beasts, one hand curled on his sword hilt. Surely they ought to be back soon, the flowers couldn't possibly grow that far underground...

"Leon!"

Arthur's distant shout echoes from inside the cave, a sound of fear and panic. Swearing softly, Leon draws his sword and turns to run into the caverns, then halts in place as the young woman emerges from the darkness. All the trembling fear is gone from her. She stands with her back straight and chin lifted. Her injuries have vanished as well, and a cruel smirk is fixed on her lips. Leon starts to raise his sword. She flicks her fingers at him. "Hathian," she says sharply, her eyes flickering gold.

He drops his sword with a gasp as it suddenly grows scalding hot in his hand, as though he's tried to seize it directly from the forge. If he didn't have his glove on, he'd have lost some skin from his palm, certainly.

"You cannot save your golden prince," she laughs, casting aside the torch. For every step she advances, Leon takes one in retreat, keeping the same space between them as he would an opponent, just slightly more than arms' length. She may be a small woman, but she has magic, and he is unarmed. "Did you think to defeat me with your little toy? I am a Priestess of the Old Religion, you foolish boy, I am not—"

Leon smashes a fist into her face.

One of the first things he ever learnt was that no man raises his hand to a woman in anger or he is no true man. However, if she is truly a High Priestess, then she is no normal woman, and given that she is threatening the life of his prince, he thinks it fair to assume he has the right of it. As it is, she only staggers back, even though he'd lain grown men out with a blow like that. Leon shakes his hand out, feeling as though he's just punched a tree trunk.
Blood pours from her nose, her mouth a red ruin. Her eyes widen almost comically, hands rising to cup her face in disbelief.

Leon holds his breath as her gaze snaps to him, spilling into gold.

There is an impact upon the air around them, thunder without sound. Glittering darkness overtakes him.

Magic might well be forbidden in Camelot, but Arthur has never been so overjoyed to see light in his entire life.

Following the silvery blue-white glow up the cavern wall, grasping at the ledges and pits large enough for him to hold. He can hear the scuttling of the enormous spiders behind him, like dead twigs scraping over stone, coming up after him. He feels a tickle against his calf and kicks back at it, not daring to look down, feeling his boot strike something solid that goes falling away into the darkness. The light goes up higher, illuminating a path leading up higher to where the rock wall curved up into a ceiling...and into a shaft leading upwards to a narrow sliver of starry sky.

As he ascends higher, the light breaks apart and dissolves like smoke, but he doesn't need it any longer, moonlight spilling down into the crevasse, and he can see the edge, grass feathering over the lip. One last desperate heave upwards, and he gains the lip of the fissure. He starts to drag himself upwards when the unstable edge begins to crumble. Arthur cries out as he starts to slide backwards into the abyss, the ground crumbling as he scrabbles for something, anything to hold onto. His legs kick at empty air.

Strong hands seize his arms.

"Leon!" he wheezes out. If he had the breath for it, he would've cheered.

The curly-haired knight looks thoroughly ruffled and somewhat dazed, an enormous bruise already forming on the side of his face. His grip, however, is like iron, and he drags Arthur upwards, armour and all, onto solid ground. They both collapse in an undignified heap, catching their breath. The spiders, apparently, have no love of open air, since none of them appear from the crevasse.

"Do you have it? The mortaeus, do you have it?" Leon pants out.

Arthur grasps at his belt pouch, feeling the velvety petals and the so-precious leaves. "I have it. What happened to your face?"

"The woman, the sorceress, she felled me with magic. I hit my head, I think." He chortles hoarsely. "Considering I struck her in the face, I believe I'm in remarkably good form."

At that, Arthur lifts his head, mouth agape. "You did what?"

Leon laughs as he sits up, gingerly touching the side of his face. "She paid me back in kind, sire. I think I hurt my hand more than I hurt her, to speak true." He gets to his feet and leans down to draw Arthur up. "Now let's go. We need to get back to Camelot. Merlin's waiting for us."

The ride back to Camelot is swift yet impossibly long. The memory of the light haunts Arthur's thoughts, yet he doesn't dare mention it to Leon. It seems to him a double-edged sword to have, an alleged destiny that even sorceresses won't cross, a guardian keeping watch on him...and having a magical protector as well as a father who finds the very word magic abhorrent.

Finally, the landscape around them becomes more and more familiar. The hedgerows and fields
begin to take on a well-known pattern, and Arthur's heart jumps in his chest when the familiar spires of Camelot appear, the white walls and towers shining brightly. They halt temporarily on a ridge, the front gates in sight, and the elation that he'd just felt vanishes like a swift bird taking wing. Llamrei blows hard, near spent, but Leon's spotted horse is scarce winded, prancing in place with her strange high-stepping gait. "Did anyone see you leave the city, Leon?" Arthur wonders, staring at the gates. There are more men than he recalls being there before, and he has an idea of the sort of temper that his father is in. "Does anyone know you're gone?"

The other knight shakes his head. "No, sire. Well, none but Hunith and Gaius, but they would not say anything of it. Why?"

Arthur carefully fishes out the mortaeus flower; it's slightly wilted and the velvety petals are bruised, but the all-important leaves look unharmed. Or at least, so he hopes. For Merlin's sake. "Then you go back in the way you left. Get this to Merlin. I will deal with my father's temper. He doesn't take well to being disobeyed, least of all by me." He passes the delicate scrap of plant over to Leon. He has no doubt that his father will be furious with him and will demand an explanation or at the very least an audience so he can be shouted at in person. Nobody leaves the King's presence without permission. It is time that Merlin surely doesn't have.

"Very well. Thank you, Arthur."

Being addressed by name makes him smile a little despite the situation. Leon turns his horse and rides away, towards the outer walls rather than the gates proper, and Arthur counts to ten to give him a decent start. Leaning forward, he pats Llamrei's neck. "Come on, girl. Almost home now," he reassures, then urges her into a canter, making directly for the gates and his father's awaiting fury.

Waking is sometimes like falling asleep, slowly and then all at once. Merlin, however, wakes only slowly, dragging himself up out of a deep, feverish darkness back to the surface, with exhaustion still clinging to him around his corners and edges. He can smell woodsmoke and herbs and old parchment; Gaius's chambers, then.

He pries his eyes open slowly, and a familiar, beloved face swims into focus before him. "Mother?" he mumbles.

She lets out a joyous cry, leaning over to pepper his face all over with kisses, and Merlin lets out a raspy cough of a laugh, resting his cheek against her warm hand. "What hap'ned?" he asks. There's an awful taste in his mouth, like he's just licked a tavern floor, and he feels all over grimy and sweaty, an ache in his joints and a prickling heat across his skin. He recalls drinking the wine at the feast, the burning constriction in his throat, and after that...nothing. Just scattered flashes of colour and light and sound that all run together into mush.

A hand runs over his hair, which feels just as grimy as the rest of him, but this hand is much larger and more callused than Mother's. "You gave us a fright, Merlin, that's what happened," Leon says quietly. "This is the first time you've been lucid in days."

"Kindly never do it again," Gwen adds, leaning forward to press a kiss to his cheek.

Merlin closes his eyes for a moment, breathing in slowly. His chest aches. "What was I poisoned with?"

Gwen and Leon both let out disbelieving little laughs, and Mother shakes her head, running her
fingers through his sweaty hair. "The mortaeus flower. The petal was stuck inside the goblet."

He opens one eye, looking at Gaius. "How in seven hells did someone get hold of that?" He frowns a little, his sticky mind gradually recalling what he has read about the deadly little plant and how to cure its effects. "And who went to get it for me?"

Leon chuckles at that, looking entirely smug. "Arthur did."

_Pardon?_ The golden git himself, Prince Prat, rode all the way to the Forest of Balor to save his life? Merlin huffs and sits up a little, accepting the cup of water that Mother hands him. Nothing has ever tasted better in his entire life. As his mind slowly clears up, he looks at Leon properly for the first time and frowns. "Name of the Mother, what have you done to your face?" he asks.

"I'll tell you later. For now, you need to eat. And bathe. You stink," Leon adds with a smirk.

His muscles are fatigued and aching, but he still finds strength enough to cuff Leon's ear. "I was poisoned, you arse, I couldn't exactly get to the bath."

"Whatever you say." He straightens up and ruffles Merlin's hair again. "Now, I have to return to my duties before the King takes notice of my absence. I'll see you tonight. Try to stay out of trouble until then, if you can," he remarks, and Merlin rolls his eyes hard enough to give himself a headache.

Gwen leans forward to kiss his cheek again. "I am going to go and tell Lady Morgana that you're well. I've left my lady on her own long enough."

As the knight and the maidservant leave, Mother rests a hand on his head. "And you, young man, are going to eat your dinner before I let you set foot out of these chambers," she informs him; that, he has no issue with. His stomach feels as though it's ready to eat itself and then move on to the rest of his innards. He wonders if he's eaten anything at all, caught in the delirium of poisoning. He doubts it.

Merlin is carefully eating a bowl of stewed chicken, having to concentrate on not dropping the spoon or spill it for trembling, when he hears a familiar drawl from the door of Gaius's chambers. "I see you're still alive, then."

He sets the spoon in the bowl and turns around to face Arthur. "Indeed I am. I understand I have you to thank for that," he adds with slight bemusement, eyebrows raised.

Arthur moves closer, coming to rest a hand on the back of his chair. "Your brother helped."

"You still went first."

The prince shifts his weight slightly, his gaze sliding away. Merlin hides a smile; he's embarrassed, embarrassed to have done something so selfless for a mere servant and to then be confronted with that kindness. "Yes, well, a half-decent servant is hard to find. I simply wanted to be sure you'll be resuming your duties tomorrow."

"Of course."

Arthur nods and moves away, heading back for the door.

"Arthur," Merlin calls, and the young man stops, turning back. "Thank you." He arches an eyebrow. "But don't suppose that this means I'll be polite with you now."
That earns him a most unprincely snort. "Never even conceived of it," Arthur replies. "I'll see you in the morning."

A few moments after Arthur leaves, Leon returns to escort him home. Mother insists that he stay another night and rest, but he won't turn her or Gaius out of their beds again. He would feel better in his own bed, anyways, surrounded by his own things and the safety of his magic. It takes far longer than any normal day, given that the muscles in his legs feel about as firm as overboiled turnips, but he does have enough pride to not let Leon carry him through the streets like a maiden.

Finally, though, finally, they reach the townhouse. "She hid herself from me," Merlin mutters as he staggers in, only his brother's firm grip on his arm keeping him upright. He sighs in relief when Leon helps him down onto a couch, sinking back into the cushions; Allegra immediately lopes over to sit beside her master, resting her long muzzle on his thigh. He'd prefer his bed, but the stairs are too daunting a challenge at the moment. Perhaps after a moment's rest.

"Who did? The woman? She hid from everyone, walked right in with the rest of the Mercians."

He shakes his head slightly, sinking back into the couch with relief and scratching Allegra's ears. "No, her magic. I can feel it in others." Brow furrowed, he rubs his fingers together as if recalling an unfamiliar texture or a lingering sensation of touch. "Like heat coming from an oven. And yet she could hide herself from me."

Leon nods thoughtfully, then recalls the sorceress's words in the cavern. "She said that she was a priestess. Perhaps that is a gift of hers."

"Perhaps. Still. Worrisome." He puts his head back against the cushions. The corners of his mouth twitch. "And you...punched her in the face."

"Yes, I did. I'm surprised she didn't kill me, considering," Leon remarks, rubbing his bruised knuckles and flexing the ache out of his fingers.

Merlin hums a little, eyes half-closed; one hand strokes Allegra's head in uneven, drowsy motions. "Might've been me," he mumbles.

"Eh?"

"I..." He yawns enormously wide. "...put 'n enchantment. Blessing. Keep y' from bad magic."

Smiling slowly, Leon stands and walks over to run a hand over Merlin's hair, gently ruffling the tangled curls. It doesn't surprise him in the least to hear that Merlin has found a way to cast a blessing around him, no matter how reckless it might be, and he can't even have it in him to be angry. Leaning forward, he presses his lips to Merlin's brow, still warm from lingering fever. Rather than trying to rouse Merlin again, he scoops his younger brother off the couch and carries him up the stairs to his chambers, Allegra loping at his heels.

The dog bounds up to lay across her master's feet when Leon sets him on the bed, thumping her plumed tail on the bedcover. Leon chuckles at her lolling red grin, smoothing down Merlin's hair. "Never again, little villain," he says quietly; Merlin only mumbles and rolls over. Leon glances down at Allegra and scratches the hound's ears. "Keep a watch on him, yes? He gets in trouble without supervision."

Allegra thumps her tail vigorously, resting her muzzle on the nearer of Merlin's sprawling legs.
Arthur twists his ring thoughtfully as he gazes at the hearth unseeing, seeing the flames paint an ever-changing, flickering pattern against the rushes. He is still thinking of the light in the darkness, like blue fire blown into a glass ball. It unnerves him just slightly. Not the magic itself, though yes, it is that. It is how everything Father has ever told him about magic does not quite line up with what he has seen.

_To know the heart of one sorcerer is to know them all._

He mulls over Father's words, rubbing his thumb over the delicately engraved band. The sorceress had tried to kill him, albeit indirectly as apparently it isn't his 'destiny' to die at her hand. She had certainly been content to leave him to be spider bait, however. And the light had come for him. The light had done him no harm. Indeed, it had illuminated the way for him, shining on the path he needed to climb in order to get out of the caverns. If it hadn't, there is a more than decent chance he would currently be feeding a host of spiders at the bottom of a deep pit.

"How was your time in the dungeons?" Morgana drawls as she strolls into his rooms without knocking, her shaggy bear of a dog loping alongside her. She never goes anywhere without the beast now, always on its braided silk lead and studded collar. Arthur doesn't actually mind it so much. The dog does well to ward off any unwanted attentions from noblemen, given that she's as tall as a man on her hind legs, and it makes Morgana happy at any rate.

"Splendid, thank you for asking." Arthur dangles his arm over the side of his chair, and Celeste lopes over to push her head beneath his palm, tail sweeping the floor. "Those wonderful consequences that you told me to damn."

Morgana smiles a little, leaning her hip against the side of the table. "Yes, well. You did the right thing, Arthur. We all know it. Thank you."

Arthur ruffles Celeste's ears, thinking of another wolfhound in a spring wood. "You're thanking me, Father said he's proud of me, have you all been poisoned as well?" he muses in good humour.

"Oh, hush." She swats his shoulder. "Now, are you going to tell me what you're in here brooding about?"

He sobers, turning his gaze back down towards the hearth. Celeste nudges his hand for further petting, and he obliges absentmindedly. "It's just..." He pauses a moment, weighing the wisdom of telling her about what had happened in the caverns. Morgana's always been quick to pardon the use of magic. "Someone knew I was in trouble and sent a light to guide the way," he says at last.

Morgana listens with surprising solemnity as he tells the story of the cockatrice and the mysterious young woman that had turned out to be far more dangerous than she appeared to be. And when he had been abandoned to the darkness, Leon waylaid by the sorceress's magic, a light had come to him, illuminating the path. As strange as it sounds, a part of him is relieved to think that there is someone watching out for him. Magic or not. The idea of owing such a debt to a sorcerer, however, knots up inside him unpleasantly.

When he finishes, Morgana surprises him even further by leaning forward and giving him a gentle half-hug with one arm, as best as can be done with him sitting down and her standing. "Well, no matter who it was, I'm glad you're home safe, Arthur," she reassures him. "Goodnight. Celeste, come."

He watches her go in disbelief, shaking his head. What a peculiar day.
"Bescyldian!"

Lancelot wakes up with a little gasp, feeling a sharp ache run through his side. He sits himself up carefully, recognising a soft bed underneath him and fine blankets over him. Memories flicker across his mind: the woods, the winged beast, the young man he had pushed out of the way, the foreign word that still rang in his ears...a glittering darkness.

"Ah, you're awake," says a friendly voice, and he turns his head, absently taking stock of the spacious bedroom he was in, obviously a fine place. Leaning up against the wall is the young man that he had saved. He walks over to Lancelot's side, putting a long-fingered hand on his shoulder. "You have a good scratch, but you'll live. It's a most fortunate thing we managed to escape before it caught the both of us."

"I...I heard you," Lancelot murmurs in an undertone, shaking his head and glancing about as if expecting the King to leap out from behind the draperies. "Bescyl...?" He shakes his head, unable to properly pronounce the word. He knows what it means, however. "You did magic." The young man gazes at him, his blue eyes inscrutable, and Lancelot hastily backtracks, realising his blunder and cursing his own foolishness. "I shan't tell. I swear. You saved my life, I'm in your debt. Thank you." He has no issue with magic and never has, having seen somewhat of it himself in his youth.

One corner of the man's mouth lifts in a crooked smile. "You as well. It might have gotten my head off had you not pushed me out of the way. My name is Merlin." He holds out his hand.

"Lancelot. Am I in Camelot?" he asks, shaking the young man's hand.

"Indeed you are."

He pushes the blankets back and gets to his feet carefully, wincing at the ache in his ribs. With exceeding care, he lifts up his shirt—which isn't actually his, he realises—to look at the scratch on his side. It's swathed in bandages and has a strong herbal scent, meaning he's been treated by someone with some knowledge, thankfully. When he takes a deep breath, the expanding of his ribs aches, but its bearable, more of a discomfort than an outright pain. Letting the shirt down, he walks to the window and gasps softly, looking out at the city of Camelot for the first time. He can't see the castle itself, so he supposes this room must be facing away, and it lies behind him. "Oh, it's beautiful."

"What have you come to Camelot for, Lancelot?" Merlin asks, leaning one shoulder against the wall and watching him with some amusement.

"I wish to be a knight," he replies. "Ever since I was a child, it has been my dream to join the knights of Camelot. It's a foolish dream, I'm certain, given that Camelot's best and bravest already fill its ranks, but I want to try."

Merlin smiles full and white. "I can help you there, then."

Lancelot turns in surprise. "You can? How?"

"My half-brother is a knight. The prince's First Knight, actually," he replies. "And I will speak to Arthur himself. They will love you, the both of them."

He can scarce believe what he's hearing. He laughs a little, awed. "You know Prince Arthur?"
"Oh, yes." He laughs aloud, walking over and clapping a hand against Lancelot's shoulder. "I saw you against that beast, and if there is one thing that Arthur values, it is the kind of courage that borders on foolhardy. He's an expert in it himself," he says, and Lancelot widens his eyes slightly at the flippant tone Merlin uses, so casually insulting the prince. Merlin's smile falters slightly, however, and he casts a sideways look at him. "Tell me, Lancelot...are you a nobleman?"


The young man's expression sober. "I'm sorry, Lancelot. Only nobles can serve as knights in Camelot, I'm afraid."

Lancelot exhales heavily, feeling as though he's just been struck in the gut, or if the rug has just been yanked out from beneath his feet. "No," he mumbles, shaking his head, running a hand back through his hair. "Gods' mercy, why?"

Merlin's hand squeezes his shoulder gently, but then something in his face changes, growing more resolute. "Come with me," he says, turning and walking out of the room; confused, Lancelot follows after him. The townhouse, he sees, is spacious and beautiful, though not extravagant, tastefully furnished. A small bear of a dog comes bounding over, plumed tail wagging, and stands in front of Lancelot, investigating him. "Allegra won't bite, just give her a scratch," Merlin reassures without missing a step, walking down a corridor and opening a door. "In here."

He follows after the younger man and gasps as he steps into a library likely worth a lord's ransom, books and scrolls filling up shelves and cubbyholes all the way up to the ceiling. He couldn't even imagine how much some of these must cost. They must be very wealthy indeed. Lancelot sits in the chair that Merlin points to, almost afraid to touch anything. He's never seen so many books in his life. The bear dog Allegra lopes over to him and lays her long muzzle on his thigh, her plumed tail sweeping the floor, and he proffers a hand, scratching her ears once she licks his fingers. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"If you are not a noble..." Merlin walks over to one of the shelves, and he draws a thick tome down. "...I suppose I will simply have to make you one." He sets it down on the table: *A History of the Noble Houses of Camelot and Their Lineages.*

Lancelot's eyes widen. "What? No, no, I cannot. I wish to be a knight by merit, not by deceit, Merlin—"

"Then you shan't be a knight," the other man cuts him off, not unkindly. "The King's Code decrees that only those of noble birth may serve. Merit aside, if your blood isn't suitably pure, then you will never be a knight of Camelot. Even I could not be one, if I so wished, because I am a bastard."

His shoulders slump in defeat, a breath rushing out of him, and he shakes his head in despair. "Why? Why make such a code?" he asks despondently.

Merlin comes to sit beside him. "During the wars, Uther made the order of the knights to protect the kingdom from those who wished to destroy it. He knew that he would have to trust every man with his life, so he chose them from amongst those who had sworn allegiance to him when he called the banners," he explains, remembering his lessons from childhood; he never desired to be a knight but it was part of his learning nonetheless. "The nobility. Thus the First Code was created, and ever since then, only the sons of noble families may serve. It's utter rubbish, I know, but it is the King's order."

Lancelot stares at the thick book, the blank sheets of vellum beside it. "It is a lie, though. It would
be against everything the knights stand for, would it not?"

"Damn the code! The code is wrong," the young man snaps. "You have as much right as any man to be a knight, and this—" He places his hand on the book. "—this is only a way to get yourself an audience, to have them see you. Once that happens, then you will be judged on your merit alone. Do you believe that Arthur judges his men on the renown of their family name? Of course not. Son of a duke or an impoverished lordling, he cares aught for it. If you become a knight, then it will be because you earned that right. Do you know what the word 'noble' means, aside from rank? It means honour. Virtue. Being good."

"Does it not also mean to be honest?" Lancelot muses.

Merlin's mouth quirks. "Three out of four isn't bad." With that, he opens the heavy book and starts turning through the pages, humming to himself. He stops on a page bearing the crest of a noble house. "Lord Eldred of Northumbria. Has a nice ring to it, no?"

Distantly, they hear a door open and shut, and Allegra lets out a happy woof, bounding out of the library. "Merlin?" a man's voice calls, coming closer, and then the owner of said voice fills the doorway. Lancelot swallows hard. This has to be Merlin's half-brother, First Knight to the Prince. He's a large man, a good handspan taller than Lancelot and broad as a tree, wearing mail and the red cloak of Camelot, and he has one hand at rest on the hilt of his longsword. "Ah, I see your companion is awake. You have my thanks for saving my brother."

"He saved mine as well," Lancelot replies, trying not to appear as guilty as he feels, like a small child being caught stealing sweets.

Merlin smiles. "Indeed. Leon, may I introduce you to Lancelot? And Lancelot, this is Sir Leon, my brother." He puts an arm around Lancelot's shoulders, giving him a little shake. "Once he's healed up a bit, Lancelot is going to join the knights."

"Is that so?" Leon nods, seeming accepting, but then he narrows his eyes, arms folding across his chest. "I know that face, Merlin. You can't fool me. What are you plotting over there?" he asks.

"Nothing!" Merlin sounds perfectly offended.

"No?" Crossing the room, he leans over the table to peer at the open book, brow furrowing. "Why are you looking at noble houses, then?" His gaze flickers from the book, to the blank parchment, to Lancelot, and finally to Merlin. He arches an eyebrow at the younger man; Merlin holds his gaze resolutely. "You play a dangerous game."

"I always have."

Eyes darting nervously between the brothers, Lancelot opens his mouth to protest yet again, but Leon holds up a hand, and he snaps his jaw shut without a sound. "Why do you want to be a knight of Camelot?" Leon asks of him, gazing at him with that unreadable expression. "The privilege? The renown?"

Lancelot shakes his head, then seems to find his voice once again. "I want to protect those who cannot protect themselves," he says in a small voice, but then he lifts his chin and continues more firmly. "When I was a boy, my village was attacked by raiders from the northern plains. They were slaughtered where they stood, my father, my mother. Everyone. I alone escaped. I vowed that day that never again would I be helpless in the face of tyranny. I made swordcraft my life. Every waking hour since that day, I devoted to the art of combat, and when I was ready, I set forth for Camelot. And now, it seems, my journey ends."
"It is not over," Merlin says firmly, glaring at him. He turns hard eyes up to Leon. "You know as well as I that the First Code is a bit of elitist nonsense made by a paranoid, oppressive totalitarian."

He had understood nearly all of the individual words and had the feeling that none of them were flattering. Nervously, he glances up at Leon again; the tall man staring at his brother with that same unreadable expression on his face. It is easy how to see he could be the prince's First Knight.

"No."

Lancelot's face falls, and Merlin's brow furrows. "The hell do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean, no." Leon turns the book around and slides it across the table to him. "Lord Eldred of Northumbria is a childhood companion of the King. He knows how many sons the man has, and if he does not recall directly, he will still suspect you." He rifles through the thick pages for a moment, muttering to himself, then stops and taps the page. He turns the book back and pushes it towards Merlin; the crest displayed shows a white seven-point star on a field of sea-blue. "There. House Marbrand from the White Isle. They're a proliferous lot, and they don't keep track of their records. It'd take a dozen scholars a dozen days to even make a start at untangling their lineage."

Lancelot blinks in a few times, looking between them. "But you're...you're a knight, you shouldn't..."

"Oh, I haven't. I wasn't here. I haven't seen you. I certainly couldn't have stopped you." With that, Leon turns and walks out of the room.

Merlin chortles at the look of befuddled dismay on Lancelot's face. "Don't worry, he's quite used to this from me," he reassures. He unfolds the blank vellum and smooths it out flat beside the page. Laying his fingertips against the page and the vellum together, he takes a deep breath, centering himself. "Ic us biseu hræð tán hwanon."

Lancelot makes an awed sound as colour begins to bleed into the vellum as if ink is soaking through an invisible page. The seal of House Marbrand is imprinted perfectly onto the parchment, flawless, and beneath it, spidery threads of ink shape themselves into words.

"Perfect." Merlin holds up the parchment beside the book and nods, pleased with his handiwork; he folds it up and hands it to Lancelot. "I do name you Lancelot of House Marbrand of the White Isle. Go forth and conquer."

He stares at the folded parchment in his hands, uncertain. A part of him wants to hold fast to it, sprint all the way up to the training fields with it now, barefoot and injured as he is; another part of him wants to throw it into the fire and forget having ever seen it at all.

Merlin touches his wrist. "Arthur is still testing the newest recruits. He won't see you until he's done with them. And your ribs need to heal some before I suggest you attempt any serious exertion," he explains gently, as if able to see Lancelot's very thoughts. Perhaps he could. "You will have a few days to decide. Think on it."

He does. He thinks on the First Code and the false seal of nobility resting in the chamber that Merlin and Leon let him have use of whilst he recovered, allowing him to remain as a guest. Merlin, as he learns, not only knows Arthur, but is the Prince's manservant, a truly mind-boggling position for him to have. Another of Merlin's friends, a beautiful young woman by name of Guinevere, comes to take his measurements and has him fitted for suitable livery, as his travelling clothes aren't adequate for meeting the Prince.
And when his unusual new friend comes to bring him to the training fields, Lancelot belts his sword around his waist and takes up the folded sheet of vellum. "Lead the way."

"I cannot take credit for something I did not do, Merlin," Lancelot murmurs in an undertone, glancing around the Hall of Ceremonies. "I have already lied to be here, I do not—"

"Lancelot," Merlin sighs in exasperation even as he smiles, handing him a goblet of ale. His gaze drifts across the hall to land on Arthur, the prince sitting near Morgana and, judging by his enthusiastic gesticulating, describing the attack on the griffin, making the young woman laugh. "I cannot take credit for slaying it without revealing myself, which I will not do considering that I prefer my head to be attached to the rest of my body. So if anything, you are doing me a favour."

Lancelot shakes his head insistently. "It isn't right," he repeats.

"Mm, perhaps. Listen. You said that you were in my debt, yes? Then I claim it now," Merlin says, slinging a friendly arm around his shoulders. "From this moment forward, you have killed the griffin. You'll say no more of it. You will let these nobles and soldiers drink in your name and celebrate your bravery, and you will let Arthur congratulate you and certainly stroke his own ego for having knighted you. And I will consider the matter settled between us, yes?"

He shakes his head once more, though this time from disbelief. "How are you so selfless?" he wonders.

Merlin chuckles. "Largely because I don't consider it altruism. I prefer to call it self-preservation. I meant it when I said I liked having my head attached to the rest of me." He drains the rest of his cup and hands it off to one of the circulating tray-bearing servants. Then, seeing that Lancelot doesn't intend to do anything with it, takes the cup from him and sips it as well. "Do you agree to the terms?"

"I suppose I must." Lancelot laughs as well, unable to help it. "You're an interesting friend to have, Merlin."

"Camelot is an interesting place, as you'll soon find out. Now excuse me whilst I go make sure that Prince Prat doesn't drink himself sodden. He'll be a nightmare tomorrow if he does. Enjoy your celebration, Sir Lancelot." He smiles and claps his shoulder with a wink. "I told you that you would be judged on your merits, didn't I?"

As Merlin slides away neatly, going to speak to Arthur and saying somewhat that made the prince roll his eyes and laugh, another solid arm falls around Lancelot's shoulders, and he glances to see Leon beside him. "He's an incorrigible little whelp, I know, but I've never met someone so damnably devoted to doing what he believes to be right," the tall man chuckles, fondness layering his tone. "Even if he does have to achieve it through some...interesting means."

Lancelot snorts. "That is certainly a diplomatic way of saying it," he muses, watching Merlin make some comment to Arthur that has the blond near choking on wine for laughing. He wonders how it is that Merlin even ended up as the prince's manservant, as it surely wasn't through his well-honed grasp on propriety; perhaps he'll ask in a moment.

"Indeed. I am proud to welcome you to the ranks, Lancelot. Camelot can always use good knights for her defense. I'm certain you'll make friends here," Leon remarks, giving him a smile. "You know, I am inclined to trust Merlin's judgement in most things. If he says you are a good man, I have no cause to repute it. He would not have been so insistent on your becoming a knight if he
didn't believe it true. However, I have seen how power and greed can corrupt even the noblest of men." His pleasant expression doesn't slip, nor does the glimmer of humour in his eyes, but abruptly, the amiable hand on Lancelot's shoulder tightens its grip to the point of pain, fingertips digging in hard enough to leave bruises beneath his tunic. "Should you ever breathe a word of my brother's talents and bring him harm for it, I'll have you strangled in your sleep."

Lancelot doesn't think himself a coward, and yet a cold prickle breaks out across his back at those words, the honest truth of them. He opens his mouth, foundering for words. Before he can think of even one to say, Leon has released him and stepped away, going to converse with another group of young nobles. Lancelot stares after the other man, still feeling the ache in his shoulder from the iron-hard grip, and he exhales heavily, shaking his head.

Oh, yes. Living in Camelot is certainly going to be an interesting experience.
Elegant as a Dancer

There are days when Arthur wishes he could have a normal sort of life, one that didn’t involve near-poisonings, magical creatures, sorceresses bent on killing him…or being taken hostage by mercenaries.

It was meant to be a simple light ride through the woods, one of the rare days when he ducks his duties as Prince and enjoys the early summer weather before it grew too hot to even breathe clearly. He’d brought his useless manservant along, of course, just to say that he hadn’t gone alone. Perhaps he should have known better than to expect the day to go so smoothly.

If he had, maybe he wouldn’t currently be bound hand and foot in a mercenary camp next to said useless manservant, watching the brutish men dump out the contents of their saddlebags and argue over who got what.

“I hate you sometimes,” Merlin sighs as he fidgets beside him, similarly bound with rough cords.

“Shut up, Merlin. And stop that damned wiggling about. I’m trying to think.”

“Oh, I’m the great and powerful Arthur, I don’t need to tell anyone where I’m going because I couldn’t possibly be overpowered by a dozen armed men or taken hostage, oh no, no, not me, not Arthur the Magnificent.”

“Will you shut up and be still?”

The younger man subsides with his mocking, but he doesn’t stop glaring holes in the side of Arthur’s head, nor does he cease wriggling.

“Merlin, have you taken with a plague of insects?” Arthur hisses as the manservant continues to squirm beside him, wriggling his shoulders.

“Oh, do shut up, you prat, I’m trying to get us out of this.”

“One of these days, I am going to have that insolent tongue right out of your head—” He snaps his mouth shut as Merlin suddenly brings his hands in front of him, severed cords falling from his wrists. How in the gods’ name…?

The young man leans forward and slashes through the cords on his ankles; one of the mercenaries turns towards them and shouts in alarm. With an alacrity he’s never shown before, Merlin lunges to his feet and snatches up the quarterstaff that had been left propped against a tree, immediately taking a defensive stance between Arthur and the mercenaries. The nearest one lunges forward, swinging his sword hard enough to fell a sapling tree; the quarterstaff crosses it, the edge of the blade catching on one of the steel bands. Spinning the staff in hand, Merlin jabs the end into the mercenary’s middle, bringing the man to his knees retching and groaning. Another blow across his back sends him to the ground.

The rest come for him in a rush, and Arthur watches in disbelief as his fool manservant wards them off with only a quarterstaff. It holds no edge, but both ends are metal, and with its greater length, Merlin has the reach of all of them. Arthur winces at the impact when Merlin lands a smashing blow against the side of a mercenary’s head. It sounds something like an overripe melon bursting on cobblestones. The man collapses on the ground and doesn’t get up.

Suddenly, one of them drops his sword and backs away, diving instead for a crossbow. Merlin’s
arm lashes out, and the mercenary collapses, a small knife embedded in his heart. Another tries to flee and meets the same fate, another knife finding his exposed throat.

The last man, the largest of the lot, holds out longer than the others, managing to parry the lighting-swift strikes Merlin throws at him. Swift and light on his feet as a dancer, Merlin steps neatly inside the man’s guard and kicks out hard, striking the mercenary’s knee square on with the heel of his boot. The knee gives, and the man goes down with a scream, quickly silenced with a smashing blow atop his head with the metal end of the quarterstaff.

Merlin plants the staff in the soft earth and leans against it a moment, catching his breath.

“You never told me you knew how to fight,” Arthur accuses, finding his voice at last as his not-so-useless-after-all manservant turns towards him.

Merlin scoffs and leans over him, reaching down to slash through the cords on his wrists with yet another knife; how many did he have? “You never asked,” he replies.

“The training bouts—”

“I’m no good with a sword. I never have been. And I don’t fight in armour.” Merlin cuts the bindings on Arthur’s legs, then tucks the knife up his sleeve. He retrieves the other two from the mercenaries’ bodies and wipes the blood on one man’s grimy shirt before somehow vanishing them both into his clothing.

Arthur rubs at his wrists, watching the young man pick his way through the mercenaries, collecting their belongings. His sword is tossed at him carelessly, and he catches it without thinking, buckling it around his waist. He feels better wearing it, even if the mercenaries are already downed. Merlin whistles loudly, and the Hellion ambles over to him, ears pricked. He catches her by the bridle and starts packing their things back into the saddlebags.

He doesn’t only take their things, Arthur notices. He also cuts the purses from the mercenaries’ belts. “Honestly?” he remarks.

Merlin arches an eyebrow. “It’s not like they’re going to need it now. There are good people who could use it more than them,” he answers. He shoves the last grubby purse into the saddlebag. “And unless you intend to help me dig a hole big enough for all of them, they can rot where they lie. There’s scavengers aplenty in these woods who will make clean work of them.”

Arthur unties Llamrei’s reins, staring at him. “Bit cold, don’t you think?”

The young man hums thoughtfully. “I prefer eminently practical.” He walks over to the leader of the lot and turns the body over with one boot, pointing to a tarnished medallion. “See that?”

“What of it?”

“He’s a slaver. That’s why they didn’t kill us right off. We had issue with them constantly in Brechfa when I was younger. They had a route set up running from the ridge of Chemary to the mountains in Isgard and then over into Essetir. There’s a slaver’s market there,” Merlin explains. “You and I would be worth good coin. Didn’t you notice?” He walks over to the fire and brings his foot down on what Arthur had thought was a piece of protruding firewood at first glance. The other end lifts from the fire, however, and it is not a particularly straight branch. It’s an iron rod, the end twisted into the same insignia that’s stamped on the leader’s medallion, glowing dull red. A brand. “It wasn’t for the horses.”

“Alright, you’ve made your point,” Arthur relents, straightening up. “We’ll leave them. Let’s just
get away from this place, shall we? If they have any companions who will come in search of them, I’d rather not be here waiting for them.”

They ride a good distance from the mercenaries’ camp before Arthur decides to make camp for the night. They won’t make Camelot tonight, and he dislikes riding at night. “I don’t suppose you thought to bring that crossbow, eh?” he asks. “Roasted rabbit sounds good about now.”

Merlin hums. “No, I didn’t, but find a stone or two, and we can have roasted pheasant instead,” he says with a little smirk.

Somewhat baffled but hungry enough not to question it, Arthur scrounges around until he finds two decently large chunks of rock, then follows after Merlin. The young man creeps through the underbrush with a careful grace that he’s never shown before on their hunts; Arthur resists the urge to swat him upside the head, knowing that he had likely been so damably clumsy on purpose. Pausing, Merlin points towards a large bush, then carefully slides one of his knives into his hand, cocking his arm back.

You are kidding me. Did he honestly think to hunt pheasant with a knife? Arthur rolls his eyes, but he takes one of the stones and hurls it into the brush.

A pheasant takes to wing with a startled cry, the knife flashes silver through the air, and the bird falls to the earth, pinned neatly through one wing. Merlin snatches it up and breaks its neck with a swift twist.

Seven hells, Arthur thinks. “So,” he drawls, lightly tossing one of the rocks in his hand. “All those hunts, and the game you spooked…”

Merlin smirks at him, and Arthur hurls the other stone at his head. He ducks it with a laugh, wiping the blood onto the bird’s feathers. He holds out the pheasant by its feet. “Here. Take this to camp and start plucking. I saw some berries over there that’ll be good with it.”

“You do recall that I give the orders around here?” Arthur reminds him.

“Of course, sire.” He holds out the bird again.

Rolling his eyes, he takes the pheasant and returns to their camp. As he sits down and starts plucking the bird, he muses on the new and incredible fact that Merlin has been able to properly take him in any of their practice bouts. The scrawny little whelp is scarce ever without that quarterstaff of his, and apparently, he always keeps those knives on him, likely when he isn’t supposed to. Most well-trained knights would be hard-pressed to hold their own against that many men, and Merlin had done it with only his quarterstaff and a few throwing knives. You never asked.

Merlin returns a few moments later, neck bare, his neckerchief full of ripe berries. He pauses and arches an eyebrow at Arthur. “I don’t know what you are over there contemplating so hard, but be careful, sire, I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself,” he remarks dryly.

He chuck a handful of bloody feathers at the young man. “Have a care for who you’re speaking to, Merlin the Mighty. Saviour of dogs, defender against deer,” Arthur remarks, chuckling to himself.

Merlin blinks, looking up from the berries in surprise. “You remember that?”

Too late he realises his blunder and hastily wipes the smile from his face. “Of course I do,” he replies brusquely, turning back to plucking the pheasant. Arthur has both of their previous
encounters carefully preserved in his memory like records in one of Geoffrey’s archives.

Silverpine. Two-and-ten, just shy of his Colts’ Years. He’d never had anyone dislike him before. Of a certainty, he knew that some people had to dislike him, but none were ever brave enough to show it to his face. They were too afraid of him, or more accurately, of his father. So to meet Merlin, small and bird-boned, who had looked at him with such blatant disregard, was a novel experience indeed. Arthur internally winces still to think on the things he had said, trying to coax a reaction from the other boy, not thinking much of Merlin’s feelings for relishing the new experience. He remembers the look of incandescent fury that had come across Merlin’s face when Arthur insulted his mother, how he’d thrown any kind of respect or hospitality to the winds and tackled him, bitten his arm like a dog.

The hunt. This one he tries not to look at too hard or too often. He was two winters younger than the rest of his fellow knights, and he had pitted himself against that disadvantage with a vengeance, determined to be better. The hunt had been celebration of both their knighting and quietly, his own victory at being the best of them. When he was thrown over the deadfall to his back, it had felt like taking every blow in training practice at one time, unable to breathe. He had expected someone to come for him; he hadn’t expected it to be Leon’s gangly half-brother on that spotted Aragonian horse. And he had not expected, either, for Merlin to fling himself over Arthur when they thought the boar was coming for them. Merlin might have looked like little more than skin and bones, but beneath his deceptively loose clothing, he was surprisingly muscled. Wiry, perhaps, but well-built. Arthur had laughed when the deer came bounding out simply for the sheer foolishness of it, men grown frightened by a stag, and the look of complete dismay of Merlin’s face had been a sight. So was his anger when he leapt to his feet, snarling at Arthur as if he wasn’t a prince.

He’s never met anyone who could make ‘sire’ sound so much like ‘you wretched cankerous bastard.’

Once the bird is spitted and set over the fire to cook, Arthur sits back and rubs at his wrists, the skin chafed raw from the rough cords the mercenaries had used to bind their hands. “Who trained you?” he asks. At Merlin’s puzzled glance, he nods towards the quarterstaff propped up beside him. Now that he looks at it, he can see that the exposed wood surfaces are nicked and scratched from use, the metal bands polished and cared for. It’s obviously a well-loved weapon.

“Sir Lionel did,” Merlin answers. “During Leon’s squiring.”

Arthur nods. The fathers of the squires weren’t permitted to be involved in their training, to avoid any bias or favouritism, so Lionel certainly would have had time enough to do it. “Why? Did you want to be a knight?”

That earns him a loud snort, which Arthur suspected it would. “Maiden’s mercy, no. But he thought it was good for me to have a discipline, to be able to defend myself.” Merlin reaches over to turn the pheasant, then glances at him, eyes narrowed. “Why are you suddenly so interested?”

Arthur shrugs one shoulder. “You hadn’t told me because I hadn’t asked. I’m asking. So, you can take down pheasants with your knives. What else?”

Merlin makes a mild shrug of his own; his fingers twitch, and one of the slender knives appears in his hand. He spins it between his fingers, flashing silver in the firelight, dancing it through his fingers with casual ease, though Arthur wouldn’t have attempted it for risk of losing a fingertip. “I don’t know. I’ve never gone hunting with them, if that’s what you’re asking. These are meant for beasts of the two-legged variety,” he says with a sly glance at Arthur.

“You don’t use a sword, though?”
“No. Too heavy, too cumbersome. Longsword isn’t a good option in close quarters, and it cannot be easily hidden. A knife is, and can.” Merlin tosses it up lightly and catches it again before making it vanish once more up his sleeve.

“Hm.” Arthur doesn’t inquire further, and Merlin doesn’t say anything else, the two of them eating in quiet. “I’ll take first watch,” he offers, leaning back against a tree, sword laid across his knees.

Merlin doesn’t argue for a first, curling up beneath his jacket, one of their saddlebags serving as a pillow. Arthur leans his head back against the tree trunk behind him, eyes half-lidded as he carefully preserves the details of this day and stores it beside the memory of a summer day in Silverpine and a hunt in a spring wood.

Three days later, Arthur walks into the armoury and aims a sideswiping kick at Merlin’s backside as he strides up to the young man, diligently scrubbing his armour clean. For some reason, he’s chosen to sit on the floor instead of at one of the tables. “Get up, Merlin. Fetch my sword and come with me.”

Merlin throws him an irritated glare. “I’m nearly done.”

“Finish later. Come along, we don’t have all morning.”

With a great deal of angry muttering—much of which would have landed him in a cell if the King heard a word of it—Merlin sets aside the armour and cleaning rag, stomping over to snatch up Arthur’s sword from the table where it sat, newly polished and sharpened. Entirely in Arthur’s reach, too, but why have a manservant if not to do things for him? “Anything else, sire?” Merlin snaps.

Arthur fastens the belt around his waist. “Get your quarterstaff and follow me.”

They don’t go to the training field proper, since he doesn’t want to risk any of his knights observing them. Instead, Arthur leads Merlin out to the small clearing just outside the city walls where they had practiced during the tourney. The last time they had sparred out here, Merlin had done little more than flail about whilst Arthur mercilessly laid into him with the practice sword until the young man could scarce lift his arms.

“Name of the Mother, Arthur, it is entirely too early for this nonsense, will you just tell me what —”

Arthur draws his sword and turns to face him. “Spar with me.”

Merlin stops dead in his tracks and snaps his mouth shut with an audible click, staring at him. “I do beg pardon?”

“You heard me perfectly well.” He flourishes his sword neatly before him, slashing the air with the blade. “Spar. Properly, now.”

Merlin begins to grin, a slow, pleased smile. “Truly? You want to spar with me?”

“I’m asking,” Arthur says simply, hefting his sword.

“Very well.” He spins the quarterstaff so swiftly the ends whistle sharply through the air. “Shall we dance, then?”
An hour later and not a single clear victory either way, Arthur drops to the grass, his tunic plastered to his skin with sweat, fumbling for his waterskin. “Seven hells,” he gasps out once he has breath enough to speak again.

Merlin sprawls out on his back near him, one hand curled loosely around his quarterstaff. “Told you, sire,” he pants out. “Like a swan.”

Arthur chuckles and dumps the rest of the water over Merlin’s head.
Leon is penning a letter to his mother when the front door of the townhouse slams shut so hard that Allegra barks in alarm at it. Quickly, he sets aside the quill and stands, leaving his chambers just as a flash of red fabric and dark hair storms down the corridor into the library. Curious, he goes to the doorway but no further, leaning his shoulder against the frame; Merlin's ability to control his magic has the additional bonus of giving him ample control of his emotions. Which means a fit of temper is nothing to be taken lightly.

True enough, Merlin is sitting stiff in his chair, long-fingered hands working around the carved arms like a cat kneading. There're white lines around his mouth, and his eyes flicker from gold to blue like fast-moving shadows across sunlight. Several of his knives dangle in midair as if from unseen threads, the blades spinning so fast they blur. Allegra slinks over to him and rests her muzzle on his knee, but Merlin doesn't even take notice.

Leon folds his arms. "Do you wish to speak of it, or shall I leave you to it?" he asks, making his tone light but careful, one eye on the darting silver of the knives.

"The Lady Morgana," Merlin spits.

A cold stone drops in the pit of his belly. "Oh, gods, Merlin, you haven't—"

One hand waves impatiently, dispelling whatever though he might have voiced. "No, no, she has done nothing. It's what's been done to her." A muscle in his jaw jumps. "Morgana is a seer. She has magic."

Of all the things that Merlin might have said, that is the very last one Leon expected to hear. He shakes his head a little, eyes wide. "Wh-what? According to whom? What makes you think that?"

The young man takes a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment; when his lashes part again, his eyes are blue and remain as such. The knives cease spinning, though they still dangle brightly in the air. "I have had my suspicions for some time, but I had no way of confirming it. Until Sophia and Aulfric."

The Sidhe. Leon doesn't know much of the fair folk other than they are capricious, powerful, and chillingly amoral. Even near-stripped of power, Sophia had been strong enough to wrest an enchantment around Arthur insidious enough for her to near drown him without a struggle. "What of them?"

"Morgana dreamt of Sophia drowning Arthur in the lake. She saw her face... before they ever arrived in Camelot," Merlin explains; one hand strokes Allegra's head, scratching behind her ears. "The nightmares. The sleeping draughts. I have administered Gaius's mixtures to patients before, and grown men have slept deep as the dead with them. And yet, she still does not sleep. She still has nightmares."

"But a seer...?"

The knives begin to spin again. "Oh, yes. Gaius told me, when I asked him. He says that Morgana's dreams have come to pass before, and he has known what she was for some time," he says, grinding the words out from between his teeth. "And he has decided that it is in her best interests not to know, that it is best for her to remain ignorant of her power."

And there is the heart of it. Leon is much aware that Merlin's opinion on certain subjects of magic
are vastly different than his great-uncle's, and they have had their quarrels over it before throughout the years. He's tried not to get himself much involved, having no gift of magic himself and no place to speak of it. It makes him somewhat objective, anyways. Gaius errs on the side of caution, but having lived through the bloodiest first years of the Purge in the heart of Camelot, steeping in paranoia, he's learnt the hard way that one wrong word uttered to the wrong person might become the torch which lights their pyre. However, secrets are double-edged blades that can cut deep, and some trusts, once severed, cannot be so easily repaired, if at all. Ignorance is not always the best option; lambs go willingly to their own slaughter, ignorant of the knife hidden out of sight.

"You do not think it so?" Leon ventures.

Merlin gives a harsh bark of laughter. "To put it as such is a gross understatement. If Morgana is a seer, then she was born one. Her gifts are in her blood as mine are, and it will out. Whether Gaius likes it or not. I heard her speaking to Gwen some time ago. She fears she's going mad," he says, his voice breaking slightly. "Her power will not disappear simply because Gaius wishes it so, and it will eat her alive from the inside out. I do not use my magic simply for the pleasure of it, Leon. I cannot go without it, no more than I can go without breathing. I tried once. Do you recall? The winter I took with fever, when we were children."

Leon does remember. Merlin had grown dreadfully ill, so much so that Father had near been willing to make the journey to Camelot on his own, to get treatment from Gaius. He had been so afraid that his little brother would die, huddling at his bedside all hours. "You grew ill because you tried to repress your magic?"

"I did. I thought...I thought that if I could just stop using it, if I could make it go away, then I could live with my mother again. I missed her so much, and I loathed myself, too, wishing that I could just be...normal. So I buried it as deep as I could." He takes a shuddering breath. "It hurt. Everything hurt. And then it didn't. I felt cold all the time, and the weather had nothing to do with it. I just felt numb, all over. And then I fell ill, and I stayed ill...until I let my magic go again. I tried to keep it pinned up inside myself, and without any place to go, it turned in on me, like it was trying to make me weak enough that I couldn't fight it anymore. That is what is happening to Morgana, and it will only get worse. It will devour her, you understand? And I...I cannot sit here and watch it happen." He raises his gaze to Leon's, a sheen of tears in his eyes; the knives clatter and thump to the floor. "I cannot."

"She is the King's ward..."

"And I am the Prince's manservant. It is dangerous to even breathe in this damn kingdom, but we do each other no favours by isolating ourselves. I have to help her. I have to. I don't think I'll be able to abide myself if I don't."

Leon walks into the library, crossing the room to his side, and he rests a hand on Merlin's shoulder. The young man rests his brow against Leon's arm, sniffling. "When the choice is between doing one's duty and doing what is right, there is no choice at all," he murmurs, squeezing gently. "I don't envy your position, and I wish that I could steer you true. All I can say is to make the decision that you yourself can live with making."

Merlin is a strange sort of friend to have, or at least so it seems to Morgana. He has the amazing ability to switch from being recalcitrant to obsequious in the blink of an eye, depending upon who he's addressing, he knows the oddest things on the strangest subjects, and he's never displayed even the slightest indication that he might desire her. It had pricked her ego at first, just a little bit, but now she near relishes it, being able to have a decent conversation with a member of the opposite
sex without playing subtle games of courtship. Sometimes he seems so much older than he is, and other times he seems as innocent as a boy. Arthur might call him an idiot on a near-daily basis, but he has a wit keen as a blade and true as an arrow from a bow. It's the most entertaining part of her day, hearing some of the quiet, backhanded insults he murmurs about the other nobles and courtiers.

When he asks her, courteous as anything, if they might take a ride outside the city, as it's the perfect weather for it, Morgana heartily agrees and has her favourite palfrey saddled. "Will you chaperone for us?" she asks of Gwen, already knowing the answer. Her maidservant is a close friend of Merlin's, his near-equal in rank in the royal household, and Merlin never hesitates to exploit that whenever someone suspects him of being a little too near to the King's ward.

Once they're outside the city, hovering on the brink of autumn but still warm, Merlin immediately drops all pretense of propriety, just as she prefers. "I'm grateful you accepted my offer, Morgana. I've missed your company."

"And I yours," she agrees, leaning over in the saddle to unclasp Celeste's leash, letting the young wolfhound spring ahead of them, chasing after Allegra. "Do you take Allegra out here often?" Morgana asks, watching the two wolfhounds bound through the long grasses ahead of them, snapping at passing insects and mock wrestling one another.

He nods, smiling with amusement at the dogs' antics. "Whenever Prince Prat goes hunting, I bring her along. I think he's glad of her, even if he'll never admit it."

"Of course not."

Merlin glances back at Lancelot, assigned to guard duty by no mere fallout of chance, who follows at a sedate pace behind them. Gwen walks alongside him, the two sharing quiet conversation of their own, and he grins at the obvious cow eyes that Lancelot is making at the young woman. And, even more interestingly, the fact that Gwen is making them in return, blushing under his gaze. When he casts an amused glance at Morgana, she's watching their interactions just as curiously, and they exchange a knowing grin. Merlin jerks his chin forward, and she nods, urging their horses onwards to put a little more space between them, staying within sight but out of speaking range.

"I wanted to speak to you privately, Morgana," Merlin begins carefully, reaching forward to gently stroke the Hellion's strong neck. "And this is the best way I knew of to do it without being...improper."

"As though you've ever given a whit for propriety," she replies, though she's curious as to what is so important he would want her outside the city walls to speak of it.

"For this, I do." He glances back at Lancelot and Gwen, still out of their hearing unless they shout, and he takes a deep breath, seeming to brace himself for what he means to say next. "This might sound a bit mad, but I ask you as my friend to hear me out, yes?"

A faint touch of worry colours her curiosity. "Of course, Merlin. What is it?"

"When did you first begin to have your dreams?" he asks, and she raises her eyebrows in surprise. "You know the ones I mean. The ones that wake you in a cold sweat and haunt you the rest of your waking hours."

She straightens in her saddle, twisting the reins a little tighter around her hands. Nobody ever asked her about her dreams, aside from Gwen and Hunith. It is something that people politely ignore and overlook. Even Gaius never asks her about them, only gives her another sleeping draught that does
nothing to alleviate them. "Since I was a child," she replies.

Merlin glances at her sideways, head tilted slightly. "Since you became a woman?" he prompts.

She flushes at his bluntness, but it is one of his contradictory traits. He can dither with the best of them, but he can also be painfully direct. And now that he's said it, she realises that the beginning of the dreams did coincide with the start of her woman's courses. "Yes."

"And the things you have dreamt...they have sometimes come to pass, haven't they? Even things you couldn't possibly know about?"

Her heart is beginning to beat quicker, a tightening in the pit of her belly. "Yes," she whispers.

Merlin turns his gaze to hers, and for the first time since knowing him, his gaze is hard for her to hold, full of such knowing and empathy. "Morgana. Your dreams are not merely dreams," he begins; her body trembles slightly, hands gripping the reins so tight the leather bites into her fingers. "They are visions. True dreams, glimpses of the future. You're a seer. You have magic."

He's said it.

Morgana draws in a ragged breath, feeling as though some terrible tension has at last been released, a spring coiled too tight finally loosed. "I have magic," she whispers. Even as she says it, the truth of it settles down in her bones, fitting clean and true.

"You have the right of it," Merlin continues gently. "The gift of foresight is an innate one. It is something that chooses you. You were born with it." He leans towards her slightly, holding her gaze unblinking. "As was I." When she gapes at him, he uncurls one hand, palm-up, and a flower blooms in the middle of his palm, opening petals the same blue of her gown. He holds it out to her.

She takes the flower in trembling fingers, holding it to her breast. "Merlin...I..."

"I don't want you to be afraid of yourself any longer," he says gently. "I can help you. I want to help you. And not only me. There are those here in Camelot who will help you, who know that the ban of magic is wrong, the persecution of sorcerers unjust, and would see it all undone."

"You want to bring about the return of magic...in Camelot. Under Uther's reign," she says flatly, staring at him. "Merlin, you have said bold words before, but this... Your faith in the goodness of people is admirable, but Uther will not be swayed. He's as cold and unyielding as stone."

He doesn't argue with her, only nods agreement. "I know. I know. It may not seem like it, but Uther is still only a man, and mortal for it. He won't live forever. I know he won't change, but I don't expect him to. I have hope elsewhere."

"Arthur?" Morgana exclaims incredulously.

"Arthur."

"You truly think that someone raised under Uther is going to repeal the ban of magic?" she asks with a shake of the head, clearly doubtful.

Merlin sighs. "Arthur wishes to please Uther, make him proud. Such is the way of sons and their fathers. But come down to it, Arthur is not his father, and he never will be. You told me he has a soft heart under it all, and he does. He does not have Uther's capacity for...impersonal cruelty. Yes, he has somewhat of his father's temper, but he is far more inclined to forgiveness, understanding. With some time, yes, I think he will." He casts her a sharp look. "And don't you ever tell him I told
you that."

Morgana turns her gaze back out on the stretch of field, the wind stirring her hair. "You could have killed him, couldn't you? Anytime you wanted, you could do it. You have all the reason in the world to."

He's very much aware that she isn't speaking about Arthur any longer. "I could have," he agrees, knowing they would broach this subject sooner or later. "But Arthur isn't ready for the throne yet. And if he witnesses his father killed by magic, it will harden his heart to it. I've chosen that battle already, Morgana. I play a dangerous game, and a long one. Can you?"

She smiles, a flash of teeth that's more warning than mirth. "Well, we'll find out, won't we?" Her expression softens a degree. "Why did you tell me all of this? Everyone else seems content to lie, or at the very least blindfold themselves."

Merlin adjusts his grip on the reins, his voice softer when he answers. "Because when I look at you, I see myself as I might have been. Alone. Afraid. Wanting to belong and unable to do so," he replies. "Everyone has to look into the dark mirror as well as the bright, and when I do, I see you reflected back at me. Since I cannot abide what I see, I intend not to look away, but to change it."

They turn their horses around and make their way back to Lancelot and Gwen. "We can make a visit to the townhouse on our way back up to the castle. I have a book about foresight that might help you make a start at understanding your dreams until we can find a safe way to educate you inside the citadel. We can hardly go running off to the darkling wood every few days," he says, and she nods agreement, wondering how it is he can conceal books of magic in the city itself, marveling at his bravery.

Her good mood is only bolstered further when she sees that her maidservant has plucked several wildflowers and woven their stems into a colourful coronet, set atop her hair. And there is a sprig of bright yellow flowers tucked behind Lancelot's ear, matching the colour of Gwen's gown. Morgana hides a smile behind her hand, and Merlin conceals his mirth by turning in the saddle to whistle loudly, Celeste and Allegra bounding over to accept their leashes with dignity.

"Gaius won't be happy with you, will he?" she asks as they ride back. She knows the old physician must know about this. She remembers him talking her out of her nightmare-induced panics, coaxing her to uneasy quiet and persuading her to take only another mixture meant to bring her a dreamless sleep. She feels as though she might be angry with him later, but now she feels entirely too full of joy.

He gives her one of those sly smiles she has come to quietly relish, as it generally means he's feeling inclined to mischief. Usually at Arthur's expense. "Gaius does not need to know."

Merlin wonders if perhaps he has some touch of foresight as well, or if his magic unconsciously bends coincidence around him, for no sooner than he tells Morgana of her magic than an injured Druid boy comes tumbling into their lives.

"What do we do?" Morgana asks anxiously, stroking the boy's dark hair with one hand as he sleeps through the last remains of his fever. Merlin had quietly entreated his mother for feverfew and a few drops of opium tincture for the pain, and he does know just enough of healing magic to draw out infection. The boy sleeps soundly despite the frenzy of activity searching for him, cuddled up between Allegra and Celeste. The hounds had taken an immediate liking to him, flanking him like furred sentinels.
"I don't know. We need to get him safely back to his own people, but we can hardly leave the citadel now. It'd be entirely too suspicious, especially with Uther having every damned chamber searched," Merlin replies with a scowl, staring out the window at the bobbing torches down below, knowing that Arthur is somewhere down there leading the knights to search the upper city before expanding down into the lower town. Again.

His true anger, however, is reserved for the King and his determination to bring an innocent child to bay like a hunted deer. He had heard listened just outside the hall whilst Arthur attempted to sway his father towards clemency, insisting upon the Druids' peacefulness. It had done no good, of course, but it's comforting to know that there are lines Arthur will balk at crossing, and Morgana had told him of the prince's repeated insistence of the boy's innocence at supper.

"Is there no safe way out of the city?" Gwen asks, keeping her hands busy by sorting through Morgana's washing, folding up the laundry. It's more nervous habit than anything. She moves around the chambers, absently tidying.

Merlin steps back from the window and puts his head back against the wall. "Every gate is manned and the guard's been doubled," he answers. If it was any normal day, he might have taken the boy down to the Red Pavilion (albeit blindfolded) and slipped out the back way, but with as many guards as there were going around, he's certain the Pavilion would be full of them. They couldn't have gotten all the way from the citadel to the lower town without being caught. "I'm certain there's some tunnel or passage or whatever else, but I have no idea where, and I will wager that Arthur has the damned keys to them, too."

"Well, you could have always just asked," Arthur drawls.

Gwen drops the cloak in her hands with a startled yelp, Morgana leaps to her feet, and Merlin nearly uses his magic to fling the prince into the wall, one hand grasping for his quarterstaff on reflex.

The blond holds up his hands to show them empty, well away from his sword hilt. "Easy. I'm here on my own. And I'm here to help." He makes his way across the chamber to the foot of the bed, staring at the occupants with a wry smile. "Traitors," he accuses the two wolfhounds, both of whom merely thump their tails and give him lolling red grins. Arthur gazes down at the Druid boy, still deeply asleep from the tincture Hunith had given him. "So this is the great and terrible enemy my father is after. Gods' mercy, my tourney lance weighs more than he does."

Morgana moves a little closer to the boy, hands hovering protectively over him. "How did you know?"

He gives her a smirk, though his eyes are surprisingly soft. "You can't even kill a deer, Morgana. And baiting me, telling me you were hiding him behind the screen so I wouldn't look? You've used that same chess strategy since we were ten." He glances over at Gwen and Merlin. "I expected no less from either of you as well. And I am not going to murder a child, King's order or not. So, the boy is leaving the city tonight."

Merlin can't help but smile as he steps closer, feeling yet again that deep pang of hope he feels in his chest at times like this, like seeing the distant glimmer of sunlight beyond storm clouds. "How are we going to do that?"

"You'll go and dine with my father," Arthur says, pointing to Morgana.

"I will not—"
"Oh, yes, you will," he repeats firmly. "And you'll say some pretty words about how sorry you are for quarrelling with him and conjure up a few tears for him, too. It'll be no different from all the other times we got into mischief and I was the one punished because you started sniffing and looking wretched. He will suspect you before anyone, as much as you've argued with him on magic before. Merlin and I will take the boy out through one of the siege tunnels. The question is how we get him back to his people. The Druids are peaceful, but they're elusive, too. They move their camps constantly, and rarely ever near the city."

Gwen clears her throat softly, and they all look to her. "Correct me if I am wrong, sire, but isn't Sir Lancelot to take your place on the usual patrol? Seeing as you and your senior knights are occupied here?" she points out.

Arthur raises his eyebrows. "That...is correct, but how do you know he will agree to this? Not everyone is quite as ready and willing to commit treason."

"He will," Gwen and Merlin say in unison, exchanging a glance.

The prince glances between the two of them and heaves a sigh, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Gods' mercy. Anyone else? Shall we go ahead and begin our own thieves' guild whilst we're at it? Seeing as how we are all ready and willing to commit treason against the crown?" he asks, directing the question to no one in particular, throwing his hands up.

Merlin's never actually seen someone throw their hands up before; he finds it amusing, to say the least.

"Alright, then that's it. Guinevere, Lancelot will be down at the stables making ready to leave. Tell him that once he leaves the city walls, he needs to ride around to the east gate and bear directly right until he comes to a shallow ravine. The siege tunnel lets out there, and that's where we'll meet him," Arthur instructs. "Morgana, my father should have taken his dinner in the hall by now, you go down and play your part. Merlin, you're with me. Wake the boy."

Morgana quickly goes to her mirror and begins to pin her hair up into a semblance of order as Gwen leaves the chambers to head for the stables. Merlin leans over and gently shakes the boy's shoulder. [Wake up,] he says mentally even as he murmurs the words aloud, brushing his thoughts against the boy's as the Druids do. The boy stirs, lifting his head groggily, and his eyes widen when they land on Arthur. [Don't be afraid. Prince Arthur is helping us get you out of here. Put your boots on and get your cloak, we must depart now.]

[Thank you, Emrys.]

Ah, that name again. The Old Ones address him as such, no matter how often he corrects them, as have the few other Druids he's encountered as they travel through Silverpine. Apparently it is his "true" name, though he doesn't know how he can have any name other than the one his mother gave him. He's halfway given up on trying to make them stop. [You know my name, apparently. Will you tell me yours? he asks, taking the boy's hand in his own and following Arthur's determined, long-legged stride, moving down and down and down into the bowels of the castle where the siege tunnels lay.

[Mordred. My name is Mordred. Will you tell the ladies I said goodbye? And thank you for taking care of me?]

[Morgana and Guinevere? Of course. Keep quiet now, there are guards on duty in these corridors.]
Arthur peers around the corner to make sure their path is clear before moving on. Merlin feels the air growing cooler the further down they go, and Mordred's small hand grips his tightly. "Just through here. I hope Lancelot wasn't stopped at the gates," the prince mutters, stopping at the mouth of their escape route, the carved, shaped walls giving away to the rough, natural stone of the tunnels. He takes a torch from a cobwebbed bracket, swearing aloud when he realises he has no flint, but Mordred extends his free hand, and it sparks to life. Arthur blinks a few times in the sudden light, then gives a stiff little nod. "Sharp trick. This way."

The tunnel is narrow enough that Mordred has to walk slightly behind Merlin rather than directly beside, and there's places where Arthur's shoulders can almost touch both walls, pitch black ahead and behind them, but then it begins to lighten ahead. They come around a curve in the tunnel and suddenly find themselves standing at the mouth of it, standing in the bottom of a ravine about twice a man's height, perhaps some long-dry creek bed. And standing tense and wary at the lip of the ravine, Lancelot is waiting for them; in the moonlight, the Pendragon red of his cloak is deep and saturated like old blood. "Sire," he exhales in relief. "I was concerned you were...waylaid."

"Not at all." Arthur thrusts the torch at Merlin, then looks down at Mordred. "Time for you to go, little one. Sir Lancelot is going to bear you away from the city and help you locate your people."

Lancelot kneels at the edge of the ravine, and Arthur stands directly below. He hefts Mordred up with ease, lifting the boy up enough so Lancelot can reach down and pull him up. "Huh," Arthur mutters. "I was right. My tourney lance does weigh more than he does." Raising his voice slightly, he calls up, "Normal patrol lasts three days, so that's the time you've got. Make good use of it."

"I will, sire. You have my word," Lancelot replies, keeping a bracing arm around Mordred, the boy looking terrifically small and frail against his bulk.

[Listen to me. Tell Lancelot to bear southeast, towards the province of Brechfa. Keep the ridge of Ascetir to your left and the mountains in front of you, and you will enter the Silverpine estate. Ask for Sir Lionel and Lady Evaine. Tell them a villain sent you. You'll be safe there until your people can be found,] Merlin orders, staring up into the boy's pale face.

[I will. Thank you for everything. I'm sure we'll meet again.]

[I'm certain we will, Mordred.]

"Well?" Morgana demands as soon as they step into her chambers, scarce waiting for Merlin to close the door. "Did you do it? Did Lancelot escape with the boy?"

"Oh, we did, and he did." Arthur unfolds his arms and shakes his head at Morgana in mocking disappointment, gesturing between her and Merlin. "The two of you are a most horrendous influence, and I have no doubt you'll be the death of me one day," he announces succinctly. "I am going to bed before one of you wrangles me into another act of treason against my father."

Morgana flings herself at him, throwing both arms around his neck in a fierce embrace. Arthur stands stock-still, an expression of shock writ across his face, hands held out uselessly at his sides. "Thank you," she says, planting a kiss against his cheek, then lowers her arms and steps back. "And you should go before Uther sends the guards looking for you." Arthur starts to turn away, but she catches him by the arm. "One more thing."

"Oh gods, what now?"
Chuckling, she reaches up and swipes her thumb over Arthur's cheek where she had kissed him, showing him the bright red smear of carmine left behind. Arthur scowls and scrubs at his cheek with one sleeve, grumbling even as a red flush spills up the sides of his neck. Morgana, Gwen, and Merlin all laugh as the prince stomps away, muttering about treasonous maidens and seditious manservants.
"One night. All I wanted was one thrice-damned night," Arthur snarls as he paces the length of his chambers in a fury, snatching off the coronet that he's scarce worn for a few hours. Anger simmers low in his gut, making his teeth grind and his fists clench. One night.

Footsteps clatter up behind him, and he doesn't even have to turn around to know who it is; he recognises that long-legged stride and the utter disregard for the protocol of knocking. "Arthur, there you are. Sir Lionel has asked you to come speak with him, he staying here in the city with us."

"Not now, Merlin," he snaps. He is not in the mood to visit anyone, not in this temper. "It concerns the Black Knight, sire."

Arthur halts so abruptly Merlin nearly collides with his back, stumbling back a step. He turns to stare at his errant manservant. It might not happen often, but it is possible for Merlin to be serious, and he recognises the look of it, the hard set of his jaw and rigid posture. He nearly says no; he is no fit company when in a temper, Morgana's always told him so. However, Father is being so dammably closed-mouthed on this Black Knight, though Arthur knows that he had recognised the stranger, had seen the glimmer of recognition on his face. "Very well."

Having not seen him in person since his summer fostering at Silverpine, a part of Arthur almost expects Sir Lionel to still be the same quietly imposing man in the prime of his life. To see that the lion knight's mane has gone mostly grey is a shock, as is the slow, pained way he rises when Arthur enters the library of the de Galis townhouse. "Prince Arthur. You've grown into a fine man since last we met. It only grieves me that we are meeting under these circumstances," he says, inclining his head.

"Indeed, my lord. Do forgive me for being blunt, but Merlin says you know somewhat of this Black Knight. I'd hear it."

Lionel nods, his face set solemn, and he retakes his seat, rubbing at his right leg. "Has your father said anything to you of him?"

Arthur grinds his teeth, recalling his spat with Father earlier that night, after they'd left the Hall of Ceremonies. "No."

"It doesn't surprise me."

"Why? What does my father know of this knight?"

Lionel hesitates, then turns his gaze to Leon and Merlin. "Leave us. This has naught to do with either of you," he orders; without a word of argument, both of his sons bow and leave the library, Merlin drawing the doors shut behind him. He leans back in his chair, the lines etched in his face seeming deeper in the low light. "What I am going to tell you, Prince Arthur, is something your
father would order me to keep silent unto my death. I shan't repeat it again, so I pray you listen well."

"I am."

"The Black Knight is your uncle."

"What?" Arthur exclaims. "No, no, you must be mistaken…Uncle Agravaine would never…"

"Hush. You said you would listen, so listen," Lionel says firmly. "Not Agravaine. Tristan. Your mother's elder brother. I know him by the crest he bore in the Hall of Ceremonies. No other has borne it. And I know it because he and I were friends in our youth. We fought many battles together," he explains, an old ache of sorrow painting his words. "Tristan was some years older than Ygraine. He doted on her. He wasn't wholly pleased when she wed your father, but only because I do not believe he thought any man good enough for her. When you were born…when Ygraine died…Tristan went mad with grief. He came to the gates of Camelot and challenged your father to single combat, to avenge his sister's death."

Arthur's stomach churns, and he tastes bile in the back of his mouth. "And my father killed him." It isn't a question. Single combat has only one outcome.

"He did. Tristan refused to rescind his challenge."

"Dead men do not return," he says with a sharp shake of his head. "Even if what you say is true, then this Tristan is dead and has been for 20 years. Why would he return now?"

Lionel spreads his hands in front of him. "That, I cannot say. But what has returned is not your uncle as he was. He is a wraith." He places his hand on one of the books, lying open on the table, and pushes it towards Arthur; he leans forward to peer at the open pages. There is an illustration of a snarling skeletal figure, bearing a sword and shield before an empty grave.

Arthur leans back in his chair, shaking his head again. "If what you say is true, if this is a wraith, then how can it be stopped?"

"The dead cannot be killed, my lord. A wraith is a tormented spirit returned to exact the vengeance they failed to get in life. It will not rest until it has."

A cold knot settles in the pit of his belly. "Vengeance. Against my father."

"Just so."

Forcing a trembling breath, he shakes his head. "No. No, you must be wrong. This Black Knight, whoever he might be, is a man living and mortal like any other," he protests, pushing to his feet and slamming the book shut. "I have faith in my knights that they'll defeat him."

Lionel gazes at him with dark, dark eyes that seem entirely too old. "I pray you are right, Prince Arthur," he says quietly, though Arthur can see clearly in his face that he is not.

Many of the sacred places of the earth were destroyed in the Purge, and Merlin can feel their ruins like wounds in the surface of the land whenever he is near to them.

Many are lost. But not all.
Arthur dismisses him early to stew in his own bad temper after the match, both grieved by Owain dying and angered by Pellinor taking up the Black Knight's challenge in his place. For once, Merlin is actually relieved to leave early, and he saddles the Hellion and rides out to the forest. Once he's surrounded on all sides by the trees, cool and dark and wild, he dismounts, kneeling on the leaf mat, hands pressed to the ground. He closes his eyes and breathes in deep, reaching outward with his power, centering himself.

The Hellion ambles over to lick at his hair. Merlin straightens up, patting her neck. "Are you a goat now? This way, great heart," he says, mounting up and steering her in the proper direction. He keeps her under tight rein, and she chafes at it, snorting and tossing her head.

The trees slowly grew thicker the further they went, older and deep-rooted. Merlin brings the Hellion to heel and dismounts again, lashing her to a nearby tree, going forward on foot. The trees grow too thick and close for him to ride comfortably. Following the thrum of magic in his blood, a second pulse echoing his own heart, he picks his way over the thick roots and mossy boulders, until suddenly the trees stop, opening into a clearing where a ring of standing stones still remains.

It's a small circle, no more than ten paces across, but it is old. There are nine stones in all, a deep, somewhat flat-topped boulder marking the centre, grown with moss. He stops and removes his boots and socks, then steps into the circle, touching the nearest stones as he passes it, and he goes up to the centre stone, taking the wineskin from his bag. Drawing the cork, he pours the perry brandy out over the top of the boulder. It is mostly flat, with a depression in the centre of it like a shallow basin. The perry fills up the indentation before spilling over, trickling down the sides of the stone into the earth.

There's another odour beneath the sweet tang of brandy, darker and deeper and metallic. Blood. Old blood. More than one kind of tribute had been received here.

Once the wineskin is empty, he kneels down, clasping his hands in his lap, and waits. Kneeling, the top of the boulder is about eye-level, and he can hear the trickle of brandy over the stone, dripping softly onto the grass.

The wind picks up, stirring around him, rustling in the grasses and leaves, boughs creaking softly, whistling between the stones.

[Emrys.]

"Old Ones," he murmurs. "I come in supplication, to ask for your help."

[If it is in our power to do so. Speak.]

"A wraith has been called from the grave. No mortal weapon can defeat him. I have sought the answer with mortal magic and found none. What can I do? Is there no way to defeat the dead?"

[The dead do not rise without reason.]

Merlin nods, expecting that answer. "I know, but this one has not returned on his own strength. The priestess Nimueh summoned him," he replies.

The knowledge sits within him firm as stone. After having felt the effects of her magic in a most up-close and personal manner, he knows Nimueh's magic now. It clings to the wraith like a rotten odour, and one whiff of it makes his throat tighten in remembrance. He had barely been able to be still long enough to watch the match play out to Sir Owain's death. He knows little of necromancy, knowing how dangerous it can be to unbalance the scales of life and death. It is not something to
be undertaken lightly, which is precisely why he has chosen to seek the advice of those wiser.

Taking a deep breath, he spreads his hands out in front of him, not having to feign humility. "She has exercised her own power to upset the balance, and she has done so for no reason other than to take her own vengeance," he implores. "Magic is not meant to be used so selfishly, and the balance must be restored. Already, the wraith has claimed the life of one knight and is set to claim another tomorrow, and the longer it continues, the more the imbalance shall grow. I ask you for your help. Please."

There's silence in the clearing, but he is aware of the stir of the wind around him, the rustling of the leaves and grass; the earth beneath him seems to thrum like some great heartbeat, deep and slow.

[A weapon can be made. It comes with a price.]

Merlin exhales a breath he hadn't realised he held. "I will pay it. What must I do?"

[Bring a mortal weapon to the standing stones after moonrise tomorrow. We will show you the way.]

"Can it not be sooner? Sir Pellinor—"

[Moonrise tomorrow, Emrys.]

He bows forward until his brow touches the mossy stone. "I understand, Old Ones. Thank you."

"So tell me again why it is you are at my doorstep asking me for a sword in the middle of the night?" Gwen asks in a low voice as she ushers him into the quiet forge.

Merlin's mouth twists into a semblance of a smile. "Because Arthur is a self-sacrificing fool that I would rather not see dead just yet," he answers, and she smothers a laugh behind one hand even as she shakes her head. He understands the feeling. He had curse the prince for a foolish ass the moment Arthur cast down the gauntlet at the wraith even as he inwardly marvelled at his bravery. "Trust me, Guinevere."

She casts a furtive glance around the forge, then walks over to one of the benches and kneels down beside it. Merlin follows suit, watching as she retrieves a long cloth bundle that's been hidden beneath the seat. "He's been saving this. Says it's the finest thing he's ever crafted. He tempered it for ages," Gwen murmurs, lying the bundle across the bench and unwrapping the cloth. The sword inside gleams dangerously in the low light, the steel pounded thin and razor keen. "And he will be furious when he sees I've taken it."

Merlin folds the cloth back over the blade and clasps his hands over hers. "If everything goes accordingly, I'll pay him thrice its worth in gold," he promises.

"And just what exactly are you hoping will go accordingly?" Gwen asks, arching an eyebrow at him pointedly.

He grins back as he takes the bundle up in his arms, straightening up. "Interesting choice of sleepwear, Guinevere," he says with affected nonchalance, eyeing the faded blue shirt and loose trousers she wears instead of a nightdress. "That shirt is much too large to be yours, though, and I'm certain I've seen it before on a friend of mine..."

She flushes deeply, trying to appear stern and failing, lips twitching as she points to the door. "Go
on then, you sly bird, do what you will," she orders.

Merlin takes a step forward and ducks down quickly to kiss her blushing cheek. "Thank you, Gwen."

"Go," she repeats, her voice softer. "Save the noble idiot from himself."

Exactly what he means to do. Stealing quickly outside to where he's left the Hellion waiting, snorting impatiently, Merlin lashes the bundle to her saddle and steers her once more towards the woods, giving her head. In high spirit, she breaks into a gallop and is scarce winded when they reach the treeline. Once more, he leaves her well outside the standing stones; not knowing how long this magic will take, however, he does not tether her to a tree but instead lashes a hobble around her legs, much to her displeasure. He narrowly misses having one of his hands bitten when he retrieves the sword from her saddle.

The moon is just ascending over the treetops when he steps into the circle, and perhaps it is because the Old Ones are already present and waiting, but the sacred ground feels more alive than it had the night before. Magic vibrates in the very air, in the ground beneath his bare feet as he comes to stand before the centre stone. "I have returned, and I have brought the weapon as asked. What must I do?"

[The wraith is a being of death. A sacrifice of life must be made in order to defeat it. You say you will take it upon yourself. Is this truly your will? You do not know what is demanded.]

That deep, old blood-smell again, stirring old memories of a crowded square and sun-gilded hair. Merlin takes off his jacket, rolling his left sleeve up past his elbow, and he takes out one of his knives, gripping it tightly in his right hand. "I have an idea of it. It is my will."

[So be it. Make your sacrifice, Emrys.]

He takes the knife up, whispers a prayer asking the Maiden's mercy and the Mother's strength, and extends his left arm over the shallow basin of the boulder, inhaling deep. Gripping the knife tightly, he does his best to recall all that Gaius and Mother have taught him about blood and sinew and cutting open the body, then places the tip of the knife midway up his inner arm. He lets his breath go and jerks the knife sharply.

The pain of it makes him gasp aloud, and it is only through a force of will that he does not startle and cut himself deeper by mistake. Blood seeps out from his arm quick and steady, dripping into the basin of stone. Merlin drops his knife and fumbles blindly beside him until he grasps the hilt of the sword, holding it tight but not raising it. Words form on his tongue, strange and foreign and old. Old as stone and sea and sky. As he speaks, the night seems to grow brighter around him. Everything becomes sharp-edged and clear even as his body grows heavy and warm. His magic pulses through him like a second heart, matching the steady thrum of the earth's power all around him, in time with the pulse of blood dripping from his arm, more and more, greater than any magic than he has tried to cast before. So very vast and mighty and alive.

Blood trickles down the sides of the boulder, dripping onto the earth.

His right arm lifts, holding aloft the sword that Gwen had given him. Her father's finest work. In his heightened state, he knows the steel is keen and true; no other would have done for this. He looks up at it, shining flame-bright in the moonlight and says a single word. "Hathian."

The blade begins to heat, faster than any forge could, so hot he has to let it go and hold it aloft with his magic instead. Hotter and hotter, until the air around it ripples from the heat of it and the steel
hisses like some angered serpent.

[Now, Emrys.]

He brings the sword down, quenching it in the pool of his blood.

Immediately, he is surrounded by the smell of it, the blood hissing and spitting and frothing. When he raises it out again, the blade catches fire in open air, the flames no one colour and all of them at once. He might not be a bladesmith, but he is fairly certain that isn't what normally happens. He lowers it back in again, extinguishing the flame, and when he does, he feels the magic crest and break, seeping back out of him.

It is done.

He falls to his knees, all the strength suddenly gone out of him with the ritual done. His arm is bleeding still. Merlin fumbles for his jacket, his neckerchief, anything, but his limbs are uncooperative, cold and numb. He is distantly aware of collapsing to his knees and then falling to his side, blood soaking into the earth.

Glittering darkness overcomes him.

When he wakes, feeling groggy and hollowed out, the moon is only a ghostly sliver of itself, and the sky is the cool, deep grey of predawn. Merlin rolls his gaze down and sees his arm has been healed, the cut a line of shiny, tender pink scarring, the grass beneath it discoloured with dried blood. Grasping at the rough sides of the boulder, he drags himself up to his knees with difficulty, his head spinning. He feels as though he's been scraped out and scoured with sand inside, his magic guttering low in his chest.

Lying atop the stone is the sword that can kill the dead. His blood has already congealed and dried into a deep red-black crust on the boulder, joining all the other sacrifices made in this place, but the blade itself gleams clean and new. Fine ripples gleam across the steel, and the metal has a faint reddish hue to it. When he lifts it from the boulder, it is much lighter than he recalls, and it hums with magic at his touch, reverberating in tune with his own power, separate yet tethered.

"Thank you," he whispers, wrapping the sword in its cloth once more.

The breeze sighs through the standing stones, and their reply sounds almost amused, [This magic is given strength by life. It would be quite counterproductive if you died weaving it. Be warned. In the wrong hands, a weapon of such power is capable of great evil. It is meant for Arthur Pendragon and no other.]

Nodding agreement, he stands up and staggers, bracing himself against the boulder as the world spins around him, greyness creeping around the edges of his vision. Losing so much blood and working such powerful magic at the same time has left him bone-weary and almost ill. Weaving on his feet, he staggers from the stone circle and through the thick trees. He puts two fingers in his mouth and whistles. The Hellion ambles over to him, snorting at him in displeasure at being left hobbled all night. "Yes, I know. Don't worry, I'll have you spoiled in the stables shortly," he replies as he unties the hobble. She holds still once it's off, thankfully, and he leans against her solid bulk as he lashes the sword to the saddle. It takes him three tries to mount up, and when he does, she whickers and tosses her mane in obvious amusement. "I have done an incredible amount of work this night, so kindly hush and get us home," he says, nudging her with his heels.
The Hellion makes for Camelot at a surprisingly easy pace in the grey predawn light. Merlin closes his eyes and relaxes, winding the reins around his arms. At first, the swaying makes him a little nauseous, but then it becomes almost soothing. He dozes. When the sound of hooves on stone reaches his ears, he opens his eyes again. They're approaching the gates. Merlin pats her neck gently. "Good girl. Almost home."

He's scarce approached the townhouse when the stable boy Sam comes bolting out to meet him, taking the reins of the Hellion with care, watching her teeth. "Sir Leon has been in a right state since you left, my lord," the boy says in a quiet voice.

Merlin stumbles as he dismounts, grasping Sam's shoulder for support, and unlashes the sword from the Hellion's saddle. Straightening up, he describes exactly what Leon could do with that temper of his in words that would have cost him his tongue in the court. Sam flushes bright red and quickly leads the Hellion away.

He barely takes a step inside before Leon is storming up to him, still in his nightclothes. "Gods' mercy, Merlin, where have you been?" he demands, taking him by the shoulders and giving him a shake. "You cannot simply up and vanish like this without a word's notice, especially knowing that damned priestess is about!"

"Leon!" Merlin exclaims. "Please. I have not eaten since yesterday, and I am exhausted like you wouldn't believe after what I have achieved this night. Will you at least allow me to eat something before you have my hide?"

His brother glowers at him for a moment longer, eyes darting down to the bundle in his arms. Finally, scowling, he takes hold of Merlin's arm—the right, thankfully—and drags him into the dining hall. There's a light breakfast on the table. However, Leon gives a curt order to Elfgifa, the kitchen girl, and she darts out of the hall into the kitchen. Merlin sits down, propping the sword against the side of his chair, and can almost kiss Elfgifa when she sets a still-warm chunk of bread and a dish of stewed chicken in front of him, leftover from last night's supper.

"Now, tell me what damned bit of mischief you've been into now," Leon orders, dropping into his own chair.

He's entirely too busy eating to answer, not realising how hungry he truly was until now. So instead of speaking, he sets the cloth-wrapped sword on the tabletop between them; Lady Evaine would've had both of their hides for it were she there to witness it.

Leon leans forward to pull away the cloth. "Name of the Mother," he remarks, staring at the sword; the blade gleams subtly red, as though it has been burnished with carmine. Or blood, perhaps. "It's a beautiful thing. So light! And such a perfect balance, too. Strange colouring, though. The markings here, what do they mean?" He tilts it slightly to show the engravings on the flat. "Don't you have scripts in the library written like this?"

Merlin uses the heel of the bread to sop up the last of the broth, licking his fingers clean. He feels far more himself with a bit of food in him, a measure of strength returning. He tilts his head to read it. "Yes. It's a script used by Druids and other magic users." He hadn't even noticed it this morning, he'd been so disoriented. "That says 'take me up.' Turn it over." Leon flips the blade. "And that says 'cast me away.' Huh. Wonder how I managed that."

"You? What did you do to make this?" Leon asks, narrowing his eyes. He sets the sword down with care on the cloth between them. "You've never so much as touched a bellows in your life, much less a hammer and anvil. You've been gone all night. What did you do?"
Avoiding his brother's all-too-knowing eye, he reaches over and draws Leon's abandoned plate of breakfast to him, helping himself to a bit of oatcake and honey. "Magic powerful enough to defeat the dead demands a price," he says at last. "That sword is meant for Arthur and him alone, and it will kill the wraith. Or rather, kill it again."

"A price." Moving with incredible quickness, Leon's hand shoots out and grabs Merlin's left arm, squeezing; Merlin gasps aloud at the sharp throb of pain. The Old Ones had closed the wound before he bled out, but he is still healing underneath. He snatches his arm away. Leon allows it, retracting his hand. "You were favouring your left side when you came in. You took that price upon yourself, didn't you?"

"I wasn't about to ask someone else," Merlin replies stubbornly, still hugging his left arm against his chest. It aches in time with his heartbeat. "The match starts at noon. I have to give this to Arthur before then. It's the only weapon that will stop the wraith."

Leon runs both hands back through his hair. "I ought to put a tether on you and keep you bound to this house," he mutters, the heels of his hands pressed to his eyes.

"I'd still cause mischief," Merlin points out as he licks a drip of honey off his fingers.

"Mm, no doubt. Very well. Go and change your clothes. I'll get dressed and find a scabbard."

As they make their through the castle, directly towards Arthur's chambers, Leon nearly ends up knocking the King's ward down the stairs when they round a corner and collide head-on with Morgana.

"My lady, forgive me, are you alright?" Leon exclaims, grasping her shoulders.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It's Arthur."

Merlin's chest constricts, and he grips the scabbard hard enough his fingers cramp slightly. "Is he hurt? The match hasn't started—"

She shakes her head again. "No, he isn't hurt, and it hasn't begun yet, though it will. He isn't in the challenge ring," she replies, and the brothers exchange confused glances. "Uther, he's ordered Arthur locked in his chambers. He means to face the Black Knight in Arthur's stead."

Merlin lets his breath out in a rush. For a brief flicker of time, a scarce breath of thought, he considers allowing the wraith to exact its vengeance upon the King. Just as swiftly as it comes, though, he brushes it aside. No. Arthur isn't ready for the throne yet. However, no matter what peril Uther might face, Merlin will never let him wield this sword, tempered in his magic and quenched in his blood. He'd sooner run himself through with it. So, they will simply have to release Arthur from his chambers and give it to him instead.

He runs up the last set of stairs and down the corridor to Arthur's chambers. There are two guards posted outside the doors. It takes only a small nudge of magic to knock them both out, sending them sprawling to the ground.

"Do say you'll show me that trick," Morgana says in an undertone.

"Certainly." He hesitates, however, when he reaches for the handle of the doors. Locked, she had said. Knocking out a few guards is an easy task, but unlocking a door without a key with Arthur directly on the other side....
"Have you a hairpin, my lady?" Leon asks abruptly. Bemused, Morgana nods, pulling a long silver pin from her carefully styled tresses. "Stand aside," he mutters, pushing Merlin out of way. He forcibly bends the tip of the hairpin out of shape, then kneels and jabs it into the keyhole. A few tense moments of careful manipulation, it catches and holds. He pushes down on the pin. The lock clicks.

"Sharp trick. Where did you learn that?" Merlin exclaims.

"You have your talents, and I have mine."

Snorting, Merlin yanks open the door to find Arthur pacing the length of his chambers in a fury. The prince whirls towards him, but the rage evaporates from his face when he sees them. "What are you doing here? How did you—?"

"No time, Arthur," Merlin insists, holding out the sword in its scabbard. "Quickly now, your father intends to face the wraith in the challenge ring in your place."

Even as he says it, the distant sound of clashing swords and the exclamations of the crowds can be heard.

"Not if I have any say in the matter," the prince snarls. He strides past them, snatching the sword out of Merlin's hands as he passes, making a run down the corridor, and the brothers make haste after him.

Morgana lifts the hem of her gown and sprints along with surprising swiftness. "He's not wearing armor," she points out as they chase after Arthur.

"I know," Merlin mutters back. He doesn't believe he could make Arthur hold still long enough to put any on, either, not with the match already begun. He can only hope that the element of surprise will be enough to allow Arthur to kill the wraith before it makes one well-aimed blow of its own.

"So…how was your father?"

Arthur snorts through his nose as he slouches in his chair, legs stretched out in front of him. Surely half the kingdom had been able to hear Uther's bellowing after the match. "Furious, of course. Shouted at me for interfering, then shouted more for running into the middle of a melee without any armour on, and then moved on to various other slights, both real and imagined, going back some five years or so," he replies dryly, leaning back in his chair and running a fingertip around the rim of his goblet. "However, since everyone else is going on about how wonderful and heroic it was for the brave prince to take up arms against the Black Knight in defense of his royal father, he can't throw me in the dungeons as he would very much like to."

Merlin's mouth quirks up as he finishes hanging up Arthur's clothes in the wardrobe. "Well, perhaps there will be a few new ballads written in your honour. Not that you need it, given your head is already as thick as your waist."

"I am not—" He snaps his mouth closed at the smile Merlin is failing to smother, and he rolls his eyes. Idiot. Turning in his chair, he picks up the sword that he had left propped beside his desk after being banished to his chambers by Father. "Here. Return this to whomever it belongs to, it isn't mine." It is a well-made sword, though. Lighter than any steel he'd wielded before, burnished a curious yet lovely reddish hue, with engravings on both sides. When he had run the wraith of his long-dead uncle through with it, the creature had let out a sound unlike any other before bursting
apart into ragged pieces of desiccated flesh, bone, and cloth. The smell had been quite unlike any other as well.

"Oh, it is," his manservant replies with a strange little twist of his mouth. A smile, yes, but somewhat else too. "Yours, I mean. It was forged for you, a gift. Do you like it?"

Arthur blinks. "I do. Fine blade." He sets it back down on the table, smiling a little. "You're dismissed, Merlin. Try to be on time tomorrow morning, if you would. I have a training session scheduled early. Since Father can't lock me in a cell, he will settle with running me ragged instead. A wonderful beginning to my tenure as crown prince."

Merlin shrugs nonchalantly, coming to collect the goblet and wine. When he starts to turn away, he stops, balances the tray on his right arm, and fishes a small box out of his jacket pocket, setting it on the tabletop.

"What is that?"

"For you. I meant to give it to you after the crowning ceremony, but..." He sketches a vague gesture in the air meant to encompass the events of the past three days.

Arthur raises his eyebrows in surprise. "You actually got me a gift?"

"I know, I know, my stellar wit and company is gift enough." Merlin gives him a sly wink. "Goodnight, Arthur."

Once he's left the chamber, Arthur leans forward and picks up the small box. It's very light, and for a moment he wonders if Merlin would give him an empty box as a jest. It wouldn't be entirely a surprise, given that unique sense of humour he boasts of. At least he is alone in his chambers, with nobody to see. He lifts the lid.

Not empty. It's a pin, wrought in the shape of a sun with a tiny piece of polished sunstone at the centre, radiating golden rays outward. It's a subtle design too, small and neatly done, one that could easily be affixed to most any garment without being ostentatious. Arthur picks up the pin, lightly rubbing his thumb across the sunstone, a deeper gold than the metal around it. Most gifts he receives are embellished with the dragon befitting his house, but one can always trust Merlin to be different, if not outright contrary.

He goes to his bed and sets the pin on the bedside table before climbing into the blankets, and he gazes up at the bit of wrought gold, watching the low flicker of the dying firelight catch in the sunstone until he falls asleep, sinking into tangled dreams of blood and flaming steel, lights blooming in darkness, and burning gold bright as the sun.
"Do you truly believe this is going to work, Prince Arthur?"

He looks down at the diminutive woman beside him. "It will. I have faith in them," he remarks, glancing back at the people of Ealdor, arming themselves for battle. A part of him clings to doubt, but he refuses to let it show on his face. Their weapons, such as they can be called—rakes, hoes, cudgels, anything heavy and firm enough to land a blow—might not be castle-forged steel, but there's determination in them, a fierceness. This is their home. "So, my lady, tell me how you came to know Hunith and Merlin," he asks, leaning one shoulder against the wall.

"I am no lady, Prince Arthur. Just Anna will do," she replies with an amused smile. "Hunith used to live here, in that house you and your companions are staying in. She and I have been near to sisters. I was there when she gave birth to her son. She lived with me and my husband for a time afterwards. Merlin and William were friends for a time as they were the same age, and when she left Ealdor, I helped her get away from Essetir's soldiers. That is why I came to Camelot. I knew she would help me if she could."

"I'm sorry that my father couldn't," he says honestly.

She shakes her head, smiling up at him. "You came. So did they. That is enough." Anna glances back at the others. Father had said that taking an army beyond the ridge of Ascentir would be an act of war…but they could hardly be considered an army. Merlin and Leon, who had come with Anna on their own at first. Morgana and Guinevere, who refused to be talked out of accompanying. Lancelot, who would follow Merlin or Guinevere alike to the ends of the earth. Arthur knew he would never hear the end of it if he didn't go, but more than that, he didn't want his idiot manservant to get himself killed. And he knows that it is right to help these people, abandoned by their own king and left to fend for their own.

"Some don't think it so," he points out.

"I know my son can be…ornery. He gets it from his father," Anna accedes, knowing exactly who he is referring to, a sad ghost of a smile touching her lips at mention of her deceased husband. "But he does mean well, and he frets worse than a fishwife in his own way." She reaches up and pats his arm. "Thank you. Truly."

He smiles back. "You should get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be…tomorrow."

"You as well, Prince Arthur."

"Are you certain you're ready for this?" Arthur asks. "You've never been in a true battle before, you know that."

Merlin smiles a little as he fixes the buckle on his vambrace. It feels passing strange, to wear chainmail, to not have his knives in sheathes on his wrists. Leon wouldn't hear of him going to battle without it, however. Mail might be heavier than the padded gambeson and leather he's used to fighting in, but at least he still has movement in his arms, enough to wield his quarterstaff properly and make a proper throw with his knives. "Not particularly, no, but I am not going to turn tail now," he replies, fumbling the catch again.

"Here." Arthur takes a step to him and fixes it for him, settling the small buckle with ease of long
practice.

"Thank you." He swallows hard, running his fingertips lightly along the cool steel, missing the familiar presence of his wrist sheathes. He picks up his quarterstaff and turns it lightly in his hands, anything to distract himself. "Arthur," he says quietly, and the prince raises his eyebrows at him. "Listen…whatever happens today…I just want you to know…"

"Yes?"

"Arthur!" Merlin whispers a few vile words under his breath as Morgana appears in the doorway. "They've crossed the river," she says, voice taut.

His expression immediately turns grim, his battle-mask settling in place. "Very well. Everyone in positions. Now."

For a moment, a single, delirious moment, Arthur almost believes they might actually achieve victory over Kanen and his men. The villagers of Ealdor are full of righteous fury, protecting their homes and families, and between the six of them actually trained to fight, they can even hold some ground. But still, these men are unremorseful murderers, wearing armour and bearing steel, most of them mounted, and they outnumber the commoners.

"Move!"

A powerful body crashes into him, almost taking him near off his feet, just as a spear flies past him, just where his chest would have been had he stayed still. He very nearly runs them through, then checks himself with a strangled curse. "I thought you had left."

Will gives him a feral grin, all teeth. "So had I. Come on then, pretty boy, don't just stand there." He snatches up a sword from one of the dead men and charges into the melee.

Arthur glares at the other man's back.

The wind begins to pick up, a cool breeze blowing up against him…and then it continues to build, gathering, circling. As he watches, a whirlwind begins to form in the middle of the village, spiraling upwards until it's thrice a man's height, taking those near to it right off their feet. And standing just before it, standing unafraid, Merlin and Will. His breath catches sharply in his throat.

The wind does win them the day. Kanen's men flee from the display of magic—for it is surely magic, Arthur knows it true as his own name—and the villagers raise a short, bedraggled cheer as they retreat, scattering. Someone gleefully shouts that Kanen himself is slain, dead by Lancelot's hand. Arthur doesn't hear it over the sound of blood pounding in his ears as he strides forward, gripping his sword hilt tightly.

"Who did that?" he demands.

Merlin and Will both turn towards him, others slowly beginning to gather around them.

"Wind such as that does not appear from nothing," he snarls, jabbing the blade towards the swept-clean ground where it had formed. "I know magic when I see it, now which of you did it?"

Will's jaw gets a stubborn set, his shoulders tensing. Arthur's blood chills, however, when Merlin takes a step forward, a restraining hand on his friend's arm. "Arthur…" he says softly, so softly, and in his name alone there is a lifetime of secrecy laid bare.
"No." The word leaves him flat and empty. "You're a liar. You do not have magic."

There is more sorrow in Merlin's voice than Arthur has ever heard from anyone. "I do. I'm sorry, truly—"

"Shut up, Merlin."

"I've always had it—"

"Stop."

"I use it to protect you, I swear—"

"I said, shut up!" Arthur raises his sword arm unthinking, still running hot from battle. He's not sure what he meant to do, if anything at all. However, Leon suddenly stands before him, bringing his blade down across Arthur's hard, driving the point downwards to the churned earth. He snaps his gaze up at the other man, one he had named his First Knight, his second. "You would dare…"

"You are my prince. He is my brother," Leon replies, his voice strained.

Merlin steps forward, grasping Leon's arm. "Don't," he pleads, eyes damp. "Please, I beg of you, don't."

Leon looks pained. "Merlin…"

"Don't," he repeats, then steps around his brother to face Arthur directly. The prince still has his sword drawn and held before him, his hand working around the hilt. He takes another step forward; Arthur starts to retreat, then holds ground, jaw tight. Another small step, and the point of the sword is level with his breastbone, just touching the rings of his chainmail. It would cut clean through the mail, he knows. Merlin raises one hand, agonised by the way Arthur watches his hand as though it is a live serpent, and grasps the end of the sword in his bare hand. The edges bite into his skin, but it's hardly the first time he's shed his blood on it. Perhaps not the last. He moves the blade left and up a few inches. "My heart is here, Arthur," he says quietly.

There's a faint sound of fear from someone behind him; he doesn't turn to see who it is, holding Arthur's gaze.

His arm trembles, and he holds the sword for only another heartbeat. The prince still has his sword drawn and held before him, his hand working around the hilt. He takes another step forward; Arthur starts to retreat, then holds ground, jaw tight. Another small step, and the point of the sword is level with his breastbone, just touching the rings of his chainmail. It would cut clean through the mail, he knows. Merlin raises one hand, agonised by the way Arthur watches his hand as though it is a live serpent, and grasps the end of the sword in his bare hand. The edges bite into his skin, but it's hardly the first time he's shed his blood on it. Perhaps not the last. He moves the blade left and up a few inches. "My heart is here, Arthur," he says quietly.

"Gods be damned, Merlin!" Arthur exhales in a ragged breath, taking a step backwards, shoving both hands through his hair.

"Arthur—"

"Don't!" he shouts, then takes a shuddering breath. "Leave me be. Go…help the others. See to the wounded. Do whatever you wish, just…leave me be." He turns and strides away from them.

Merlin forces himself to breathe again, shoving away tears with the heels of his hands, then leans down and picks up the sword. Feeling numb down to his bones, he carries it back to his old home, and he sinks down to his knees on the rushes, gasping in great, ragged breaths like a man half-drowned.

A cold, damp cloth covers the back of his neck, a gentle hand applying pressure. "Slow down, or you'll make yourself faint," Gwen says as she kneels down beside him.

He chokes on a sob. "Gwen—"
She throws both arms around his neck, embracing him tightly.

Merlin shudders and wraps his arms around her, burying his face against her neck for a moment. "He'll hate me," he moans. "He does already."

"No, he doesn't. He's hurt, but he's too fond to hate you." Merlin shakes his head despite her insistence, and Gwen leans forward to press a sisterly kiss to his brow, hugging him closely to her. "Have faith, Merlin. He's too stubborn to admit it, but he cares for you."

"You aren't angry. Did you know?" he asks, trying desperately to think of anything other than Arthur and the fury, the hurt in his eyes.

When she sits back, she touches his cheek with callused fingertips, then gently lifts the half-forgotten sword from his lap. "My father's finest work," she murmurs. "He tempered the steel for a hundred days, he told me. There were times when I worked the bellows with him, keeping the flames the right colour. I gave it to you because you said you needed it to save Arthur. And the next day, you gift him with a blade that can kill the dead when nothing else could. I would know it anywhere." She turns slightly and sets it down on a bit of clean straw, then cups his face between her hands, brushing the tears off his skin. "Merlin," she murmurs.

He lets himself be held a moment longer, then draws away and scrubs his hands against his eyes, scouring away tears. "Let's go. The others will need our help. There's been damage done." He fumbles off his vambrace, then wriggles out of the chainmail, sniffling as he packs it back into their belongings, once more putting on his jacket and tying his neckerchief on. He looks more himself with it, and a small, sad smile touches Gwen's lips. He uses a bit of scrap cloth to wipe the blade clean, then leans over and gently lays it atop Arthur's bedroll, staring at it for a long moment.

When they step back outside, the rest of the villagers are cleaning up the aftermath of battle, collecting up fallen weapons, catching abandoned horses, dragging away the fallen. Lancelot is helping one of the men with the horses, calming them as they snort and stamp, unsettled by the scent of smoke and blood. Morgana is collecting the weapons and piling them in an empty hay cart, as nobody seems to want to touch them. "Where's Leon?" he asks, looking around.

Lancelot scratches at his neck. "He, ah…"

"Went to shout at Arthur," Morgana says, sparing the other knight. She comes over and takes Merlin's hands in her own, her grey-green eyes damp. "Merlin…"

"Don't," he murmurs, shaking his head, though he doesn't shake off her hold. "Please just don't. Are all the fires out? Is anyone injured?"

"A few. Nothing severe. Over there," she replies, nodding in the direction of the wounded, gathered around the well.

Merlin releases her hands and starts towards them, but Will catches his arm, tugging him to a halt. "Thank you," he says quietly, squeezing Merlin's elbow. "You didn't have to do that for them, not after what they all did to you."

He nods once. "You should go see to your mother. Ask Guinevere about the weapons. Her father's a blacksmith, she can tell you what to do with them." When Will drops his hand, he goes over to the few injured people, kneeling down to the nearest of them, a young woman pressing the wadded-up folds of her skirt against her left leg. "Here. May I see?" he asks gently; she stares at him for a long moment, then releases her skirt and extends her leg slightly. There's a tear in her skirt, a cut on her thigh underneath. Not deep, but it is bleeding, and he very much doubts that any of Kanen's men
bothered to keep their weapons clean.

Healing magic is a tricky thing. Most never know just how intricate the human body truly is until it needs to be repaired. It is why Merlin never did much studying with Gaius, as his great-uncle's knowledge of magic is specialised to healing, though he does know the basics, such as how to stop bleeding, purge infection, cool burns. He cups his hands around her wound and coaxes his magic into it, watching her eyes widen when she feels it dance over her skin. Once the blood flow's stopped, he bandages it up, then goes to the next man, holding a wounded shoulder.

He does his best to ignore the way they stare at him.

It still hurts when one greying old man snatches his bleeding arm away from Merlin's extended hand, muttering under his breath about demon spirits.

By the time he's finished healing those who would let him near, Leon's returning to the village, his face grave. Merlin straightens up, his chest tightening when he sees Arthur a few paces behind. His face is set in stone, wearing the cold, inscrutable mask that is every inch the Crown Prince of Camelot and not at all Arthur. "We should be leaving soon," he orders, not looking at Merlin at all as he addresses them. "Finish whatever you are doing now, then make ready to leave."

Morgana opens her mouth, but Merlin hastily grabs her arm, digging his nails in to quiet her. Whatever hold Arthur has on his temper is tenuous at best at the moment, sure to shatter with one wrong word, and there is little Morgana does better than rouse temper.

A hand touches his back, and he turns to see Anna standing beside him with Will at her elbow, her son glowering at Arthur. "If you want to stay...if you need to hide...my home is open to you still, little one," she murmurs, her gaze lingering on the prince. "Hunith is near to a sister to me. It would not go amiss."

"No," he replies softly. "Thank you, Anna, truly, but...I've made my choices. I don't intend to run from them now." He takes a breath and glances back at Arthur. "I'm going back to Camelot."

Arthur stares into the empty air before him without seeing, tracing his fingers along the wood grain in the tabletop. His head aches, a steady pulsing just behind his temples and at the base of his skull. Everything in him feels scraped raw and tender, as though he's been scoured through with sand, and so many emotions vie for dominance that he feels ill with it all.

The sound of knocking seems to reach him from someplace distant, and he only vaguely hears himself calling, "Enter," in reply.

However, he comes crashing back into himself, once more immersed in the revelations of the past several days and the fearsome questions he grapples with, when the door opens.

"You wanted to speak to me, my lord?" Hunith asks, her voice admirably steady. She must know he knows, and yet one couldn't tell she was afraid looking at her.

He gestures wordlessly to the other chair, and she crosses the room to sit, angling herself to face him. For a long moment, Arthur gazes at her without speaking, chin propped on his fist. Hunith, for her part, doesn't flinch beneath his inspection, only gazes back, impassive.

"Why?" he asks at last.

"You would do well to ask why the sun rises in the east." Hunith smiles a little, more of sorrow
than humour. Then the expression leaves, and she takes a deep breath, somber once more. "When I first knew that I was with child, I was terrified. I was unwed, I was alone, I had scarce more than the clothes I wore. Were it not for the kindness of Anna and Hughes, I surely wouldn't have survived. But it all paled when I first felt my son stir within me. I loved him. I thought I had felt love before, but that…. It is like comparing the light of a burning torch to the dawn itself, fiercer and hotter than anything I had ever felt before, and I knew that I would do anything for him. I had never done harm to another person in my life, and yet I would have gladly killed anyone with my own hands if they wished to harm him." She pauses, looking at her hands. Not a lady's hands; rougher, stronger, faintly scarred. "He did magic before he could turn himself over or raise his head. It was a part of him as much as breathing. It could no more be parted from him than his own blood. I was afraid again, for I had heard what was happening in Camelot. I feared it would spill over into Essetir. I feared someone would learn of his nature and turn him in. So, I taught him to hide, to never reveal himself to anyone, to keep his magic for himself. Perhaps I taught him too well."

"Why Camelot?" Arthur forces the words out, voice rough.

"There are those within this kingdom who know that your father is wrong. That magic is not evil, that it is a part of nature and should be honoured and cherished the same. The only family I had left was in Camelot. And if Merlin's magic was ever discovered…." She takes a deep breath, a faint trembling in her voice as she puts words to one of her deepest fears for the first time. "I would rather him die clean than be chained up and made to attack on command like a well-trained beast."

"What was I to you, then? A means to an end, a convenience in whatever long game you had?" Arthur demands sharply, then clenches his jaw. He hadn't meant to say that, or at least not word it as such. The question had been gnawing at him, though, burning in his chest with the need to be spoken.

The look Hunith gives him is one of utter horror. "No! Never. Gods' mercy, you were a child," she exclaims, shaking her head. "You were a child. A very sad and lonely little boy who had been deprived of his mother. And I was a mother who had been forced to give up her child. I did not get close to you for some…expedience or to try and shape your will. I did it because it soothed the hurt in my heart, and because I hoped it might do the same for you, even if you were too young to understand it." She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, resettling herself. She lifts her chin to meet his eye once more. "Is there aught else you wish to ask me?"

Arthur shakes his head, not trusting his voice, and gestures towards the door. He needs to think. He needs the past week to not have happened.

Hunith stands up, but she doesn't leave. Instead, she comes around the corner of the table to stand beside his chair; after a second's hesitation, she lifts a hand to smooth down his hair. It pains him to be still, to not lean into her hand as he had so many times before, callused, gentle mother's hands. "I loved you, Arthur. I love you still. You're the son of my heart as Merlin is the son of my body. I know you might not believe it now, but it has always been so. I am truly sorry to have given you this pain. Understand that it is part of what we hoped to avoid. Perhaps that is the folly of all parents, the desire to shield them from the unpleasantness of life. Whatever you decide, we will abide." She lowers her head and presses lips to his temple, stroking his hair once more before stepping away and leaving his chambers, closing the door quietly.

Arthur stares at the closed door for a long time.

One could be wounded in battle without feeling it. After his first true battle—one of the border provinces, a band of Mercian raiders—he had been surprised to find an arrow-gouge in his arm, a
knife gash on his thigh. He is just as surprised now to feel a prickling heat rise behind his eyes, tears making hot tracks on his skin. He presses the heels of his hands against his closed lids, a wretched sob catching in his throat.

It hurts.

It hurts more than he would ever have reckoned.

He scrubs his hands through his hair, down his neck, and his ring catches against the pin on his collar. He fumbles it off, holding it in his palm. The sunstone gleams a deep honey colour, golden rays spreading out from it. A gift, not the only one he'd been given that day. A sword a strange hue of red, lighter than any steel he'd held before, able to kill that which was already dead.

Given to him, not used against him, despite who he was. His father's son.

What was it Leon had said, or rather, shouted at him back in Ealdor? _There are families born of more than blood and seed._ Lionel and Evaine had taken Merlin in, raised him as Leon's younger brother. Hunith has loved Arthur like her son, been the mother he had lost and never known. Morgana has been the nearest thing to a friend he had for a long time, the sister he never had the chance to have. She and Merlin are friends too, full of deep and abiding fondness for each other, extended also to Guinevere and Lancelot. All of them bound to one another with love, not fear or obligation.

In Arthur's memory, he does not recall Father ever saying he loved him, and he has never presumed so, either. He doesn't recall ever telling his father what his favourite colour was, or what he would like to name his own sons one day. He surely never woke teary-eyed and fearful from nightmares and thought to visit his father's chambers, because he had never thought that his father might comfort him. He had always considered himself a political necessity. A king's heir, not a father's son.

He closes his fingers around the pin.

"This isn't how I wanted to tell him," Merlin murmurs, his face buried in his hands. "Maiden have mercy. Did you see his face? He'll kill me."

"He will not." Gaius potters about his bottles and vials, though his hands are trembling too much to do anything of use. "You are more his friend than his servant."

A harsh laugh breaks out of his throat. "Friends is an exaggeration, and executing magic-users never presented much of an issue for him," Merlin replies bitterly, recalling the gleam of sun on white-blond hair and sickly-sweet blood smell. "He's been perfectly content to stand beside his father and watch without a word since we were children."

"Uther forced him to attend those executions, even when others spoke against it," Mother says in a surprisingly sharp tone, and then her voice softens slightly. "And Arthur was not…well, afterwards."

At that, he lowers his hands and turns to look at her. "What do you mean?"

She's quiet for a moment, frowning, then says hesitantly, "He would not eat. Sometimes for days. He would not sleep until Gaius or I gave him valerian, and when he did sleep, there were times he woke screaming. Or he would get out of bed and roam the halls without waking at all." She turns her gaze up to Merlin, stern once more. "So do not think that he is unaffected by these things."
Merlin ducks his head, chastised. "Uther didn't notice?"

"He might have, if ever bothered to look." She takes a step closer to him and rests a hand atop his head, smoothing his hair. "Have faith, Merlin mine. Arthur is a better man than you think," she whispers.

A brisk knock on the door startles Merlin halfway out of his skin. Leon rises to open the door; on the other side, George stands stiff and proper as always. "Prince Arthur requests his manservant at once," he says in his crisp voice, then turns and walks off.

He forces himself to take a deep breath, then pushes to his feet. He takes two steps to the door, then turns around and throws his arms around Mother, hugging her briefly but tightly. With her herb-and-woodsmoke clinging to his clothes, he walks out and goes up to the prince's chambers.

His heart and his stomach both give a nervous little flutter when he walks in and sees the sword lying on the table in front of Arthur; in the warm light from the hearth, the steel's reddish hue is deepened to a colour almost like watered wine. He wonders if he can be killed by a sword he crafted, if its power will be broken when he dies. Without a word, Merlin approaches the table, but he doesn't sit down, staying on his feet beside the other chair.

Arthur looks up at him, his blue eyes pain-bruised and weary. "I…understand," he begins slowly, "why you couldn't tell me, Merlin, but—"

"I was going to," he blurts out, clapping his hands tightly behind his back, and Arthur gazes at him, obviously waiting for him to continue. "After Mordred, the Druid boy…when I saw what you did for him, I told myself I would, I just…I didn't know how," he says helplessly, aware of how pitiful that sounds, despite being the truth. All his life, he had been taught to keep his magic secret from everyone, except for the handful who already knew; he'd mastered the art of sidestepping questions before he had become a man. It had been different with Morgana because people who have magic feel like kin to him, a secret shared. "I was afraid. I'm sorry. I truly am."


Merlin swallows hard, forcing the words up past the thickness in his throat. "Of what you would think of me."

Solemn, he looks down at the sword between them. He reaches out and lays his fingertips against the hilt but doesn't grasp it, doesn't lift it. "Morgana once told me that one day, I will have to decide what sort of king I am going to be. One who does what's right, or one who does what his father tells him to. I do not intend to be one who execute his rescuers." He withdraws his hand and raises his gaze to Merlin's. "Swear to me, Merlin," he says softly, voice rougher…and trembling just the slightest, too. Another might not have heard it, but Merlin did. "Swear you never use your magic against Camelot. Please."

"I swear," he whispers, stepping closer, and he goes to one knee as knights do when making their oath. "By stone and sea and sky and all they encompass, in the name of the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. My magic is yours and yours alone."

"Thank you," he murmurs, eyes closed. When he looks back at Merlin, a faint glimmer of humour is back in his gaze. "Besides, as I see it, I execute you, Leon runs me through, Father executes Leon for regicide, Morgana poisons Father's supper and crowns herself Queen of all Camelot, which is, all in all, quite an unsatisfactory situation," he reasons out, ticking off on his fingers, and Merlin snorts despite himself. Arthur's mouth curls up the slightest bit. "Now, answer me one thing. Did you conjure the light I saw in the mortaeus cavern?"
"I did, but I didn't know it. Mother told me once I was well. Apparently, I was delirious and spouting all manner of things." He hadn't known he could do magic in his sleep, much less when he was ill, but apparently so.

"Mm. Dismissed, Merlin."

He gets to his feet, hesitating. "My lord, do you—?"

"Goodnight, Merlin," Arthur cuts him off, though not unkindly. A hint of a smile returns. "Do make an attempt to be here before high noon tomorrow, hm?"

Merlin presses his lips together on a grin, and he sketches a low bow. "Of course, sire."
Days of Ours and Thine

Life continues apace.

It doesn't seem that it should, and yet it does. Arthur feels as though it should have halted, held its breath, remained still for the enormity of what had happened, and yet when they return to Camelot, his duties are still waiting for him, everything continuing on as if his world hasn't been tipped out of kilter.

Merlin, for his part, doesn't mention it again and goes about his duties with a diligence that's more suited to George than him. Arthur watches him sometimes, musing on the fact that Merlin has the ability to summon a whirlwind, yet he sits and polishes Arthur's armour by hand and washes the floors on his hands and knees. He doesn't chatter on like he usually does, either, and he does, for once, keep a civil tongue.

It's maddening.

He doesn't know precisely when or how it happened, but he's come to...perhaps not enjoy, but at the very least welcome the constant noise and general impertinence that Merlin brought with him. He's never met anyone with that kind of nerve before, and it's somewhat of a relief to know there is at least one person in this castle who won't mince words and talk circles around unbecoming subjects.

"Merlin," he says, a week into their strange stalemate, when his manservant is setting out his clothes for the banquet tonight.

"Sire?"

He looks up from the crop reports Father delivered to him—it's been a good year, they'll have an excellent harvest for once—and laces his fingers together beneath his chin. "I've never had even the slightest impression you minded my temper. Do me a kindness, and don't start now."

Merlin's mouth twitches slightly. "Yes, sire."

The guest they're currently entertaining is actually from Nemeth, Rodor's kingdom. He's a minor lord, truly, but his lands are directly upon the border of Camelot, and the mountain pass that straddles the two kingdoms, their main trade route. Therefore, it is in their best interest to keep the man well-pleased.

Arthur is tasked with occupying the man's daughter, Regeane. She's a few years his junior, near six-and-ten, and he finds her exhausting to say the least. She's obviously well used to having people catering to her on account of her father's importance, a haughty, demanding little upstart. When he mentions as such, Merlin gets a grand laugh out of it, though he can't understand why. He also doesn't understand why it's his duty to occupy her and not Morgana's or honestly anyone else's. It's not as though he has anything even remotely in common with the diminutive harpy, and Father would never even entertain the idea of a marriage with the daughter of a minor lord when King Rodor has a perfectly unwed daughter of his own.

Still, at the feast, he does his best to make conversation with Regeane, though he finds the pitch of her voice grating. She turns her pert little nose up at almost everything served, and she makes a sour face at the young singer who performs for them, though Arthur quite enjoys the song.

Over the strange days of stalemate, he's forgotten, however, not to attempt to drink whenever
Merlin is standing near to him and makes the mistake of doing so. Merlin chooses that moment to lean closer and murmur lowly about Regeane's father—a corpulent and rather self-possessed man with a tendency to prattle on endlessly about the inanest of things—speculating about the nature of his relations with his wife and the likely paternity of his children. Arthur promptly gets wine in his nose laughing and goes into a sneezing fit for it, earning him no small number of bemused glances.

He does manage to learn, however, that the young Lady Regeane does enjoy hawking. Arthur isn't much keen on falconry, given that the birds never like him, eternally biting at his hands, so he does a bit of groveling to convince Morgana to accompany him on a hunting party the next day. They make a picture of merry pageantry, the ladies in their fine light gowns, lordlings in their bright summer colours; flasks and waterskins are passed back and forth, laughter and wagers exchanged. Patient cadgers carry the birds of prey, and beaters and bird-dogs forge ahead to flush quarry. Given they are in the midst of the fence months, they are not hunting deer, only birds and small game. So Arthur is, in a single word, bored.

Merlin is made to walk alongside Llamrei; he would've ridden the Hellion, but Arthur had ordered him not to, the prat. Servants aren't supposed to have their own horses, Merlin, he'd said. He carries the prince's crossbow in one arm, quarterstaff slung over his shoulder, and he glances up at the prince. "You look as though you'd rather be counting up grain stock," he remarks in a low voice so the rest of the party couldn't hear.

"I would," Arthur agrees unhesitating, proof of how miserable he is; he hates doing sums.

"You don't like Lady Regeane?"

"Mm. It's not that I don't like her, exactly, it's just…" He pauses and hums a little. "No, that's about the sum of it. I don't like her."

Merlin snickers, flicking his gaze up to the front of the party where Regeane rides alongside Morgana, curly chestnut and glossy black hair shining in the sunlight. He can't see their faces, but he can tell from the set of Morgana's shoulders and back that she's not enjoying the other girl's company, either.

He reaches down and ruffles Allegra's ears, loping alongside him. She's the only coursing hound of the lot, not exactly suited to their purpose, but Merlin's loathe to leave her behind. No sooner than he thinks of it, one of the beaters flushes a hare, sending it bursting from the long grass in great, powerful bounds propelled by the strong hind legs. Without a second's hesitation, Arthur calls, "Allegra, hunt!" After so many hunting trips with the prince, the wolfhound has learnt to respond to his voice as easily as Merlin's, and she lunes forward into the chase.

It sows utter chaos on the field.

The hare doubles and zigzags in a blind panic, streaking between the nobles and attendants with Allegra in close pursuit, a grey-furred streak, and by some stroke of luck, a covey of partridge flushes from the underbrush at the same moment. Horses shy and jostle their riders with no few exclamations of alarm. Hawks batter the air with their wings, straining at their jesses and uttering sharp cries. Everyone seems to be shouting at once: gentry, attendants, guardsmen.

Arthur laughs, a deep, full-throated laugh that Merlin's not heard from him since the boar incident nearly four years past now, laughs until he's bent double in his saddle for it, shoulders shaking. Merlin can't help but laugh as well, realising that he had done it on purpose, delighting in this small act of mischievousness. "Good girl, Allegra," the prince gasps out when the hound comes loping back to them, the hare dangling limp from her jaws. "Good girl!"
Ahead of them, Regeane gives a disdainful sniff and turns away with hauteur.

When Lord Self-Important and the oh-so-delightful Regeane finally depart, Merlin says his thanks to Maiden, Mother, and Crone alike. She truly is an awful little thing, and Arthur is wretched in her presence, as is...well, everyone. Even the unfailingly noble Lancelot had been hard-pressed to remain courteous. And yet, he's almost sorry to see her go as well, for her presence had given him and Arthur a small measure of common ground back, and it departs along with her.

Merlin carefully runs a whetstone along the edges of Arthur's sword, thinking on it. In a part of his heart, he wishes that Arthur had never come to Ealdor with him, that he'd never told the prince of his magic and had kept the secret of it. But he had, and it could not be undone. Now the knowledge of his magic lies between them, deep as a chasm, and he does not know how to bridge it.

He wonders how long they can carry on this way before something gives beneath the pressure.

Merlin comes within a hairsbreadth of gashing his hand open on the sword when the chamber door slams open and Arthur comes striding in. "Pack your things, Merlin!" the prince declares.

His stomach knots up, and he sets aside the whetstone. "Where am I going?"

"Silverpine."

"Sire..."

Arthur turns to look at him and scowls when he sees Merlin unmoved from his seat, clapping his hands briskly. "Come on, Merlin, get up, we need to leave as soon as possible!" he orders, snatching a tunic out of the wardrobe and throwing it at him.

"We?" he repeats dumbly.

The blond gives him a flat, unimpressed look. "Yes, Merlin, we. We are going to Silverpine, so collect your things and tell Leon to have our horses prepared. I had to get Father well in his cups before he gave me permission to leave, so we need to go before he sober's enough to recant," he says, striding over to take the forgotten sword from Merlin's hands and pull him up to his feet, propelling him forward with hands on his shoulders. "Hurry up, will you?"

Baffled, he does as he's told. Why Arthur would suddenly decide to make a trip to Silverpine is beyond him, or why he would take only Merlin and Leon with him. A part of him dreads to think that they're about to be quietly released from service to the crown and bid not to return, but he doesn't think Arthur would be quite so exuberant if that were so.

"What do you suppose all this is about?" Leon asks, stifling a yawn as he helps ready the horses.

"No idea. He seems...excited, though, so perhaps something good."

"Here's hoping, then."

Their...unusual departure from Camelot means they arrive in Silverpine just after moonrise the next night, much to the sleepy bemusement of the Lady Evaine; Sir Lionel wasn't there, away with the senior members of his guard to handle rumours of slavers on the border. Still, they are welcomed in gladly and shown to chambers so they might achieve at least some sleep.
The next morning, Arthur wakes on his own, early enough for it to still be cool and quiet, the household only just beginning to stir. When he glances out his window, he's surprised to see Evaine outside in the garden; dressing quickly, he makes his way out to her, walking quietly past the other rooms.

"Good morning, Lady Evaine," he greets, standing in the doorway of the kitchen, which the garden is located directly behind.

"Ah, good morning, my lord. Forgive me," she remarks, brushing her hands off on the already dirtied apron she wears over her gown before walking over to him. "I had to tend to my subjects. Behold my kingdom, your highness," Evaine declares, making a grand, sweeping gesture towards the garden. "I am mistres and absolute monarch of all I survey here, peerless queen of the earth, arbiter above all, ultimate judge of who lives and who dies." All this, she intones in an exaggeratedly solemn voice, but when he glances at her, the stern expression cracks into a broad smile, the same one that her son inherited. She brushes her hands off again, though it does little good. "Did you need to speak to me, my lord?"

Something in her tone is quietly understanding, and he arches an eyebrow at her. "Do you know what I mean to speak of?"

She gives a soft, amused sound. "Leon writes to me often. I know a great many things."

Arthur sighs and looks out at the garden, shaking his head slightly. "Then I envy you, my lady, for I feel as though I know nothing at all," he admits in a low voice.

"Mm. Is that why you've come here so suddenly, then? To relearn in a new light?"

"I hope to." People are most comfortable on their own ground than another's. He would sooner be outnumbered by an enemy within Camelot's borders than have the greater numbers outside them. The damage done between himself, Leon, and Merlin can be repaired, or at least so he hopes, but it will be easier healed here, surrounded by their own. If it leaves him vulnerable, then so be it. "I just...I don't know how to."

Evaine is quiet a moment, leaning over to pluck an unsightly leaf from one of the plants, rolling it between two fingers. He can smell the heady fragrance of it. Basil. "How old are you, my lord?"

"I—one-and-twenty," he answers, taken aback by the question.

"Then there you have the answer," she announces. When he stares at her in blank puzzlement, she smiles again. "You're young. Go be young. Have fun as young men do. It is the Prince who makes them nervous, so try instead to be Arthur for a time. That is who they trust, who they have faith in. Remind them of it, and only know..." She opens her hand and shakes her head, contemplating the dirtied lines on her palm. "Only know."

"Know what?"

"Yourself, my lord. It's a very good place to start."

Arthur stares out at the garden for a time, silent as he turns her words over in his head. To hear it put as such...it sounds so simple, yet he's almost certain it's not. "You have a lovely garden, my lady," he says at last, unable to think of aught else to say.

"Thank you. I have never been able to embroider, I've never gone hunting, and I have a mild fear of horses as well, no matter how illogical it might seem. However, I have always enjoyed this task, no matter that some might look down on it, and I am lucky to have a husband who does not mind if I
sometimes come to bed with dirt beneath my nails." She looks at him sideways, a smile playing about her lips once more. "Would you like to help me collect some for supper? Hilde will be making pork roast, and I know what herbs she needs. This is the best time of day for them, after the dew's dried and before they lose their savour to the sun."

"On one condition," he replies, and she arches her eyebrows. "If I do, will you call me Arthur?"

Evaine chuckles and reaches into the deep pocket of her apron, taking out a pair of shears; she presses them into his hand. "Here. Rosemary, basil, thyme, and sage. We'll need a sufficiency of them to stuff the roast."

"How much is a sufficiency?" he asks.

"A sufficient amount, of course." She gives him a perfectly mild look, then chuckles. "Go on. Think on what I've said and meet the rest of my friends, for by learning them and their uses, one can turn even a peasant's fare into a delight fit to charm princes and kings alike. Don't be afraid to cut anything, either, for nothing noxious grows in my garden."

He wanders out into the garden, looking about with no small bit of wonder. Each type of herb is contained in carefully separated sections, the plants all standing at attention beneath the gentle morning sun. He could see from the occasional bare patch of soil between the herb plants that no weed should dare raise its head in here. Holding the shears in hand, he goes to the task of collecting the herbs she'd listed; he has never seen the plants themselves whole and intact, but he knows enough of their taste and scent to recognise them anyways.

When he returns to the kitchens, the sun has climbed a fair measure, and Evaine is up to her elbows in bread dough, forming it into loaves alongside an older woman he can only assume is Hilde, the cook. He sets the herbs out on a clear bit of table space. Once she'd finished with the dough, Evaine steps over to examine his selections. "Basil. Regular as well as cinnamon and clove. You noticed the difference?"

"I did. Forgive me if I cut too much, I don't want it to go to waste."

"No, of course not. The cinnamon and clove will do well for baked apples we'll have for dessert tonight. Have you ever had baked apples stuffed with sweet bread?" she asks, and he shakes his head. Evaine chuckles. "You'll never forget it, then. Now let's see what else. Clary sage, hm. Interesting choice. Long-stemmed thyme. Ah, a touch of rue. A hint of bitterness to take the sweetness out of a wine sauce. Well done. We'll see if any of it goes amiss at supper tonight."

Arthur's instantly alarmed. "You're going to trust my choices?"

"Of course. How else does one learn?" She chuckles at the look on his face and pats his arm. "Have no fear, I shan't let you poison us. I have it from here, and I shan't make you my scullion. Why don't you go find the boys? Like as not, they'll be in the east courtyard this time of morning. It's where the guardsmen like to spar."

"Thank you, my lady." He leaves the kitchen, makes his way towards the east courtyard, and sure enough, as he draws closer, he can hear the familiar sounds of sparring—the clatter of staves, the ring of swords, the swearing and shouting of men. The east courtyard, a broad stretch of open grass, has been made into a kind of small training ring. Just as Evaine said, Merlin and Leon are standing off to one side, watching two of the guardsmen spar with oak staves, pointing out their different forms.

"Seven hells, what a woman!" Arthur exclaims aloud, staring at another of the observers. "Nobody
told me you grow giantesses here as well as pine trees."

The woman in question is unusually tall, standing of even height with Leon, and she's built like an ox as well, broad and well-muscled. Hearing Arthur's words, she straightens up and turns to face him with a laugh. "Well met, highness. My name is Mhera. I'm the lieutenant of the Silverpine guard." At the look of shock on his face, she props her hands on her hips. "What's the matter, my lord? Not used to seeing a woman doing something other than gossiping and embroidering?"

"Sir Lionel allows women in his guard?" Arthur asks, stepping closer. He has to tilt his chin up slightly to meet her eye.

"Aye. Anyone who can wield a sword and throw a spear is welcome to join. Lord de Galis is wiser than some. Do I frighten you, highness?"

He smiles, a sharp baring of teeth. "Not at all."

Mhera chuckles as she gazes down at him. "Are you certain of that? I find most men are afraid of a woman who can fight better than they can. And you...you're prettier than both my sisters. Perhaps you should wear the gown and I the mail."

"Do you give challenge?"

She shrugs her broad shoulders. "If you aren't afraid to lose to me, of course."

The Prince of Camelot might have been. Arthur wasn't. "Not at all."

Mhera grins broadly, tossing her mane of red hair. "Very well, then. A challenge it is. A wrestling bout. Two falls out of three, victor claims a prize from the other. Do you accept?" She extends one hand.

Arthur grasps her arm, squeezing tight; it makes him grin all the more when she tightens her own grip in return. "I do."

Quickly, the other guardsmen begin to make space in the courtyard, moving aside the training weapons until there's a decent amount of open space. They all gather around the edges of the courtyard, gleefully trading jests and bets amongst one another. Merlin climbs up to sit on top of stacked cider barrels repurposed for targets to have the best view.

"Do you think Arthur will win?" Leon muses, climbing up to sit beside him, though from the smile he sports, he has little faith in his prince.

"Maybe one bout. Not all three," Merlin replies happily. If it had been a match of swordsmanship, then Arthur would've won, but not wrestling. Mhera had taken Leon in wrestling bouts when they were younger, and he'd never bested her, neither had any of the other guards or young men who thought to test her.

"Simple rules," Mhera says. "Pinned to a count of three or yielding ends the bout. Two falls out of three wins it. Stand ready?"

"Ready."

No sooner than the word leaves his mouth, Mhera charges him, shoulder forward, tackling Arthur to the ground. He hadn't expected her to be so brash, and the impact coupled with her full weight knocks the wind from him. The moment of shock gives Mhera the chance to straddle his chest, pinning his arms with her legs and bracing a forearm across his throat. Merlin almost pities the
prince, watching him struggle under her, but finds that his mirth far outweighs any sympathy. They all chant the count aloud; the moment they call three, she releases him and backs off. Arthur rolls to his feet, rubbing at his throat. "One for me," she chuckles.

The second bout goes more slowly. She isn't fool enough to try the same charge twice, and if he had underestimated her before, he surely didn't now. The two circle each other for a span of heartbeats, and then they're both in motion, grappling at each other roughly, seeking purchase, trying to force the other off-balance. Abruptly, Arthur gives ground, backing up a broad pace, and Mhera staggers from the sudden lack of resistance. He takes the advantage to get behind her and hook an arm around her neck. Mhera tries to pry his arm away, throwing her weight back against him; he holds fast, squeezing tighter. She drops her hand and pats his thigh. Arthur releases her, getting to his feet. "One to me," he says breathlessly.

The third bout is almost as swift as the first. Having better measure of each other, neither play any games nor try to test each other again. Mhera tackles Arthur down rough, but ready for it this time, he doesn't give her the chance to pin him. The two roll across the ground, grappling roughly for the upper hand as the onlookers cheer and shout encouragements. For a brief second, it almost seems as though Arthur has her pinned, but then she twists, breaking his grip. Mhera rolls over him hard and manages to get her legs around Arthur's upper body, pinning one of his arms and trapping the other above his head. The muscles in her thighs tighten as she squeezes hard, compressing the air from his lungs. Arthur's face turns a few interesting colours, and he does some fruitless struggling before finally giving in, patting her leg. Mhera laughs as she releases him, pushing him away and rolling to her feet. "Well, my lord, that's my two out of three falls."

"Indeed," Arthur wheezes, rubbing his chest. She extends an arm to him, and he grasps her hand, letting her pull him up. "Very well done. What would you have as a prize from me, then?" he asks with surprising good grace. If Merlin didn't know any better, he'd even say the prince was quietly delighted.

"Hm." Mhera cocks her head, thinking on it for a moment. Then, she steps forward and catches him by the shoulders, ducking down to kiss him full on the mouth. "There! A prize for you as well as me, my lord!" she exclaims, eliciting a round of laughter from the observers.

"Enjoying yourself, sire?" Merlin asks as the prince walks over to them.

"Surprisingly yes," Arthur laughs and makes the attempt at dusting his clothes off, though his attire is well beyond help by now, smeared with grass and dirt. Grinning, he turns and looks at the brothers. "Well then, what shall we do?"

Arthur can count on the fingers of one hand how many times in his life he has given himself leave to well and truly have fun. He's always been painfully aware of his responsibilities to Camelot, since he was old enough to comprehend the meaning of the word. The summer he had first come to Silverpine had been done a-purpose, meant to begin building connections to his future knights. This, however, is different. This is him needing to be able to breathe, just a little, relieve this weighted sensation that's been laying over him since Ealdor.

As if knowing it, Leon and Merlin give no quarter, and the three of them run roughshod over the countryside. There's no harm found in it, merely an excess of high-spirited exuberance. And why not? Evaine has the right of it. He's one-and-twenty, a young man. Is he always to be a prince, never himself? He finds his relief in Silverpine, and he also finds a surprising streak of wildness in Leon, the most dignified of his knights. In Merlin it's scarce a surprise, but to see it unleashed is another thing.
They go exploring caverns, scaling crags, and swimming in the lakes. Silverpine might not be the largest of holdings, but it seems to expand inward unto itself, running deep rather than wide. There are cave systems that have never been charted and stretches of forest and mountain that have never been explored. Within the boundaries of Silverpine, they seek to outwit the border guard; outside it, they devise ways to outwit their own men-at-arms, running off on their own. It's hardly as if they are in danger here, where scarce anyone recognises him, and he delights in the freedom of it. Saddling their horses, they ride out to the very borders of Silverpine and go stealing into the neighbouring lord's orchards, making off with saddlebags full of stolen summer apples and a small cask from one of the distilleries. Not cider, Leon announces gleefully when they breach it, but something called applejack. Arthur's never had it before, but he finds it wonderful.

And also quite strong.

They drink themselves sodden and sleep where they fall, which happens to be in the Lady Evaine's garden. None of them quite recall arriving there. Sir Lionel wakes them the next morning with a bucket of water drawn from the well and employs the assistance of Mhera to drag them out to the courtyard and dunk them in the fountain, fed by snowmelt from the mountains, clean and icy-cold, until declared passing sober.

Apparently, staging small raids upon neighbouring estates is a common pastime in Brechfa. It's largely done by young men like themselves, and the thefts are usually a few sheep or goats, or small casks of cider and perry, small things that give no cause for blood-feud. Arthur finds it splendid fun and wishes that more nobles would share in the practice instead of bringing every petty dispute to the crown.

A storm moves in, dousing them in rain for three days unending, swelling the lakes and rivers and curbing their adventures, but only slightly. Sir Lionel, he discovers, prides himself not only on his skill with weaponry but on ingenuity as well, and Evaine is firmly of the belief that a sharp mind outweighs a sharp sword. Arthur is far too old to sit through lessons and sums again, but they had different kinds of studies here.

His favourite is the blindfold game. They would begin at the library, don blindfolds, and wander through the manor house for an hour, making what observations they can without use of their sight. Merlin and Leon have him at disadvantage, given they grew up in the manor and have long since memorized its layout, but he finds it enjoyable either way. The first time they play, he feels somewhat foolish wandering about with hands outstretched, but the first time he tries not to, he bloodies his nose by walking face-first into a wall. He wonders if they might find a way to play it in the castle, too. He knows his way around the castle with ease, but he's never attempted it blindfolded.

By the time they're due to leave again, Arthur is genuinely grieved to go, but he also feels more at ease than he has in months, settled more securely in himself. The part of him that had ached since Ealdor no longer pains him so. The hurdle he had built in his mind is nowhere near as high or vast as he'd imagined it to be, and the terrible uncertainty ceases to plague him. Magic might not sit well with him yet...but he doesn't see how someone who gets laughing drunk off a thimbleful of applejack and braids crowns of pine needles and flowers for small children can possibly be evil.

"Where's that brother of yours gone off to?" he asks the day before they intend to leave.

"Ah, he'll be in the wood, sire." Leon turns and points in the direction of the treeline. "Just go straight on from here, you'll come to a clearing with a yew tree. He always goes there before leaving."

Arthur heads out in the direction Leon had pointed.
The pine forests give the estate its name, growing tall and close. There's little undergrowth, as not much sun can penetrate the heavy canopy of dense needles, and the air is thick with the scent of resin. He can see the clearing Leon had spoken of, and sure enough, there is a great white yew tree growing in the middle of it. There are several paces of open space around it on all sides, as if the rest of the forest is giving it a respectful berth. "Merlin?" he calls, walking up to the tree, not seeing his manservant anywhere about.

Something semi-hard and damp thumps off the top of his head. "Ow!" he yelps, taking a step back. He tilts his head up, peering into the branches, and swears aloud when he sees Merlin perched high up in the branches, grinning hugely. "You're not funny," he says, looking down at what'd hit him: an apple core.

"According to you, sire," Merlin counters, swinging his feet in empty air. "Would you like to come up?"

"Uhm…" Arthur eyes up the branches doubtfully.

Merlin gives him an unimpressed look. "You can't tell me you've never climbed a tree before."

"I have!" Only twice, and not since he was a child, but he has, damn it. Galled, he steps around to one of the lower branches and starts climbing. This certainly isn't any of the well-maintained, trimmed trees in the castle gardens, but the thick, gnarled branches are capable of supporting his full weight at least, creaking only slightly when he steps on them. He makes the mistake, however, of looking down. "This is as high as I'm going," he declares, straddling a thick branch and putting his back against the trunk, grasping the limbs tightly. There's higher walltops in Camelot, certainly, but walltops are not so easily fallen off of, and there certainly isn't a dense tangle of sharp wooden branches underneath them ready to impale the unlucky faller.

Chortling, Merlin drops down to sit on a branch almost level with him. "Apple?" he offers, holding one out. "It's one of the ones we stole."

"Sure." He takes a bite, juice running down his chin, and leans his head back against the bark, looking out at the forest through the yew branches. "What are you doing out here?" he wonders.

"I was giving tribute. Smell the brandy?"

Arthur had smelled perry brandy, but he had assumed that the fool was out here getting drunk again. "Tribute. To whom?"

"The Old Ones."

"Old Ones," he repeats, taking another bite of the apple.

Merlin offers a hint of a smile, running his hand along the bark. "Yes, Arthur. I'm a creature of the Old Religion," he reminds gently; it's the first time they've directly spoken of the subject of magic their return from Ealdor. It doesn't hurt as much as Arthur thought it might. "I give tribute to them, as their power is my power. They showed me how to make your sword, you know."

He hadn't known. "Truly? How did you do it, then?"

Abruptly, Merlin seems to grow somewhat cagey, shifting his weight on his perch. "It's a… complicated process. Magic of such power is very intricate."

He doesn't quite meet Arthur's eye when he says it, which immediately makes him suspicious. He narrows his gaze at the younger man. "Simplify it for me. What did you do?"
Merlin hesitates again, but Arthur flicks a piece of bark at him, silently demanding an answer. "The wraith was a creature of death. A weapon powerful enough to defeat it needed to be imbued with the force of life," he begins, rolling an apple between his palms. "And that kind of power requires...sacrifice to achieve."

The word sends a chill down his spine, and in the back of his mind, he hears an echo of his father's voice speaking of magic's corrupting force, nightmare tales of maidens and children slaughtered in exchange for power. "Sacrifice. What manner of sacrifice?"

As though somehow knowing what Arthur is thinking, Merlin scowls at him. "Not anything like what you are thinking of. A sacrifice of life, not death. In simplest terms, blood. A great deal of blood, as it is one of the cornerstones of life. I had to make an offering of blood, and I quenched the blade in it. That's what gives it its power."

Arthur thinks on the strange ripples in the steel and the reddish cast of the metal. "Whose blood did you use for it?" he asks; Merlin's gaze slides away from his again. "Merlin. Tell me," he orders sharply. He couldn't imagine Merlin ever asking Leon to do such a thing, even if it wouldn't kill him. In fact, he can't imagine Merlin asking anyone to do such a thing. He stares at the younger man. "Did you...Merlin, did you let your own blood?" he asks in horror, then notices that his manservant is rubbing at his left arm, and he snatches at Merlin's wrist, yanking the arm towards him and shoving up his sleeve. Running up the inside of Merlin's forearm is a pink scar, almost perfectly straight. A clean cut, narrow too, made by something small. Like a throwing knife. "Gods' mercy, what the hell were you thinking?"

Merlin yanks his arm back with a scowl. "I wasn't about to ask someone else!" he snaps, straightening out his sleeve. "Besides, the blood of a sorcerer carries power of its own."

"So you bled yourself like a stuck pig?" Arthur demands. "Are you entirely mad? You could have very well killed yourself!"

"My mother and my uncle are physicians employed by the King. I know how to cut into the body without causing permanent damage. Besides, the spell wouldn't have worked if I died, now would it?"

"That is hardly the point," Arthur grumbles, shifting his weight on the branch. "Just...don't do it again, alright?"

"I have no intention to, believe me. Arthur." He turns his gaze up to the younger man. "I couldn't tell you before, but the sword holds a magic of its own. In the wrong hands, it has the power to do great evil. I forged it for you and you alone. Don't let anyone else wield it. Please."

"Could you not simply destroy it, if you created it?"

"No. What is made cannot be unmade. But I'll conjure it into the deepest pit of the ocean before I see it used wrongly. Will you give me your word that you'll keep it safe?" Merlin asks.

Arthur recalls the way the wraith had screeched when he ran it through, the smoke and the smell of the grave. "My word," he agrees. "I'll not let another wield it."

"Thank you. Did you need something?"

"Huh?"

Merlin gestures around them. "You came out here looking for me, and you usually only ever bother looking for me when you need me to be your dogsbody."
Arthur rolls his eyes. "No, I was coming to tell you that we're leaving tomorrow and to make ready," he replies.

"Oh, that I knew. I have my things packed."

"Mine aren't."

"Ah."

Chuckling, he tosses the apple core at the other man's face. "Come on, then. Let's go inside."

Merlin jumps down from the tree with ease, landing neatly on his feet as a cat might. Arthur doesn't quite manage it so gracefully, swearing as twigs catch at his clothes and hair, and he doesn't so much as drop down as he does fall. But he manages, to a great deal of snickering. "Shut up, Merlin," he grumbles, shoving against his shoulder. As they walk back towards the manor house, Arthur glances out towards the glimmering lake. "Remember the last time we were here, you and I?"

"I do."

He chuckles. "What was it you called me? A…'mewling little princeling.'"

Merlin glances at him sideways. "And do you remember what you called me?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"You're…apologising? For something you said to me near ten years past?" The young man snorts. "Well, at least now I know that you are actually capable of speaking the words without your tongue shriveling and your teeth falling out, so I'll accept it."

"Good. And I forgive you as well."

"For what, exactly?"

Arthur turns back his sleeve and holds up his left arm. It's faded over the years, of course, but when he tilts his arm, a jagged double-crescent mark is visible on his inner arm, easier seen in the sunlight.

"Maiden have mercy." Merlin puts a hand over his face, the tips of his ears turning bright red. "I didn't bite you that hard!"

"Oh, yes, you did! It itched, too. I was certain you'd given me some horrible disease, you know! I was afraid Gaius would have to bleed me with leeches or something else wretched."

"Shut up, you ass, I did not have a disease, and I never have!"

"So you say!"
Trial of the Heart

Merlin is beginning to wonder if he should be concerned by Arthur's occupation with hunting. He would have imagined that with as many duties a prince had that Arthur would be too busy to bother. Apparently not.

He follows along after Arthur and two of his courtier friends—he doesn't recall their names—carrying a game bag over one shoulder, wishing that he was just about anywhere else at the moment. He'd even take washing the prince's malodorous socks over this, especially since it's simply them going around on foot. No horses, no hounds. So he doesn't even have Allegra to keep him company, and he's the one left carrying everything.

He's not even certain what the hell it is they're hunting, just that he is about this close to cracking Arthur upside his stupid golden head with the quarterstaff, and his feet hurt. There's an uncomfortable prickling up his back, too, a nervous sort of sensation that something is not right. He can't understand what it is, though.

Merlin stares at Arthur's broad back as he stops; just ahead of them, he can hear something moving through the undergrowth. From the sound of it, he would say it's a deer, but it sounds far too big. A hart, perhaps? The prince gestures to the other two, and they both creep off to the left, no doubt going to circle around and surround it. He steps closer when Arthur waves at him. "Merlin, we are going to surround it. Now go in there and flush it out," he whispers.

"Me? Do you even know what it is?"

"No, we do not. That's what makes it fun."

Narrowing his eyes, he hisses, "You've just said yourself you don't know what it is. What if it is something dangerous?"

Arthur gives him the crooked grin that Merlin both hates and loves to see in equal turn, depending on the situation. He reaches over with his free hand and pushes the quarterstaff off Merlin's shoulder, forcing him to snatch at it before it falls. "You're armed. Go on, then."

Whispering a string of curses under his breath, he sets down the game bag—if he has to run for it, he doesn't want to have its weight—and starts forward into the glade, holding his quarterstaff firm in hand. If it is anything more dangerous than a particularly large hart, then Prince Prat will be getting cold bathwater for the next week, he decides.

Merlin peers forward and stops directly. The quarterstaff slips from his numb fingers with a muffled thump.

A unicorn stands in the glade before him. It's the purest white he's ever seen, right down to its hooves, with a crystalline spire of horn jutting from its head, spiraled through with threads of gold. Its eyes, though, are black, deep and wise and endless, gazing at him with such infinite compassion. He feels unworthy to even stand before it, even though his very body seems to hum with light in its presence, wanting to fall to his knees and simply give thanks for being allowed to see something so precious. He takes a step forward, one hand lifting, and it snorts quietly, blowing warm air across his palm. His fingers touch the velvety nose; he could very well weep for the sheer joy of it, gasping softly. And then he feels that sickly prickle crawl up his spine again, and he remembers Arthur and the courtiers and their crossbows.
"Go," he whispers. "Please go. They'll kill you."

The unicorn only snorts again, stamping one hoof on the leaf mat.

"Go, I beg of you," he implores, tears prickling at his eyes; it stares at him with that endless gaze. Trust me, the dark eyes say. A rustle of cloth, the creak of a bowstring. "Arthur, don't!"

He feels the bolt as surely as it had punctured his own side, the quarrel striking clean between its ribs into its lungs, and his own cry echoes the unicorn's scream as it falls to the ground. Blood spreads across the gleaming white coat, and he can feel that overwhelmingly warm and love and light seeping away with it, dripping out between his ribs like a handful of water through his fingers. Merlin falls to his knees, the impact jolting up his legs, and he strokes a hand over its head, tears blurring his vision. "I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm so very sorry."

One last huff of warm breath, then the last of its life drains away. The ground seems to open up beneath him, a cold void breaking all around. All the air is drawn from his lungs in an instant, snatched clean away, and everything in him curls up in agony at the loss of such goodness.

"Ha! A unicorn!" Arthur declares gleefully as he bounds down the slope into the glade, hoisting his crossbow. He seems so damnably happy.

Merlin could throttle him with his bare hands.

"Arthur...what have you done?"

Morgana gasps aloud, startling so roughly she knocks a book off the edge of the table, nearly sending her inkwell and journal over with it.

"My lady?" Gwen asks, looking up in surprise. "Are you alright?"

"I...yes, I-I'm fine," she replies, though it feels as though she's just taken a blow, cold all over. She sinks down into her chair, one hand pressed to her side. What was that?

Arthur makes him carry the unicorn horn to present to the King. Of course. He's almost of a mind to stab the foolish prat with it.

He tries to beg off, as even looking at it makes him feel sick and cold all over again, but Arthur only laughs and tells him to stop being such a girl's petticoat, Merlin. So, standing in the council chamber before Uther, Merlin holds the cushion away from him as best he can without being obvious, his jaw clenched so hard that his temples are throbbing, sure he'll end up being sick if he opens his mouth even the slightest bit. He doesn't dare lift his gaze, either, lest the King see the seething fury that's currently eating away at him.

When Gaius mentions the legend of misfortune bound to whoever kills a unicorn, Merlin fervently wishes it to be true. Perhaps it'll serve to teach Arthur the lesson of not harming innocent creatures that do him no harm for the sake of sport. He's always believed that Arthur is in dire need of a good lashing; perhaps a bitter taste of adversity will serve him the same.

As soon as he can, he hands it off to another servant and all but bolts from the council chamber, fleeing before Arthur has the chance to get even so much as a word out. He doesn't rightfully give a damn if the royal ass puts him the stocks or even the dungeons, he can't stand to be in the fool's
presence just now. So he walks away, not much aiming to go anywhere, just away. It's a very large castle. Excellent for avoiding people.

He's so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he doesn't even notice Morgana approaching him until she seizes his arm hard, nails biting through his sleeve. He jerks his gaze up in surprise. Morgana is pale and wide-eyed in a way he hasn't seen her since she's learned of her visions and begun meditation to control them. "Is it true?" she demands in a hoarse whisper, shaking his arm a little as she stares at him. Her eyes are almost entirely green and overbright, smudged kohl giving her a drawn, almost spectral appearance. "Did Arthur truly kill a unicorn?"

"Yes," he replies, tasting bile. "How did you…?"

She releases his arm and takes a small step back, breath coming shallow and tremulous. One hand is pressed to her right side, he notices, clutched under her arm, tight over her ribcage. Right where the bolt had struck the unicorn, where he'd felt a sharp echo of pain himself. He had thought it was his own imagination. "I had a dream," she whispers, shaking her head. "I didn't know what it meant, I couldn't make sense of it. I was going to tell you when you returned from the hunt today, but...I think this is what the warning was about."

Merlin touches her arm, the one she has clutched around her middle. "Did you feel it?"
murmurs.

She stares at him for a moment, then nods shakily. "As though I had taken the bolt in my own flesh."

He lets out a slow breath, taking a step back to shove a hand through his hair. When he turns back, she's still staring at him with fever-bright eyes, trembling slightly. Merlin reaches out and lays his fingertips feather-light on her arm; if they hadn't been standing in the middle of an open corridor, he would have embraced her. "I will be to your chambers later, and you may tell me what you've dreamed. Perhaps we can still make sense of it," he says quietly.

Morgana nods, but her mouth trembles slightly. She gives voice to the dark thought that's been coiled in the back of his head since the crossbow sang. "Something terrible is coming, isn't it?" she whispers.

Merlin doesn't answer her aloud, but he can feel the truth of it.

Something terrible indeed.

"Already we've caught seven looters attempting to break into the grain stock," Father says with disdain, shaking his head. "They're to be executed on the morrow. I want you to keep the stores well-guarded, understand?"

"Yes, Father." Arthur thinks that execution is perhaps taking punishment a touch too far, but he's wise enough to not argue it now. The King is already in a foul mood from news of the wells going dry and the crop dying. He knows very well not to test his father's patience whenever sorcery is involved; disturbingly, an image of Merlin being led to the block drifts across his mind, and he hastily shoves it away, focusing on his dinner.

Across the table, Morgana seems bound and determined to try and flay him alive with her gaze alone. She's not said a word the entire meal, and her face is set in a murderous expression.

It's not the first time he's ever earned that look from her, though usually he knows what he's done to
"Like what?" He could have stropped a knife on her tone.

"Like you wish to carve me up and eat my liver."

Morgana's mouth curls slightly, though her gaze is still cold enough to freeze water. "Oh, I would very much enjoy carving you up, but I would not feed the least piece of you to even Celeste." With that, she pushes back from the table and stands. "Do excuse me, my lord, I've quite lost my appetite," she says frostily, striding out of the hall.

Arthur watches her go in bafflement, then exchanges a glance with Father, who seems in turn amused and confused himself. First Merlin, and now her. What has he done to either of them? With a shrug, he reaches over and draws her half-eaten plate towards him; if there's to be food shortage, he'll not let it go to waste.

No matter what their age, women are a mystery.

"Gréot gecymen, lecan. Gecymen gé drýe wæter," Merlin incants over the bucket of sand. Again, his magic surges up…and again, it breaks against some unseen cliffside. He scowls, propping his chin in his palm as he glowers at the sand. "I know that Arthur is an ass, but you could at least accede some ground," he mutters. Apparently, the unicorn's curse is no mere myth, but he would have thought that it would only affect Arthur. Then again, unicorns were part of the magic of the land. If one was slain, then why should the land not suffer as well, and not merely the one who had done the slaying?

"Have you no luck?" Leon prompts, peering into the library.

"None. Whatever magic this is, it is greater than mine." He gestures to the precarious stack of books beside him as proof.

The curly-haired man smiles a little as he steps in, coming to sit down in another chair. "Greater than yours, truly?" he asks.

Merlin gives a half-hearted shove against one shoulder. "Whilst I appreciate your faith in my abilities, there are magics I cannot undo," he replies, reaching down to run the sand through his fingers yet again, wishing he could just understand. It hardly seems fair to him that the entire kingdom should suffer for the folly of one man, prince or no, but he's long since given up on trying to fully comprehend the will of the Old Ones and the preservation of the balance. It's not something for mortal minds to grasp, he believes. "Not yet, anyways. And the magic of the unicorns is…very raw. Primal. It's a part of nature, and trying to force it could very well tip the balance."

"Which would be even worse, I take it?"

"Oh, absolutely." He heaves an enormous sigh and scrubs a hand through his hair. "Whatever this is, Arthur brought it upon us, so it must be his to undo."

Leon shakes his head. "It is hard to believe that Arthur's truly brought suffering to his people."

"Yes, well, that is what will happen when you're an arrogant fool who gives no thought for any but
"yourself," Merlin snaps back, kicking the side of the bucket. At Leon's raised eyebrows, he sighs and slumps back in his chair, repentant. "He didn't do it a-purpose, I know. He's just...so damnably vexing sometimes. Anhora tried to tell him last night in the vaults, but he doesn't believe himself at fault. I suppose I'll have to try and talk sense to him, but we both know how well *that* is going to be received."

"Indeed," Leon chuckles. "But you must at least make the attempt."

Merlin grumbles wordlessly, hands pressed over his eyes. "Yes, yes, I know. That does not mean he'll listen to me."

Even if the prince does *know* about Merlin's magic, he does not always wish to *hear* of it. Arthur still gets tense whenever the subject is brought up to him, and when Merlin once tried to explain a feat of magic to him, Arthur had cut him off and ordered him off to run errands. Merlin understands that twenty years of fearing magic is not something to be unlearned in short order, so he does try not to press, hurt though he is. But now it seems he will have to press, and a great deal as well, because he does not believe Anhora lied to them.

Whatever ill-fortune that the unicorn's death has brought upon Camelot, it is Arthur's doing.

Merlin's eyes open, staring up at the ceiling. A smile plays at his lips.

Perhaps there *is* something he can do to help.

"Do you really believe that the King will stop distributing rations?" Gwen asks in an undertone as they walk through the courtyard, watching the people queuing up to receive their share.

Morgana shakes her head slightly, but in her heart, she knows he would. "I don't know. Let us hope that a solution has been found before then." Summoning a smile, she links her arm with Gwen's. "Let's talk of something other than food, shall we? Perhaps you can tell me somewhat about the dashing Sir Lancelot?" she suggests, and the other woman flushes deeply, ducking her head.

Abruptly, Merlin comes darting around a corner, almost falling over himself, and hurries up to them, grinning broadly. "Good morning, Gwen, Morgana. I have something to tell you."

"You also have an excellent sense of timing," Gwen says gratefully. "What is it?"

Glancing about, he leans closer and lower his voice, "It's to do with the drought. It's caused by magic. I have an idea, but I will need your help, my lady," he says with a grin, and Morgana narrows her eyes at him even as she smiles. "Come with me."

They both follow him to the north wing of the castle, scarce used, and he leads them to a staircase of one of the towers. "Just up here. Gwen, would you wait here and let us know if anyone comes?" Merlin asks.

"Of course. Just don't be long, my lady, you have a lunch with the Duchess of Powys to attend."

"It shan't take long," Merlin reassures, then starts climbing the stairs. Holding her skirts, Morgana follows him, up and up and up, until at last they come to a closed door at the very top. He waves a hand over the lock, and it springs open with a whine of rust, hinges squealing protest after no doubt years of disuse. He steps in and holds the door open for her to enter.

Morgana looks around the small, empty room, wondering when anyone had been up here last.
There are cobwebs clinging to the rafters and in the corners of the room, a few broken pieces of furniture left abandoned, worn down by exposure to the elements. The roof gapes open, a large hole punched clean through, the edges of the stone blackened as though burnt somehow. Perhaps some lucky stroke of lightning. Through the narrow window, she can see far beyond the city to the outlying woods and beyond, blurring into green smudges on the horizon. "What magic can you possibly hope to work here that will help lift the curse?"

"Not lift it, but perhaps alleviate its effects. I had the thought, if I cannot turn the sand back into water, then perhaps I can bring the water to Camelot instead," he explains, pointing upwards through the open roof.

"Rain," Morgana understands, grinning broadly. "You mean to bring the rains. Merlin, that is brilliant. Can it be done?"

"It can, but I will need your help. Your magic is closer to the element of water, and this is not something easily done." Merlin stares up at the blue sky, the small, innocuous white clouds dotting the vast expanse, hands propped on his hips.

"Have you done it before?" she wonders.

He huffs. "I tried once, when I was younger. Middle of a dry spell, hot as seven hells, and I wanted nothing more than for it to rain, just a little bit."

"What happened?"

Merlin chuckles, ducking his head. "I made the well overflow and flooded the courtyard. Don't know how I did it exactly, but I did," he laughs, then turns towards her. "I'll guide the spell. I just need to borrow some of your strength to cast it true. Clear your mind, the way I showed you, and say the words with me. Ready?"

She nods and steps forward.

He holds out both hands before him, palm up, and she rests her hands atop his, feeling the bright, tingling surge of magic wash against her skin. She breathes deep and steady as she did when meditating, gathering herself into her centre, pushing aside all other thought like sweeping dust from the floor. Merlin's thoughts brush along hers feather-light, imprinting the spell bright into her mind, and she nods, gripping his hands tightly.

"Tídrénas!" they chant together, and Morgana can feel her magic rise in her, new and familiar, joining with his like a river running into the ocean. For a moment, she feels resistance, some unseen force pushing back against them, a dam blocking the way. Merlin's hands tighten around hers, and then, all at once, something gives, running out of her in a great surge that staggers her. Morgana has to sink down to her knees before she falls over, still gripping Merlin's arms in hers, and he drops down clumsily beside her.

"Did it work, then?" she wonders. It must have, for she feels as limp and wrung-out as a dishrag.

"I think so." Merlin tilts his head back, peering at the sky through the hole in the tower roof. A breathless, weary little laugh spills out of him, and he points upwards. "True enough. Look."

Morgana laughs when she sees the clouds beginning to form. "Well, then, let's get out of here before we get drenched."
Arthur leans against the battlements, looking out at the city; the castle walltops gave the most wondrous view of the city, all the way to the lower towns, but today it does nothing to alleviate his temper. He's called off the normal training practice with the knights, since he knows exerting oneself in this kind of heat without water is a terrible idea. Father won't be happy about it, but then again, it seems nothing he can do will make Father happy these days.

A breeze slides across the walls, surprisingly cool for this late in summer, and he glances up at the clouding sky. Let it rain, he prays. Even if the wells have run dry, just let it rain a little, please.

He hates to think that he's brought this onto his own people. He loves Camelot. Not just as its prince, but as one who'd lived there his entire life. It's his home, and he wouldn't want to be anywhere else. To think that he's responsible for its water turning to sand, the crops turning rotten… He leans forward with a groan, resting his head on his arms. The old sorcerer, Anhora, had said he would be tested, that he would have to make amends for the unicorn to lift the curse, and what that might entail is beyond him. What sort of test? How was he to know it?

Something cold touches the nape of his neck.

Arthur swipes a hand over his neck and feels only a droplet of water. A spot of white drifts past his face. Then another. Baffled, he extends one hand, watching as it lands on his palm…and melts. Snow. In the summer.

He looks up towards the sky in disbelief. The sky's gone completely grey overhead, blanketing the sky, and the snow is falling fast and thick, the wind blowing frigid cold. The light clothes he wears are made for summer heat, and the next gust of wind makes him shiver all over, and he wraps both arms around himself, hearing faint exclamations of shock from below as the snow reaches the ground.

"Alright, Anhora, you've convinced me. I'm a believer," Arthur mutters, backing away from the battlements and hastening inside.

"Well, they can always melt the snow for water, right?" Morgana supposes, wrapped in a heavy cloak usually worn in winter. The wind is still biting cold, though it'd stopped snowing after only an hour. "So it did work. Just...not exactly in the way we expected."

"Rain, snow, or hail, I'm just happy to have water," Gwen agrees, sipping from a goblet full of said water that she'd melted from the snow.

Merlin opens his mouth to agree as well, but before he can get a word out, a handful of half-melted slush is forcibly shoved down the back of his shirt, running a frigid trail down his spine. All that comes out of him is a strangled half-screech as he whirls around, clawing at the back of his shirt uselessly.

Leon glowers at him, flicking melted snow off his gloves. "You really have absolutely no concept of subtlety, do you?" he hisses in a low voice, conscientious of the open space they stand in. "A snowstorm in the midst of summer, what is the matter with you? The King is in a fury, and people are near panic."

"They have water, don't they?" Merlin snaps back, grimacing as he gropes awkwardly behind him, scraping the rest of the icy slush out of his shirt and off his skin before it all melted and soaked him. "Panic or not, they'll have at least a little water until Arthur can fix this." He's seen people outside with buckets, cook pots, even bowls and cups, scraping up the snow even as they cry
sorcery; the King's own men are out there collecting snow in barrels for water. Some are even eating it without bothering to melt it first, despite the danger of doing so. Even if the spell hadn't quite gone as they intended it, he can hardly feel sorry for attempting it.

Leon's ferocious scowl doesn't abate, but he doesn't argue further either, silently acceding the point. Instead, he stoops and grabs another handful of snow, this time shoving it directly into Merlin's face, catching him by the nape of the neck so he can't escape. Morgana and Gwen both laugh, the traitors.

He shoves Leon away from him with a gasp, his face numb with cold, slush dripping from his chin and nose. Before he can retaliate, however, Arthur calls his name. "With me, Merlin. Now."

Shoving past Leon with a muttered curse, he tries to dry his face off with his neckerchief as he follows the prince. "Yes, my lord?" he asks snidely.

For once, Arthur only gives him a weary look. "Merlin."

Somewhat chagrined, he lowers his head in deference. He might have been furious at Arthur for slaying the unicorn, but his anger's tempered out into something closer to sympathy in the past few days. An arrogant, stubborn, prideful ass the prince might be, but Merlin's never doubted that Arthur loves Camelot and its people, and to see them suffering for his actions has taken a great deal out of him. There are shadows beneath his eyes, and a drawn look to him that has nothing to do with a shortage of food.

"I've…given thought to what you said about this…Anhora," he says slowly. "With the crops dying so suddenly, the water turning to sand, and now this." He gestures towards the snow-covered rooftops of the town; Merlin opens his mouth to explain, but Arthur holds up a hand to forestall him. "I've decided you're right."

Merlin snaps his mouth shut.

"Tell me true, do you believe that Anhora isn't responsible for laying this upon us?"

"Yes. He's what he says he is, Arthur. The keeper of the unicorns. Like a priest or a holy man who keeps a temple. If you desecrate the temple and incur the gods' wrath, you cannot hold the priest accountable."

Arthur raises his eyebrows, mouth curling up slightly. "Surprisingly well-said. So this is my doing, then."

"I fear so."

"Then it is also mine to undo," he says, jaw set in a stubborn line. He's quiet for a moment, staring out at the town. His voice is rougher when he speaks again. "The King wants to stop distributing food to the people. He says that we must conserve what we have for the army. Apparently, it makes no difference to him whether or not he guards a kingdom of the dead."

Merlin's stomach rolls over, thinking of all the people at the gates, pleading for help, and how it one could not be moved by it. "Could you not ask one of the other kingdoms for help? You have treaties with Mercia, Nemeth…"

Arthur scoffs. "I asked the same question. He said he would rather starve than beg for their help, that as soon as they know we are weak, they will overrun us. He told me I have no pride."

He shakes his head. "As if I can think of such a thing when our people go hungry."
"What will you do?"

The prince sighs, then turns his gaze out once again. This time, he's looking past the city, towards the forest. "Anhora said I must make amends. Tomorrow, I will do just that."

For all his faults, Merlin must admit that Arthur is a brave man. Brave unto the point of foolishness.

Merlin paces the length of the chambers once more, shoving a hand through his hair. "Arthur, let me come with you. I can help you," he insists, reaching over to pack for him even as he says it. The man has absolutely no idea how to properly pack anything.

"No. Whatever test Anhora has planned for me, it is my responsibility, and mine alone. You're staying here," Arthur repeats firmly. He's already in his mail and armour, which means he expects a fight. And yet he insists on going alone.

"Do you not think it better to have someone with you who actually understands the workings of magic?" he asks, trying a more practical angle.

"You didn't slay the unicorn. Hand me my sword."

He slams the scabbard down on the table. "Damn it, will you not listen to me? What happened to not thinking of your pride?"

"Merlin!" Arthur thunders, silencing him as surely as a blow. He heaves a sigh, shaking his head, and his voice is lower, gentler when he speaks next. "I know you want to help. I know you know more of magic than I do. But this is my test. This curse is mine to undo. Not yours. Stay here."

"And if you are killed? How will Camelot be served by losing her prince?"

"Then I will have died knowing I did all I could." Arthur takes the scabbard from the table and buckles it about his waist, then grabs his bag. "Consider this the day off you've been begging of me. Do whatever you wish with it. I'm going on my own."

Merlin watches him go, hands clenching in fists at his side. Once the door's shut, he turns and kicks over a chair with a strangled curse, hopping back on one foot.

"Stubborn ass."

Grumbling, he rights the chair and leaves the prince's chambers. By the time he's made the courtyard, Arthur is riding out of the castle gates. Scowling at the shrinking figure, he starts to walk home, then pauses. Of course. He sprints back to the townhouse as fast as he can, running directly to the stables. "Sam, bring me my saddle, quickly now," he orders, and the boy darts off. He turns towards the Hellion's stall, where she's eyeing him up with interest. "Prince Prat has given me the day off whilst he does something idiotically brave on his own. He said I may do whatever I wish with it. Shall we go for a ride, then?" he asks, and she snorts loudly, tossing her particolored mane. "Exactly my thinking."

Llamrei is a fine mount, to be sure, fit for a prince. But no Camelot-bred horse could ever match the Aragonians' mounts for speed and endurance. Catching up to Arthur is no challenge for the Hellion. In fact, Merlin has to rein her in before she can catch up to him entirely. "The idea is that we follow him unnoticed, not run right over him," he reminds her, and she snorts at him indignantly, shifting beneath him.

Anhora must have told Arthur to go somewhere else, for no sooner than the prince enters the forest does he come riding out again, setting out at a good pace. Merlin lets him get a decent lead, keeping him in sight, then knees the Hellion forward, keeping her reined in tight.
"Oh, Maiden have mercy. You must be jesting," he mutters aloud when he sees where Arthur is bound to: the Labyrinth of Gedref. "Anhora, I am beginning to seriously dislike you."

By the time he reaches the entrance to the labyrinth, Arthur has already gone in ahead of him. Merlin leaves the Hellion tethered to a tree beside Llamrei and unlashes his quarterstaff from her saddle, slinging it over one shoulder before heading in.

The labyrinth itself isn't magic, or at least not in any way he can sense. But every wall of green looks precisely the same as the next, and the ground doesn't hold track well. Merlin turns a corner and finds himself facing another branching path, swearing under his breath. If only he had a great ball of thread that he might retrace his steps, like in the Hellene myth he had in his library. He glances around the next corner and unslings his quarterstaff with a scowl. "You!"

Anhora turns to face him, holding a sword up before him.

"You said that Arthur would be tested, yet here you are waiting to trap him."

"This trap is not for him." He lowers the blade until the point touches the earth. "Gehæftan."

Arthur hears the ocean.

Following the steady, rhythmic sound of waves crashing against stone and the smell of salt, he walks around another corner of hedge, abruptly facing an open archway that leads out onto a broad stretch of uneven rock shore. There is Anhora, the old man's ragged white robes ruffling serenely in the salty breeze, one hand grasping the deer-antler staff as always. There is also a table of all things, two goblets sat upon it, two crude seats made from cuts of log, and—

"Merlin?"

"I'm sorry," the younger man says without sounding the least bit apologetic.

"How did you even catch up with me?" he asks, then shakes his head as the answer to his own question comes to him. "That damn horse." He turns to look at Anhora, the old man standing silent off to the side. "Let him go. I gave you my word that I would take whatever test you wished, and I will keep it, but not until he's released."

"I am afraid that is not possible. He is part of your test. Please sit," Anhora says; Arthur glares at him. "If you refuse the test, then you will have failed, and Camelot will be destroyed."

Damn. He walks over and sits down on the other crude seat, setting his sword on the table beside the goblets. "I thought I told you to stay home," he says, raising his eyebrows at his fool manservant.

"You said I had the day off, that I could do whatever I wished. The weather's fair, I decided to take a ride," Merlin replies with a flippant grin.

"Of course you did." He turns his gaze back to Anhora. "Let's get on with it, then."

"There are two goblets before you. One contains a deadly poison, the other a harmless liquid. All the liquid from both goblets must be drunk, but each of you may only drink from a single goblet."

Arthur resists the urge to beat his head against the table. "What kind of ridiculous test is this? What does this even prove?"
"What it proves is for you to decide," Anhora replies mildly. "If you pass the test, the curse upon Camelot shall be broken."

He puts his fingers to his temples. "You know, when he said that I would be tested, I imagined a test of strength or something of the sort. I wasn't expecting a philosophy lesson from a forest hermit," he sighs out.

"More of a logic puzzle, truly."

"Shut up, Merlin."

Merlin chuckles quietly, lacing his fingers together before him, staring at the goblets. "There must be a way around it, a way to determine which one is poison," he murmurs.

"And I will drink it."

Merlin kicks him hard beneath the table. "No, you will not."

"This is my doing—"

"Damn it, Arthur, I don't care if it is your doing or not. You are the prince of Camelot, the future king. It is more important to everyone that you live. I am a servant and a sorcerer besides."

Arthur can't help the soft laugh that slips out of him, staring across the table at the young man. "I never knew you were so keen to die for me."

"Yes, well, I can hardly believe it myself."

"I'm glad you're here, Merlin." And he is. Despite having ordered him to stay behind, Arthur is grateful to have him here, irreverent and rashly noble. He wonders if this is what it's like to have a friend, wishing they were somewhere far away from danger and yet being grateful to share in their company one last time.

Merlin grins and slaps one hand against the tabletop. "I have it. We pour all the liquid into one goblet. Then we can know for certain it is poison and it can all be drunk from a single goblet."

"You really are smarter than you look, Merlin."

"Was that almost a compliment? Are you feeling well?"

Arthur drops the smile from his face and points to the empty air behind Merlin. "Look out!" The instant the young man turns, he snatches both goblets from the table, pouring the contents into one. He makes as if to reach across the table, but Arthur holds the goblet well out of his reach.

"Seven hells, Arthur, I will drink it!" Merlin protests, sounding furious and anguished in one. He makes as if to reach across the table, but Arthur holds the goblet well out of his reach.

"Yes, well, you know me, Merlin. I never listen to you," he replies. His heart is pounding rabbit-quick in his chest, and there's a rushing noise in his ears like wings buffering around his head, and yet he feels surprisingly calm in it. He gazes at Merlin's familiar, sharp-boned face for another heartbeat, then drains the lot in one go before he can lose his courage for it, hearing Merlin's strangled cry.

It goes down easy enough, whatever it is, and the taste of it is heavy and sharp on his tongue. And familiar. A breathless gasp of a laugh slips out of him just as he falls down into a cool blackness.
When he rouses, he can still hear the ocean pounding against the rocky coast, there's a dull throb in the back of his head where he'd fallen from his seat, and he can hear Merlin quietly muttering a string of insults and swears against him that sounds almost like prayer. Without opening his eyes, he mutters, "If this is the afterlife, I've been cheated."

"Arthur! You're not dead, it wasn't poison, it was—"

"A sleeping draught. Yes, I know. A very strong one. Your mother's given it to me before," he mutters, opening one eye to a slit, squinting up at the young man. "Was that the test?"

Merlin nods, kneeling beside him, his eyes suspiciously wet. "Yes. You've passed it. You've proved yourself pure of heart, just like the unicorn. That was what it was meant to prove. Because you were willing to sacrifice yourself."

He hums, closing his eyes for a moment. "The curse is lifted, then?"

"It is. You've done it, Arthur."

Grinning, he squints up at Merlin. "Well, in that case, shall we go home? I'm famished."
The Lamb and the Knife

"I'm surprised you didn't do more complaining about coming along on this hunt," Arthur says in an undertone, crouched on his heels as he studies the rain-soft ground for animal sign. How something as large as the Questing Beast could travel without leaving a noticeable trail is a mystery.

Merlin glowers at the top of the prince's golden head, arms folded across his chest. "Yes, well, I've learnt that if I beat my head against a stone wall, the wall will not break first," he replies tartly.

"I take it that I'm the stone wall, then?" Arthur muses.

"About as intelligent as one."

The other man levels an unimpressed look at him as he straightens up, then turns and gestures to his knights. "This way. There's caverns ahead, it's probably sheltering there." As they start trudging onwards, all of them quiet and somber, Arthur spares another glance towards Merlin. "You don't have to be here, you do know that? We aren't hunting deer."

"Oh, yes, I do. Considering the… nature of this beast," Merlin says carefully, not daring to speak of magic with so many others in earshot, "it is absolutely in your best interests that I am here with you. And Morgana would've ridden out in here in her nightgown if I hadn't."

The prince's brows draw together in a frown. "Is she alright? She didn't seem… well." Which is surprisingly tactful of him, considering that the young woman had come out to the courtyard barefoot and in her nightgown, pleading for him not to go.

Merlin frowns. It's been months since she's had a nightmare so vivid as to send her into such a state, especially since she's learnt to control her visions. He would've liked to stay with her, as he leant her strength to walk through her visions until she could achieve it on her own, but when it'd become clear that she couldn't dissuade Arthur from going, she begged that Merlin stay at his side to keep him safe. A few of the other knights had gotten a laugh out of it, the scrawny manservant with a fancy stick protecting their warrior prince. "I don't know," he replies. "But you are not to go anywhere without me."

Arthur throws him a sideways glare. "I don't need a nursemaid," he says with a touch of indignance.

"Arthur," he murmurs urgently. "You heard what Gaius said. The Questing Beast foretells upheaval. Morgana has a nightmare so severe that it sends her into such a state, begging you not to leave Camelot. And even if your father denies it, this is no ordinary creature. Gaius warned me of its power. One bite means death. So, be irate all you want, but I am not letting you out of my sight until this beast is dead and you are safe."

"I don't know if I should be touched or insulted," Arthur says dryly.

"I'll settle for you being alive. Do you have your sword?"

It sounds a foolish question, considering that the weapon hangs openly on the prince's hip, but they both know exactly what the young man means. Arthur grasps the hilt and tugs, drawing the blade just slightly from the sheath, showing a gleam of rippling red steel. If it can slay a wraith, then hopefully it will be able to kill a Questing Beast as well.
The sporadic tracks lead into one of the caves that Arthur had mentioned. Merlin sighs deeply. Again with the caves. Always with the damned caves.

Pausing to strike torches and draw blades, they begin to make their way into the cavern. Merlin already knows that they have indeed come to the right place. The air carries that musky animal scent and the smell of decaying flesh and old blood. Elbowing Arthur's side, he gestures towards the ground with his torch; bones litter the cavern floor, some old and picked clean, some with ragged flesh still clinging to them. Not all of them are animal bones.

Jaw tightening, Arthur silently gestures for the knights to move forward and fan out as they venture further in.

Merlin grasps Arthur's arm. "Did you hear that?"

A dry hissing, a harsh scraping, like metal scraping over a whetstone, echoing from the darkness ahead of them.

"I did. Hush."

Glancing around, Merlin realises with some dread that they've become separated from the others. Before he can open his mouth to suggest they rejoin the knights, the Questing Beast lurches towards them with a screech, fanged maw opened wide. One bite means death, his mind repeats endlessly.

Arthur shoves him back out of the way, slashing at the beast with his sword; it shrieks and backs away from the blade, stirring Merlin's hope that it can indeed be slain. The prince makes another lunge forward, blade flashing for its throat. Its head snakes forward sharply, jaws snapping, and Merlin cries out as Arthur tumbles backwards, the sword falling from his grip. With a snarling hiss, the Questing Beast advances towards the fallen prince.

"Fléoge! Bregdan anweald gafeluc!" he hisses out, extending one hand towards Arthur's fallen sword. The blade, forged in his blood and magic, responds smooth and easy, lifting from the ground and plunging forward into the creature's breast. It shrieks piercingly loud, its body igniting into flame as it falls to the ground.

He doesn't care a whit for it, turning towards Arthur. The prince hasn't stirred from where he's fallen. Merlin falls to his knees beside him, stone biting into his knees as he turns the blond over onto his back. "No. No," he whispers, chest constricting to the point he can scarce breathe in. "It didn't bite you. It didn't. Arthur, wake up." He gives the prince a shake, going cold when he feels broken mail rings against his palm, and when he lifts his hand, his palm is smeared with red.

"Arthur! Arthur, wake up! Someone help me!"

"He's not going to die," Merlin whispers past the solid knot in his throat, staring at the still, pale form of the prince laid up in bed. The King's only just left the room, tears still on his face.

"Merlin…" Gaius's voice is heavy, resigned.

"He won't. He can't. We've not done all we're meant to do together, I know it," he insists, clenching his hands tightly behind his back, nails biting painfully into his palms. "I'm going to go to the Druids. Perhaps they might know something that could help."

Gaius is wearing that damn look of his again, that look that says he doesn't believe it'll work but won't say anything about it.
Merlin turns away from it, walking over to Arthur's bedside. The prince has been stripped to the waist, and Mother is fixing bandages around his chest and shoulder. He can see the inflammation already forming around the wound, and worse, faint blue-black blood lines. He reaches over to lay a hand on his unhurt shoulder, brushing his thumb along the line of Arthur's collarbone. "I'm going to make you well," he murmurs in an undertone. "You are not going to die. Hear me, you…you big dollophead? You're going to live, and one day you'll be king, a greater king than your father could ever be. You'll be the man I've seen inside you, and Camelot will be fair and just to all and will have a sovereign her people will love and be proud of. I know it. So don't die before I get back, understand? You do not have my permission to die." Biting his lip, he reaches over to smooth down a stray bit of blond hair, then forces himself to stand.

"Go," Mother whispers, brushing his sleeve with her fingertips. "We'll keep him alive until you get back."

As he's striding down the stairs towards the courtyard, Leon and Lancelot fall into step beside him. "Let us come with you, Merlin," Lancelot insists. "You shouldn't do this alone."

"No. I'm thankful for your help, my friend, truly, but there is no danger," he insists, though he's not entirely certain that it's true. "The Druids are kin to me, and they'll speak easier without a knight of Camelot in their presence. Besides, Guinevere will need you now." When they emerge into the courtyard, he sighs. "Oh, not you, too."

"I know you're going on your own," Will reassures him with a halfhearted smirk. "I'm just here to tell you not to do anything stupid on the way."

Merlin takes the reins of the Hellion from his friend, smiling. "Me? I would never think of it." He sets one foot in the stirrup and mounts up; the Hellion dances under him, eager to be off.

Will has to sidestep to avoid having one of his feet trod on by her striped hooves. "You sure you're going to save your pretty boy's royal ass again, then?"

"Just another day." Merlin glances over at Lancelot and Leon, watching him with poorly-masked worry, then lowers his voice slightly. "I know you don't like nobles, Will, but be kind to them. You'll like them, I promise. And you'll be kind to Gwen, too," he adds. It'd taken a bit of coaxing to convince Tom to take his stubborn friend on as an apprentice in the forge, and the deciding factor, he knows, had been Guinevere.

Will throws him a sly little grin. "I'm always kind to ladies, Merlin, you know that," he chortles, and Merlin rolls his eyes. He backs up a wide pace. "Go on, then."

Merlin turns the Hellion towards the gates and puts heels to her flanks.

For all of Uther's truly prodigious efforts, he has yet to completely exterminate Druids from the kingdom of Camelot. They've simply dug in deeper, moved their camps further into the woods and mountains, stopped keeping permanent steadings. Some have become almost like the gypsy caravans, taking up a nomadic lifestyle on the fringes of society. There is at least one camp Merlin knows to be found in the woodlands around the Ridge of Chemary. He'd seen them from a distance once before, when they moved from their winter camp in Brechfa, though he hadn't met them personally.

Tilting his head upwards, he spies the dangling pieces of red yarn tied around branches, well-spaced and easily missed by one who didn't know to look for them. Nudging the Hellion forward,
he keeps peering upwards to follow the path they mark. Abruptly, he draws rein. Sitting on fallen
tree directly ahead is a Druid man in the simple, homespun garb of their people, greying hair
silvered brightly by the sunlight.

[Welcome, Emrys. My name is Iseldir.]

"Do you not trust me to enter your camp?" he asks.

[We have every faith in you, Emrys. But you are here for a serious matter. I did not think you would
appreciate the stir of unwanted attention.]

"True enough." He dismounts and leads the Hellion over to the deadfall, looping the reins around
one of the exposed roots, now at shoulder-height. "You know what I'm here for, then?"

"We have heard of the appearance of the Questing Beast," the Druid replies aloud, nodding his
head. "And if you are here, then one can only come to the conclusion that the Prince Arthur has
been felled by it. Does he breathe?"

Merlin nods jerkily, his throat tightening. "Only just. So if you know of anything that can help
him, I beg you, tell me now."

"You needn't beg. The Questing Beast is conjured by the power of the Old Religion, you know
this. That same magic is the only thing that can heal its victims. We do not hold it. Healers we may
be, but our magic is sourced in life, not death, so we cannot hold the balance true."

He drops down to sit on the deadfall beside Iseldir, dropping his head into his hands, wanting to
sob and scream at the same time, biting his lip so hard he tastes blood. A warm hand on his back
makes him look up.

"Do not despair, Emrys. So long as the young prince draws breath, there is time still to heal him."

He scrubs both hands back through his hair. "Yes, but that time isn't last long. Will you tell me
one thing, though?" he asks, and the Druid raises his eyebrows. "Why do you call me Emrys? I've
heard the Old Ones call me such. They say it is my true name, though I have no name but the one
my mother gave me."

"Ah. Emrys is the greatest sorcerer ever to walk the earth, it is said, the salvation of our kind.
Champion of the Old Religion, chosen by the gods themselves." When Merlin stares at him in
disbelief, Iseldir only smiles, calm and serene. "There is a prophecy about Emrys, you know, one
that is well-known. It says that—"

"Iseldir," Merlin says quickly but not unkindly, holding up a hand to forestall him. A dry little
laugh slips out of him. "You and your people may call me whatever name you wish. I'll not dictate
your faith to you, nor tell you how to have hope. But I am my own man, and I will not have my life
ddictated to me by the words of some prophet whose bones have long since turned to dust. I've come
to you to heal my friend, no more than that. Anything else, I don't much care. So, Iseldir, I say with
all due respect, fuck prophecy. My life is my own."

He is far too weary and far too stressed to hear anything of it now, if there's even a scrap of truth to
be found in it, and if he could stand to hear it, he doesn't want to. The Old Ones might have named
him their champion, and the Druids might want to put their faith in him as well. But he holds no
truck with prophecy and never has. If there is some prophecy about him, he doesn't want to hear it.
He will make his own choices. It is up to him what he does with his life, not the scribblings of
some ancient seer long-dead.
Iseldir raises his eyebrows, but his lips curl in amusement as well. "If it is your will."

"It is. So...you cannot help me?"

The Druid gazes at him for a long moment, then sighs deeply. "We cannot. But there are those who can. There is a place called the Isle of the Blessed, where the priests and priestesses of the Old Religion once practiced great magics. It was scourged in the Purge, but there are some who remain. The power to heal your prince can be found there," he explains, then holds up a hand to stop Merlin from rising, a mirror of the gesture he'd made only a few moments ago. "But know that it comes with a price, Emrys. The balance is exacting."

"I know," Merlin agrees lowly. "I will pay it for him. Where is this Isle?"

Iseldir nods, lowering his hand. "Very well. The Isle of the Blessed lies beyond the White Mountains, past the Valley of the Fallen Kings, to the north of the sea. There, you will find the lake. I can give you a map." He gives Merlin a long, studious look. "You are a warlock. You are the champion of the Old Religion. And yet...you would give your life for the son of Uther Pendragon? The Bloody Tyrant, who has killed so many of our kind?" He doesn't sound judgmental, merely curious and perhaps a touch confused.

He knows how it sounds. Surely there are even some who would name him a traitor to magic. But how can he explain it to them when there's days he can scarce make sense of it himself? "Arthur is not his father," he replies at last, as insufficient as it sounds to his own ears. "Why should one be held accountable for the sins of their forebears? Where does it stop if you do? If you mark it all up, we would all surely drown in the past."

"Well-said. But how do you know that he is not his father?"

He shrugs. "He knows what I am, and he hasn't harmed me. He has pled clemency for those accused of sorcery, rescued a child that his father ordered executed. He might not appear so at first, but...he's a soft heart under it all," Merlin says, echoing the words that Morgana had said to him years ago. "One merely has to bother to look for it." He holds out one hand, and Iseldir grasps it. "Thank you for your help. I'm sure we'll meet each other again."

"I'm certain we will, Emrys."

With that, he unlashes the Hellion and mounts up, turning her in the direction Iseldir points. He rides for the Isle of the Blessed.

When he comes running back up to Arthur's chambers, Mother is tending to the prince, looking drawn and weary, and she turns to give him a small, grateful smile. "Merlin, you're back," she murmurs.

He holds out the flask of blessed water, breathless from his sprint up the stairs. "Here. Give him this, please."

"What is it?"

"It's going to heal Arthur."

"What is it?" Mother asks, sounding more suspicious.
"It'll heal him," Merlin repeats stubbornly. "Help me sit him up." Pressing the flask into Mother's hand, he shifts aside the pillows stacked behind Arthur and slides up to sit in the empty space, leaning the prince's shoulders against his lap, hands cradled behind his head. Arthur's hair is slicked down with sweat, his skin cold and clammy to the touch but for his bitten shoulder; even through the swathe of bandaging, Merlin can feel the sickly heat coming off the wound. "Make sure he drinks it all," he says as she pulls the cork from the flask.

Careful, so careful, she tips the blessed water into Arthur's mouth, having to go slowly so he doesn't choke. Merlin watches his throat move, gently running his fingertips through Arthur's sweaty hair. Praying and making vows at the same time. Praying that Nimueh has told the truth and it will heal Arthur, and vows that if she's lied, he is going to kill her himself. Magic be damned, he'll do it with his bare hands if he must.

"That's the last of it," Mother says, setting aside the flask. She raises her gaze to Merlin. "Was it…?"

"Yes," he murmurs, knowing what she dares not ask now, when the King might well walk in at any moment to see his son. Perhaps it is only his wishful thinking, but he's certain that the wound isn't quite so fever-hot anymore. Gingerly, he lifts up the edges of the bandaging. It's sticking to the wound, but what he can see doesn't look as inflamed, and the ugly blue-black blood lines have receded as well. Tears spring up in his eyes. "It's working," he whispers. "Mother, it's working. Look."

An expression of reluctant hope coming to her face, she leans forward and begins to gently feel around the injury, peering beneath the bandages. A small smile comes to her lips. "It is," she agrees, grasping Merlin's wrist tightly. "You've done it. Whatever you did," she adds, giving him that knowing look.

He forces a smile in return, ducking his head. "Will he wake?"

"Perhaps not for a while. Perhaps in a few moments. I can't be sure," Mother replies. She lays the back of her hand on Arthur's brow, nodding. "He's not as cold, and his breathing sounds easier. Let's let him be. I need to inform Gaius and the King."

She stands up, but Merlin doesn't shift. "I think I'll stay," he murmurs.

Mother leans forward over him and kisses his brow, smoothing his hair down before she draws away and leaves the chamber.

Once the door clicks shut, he turns his gaze back down to Arthur. Some colour's come back into the prince's face, and that awful rasp is clearing out of his chest. Merlin lets himself sit there for a moment longer, then carefully slides off the bed, replacing the pillows beneath Arthur's head. There's a basin of clean water beside the bed. He soaks a cloth to just short of dripping and lays it over the bandages, dampening them. They're stuck onto the injury, so he has to soften them before he can remove them. Mother's left her bag beside the chair, and sorting through it, he finds a roll of clean bandaging and a jar of liniment, one he recognises.

Careful not to irritate the wound further, he starts to peel up the dampened bandages. Softened by the water, they don't stick quite so badly to the injury, so he can remove them without tearing at the healing scabs. Once off, he gently rubs the liniment over the shoulder, careful not to get it into the wound proper. It'll help keep the muscles from stiffening up and will keep the scar tissue from becoming too tight and limiting movement of the arm. Wiping his hands clean, he bandages the shoulder again, drawing the blankets back up over the prince.
Merlin stays sitting on the edge of the bed, gazing at Arthur's sleeping face. His chest tightens, throat thickening, and he reaches out to brush his knuckles over the other man's cheek, feeling only the faintest bit of stubble. Withdrawing his hand, he turns to pack the bandages and liniment back into Mother's bag.

"M'rlin?"

He turns back in surprise at the slurred sound of his name to see Arthur's eyes half-lidded, blurred but at last coherent. Grinning, he steps closer and rests his hand on Arthur's arm. "I'm here, you prat," he murmurs. "I'm here. You're alright."

"Arthur?"

Merlin snatches his hand away and backs up, bowing as the King enters the chamber, striding over to his son's bedside. On the surface, it doesn't seem that Uther's composure changes, but Merlin can see his shoulders relax slightly, a strain of relief in his voice. He rests one hand atop Arthur's head, gently ruffling his hair like a he's a boy, and the young man manages a slightly dazed smile up at his father.

"What did you give him?" Uther asks.

"A tincture made from the lobelia plant, sire," Mother replies, having followed the King into the chamber unobtrusively. "An ancient remedy for venomous bites Gaius found in his books. He needs to rest, sire. He will still be weak from its effects."

Merlin considers himself a brave man, but he would never dare to tell the King what he should and should not do. Mother does it without flinching.

Perhaps too relieved to care, Uther nods. "Of course. I shall inform the court their prince lives," he says with a rare, true smile on his face.

Once he leaves, Mother smiles at Arthur. "I'll send down to the kitchens for you, Arthur. You'll need something light until you are more fully recovered." There's a subtle note of command in her voice, stern gaze flicking between them. She no doubt knows that Arthur is banned from the kitchen after the theft of a great many honey cakes. "And I don't want out of that bed until you're examined by myself or Gaius, understood?" she orders, and he nods drowsily. With that, she leaves the prince's chambers.

"How do you feel?" Merlin asks.

Arthur gives a vague little hum in his throat, eyes closing again. "Hungry, mostly. How long have I been…?"

"A few days."

"That explains it then."

There's a knock at the door, and Merlin goes to answer it. Sarah, one of the kitchen girls, is on the other side, balancing a tray on one arm. "For his majesty, Lady Hunith's orders," she says, trying to peer past Merlin without being obvious about it, no doubt having already heard the news of Arthur's recovery. He nudges the door open a little wider than necessary to take the tray, smiling as he sees a look of blessed relief cross her face; she bobs a quick curtsey and darts off.

Arthur's making an attempt to sit up when Merlin turns back towards him, holding the tray; he stifles a pained gasp when he tries to put his weight on his left arm, blanching. "Easy now, you
heard Mother," he scolds, setting the tray on the bedside table. As she'd promised, it's light fare: broth, small pieces of bread, some berries. Once he helps Arthur sit upright, pillows braced behind him, Merlin hands him the bowl, then goes about tidying the chambers, though it's hardly become much messier with Arthur bedridden.

"Were you speaking to me?" Arthur asks, blinking fuzzily at Merlin.

"No. Are you hearing things now?" he asks, only half-teasing. He walks back over to the bed, relieved to see that Arthur's eaten almost all of his food.

The prince shakes his head slightly, brow furrowing. "No, no, not now. Before. You...you were speaking to me." His mouth curls up into a small grin, unbearably smug despite his lingering pallor. "You were nice to me. What did you say? Hm?"

Merlin swallows hard and busies himself with fixing the blankets. "Nothing."

"Oh, come on. I remember you said something. You did. Something about the man I am inside, the kind of king I'd be," he murmurs.

"No, you must be imagining things. I never said that."

"Merlin."

"I'm taking these back to the kitchen. You should rest, Arthur. You need to sleep." He notices Arthur's necklace resting on the table as he stacks the dishes on the tray, the red gleam catching his eye. Without thinking about it, he palms the necklace when he goes to pick up the tray, using two fingers to slide it up his sleeve. "I'll see you tomorrow, sire. Goodnight."

He can feel the prince's gaze boring into his back on the way out. The necklace burns against his wrist.

When he returns to the townhouse, Leon is still awake, drinking a glass of perry brandy in front of the hearth. His curly head lifts at the sound of footsteps. "Merlin. I heard that Arthur's recovering. Is he well?" he asks.

"Well, he's already being an ass, so I would say he is indeed recovering," Merlin replies with a smirk, and his brother snorts. Walking over, he pours himself a cup of brandy, sinking down to sit on the rug; Allegra lopes over to flop across his lap, and he roughs a hand through her wiry fur. He sips his perry slowly, savouring the sweet burn of it.

"You're quiet tonight," Leon observes.

Merlin shrugs. Against his side, out of sight, he rolls the crystal pendant of Arthur's necklace between his fingers. "I'd rather just make the most of my last night of peace before the royal ass recovers." He drains the rest of his goblet and coaxes Allegra off his lap so he can stand. "Speaking of peace, I believe I'll retire early. I've spent most of the last three days in the saddle. I've missed my bed." When he passes his brother's chair, he leans over and embraces Leon as best he can from the chair, resting his cheek against curly hair a moment.

"Lightweight," Leon chuckles, patting his arm indulgently. Merlin always gets affectionate whenever he's drunk, a perfect excuse.

Mumbling his goodnights, he retires to his chambers, changing into his bedclothes absently. For a long time, he simply sits on his bed, gazing into the empty air before him without seeing. Allegra, having followed him up, lays beside him, and he runs a hand through her wiry fur. In his other
hand, he holds Arthur's necklace, watching the lamplight gleam redly in the crystal pendant. "You'll be good, won't you?" he murmurs, patting her flank. "I know you will. Make sure you scare off at least a few beasts when Arthur takes you hunting, yeah? You mustn't let him get lazy." Allegra rolls her eyes up to peer at him, tail thumping a few beats on the covers. "Good girl."

He slides beneath the blankets and leans over to extinguish the lamp. As the flame dies out, he wraps the cord snugly around his wrist and closes his hand around the pendant, squeezing it firmly until he falls asleep.

Early morning sun falls warm across the bed, and the starling nesting above his window is welcoming the day with its unmusical song. Merlin opens his eyes slowly, seeing the familiar walls of his chamber, and sits up, cautious. Same room. All his books are where they were last night, not a thing stirred. He holds up his hand, sees the pendant hanging from his wrist, then glances down at himself, searching for any kind of injury or mark. None to be found. He's…fine. Whole and hale as he had been last night. "What in the name of the Mother?" he murmurs, touching his own chest just to reassure himself that his heart is indeed still beating and he's not some lingering shade.

A knock on the door startles him. "Enter."

Elfgifa opens the door. "Mistress Clory wonders if you'll want breakfast before you leave for your duties, my lord."

"I…yes, please."

Leon's already dining in the hall when he comes downstairs, already dressed, though his hair is still a mess. "You really need to learn how to use a comb, you know that?" Merlin remarks, sitting down and helping himself to still-hot sausages and warm bread, thankful the mistress of the household understands their early-rising habits.

"Bold statement coming from a man who doesn't match his socks."

"Nobody can see through my boots." He folds the last bit of sausage and cheese into a piece of bread and pushes back from the table. "I'm going to go see how Himself is faring. He'll be an absolute nightmare recovering, I'm certain. He hates being kept from his duties. I'll see you on the practice fields later. And comb your hair before you leave this house!" he shouts back as he departs, sliding his quarterstaff over one shoulder.

As he walks up the street towards the castle, he begins to relax despite himself. The balance is indeed exacting. If he was to die, he would have been dead already. And yet he lives.

He makes his way to Gaius's chambers first. "Good morning, Mother, Gaius. Have you more of that—" The words die in his throat when he sees his mother kneeling beside the bed meant for patients. Gaius is lying upon it, breathing in small, shallow gasps, his skin covered all over with sores. "Gaius! Mother, what's happened to him?"

"I don't know. I woke this morning to find him like this," she replies in a tremulous voice, tears in her eyes. "Whatever ails him, it is no common illness."

Realisation drops into his stomach like a stone, and Merlin falls down to his knees beside her, covering his face with both hands. "No, no…this isn't what I asked," he whispers.

"What?" Mother grabs his shoulder. "What are you talking about?"
He lowers his hands from his face, shaking his head. "To heal Arthur, I went to the Isle of the Blessed. I had to bargain with the powers of the Old Religion. I met the sorceress Nimueh there. She demanded a price be paid, a death in exchange for a life."

"Merlin..." Mother whispers.

"I bargained my life, though! Mine, not Gaius's!" he insists, anguished. "It isn't supposed to be like this!" Reaching forward, he takes hold of one of the old physician's gnarled hands, the skin thin and soft where it isn't calloused, bones frail as a bird's wing. "I'll make you well. I promise I will."

Gently releasing Gaius's hand, he gets to his feet and snatches up his dropped quarterstaff. "If the balance of the world demands a life, then it will have mine. I won't let anyone die for me."

Mother scrambles to her feet, seizing his arm. "No, you cannot do this," she cries. "Stop! Stop and listen to me!" She takes hold of his shoulders, staring up into his face with tearful eyes. "You're young, Merlin, and you are far too precious to sacrifice yourself like this."

"What, my power? Power means nothing if I cannot protect those I love with it."

"Damn your power, you're my son." She takes his face between her hands, expression wrought with pain. "You are my son, my only child. You are more precious to me than any magic in the world."

"I know, Mother, I know." Merlin wraps his arms around her, face buried in her hair. "But I cannot let this happen. I'm going back to the island."

She muffles a faint sob against his chest, trembling against him, and for a moment, her grip is so tight around him it hurts, nails biting into his back through his shirt. "I love you, my beautiful boy."

"I love you too, Mother." Grasping her shoulders, he gently pushes her back and uses the edge of his sleeve to dry her face, forcing a smile. "I don't want you to worry for me, understand? I know the gods will look after me. I will see you again. He kisses her brow. "I promise."

"Go, then. Be careful, Merlin mine."

When he leaves the physician's chambers, he nearly runs full-on into Leon's chest. His brother's face is white and drawn, hand gripped tight around the hilt of his sword. Merlin doesn't ask how long he's been standing there or how much he's heard; the answer is already written across his face.

"I will be going, and you cannot stop me," he warns, gripping his quarterstaff a little tighter. He and Leon have had their practice bouts over the years, small scuffles in fits of temper, but they've never had cause to well and truly fight one another. He wonders which of them is better. He doesn't think he wants to know.

"I won't stop you," Leon replies, startling him. "I am going with you. And this time, you cannot stop me."

Now that he knows where the Isle of the Blessed lies, it's easier to get there. Having set foot on such sacred ground, imbued with such power, he could find his way to it in the dark by following his magic alone. They ride hard for it, scarce stopping to rest the horses.

"Name of the Mother," Leon breathes when he catches sight of the Isle's ruins, shrouded in mist not yet burned away by the barely-dawned sun. "What happened to that place?"

"Uther did." Merlin lashes the Hellion to the same tree he had last time, patting her sweat-damp neck, and looses his quarterstaff from the saddle. Wood and steel will do little against her, but he
feels better carrying it, having something solid to brace himself with.

"How do we get across?" Leon asks. "And how do you know that she's even there?"

"She's there." He knows her magic now, knows her power, striking a different note in the humming symphony of magic surrounding them. "There'll be a boat down near the shore."

"Good. I'd not like to take my chances swimming. Now, listen, when we get there, I want you to distract her however you can," Leon says. "I'll get around and attack her from the behind. We'll see if my sword is of any use then."

"I thought a knight would be far too chivalrous to run an enemy through the back. Is that not against the code?"

"She's nearly killed you, Arthur, myself, and everyone in Camelot. I'll ask for forgiveness later."


He catches hold of his brother before he collapses, staggering slightly from his weight, and lets him down on the grass, wadding up the folds of his cloak beneath his head. Crouched on his heels, Merlin rests his hand lightly on Leon's brow. "No bargains this time. This is between Nimueh and myself," he murmurs.

Walking down the narrow dock, he climbs into the small skiff once again and sets off towards the Isle.

Nimueh is there waiting for him, standing beside the altar in the middle of the standing stones. There is an inexorably cruel smile on her lips, and she drums her fingers lightly against the top of the altar. "Back again so soon, young warlock?" she asks, tilting her head.

"What have you done?" he hisses.

"Your prince lives. Is that not what you wanted?"

He points his quarterstaff at her, shifting into a fighting stance out of impulse. "I bargained my life for Arthur's! Not Gaius's, not my mother's, not anyone else's! My own!"

The smile disappears in a flash, her eyes narrowing at him. "The Old Religion does not care who lives and who dies, only that the balance of the world is restored," she replies sharply, then pauses, sliding her gaze up and down him. "And you... you are too valuable to be an enemy. I am a creature of the Old Religion, just as you are. Join with me. Between you and I, we could rule this kingdom, restore our people to their place in the world."

Merlin shakes his head. "I share nothing with you. It is not the Old Religion who has done this, it is you, your selfishness and cruelty. I will never join with you. No, my lady," he spits out, shifting his weight into a more suitable stance and curling his hands more securely around the familiar ashwood. "I choose to be your enemy. Ástryce!"

"Bescyldian!" Nimueh cries, flinging her arms up. The shield she erects shatters beneath the blow, but she is unharmed for it either way. "Forbarne, ácwele!" A burst of fire rushes from her outstretched hands towards him, faster than he can move out of the way, and it strikes him full in the chest.

At first, he doesn't feel pain at all. Only a vast sense of impact, flinging him clean off his feet to his back. He stares up at the sky gasping for breath, his vision going black for a moment. When it
clears, he can smell his own flesh burning, and his entire torso feels as though it is afire, centred around his sternum. But he lives.

And if the balance demands a life, why should that of a priestess not suffice?

Gripping his quarterstaff tightly, he plants the end of it firmly in the ground, uses it to heave himself upward. It hurts every bit of him, but he rises anyways. Everything around him hums with magic, stone and sea and sky, and he draws upon its strength, staring at Nimueh's back. "You should not have threatened my family," he snarls and lifts one hand towards the sky.

"What the hell did you do to your face?" Arthur demands, brows drawing together in a scowl the moment he catches sight of the magnificent black eye Merlin now sports.

"Minor disagreement with Leon," he replies, smiling a little despite the ache in his face. He doesn't even have it in him to be angry about the punch, considering that he had enchanted his brother to sleep. His chest hurts far more than his face, anyways. The burn is already starting to heal, but even with his magic, it's painful. "How's your shoulder?"

"Aches." Arthur rolls his shoulder again, gritting his teeth. "Do you have that liniment?"

He holds up the jar that Gaius had given him. "Sit forward, and rest your arm on the table," he says, walking over to stand behind Arthur's chair. Once he had, Merlin unties his sling and folds it over the arm of the chair, then leans forward slightly to grasp the bottom of his tunic, gently easing it up and over without making Arthur lift his arms. The wound has healed up almost entirely, and the scar left behind looks passing strange and gruesome at the same time. It forms a sort of starburst with the jagged fang mark in the centre; the venom had spread outwards from there and eaten into his flesh, leaving scar tissue shiny and smooth, almost like melted wax.

"Minor disagreement, was it? Over what?"

He's not certain if he wants to explain to Arthur just what he had to do in order to save him; he's not in the mood for yet another shouting-at. His ears have only just stopped ringing from the ones Leon and Gaius had given him. "Just...something I did," he replies as he opens the jar, and spreads some of the liniment on his palms, rubbing his hands together to warm it.

"Stop pretending to be interesting, out with it," Arthur replies, reaching back with his right arm to swat at Merlin.

By an unfortunate stroke of luck, he manages to strike Merlin's chest, directly on the burn. He lets out a strangled gasp and staggers back from the chair, clenching his jaw tight, groaning through his teeth.

"What's the matter with you?" Arthur demands, turning in the chair to stare at him. Sharp blue eyes rake over him, taking in Merlin's pallor, the tension in his body, the hand he has hovering protectively over his chest without touching. Immediately, his irritation cools out into understanding, like steel being quenched. "You're wounded."

"I'm fine," Merlin grinds out.

"Obviously you aren't, or you wouldn't be white as bone right now. Come here and let me see," he orders, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Merlin glares, and Arthur glares right back at him. The prince stands up and sits on the edge of the
table instead, using one foot to push the chair out in silent command. With a put-upon sigh, Merlin walks back over but doesn't sit down, contrary to the last. He unties his neckerchief and carefully pulls up his tunic. In the centre of his chest where Nimueh's spell had struck is a ferocious burn, blistered and angry red, with bruises beginning to form around it.

"Gods' mercy," Arthur exhales as though he's been struck, eyes widening. "What did you do? Gaius's chambers, right now."

"I fought a sorceress, you dollophead," he says, the prince's lips parting in faint shock. "I'll tell you another time. And Gaius can't do anything for it." Merlin shakes his head as he lowers his tunic. "It's a magic burn, Arthur. It has to heal on its own. Besides, now we match," he chuckles, nodding towards the healing scar on the prince's shoulder.

Arthur doesn't laugh, however, scowling at the now-covered burn as though his royal displeasure could shame it into healing faster somehow. He wishes that he could tell Merlin to stop being so damnably self-sacrificing. As if it'd do any good. He'd probably have better luck trying to command the tides. He reaches out and brushes his fingertips over the fabric of Merlin's tunic without applying pressure onto the burn underneath. "Don't...do that again," he says at last.

"Well, don't get bitten by an enormous venomous beast again," he replies flippantly, but then something softens in his gaze. Merlin raises a hand and slides his fingertips over Arthur's wrist, the back of his hand, a feather-light caress.

It feels like a burning brand, sending a sharp stab of heat all the way up his arm and into his chest, hollowing out a place in him and filling it. Startled, he raises his gaze to Merlin's but sees no shimmer of gold, only blue, mortal and familiar. His heart gives an unfamiliar lurch in his chest, right in that new warm space. Arthur snatches his hand back and leans away. "I'll see you tomorrow," he says brusquely, proud his voice doesn't tremble. "Be on time for once, would you?"

Something passes across Merlin's gaze, there and gone before Arthur could even attempt to recognise it. "Of course. Goodnight, sire," he replies, accepting the tacit dismissal. He takes a step back and gives a little bow.

Arthur stares down at the floor, refusing to look at Merlin until the younger man's left the chambers; once the door shuts, he exhales heavily, leaning back against the edge of the table. He feels disoriented, off-kilter, as though he's just seen the sun rise in the west. What on earth was that?
"I don't know what's wrong with him, I truly don't." Merlin blows out a breath as he traces along the woodgrain of the tabletop, then takes another drink of his ale, making a face at the taste. They should've gone back to the townhouse and had perry instead. "We were almost like friends for a moment, and now he's just…" He flaps a hand in the air, making a dismal noise. "Said that I could go home and think about whether or not I wanted to be his servant. As if poison, monsters, and sorcerers haven't made me think about it enough. All I want is for him to trust me. I swear, I don't know why I bother."

"I don't know why you care so much," Will remarks only partly under his breath, nose-deep in his own tankard.

At his other side, Lancelot snorts as he picks apart a berry tart, and Merlin remembers why they came to the Cockerel again—Aislinn's berry tarts could make a strong man weep. "He's been a proper slave driver on the training field, so I don't believe it's restricted solely to you. My arms are still sore."

Merlin snorts. "No, that's just him." He puts his head down on his folded arms and tries to think if he's done anything worth the prince's anger.

He does wonder what it is that's changed, though. Before the Questing Beast, they had been something like friends, or at least getting close to it. And now…Arthur's almost as much of a wretched bully as he'd been when they were children. Merlin would still like to beat him over the head with something heavy, but he'd also like to know what it is that's wrong first.

Lancelot licks a bit of jam off his fingertips. "So, tell me again, who is this Cedric fellow?"

Merlin hisses through his teeth as he sits up, plucking a tart off the plate Aislinn had left for them. Sweets might not make things alright, but they certainly help make it better. "He just shows up out of nowhere, keeps…" He makes another indistinct derisive sound, waving a hand. "Most sycophantic little wretch I've seen, and I know George. Goes on about how he's only ever wanted to serve in the royal household and the 'great and noble' Pendragons."

Will chokes on his drink for laughing.

"Oh, shut up, you." Merlin kicks his ankle under the table. "He wants my job, I know he does."

"Couldn't fathom why. Who would want to work with the pretty boy anyways?" Will swipes a dribble of ale off his chin, pausing to run his eyes appreciatively up a passing barmaid. "If he was any more an ass, you could hitch him to a plow and take him to field."

Lancelot nods, sliding Merlin's abandoned tankard towards himself. "He has a point there."

"I don't know, either, but I do know it cannot be anything good." Merlin takes out one of his knives and rolls the hilt between his palms, watching light catch on the blade. He would very much like to pitch Cedric headfirst out the gates, but Prince Prat not hearing a word he says, there's not much he can do other than try to speak sense at him. "Oh, seven hells on him anyway, let us speak of something else for a while."

"Is it true that there's treasure under the castle?" Will asks immediately; Merlin and Lancelot both stare at him. He shrugs. "I dice with some of the guardsmen."
"Well, do try not to make it common knowledge, but yes, there is. Gaius believes the tomb belongs to Cornelius Sigan and wants Uther to seal it entirely." Now Will and Lancelot both stare at him, and he remembers that neither of them grew up anywhere near Camelot or its knights. "Sigan was thought to be the most powerful sorcerer ever to live," he explains, reminding him of what Iseldir said about Emrys. "Supposedly his magic helped to build Camelot itself, but the king grew fearful of his power and had him executed. Sigan cursed Camelot, said that one day he would return and have his revenge. He had developed an obsession with the power of life and death, wanting to defeat mortality."

"Do you think he really did it?" Lancelot wonders. "Could he?"

"Might have. Uther thinks it's superstitious nonsense."

"Odd for him. Doesn't His Majesty take everything to do with magic seriously?" Will manages to put a remarkable amount of derision in the address, making a face as though he's tasted something unpleasant.

Merlin turns the knife between his fingers. "Yes, but over the years, Sigan's been made into a nightmare figure. Mothers use him to scare their children into behaving. 'If you steal sweets from the market, Sigan will get you.' That sort of thing. And the man's been dead for centuries, why should Uther care about the words of the dead?"

Lancelot leans in, lowering his voice slightly. "You don't believe it, do you? That it's just superstition?"

He shares a long look with the knight. "No, not entirely," he says at last. The power of life and death isn't something to trifle with lightly, and what it would take to truly defeat mortality...he's not sure he wants to have that kind of knowledge. But a man obsessed would have few issues with paying it, especially with the power he was purported to have. And then there are the dreams. Morgana had come to him the morning after the tomb had been unsealed with a vision that had left her almost as thoroughly unsettled as the Questing Beast. He'd helped her walk through the vision, but the images she saw made no sense to either of them: a flock of ravens descending on Camelot, crystal exploding into a thousand shards, blue eyes turning black, leering faces of gargoyles all around.

He has a great deal of sympathy for the seers of old who had to puzzle through this nonsense constantly.

Aislinn brings another round to them; Merlin fishes a silver coin from his purse and rolls it across the tabletop to her. She catches it with a laugh, vanishing the coin neatly into her bodice with ease of long-practice.

"If that tomb's full of treasure, then it's kept locked up, isn't it?" Will asks abruptly, gazing after Aislinn.

"Absolutely. I saw it myself. Cornelius took his wealth with him to the grave in a most literal fashion," Merlin agrees with a chortle. He'd never seen so much wealth in one place. How a man executed by the king ended up buried beneath Camelot with such valuables with him, he hasn't the slightest idea. Perhaps the old king had given more weight to Sigan's curse and hadn't wanted to keep any of his belongings near. He cocks his head at Will. "Why do you ask?"

"Who's got keys?"

"The King charged Arthur with guarding it, he has the only one," Merlin replies, puzzled. "He
never goes anywhere without those keys, though, keeps them in his chambers." Even when Arthur took his bath, he kept them in his sight; at night they were hung directly beside his bed where the slightest jingling could wake him, ever the light sleeper.

"But Prince Prat sleeps like anyone else does. Who gets into his chambers then?"

Merlin stares at him. "I do... as his manservant. Oh, seven hells."

Slightly drunk though he might be, he manages to sprint up to the castle in excellent time, taking the stairs two at a time. Coming around a corner, he almost collides full-on with Gaius, barely managing to fling himself out of the way, tripping on his own feet and landing hard on his backside, almost biting off the tip of his tongue.

"Merlin, there you are," Gaius says in surprise. "I was on my way to speak to you, there's something—"

"I have to speak to Arthur first, he's—"

"It has to do with Sigan's tomb." The physician's hand, surprisingly strong for his age, tightens around Merlin's arm. "Do you remember the stone embedded in it?"

He blinks a few times to clear his head, recalling the blue stone, the size of a man's fist, set in the engraved likeness's chest. He had felt a chill upon seeing it, but he'd brushed it off as standing in a gravesite at all. Places of the dead made his skin itch from time to time. "Yes, yes, I do. It didn't look like any jewel I've seen before," he says absently. "What about it, Gaius? I need to speak to Arthur."

"There was an inscription around it. I translated it last night. 'He who breaks my heart completes my work.' I don't believe it is a gemstone at all. I believe it is Sigan's soul."

Merlin's back prickles again, the fine hair on the nape of his neck standing to attention. "His soul? He did it, then? Found a way to best death?"

"In a way. In order for a soul to truly live, it must have a body to inhabit. Otherwise it is little more than a shade."

_He who breaks my heart..." And if the stone is broken free of its setting, then Sigan's soul will be released. He'll be free to possess someone, take their body and... complete his work," he murmurs, remembering the tales Lionel had told him and Leon as children. How Sigan had sworn vengeance against the king of Camelot and all who would hold the throne after him, vowing to bring the glorious castle he had built down upon them in retribution for betraying him. "I have to speak to Arthur now."_

There are exactly three people in the castle who have the nerve to enter Arthur's chambers without permission. One is Father, because he didn't _need_ permission. The other two are his idiot manservant...and Morgana.

She strides in and slams the door shut so hard it rattles the hinges, striding up to his table. "You put Merlin in the dungeon? Arthur, have you taken leave of your wits?" she snaps, hands on her hips and high colour in her cheeks.
"Do come in, Morgana. Please, sit down, it's not as though I was having supper," he replies in the driest voice he can muster, tilting his chin up to gaze at her.


He sits back in his chair with a scowl. "I don't know what you want me to say, Morgana. He nearly kills me on my horse, he sets loose half the stables, he tries to tell me that Cedric is possessed by a spirit, and then he threatens the man with a knife in my chambers. What should I have done? Let him go on about his day? If anyone has taken leave of their wits today, it would be him."

Morgana's face has gone white, her flush draining away. "He said that? A spirit?" she asks in a small voice, a sharp reversal of her previous tone. "Cornelius Sigan?"

"Yes. Some nonsense about Sigan taking his revenge on Camelot, as though I am some boy to be frightened by children's tales," Arthur scoffs, shaking his head, but then he notices that Morgana is even paler, if possible. "What?"

She shakes her head, taking a step back. "Oh, Arthur…"

A heavy impact shudders through the castle, vibrating in the floor, the walls, the very windows trembling. One of the hangings falls from his wall. "What in seven hells was that?" he mutters, pushing to his feet.

Outside, people begin to scream.

How he is meant to fight an enemy he can hardly see and cannot pursue into the sky, he doesn't know. Whatever these creatures are—the gargoyles, truly?—they are both dreadfully fast and strong, and they have a method of swooping down onto the heads of unsuspecting people, tearing into them with efficient viciousness, and then taking back to the air again before anyone can gather themselves to counter. Even with torches blazing everywhere, they're near impossible to see against the night sky, and people are falling to them like wheat to a scythe. And as they take shelter inside the citadel, the creatures are assailing the walls themselves.

Arthur hastily ushers another handful of fearful commoners into the citadel, a few bleeding knights amongst them, trying to pick out the dark figures against the sky. "Is anyone injured?" he asks, turning to his men.

"Just Leon," Geraint supplies.

He turns on heel to face the temporary ward, and immediately picks out the tall form of his First Knight. Morgana is at his side, holding a wadded cloth against the side of his head. Blood coats the side of his face and neck in a red mask, slicking his hair down. "Alright?" he asks brusquely.

"Fine, sire, fine. It's only a lump, a bit of falling stone, nothing serious," Leon insists, trying yet again to push away Morgana's hands without being forceful.

Despite being far smaller than the knight, however, she's not to be deterred. She keeps a hand against the cloth, holding him still with her other hand on his neck. "He's losing a great deal of blood, and a wound to the head can be fatal even if it doesn't seem to be. He's not going anywhere."

Morgana tightens her grip a little.

"I am not—" Leon pushes to his feet sharply, then goes grey beneath his mask of blood; he sits back down again.
Arthur admires his tenacity if nothing else. "Stay here," he orders. "Is there anyone else outside?"

"Guinevere," Morgana says in a fearful voice, raking her gaze around the ward. "She must have
gone to get water from the well…"

Behind him, Lancelot makes a ragged sound in his throat; Arthur turns just in time to see him go
bolting for the doors. Swearing aloud, he draws his sword and sprints after him, ordering Geraint to
hold the doors. "Lancelot! Guinevere! Inside, quickly, inside!" he shouts as they come running
back towards him.

"Arthur, down!"

A firm body collides with his just as white-hot pain etches a line up his back, and he nearly breaks
his nose against the cobblestones, scarce able to get his hands down in time to absorb the impact.
A gargoyle screeches as it swoops over their heads, winging away into the dark. Arthur turns his
head to see Merlin's drawn white face beside his, smudged with grey dust. "What the hell are you
doing out here?"

"Saving you, as usual," the young man snipes back. "Get up, we need to get back inside!"

Scrambling to their feet, they bolt back for the citadel, close on the heels of Lancelot and Gwen.
Every step makes his back hurt, and he can feel a warm wetness seeping through his gambeson and
tunic. Once back inside the hall, Merlin all but drags him over to one of the empty cots and pushes
him onto it. Quick as anything, he undoes the buckles of Arthur's armour and takes it off; the metal
plates are near buckled in places, deeply scratched. "Sit forward, arms up," Merlin barks, and he
obeys without thinking, feeling the weight of his mail come up and off.

"If only you were this efficient all the time," he mutters as the young man unlaces his gambeson
and pulls it off along with his tunic, which sticks wetly to his skin. Not a good sign.

"All the trouble I went through to heal your shoulder, I would greatly appreciate if you could keep
it intact for at least a few weeks before getting injured again," Merlin scolds as he wipes the blood
off Arthur's skin, quickly pressing a compress over the deep scratch that's running halfway up his
back. The gargoyle that had snatched at him wasn't lucky enough to land a serious blow, but its
stone claws are indeed sharp enough to cut through mail. He steps around to stand in front of the
prince, looping a length of bandage around Arthur's shoulder to keep the compress in place. "How
many times will it take?" he asks in a low voice, the good natured humour gone from his voice.

"Will what take?" Arthur grumbles, fighting a wince as the bandage is tightened.

"For you to listen to me," the younger man replies. "Don't fight the Black Knight. Don't kill the
unicorn. Don't go after the Questing Beast alone. Don't listen to Cedric."

He sighs heavily, picking up his tunic, and frowns at the sodden fabric. He'll go without it;
uncomfortable but only temporary. "Yes, well, hold off on the 'I told you so' until later, if you
wouldn't mind." Studying his torn mail, he debates whether or not it'd be worth putting back on,
then decides it'd be better than nothing and shrugs his gambeson back on, doing the ties up
roughly. It sends an ache up his back, and he wonders if it'll be another scar. He's acquiring quite
the collection. "How did you get out of the dungeons anyways?" he asks as his manservant helps
him back into his mail. It gapes a little at the shoulder, but it doesn't hinder movement, at least.

Merlin gives him a flat, unimpressed look.

"Ah. Right. Well, then, what do we do now?" Knowing Merlin had been right is unpleasant to say
the least, considering all he'd done, but he is listening now. They have to do something, and do it quickly before any more people die.

"Sigan's—" Merlin snaps his mouth shut and utters a few colourful words, taking a step back.

It doesn't take long to figure out why.

Father comes striding over to him. "Arthur?" he says, eyes on the blood-soaked tunic beside him, the ruined armour.

"It's nothing, just a scratch," he reassures.

"Have we driven the creatures out?"

He shakes his head. "No, sire. They have control of the lower town, and the market's been all but destroyed."

"And how many dead?"

"Too many to number."

Father's mouth tightens, and Arthur feels all of ten years old again. "I'm sealing the citadel," he declares.

What? He hears Merlin's indrawn hiss of breath, though thankfully Father doesn't. "You can't!" Arthur protests, lurching to his feet. "There are people still out there coming for shelter!"

"I have no choice!" the King thunders. "I have to protect those who have a chance. If I don't, we will all fall. Where are you going?" he demands as Arthur snatches his sword up and strides towards the doors.

There's a handful of knights standing guard at the door. With Leon injured, Lancelot is in his place, giving orders to the others. "There are people trapped on the drawbridge," he says, speaking to both his father and his men. "I am not leaving them out there to be slaughtered."

A hand grabs at his arm, trying to halt him. "I forbid you."

"It is my duty to Camelot!" he replies sharply, snatching his arm away. He turns to his knights, sees the grim determination in their faces, and nods. "On me. To the drawbridge, forward!"

The courtyards are frightfully empty, most of the people having either fled or taken shelter, but for the bodies of the slain. Distant cries and screams can be heard from further out in the city, the shrill shrieking of gargoyles cutting through the darkness. The air's thick with that smell, blood and gore and human fear; it's not something he ever wanted to be able to smell in his home. As they head forward, it only gets worse, and Arthur dreads what he'll see even before they make the drawbridge.

It's worse than what he thought. "Check for survivors," he hears himself say in a hollow voice, sword lowering to his side.

"Arthur," Merlin says softly, and he twitches at the sound, turning to look at his manservant, realising for the first time that the idiot isn't wearing anything that might even serve as armour, nor is he armed with anything other than that damn quarterstaff of his and probably some hidden knife somewhere. As though that will do anything against one of those beasts. "We have to stop Sigan. He's the one controlling them."
"And Cedric?" The man might be a thief and a grave-robber, but Arthur doesn't want to kill him right off.

"Cedric died the moment Sigan's soul was released," Merlin replies, shaking his head. "Two souls aren't meant to exist in one body, and Sigan is very powerful."

Arthur lowers his voice further, almost a whisper. "Is his…ability greater than yours?"

"Yes, but—"

Something rushes through the air overhead, and a gargoyle lands in the midst of them, shrieking. Arthur shoves Merlin behind him, raising his sword before him. "On me! Form up!" Lunging forward, he slashes at the creature, aiming for its throat. He lands the blow…and immediately wishes he hadn't. Though the gargoyles are animate, they are still indeed formed of stone. The impact reverberates agonizingly up his arms, sending fire lacing through his injured shoulder, and he nearly drops his sword, hands and wrists stinging like seven hells. "Retreat! Back to the square!" he shouts.

Another dives at them with a roar, coming between the two of them and the others. Just like that, they're cut off.

"Arthur! Merlin!" Lancelot shouts.

"Retreat! Back inside, that's an order! Go!"

As the knights retreat towards the citadel, Merlin pivots on heel and points his quarterstaff towards the other gargoyle like he's holding a crossbow. "Ástryce!" he hisses out; his eyes flare into gold, like sunlight catching on still water. The creature bursts apart into a shower of granite mid-lunge.

The other one shrieks, claws flashing towards him. Arthur flings himself to the ground to avoid them, hears Merlin's voice again, and feels chips of stone rain over his head and back. When he lifts his head, there's only a scattering of rubble. He peers up at the young man in amazement. "Well done," he says dumbly, a strange flutter in his chest.

Merlin holds an arm out to help him up. "We have to stop Sigan. He'll not stop this until everyone is dead, and he'll bring Camelot down on our ears if he must," he says intently, eyes blue once more. "And I have an idea."

"I'm listening."

"Sigan!" Merlin shouts, walking forward into the empty square. "Show yourself, Sigan!" A gargoyle dives towards him, claws outstretched, and he points his quarterstaff up at it, magic surging up hot against his skin. "Ástryce!"

Bits of rubble rain down as it bursts apart mid-air, and he covers his head with both arms to protect himself from it, coughing at the dust.

"Who would have guessed it. You, a sorcerer," Sigan drawls as he stalks forward, dressed in finery that must surely be of his own conjuring, nothing that Cedric could own. Glossy black feathers frame him in fluttering motion, sweeping to the ground. He inhales deeply through his nose as if catching some wonderous scent. "And a powerful one at that." His eyes—Cedric's—spill from blue into black. Magic pours off of him as heat from an oven, but it isn't hot. It's cold, the kind of deep, penetrating cold that scalds the flesh as surely as flame, snaking across the square to curl around
Merlin gasps at the frigid touch, shaking his head as if to physically dispel the cold prickle of Sigan's magic against his skin. His power pushes back against it, and though he may not be as powerful as the other sorcerer, he can keep it away from himself. "I shan't let you hurt anyone else," he says, forcing his voice steady. "Camelot is no longer yours, Sigan. Your time is done here."

"Is that so? Who will stop me, child? You?"

He lifts his chin. "I will."

Sigan's mouth curls up, and he shakes his head. "Such loyalty. And for what? The young prince? He does not deserve it. He treats you like a slave. Cast you aside without a moment's thought," he says, such empathy in his voice.

"That doesn't matter," Merlin replies with another stubborn shake of his head.

"But it must hurt, does it not, to be overlooked, to be so put upon, yet all the while you hold real power."

"That's how it has to be."

"Does it? You're young, Merlin. Look inside yourself. You have yet to discover your true power. I can help you," the sorcerer coaxes gently, taking a half-step closer. He lifts one hand, extending it palm-up. Inviting. "Think, Merlin. To have the world appreciate your greatness. To have Arthur know you for what you are. Together we can rule over this land. Arthur will tremble at your voice, he will kneel at your feet."

"If you think I want that, then you don't know what lies within me at all. And you…you don't know what true power is. I have something you don't."

The other man lifts his eyebrows, smiling in the way of an adult indulging a small, ignorant child. "Oh? What is that, then?"

Merlin grins. "Friends."

Sigan's brows draw together, and he opens his mouth to speak…but all that emerges is a strangled gasp, eyes going wide and frantic, staring down at himself. His hands lift to curl around the sword blade protruding from the centre of his chest, mouth working noiselessly. Arthur yanks the sword free and takes a step back, battle-tense as he stares at the sorcerer. Weaving slightly on his feet, Sigan tilts his head back, mouth falling open, and he screams.

The sound almost has weight to it, scraping against the air itself, and only by force of will does Arthur not drop his blade to cover his ears. Merlin does cover his ears, face screwed up in discomfort. All the fine hairs on his body stand to attention at once, the skin of his back trying to crawl right off; even his teeth ache from it. The hideous sound seems to go on forever; as it ends, Sigan collapses to the ground in the boneless, limp way of a dead man, but Arthur doesn't lower his sword just yet. "Is he dead? Truly this time?" he asks cautiously.

"I believe so." Merlin steps closer, Arthur tensing nervously, and he reaches down to touch his fingertips against Sigan's chest. "Yes, he's dead. Look." He points upwards.

Arthur looks up and sees that the gargoyles have returned to their perches, going still and inanimate once again. Cold stone, nothing more. "How did you know that would work?" he asks, looking
down at his sword. There's no blood, strangely enough.

Merlin straightens up, dusting his hands off on his trousers. "I told you that it has a magic of its own, did I not? The power of life and death, just like the wraith. Sigan manipulated it to his own ends to survive his first death, so only a weapon forged in that same power could kill him true the second time. Well done, Arthur." He offers a small, crooked smile. "Thank you for trusting me."

Arthur slides the blade home in its scabbard. "Yes, well, I am beginning to understand that in all your blathering, Merlin, you do, on occasion, say something worthwhile." He glances around the ruined courtyard, then turns his gaze towards the citadel and sighs deeply. Reparations is going to be a delightful process, he's certain. Speaking of repairs, he's certainly begun bleeding through the bandages and feels it oozing down his back. "Come on. We need to go in and tell my father it's safe."

"So…does this mean I have my job back?" Merlin asks with a little smile as they start picking their way across the ruined courtyard towards the citadel. The sudden lack of clamour from the gargoyles is almost disconcerting.

"Perhaps. I've not forgotten your lazy insolence. Or that you called me a clotpole," he says flatly, throwing a glance at the younger man. "However, there was some truth to your accusations." A thought comes to him, and he grins and claps a hand to Merlin's shoulder. "Not to mention, I now need someone to repair my armour."

Merlin's smile vanishes.

By the time Merlin is given leave to go home, dawn is come and gone and the sun has climbed above the treeline.

Once he'd redressed Arthur's shoulder properly, the prince had ordered him to go and help wherever he could whilst he and his knights restored a measure of order to the city. With the citadel unsealed, more wounded had come in, and he had mostly been a runner for Mother and Gaius, fetching more herbs from the physicians' chambers. Sprinting up and down the stairs, however, he'd slid on what he hoped was just water and bruised himself in some interesting ways. It hadn't surprised him a bit to see Morgana helping tend the injured, but he'd gotten a pleased laugh when he found Will sitting on the floor in some unobtrusive corner with a handful of small children, entertaining them with a far more embellished and fantastical telling of the battle of Ealdor.

"Oh, there you are! Where have you been?" Clory exclaims, taking Merlin by the shoulders and giving him a little shake when he comes limping into the townhouse, then crushes him in a firm embrace. He shortles, resting his chin atop her greying head. "We've been worried for you. Your brother's already gone to his chambers, his head's aching him something fierce. Lady Hunith sent something along with him for the pain."

"He'll need to take it when he wakes, and only after he's eaten," Merlin says automatically, knowing that she'd very well sit on Leon and spoon-feed him if she must. He rubs a hand back through his hair and grimaces as the feel of stone dust and sweat and probably a bit of blood too. He needs a bath. Maybe after a nap. "If nobody is hurt, I believe I need to make a visit to my bed as well. Will you wake me in a few hours?"

"Of course. You go rest, dear boy." She gives his cheek an affectionate pat, then bustles off.
He puts one foot on the bottom stair when Elfgifa darts over to grab his hand. "Yes, little one? I'm quite weary," he says with gentle patience.

"Of course, my lord, but…do you not want to look at your new books?" she asks, fair brows knitted together. "You always look at your new books before you go to bed."

Merlin blinks. "New books?"

She tugs on his hand. He lets himself be guided away from the stairs to the library, the girl pushing the door open for him, and inside, she points to an inelegant stack of books and a tumble of scrolls bound with faded, frayed ribbons on his desk. Baffled, he releases Elfgifa's hand and crosses to the desk, picking up the topmost book. It's old, he can tell by the dust that's accumulated on most of them and the cracking, crumbling leather bindings; when he opens it, gingerly, the first page is stamped with a familiar seal, the ink faded but still recognisable: a raven. Sigan. "Where did you get these?" he asks, staring at the girl.

"Prince Arthur, my lord," she replies, not yet comfortable enough to address him by name like Clory and the others. "He came here when Mistress Clory was looking after Sir Leon, and he took me and Beryl and Sam up to the castle into this big dusty room, and we helped him carry all of it back here."

"He did?" Merlin looks down at the books and scrolls, suddenly feeling far less tired and a great deal warmer. Sigan wasn't only the most powerful sorcerer of his time, he was an innovator. He had created new things, spells and potions, and of course, he sealed it all away with him in his tomb to keep any of his rivals from stealing them. Which means there are entirely undiscovered magics sitting on his desk, untouched for centuries. "Thank you, Elfgifa. You may go," he murmurs. Once she darts off, he gazes at the haphazard pile of books and scrolls on his desk, ancient yet wholly new, smiling despite his aching weariness.

He closes the book in his hands and hugs it to his chest, then makes his way up to his chambers with it.

He's surprisingly relieved to return to his duties the next day. The King is striving to regain a degree of normalcy after Sigan's assault, though his mood is most assuredly black after yet another assault of magic on his kingdom. Limping a little on the stairs up to Arthur's chambers, Merlin tries to imagine what shades of colour Uther would turn if he knew a sorcerer also saved his kingdom and chuckles gleefully to himself.

"Well, it certainly is good to see you in a more charitable mood today," Arthur drawls as he walks in; he's sitting at his desk, filling out the last of what looks to be an impressive stack of parchments, if the well-chewed end of his quill is anything to go by. "I need my mail and gambeson both repaired in time for training this afternoon, and I have a knighting ceremony first thing tomorrow morning, so my armour had best be polished as well, along with my boots. I want to be able to see my reflection, understand?" he says without looking up from his writing.

"Yes, of course, sire." He gathers up the prince's armour, setting them in a sturdy-woven basket, easier to cart down the stairs; all the while, he casts furtive glances in Arthur's direction, wondering if the other man will say anything about his impromptu gift. "Thank you, Arthur," he says at last, unable to hold his tongue.

The prince arches one eyebrow at him. "For what, letting you polish my armour?" he asks dryly. "It isn't anything to be excited about. They are your normal duties, in case you've forgotten."
"For the books," he clarifies, somewhat baffled. "The books you sent to the townhouse. You abducted half our household to help you deliver them."

Arthur sets down his quill and laces his fingers together in front of him, elbows on his desktop. "Can't say I know what you're talking about, Merlin. My father instructed me to be rid of Sigan's works, which is exactly what I did," he says equably. He pushes to his feet and shrugs his jacket back on, gathering up the stack of parchments; when he notices Merlin still standing there gazing at him curiously, Arthur casts a pointed glance towards the basket still in his arms. "Armour, Merlin. Armour. I need it ready sometime before supper, if you would."

"Of course, sire." He pauses, debating, then bends and silently sets down the basket full of armour. The prince's back is turned to him as he collects pages from his desk, which is the only reason that Merlin's able to dart over and fling both arms around Arthur, giving him a brief, hard hug. "Thank you anyways. Clotpole," he chuckles, then drops his arms, snatches up the basket, and bolts before Arthur has the chance to throw something at him or worse.

Arthur, however, remains still at his desk, his breath trembling slightly, hands gripped so hard around the parchment that he's near tearing it. His entire back feels as though it's burning where Merlin had pressed against him, even through his jacket and tunic, and his heart is pounding like he's just come off a full training bout. Forcing his grip to slacken, he smooths the creases out of the pages, breathing deeply. There it is again, that strange little flutter in his chest, the sensation of something being missing. He had hoped it would dissipate on its own with some time, but it doesn't seem to be going anywhere at all.

He's not certain if that's a good thing or not.
Once and Future

"The body of a lion, the wings of an eagle, and the face of a bear." Merlin snorts loudly through his nose, leaning back against a tree with arms folded across his chest. "I'm impressed, Arthur, truly. I now understand completely why I have to write your speeches ahead of time."

"Shut up, Merlin." Arthur tugs the tunic the rest of the way on, not quite as fine as he's used to but still comfortable. They smell different, too, like loam and fermented berries. "What is that smell? Whose clothes are these?" It's not an…entirely unpleasant scent.

Merlin's brow furrows. "Mine. I washed them especially."

Oh. He busies himself with tying the blue cloak around his shoulders, hoping the folds of the hood hide the flush he can feel crawling up his neck.

"You're truly determined to do this?"

"I am."

The young man sighs and runs a hand back through his hair, ruffling it into disarray. "Very well, then. You'll stay with us at our townhouse," he declares; Arthur raises his eyebrows, but Merlin keeps talking without letting him answer. "We're near enough to the pitch that you can get there without being seen by anyone, and even if you are spotted, nobody will be suspicious of an armoured knight leaving our home. And I…I will have to find someone that can pass as a knight, to appear in your stead. Naturally. We'll have to tell Leon, of course. Come along." Without waiting for a response, he turns and starts walking back towards the city.

Arthur stares after him in disbelief, then draws up the hood of the cloak and follows after his manservant, knowing it's meant to be the other way around.

He's only been to the de Galis household once, when Sir Lionel told him about the wraith. It'd been late, and he'd been in a temper, so he hadn't paid much attention to his surroundings. It's a lovely home, well-kept and tasteful; the furnishings are older, years showing in the threadbare spots in the rugs and the small nicks and scratches on the furniture, but it's all lovingly tended, polished and swept and cleaned. A girl of perhaps ten winters comes to greet them at the door and take Arthur's cloak, giving him frank, curious eyes.

"Elfgifa, tell Clory to ready the guest chambers, please," Merlin instructs, and the girl darts off. Once she's out of earshot, he turns to face Arthur, halting him in the entryway. His expression is set in uncharacteristically stern lines, jaw set and chin lifted. "Now, I know it's difficult for you to act like a courteous human being at times, Arthur, but I do hope you understand that you are a guest in our house, and these are not your servants. I'll not have you treating them unkindly." His voice is firm, leaving no room for argument.

"Of course," Arthur replies, not sure if he ought to be offended; Merlin eyes him for another long, calculating moment before turning away. "I'm surprised you have such young servants."

"Clory's family has worked for ours for generations," Merlin says by way of explanation. "The younger ones, they spend a few years learning the finer points of keeping a household here in the city."

"Ah."
"Now, you'll have to stay inside between the tourney matches, but the garden is walled if you have must go out—"

The door swings open, and they both turn as Leon walks in, still in his armour, with a helmet tucked under his arm. He stops in place, looking between them in bafflement. "Arthur? What are you doing here? I thought you had left for the northern plains. And why are you wearing Merlin's clothes?" he asks, raking his gaze up and down. His mouth opens as if to ask something else, but then he stops and closes his eyes with a deep sigh. "Oh, Maiden have mercy, what is it now?"

Once Leon is out of his armour and into fresh attire, the three of them take a light lunch in the hall, served by a steely-haired woman who can only be Clory, their mistress of the household. Arthur explains his plan, kicking Merlin under the table whenever his manservant snickers. By the end of it, Leon has his head buried in his arms on the table; when he sits up again, he takes his goblet and pours himself a fresh measure of wine. "You truly wish to do this?"

"Yes. You heard Sir Geraint. He withdrew when he could have easily unhorsed me because I'm the prince. How am I meant to prove myself if my opponents aren't giving me their full measure? Have you ever held back when we sparred?" Arthur demands, looking at his manservant. They now have regular matches in the meadow outside the city, and it's the only consistent challenge he has, since neither of them have ever had a clear victory.

"Short of breaking a bone or purposefully crippling you, no." Merlin arches his eyebrows with a smile, quite amused. "In case it has escaped your notice in my time as your servant, Arthur, I do not actually care that you're a prince. You are a prat first and a royal second."

Rolling his eyes, he turns instead to his First Knight. "And you? The same?"

Leon raises his glass in a toast, smirking. "If I had tilted against you, you'd still be cleaning sand out the back of your armour."

"Good to know," he snorts, at least somewhat assuaged. "So now, all that's left to do is to find someone who can stand before the people at the tourney and ensure they have a convincing enough title to enter without suspicion. Can you manage to do this yourself?"

Merlin gives him a flat look. "You were unaware Lancelot wasn't a noble until I told you. I believe I can manage."

"Oh. Right." He had forgotten about that. "Well, make haste on it, the tourney starts tomorrow."

Though he would never admit it in so many words, he's actually impressed. The scruffy peasant Merlin had found can act the part well enough, and with a bath he even looks partway decent. With Leon's guidance on how to properly behave, they might actually manage to succeed. "Sir William of Deira," Arthur mutters to himself as he walks through the small walled garden which lies behind the townhouse. He's not used to having his freedom curtailed, save for those handful of instances when he managed to sufficiently anger Father, but at least he can still come stand outdoors.

"Rolls off the tongue rather pleasantly, doesn't it?"

He very nearly startles at the sound of Merlin's voice, turning on heel; a breath leaves him in a sharp exhale when he catches sight of the young man out of his usual borderline peasant attire into soft, oversized sleepwear, the neckline of his shirt almost falling off one shoulder. Barefoot, too, a sight he's never seen before. Somehow it makes him seem younger, more vulnerable. "How did
Merlin walks over to his side and points upward at one of the upper windows. "My chambers."

"Ah. Is this the Lady Evaine's?" Arthur asks, gesturing to the surrounding garden. It isn't near as expansive as the one she keeps in Silverpine, but it has the same militant tending.

"Of course. Beryl keeps it between her visits. I help sometimes, collect some for Mother and Gaius. Sit vigil." He reaches down to brush his fingers over the tops of the nearest plants, plucking a leaf from one of the herbs to inhale its fragrance.

"Vigil? For what?"

The young man gives a little scoff. "Do you think I can observe the festivals of the Old Religion here? Yule? Samhain? Lughnasadh?" he asks. "I cannot always go venturing out to the darkling wood, either, so I do what I can here." He nods towards a small tree in the corner of the garden, a small patch of clear space beneath its branches. It seems quite an ideal place for one to keep vigil.

"I'm sorry," Arthur says, surprising himself. Those days are meant for merriment, gaiety, not for sitting quiet vigil in a patch of garden. He had never given much thought to the idea that Merlin would celebrate the festivals in a different manner, but now he remembers their visit to Silverpine, the perry brandy Merlin had poured over the roots of the yew tree, tribute to the Old Ones. Surely, on his own, he would celebrate them with magic. But here in Camelot, he couldn't. It sounds a terrible kind of confinement.

Merlin gives him a surprisingly soft look, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "No matter. You should get some rest. The tourney starts tomorrow, you'll need your strength."

"Yes, right. Goodnight, Merlin."

"Goodnight."

"Well, nobody can ever say Geraint allowed you to win this year," Leon chuckles as they make their way back to the townhouse, Arthur once more in his disguise, hood raised to hide his face. "I've never seen a man thrown so far from the saddle in a tilt. Did you see his face when he got up? Had the seven hells knocked into him."

It had been rather funny to see Geraint's squire having to come fetch the knight off the pitch, weaving a little when he walked. "The crowds certainly adore their Sir William, don't they?" Arthur muses wryly. He considers it a miracle that William had managed to stay on his horse at all, but he can scarce believe how many ladies he's seen fluttering their lashes at him.

"Indeed. Speaking of, I am going to escort Sir William to the Cockerel and ensure he doesn't say anything once he gets ale into him. Tell Merlin not to expect me until late, yes?" Leon says, clapping him on the shoulder and heading off down the street.

Merlin. His useless wretch of a manservant who couldn't even be bothered to show up at the damned tourney.

Again, little Elfgifa is first to meet him when he enters the townhouse, quickly darting over to stand expectantly at his side; dress her in livery, she'd make a passable footman. "Where's Merlin?" he asks, handing her his cloak.
"Library, my lord," she answers, pointing him in the proper direction.

The de Galis library isn't like the royal archives, which are musty and cobwebbed, layers of dust on near every surface to be found. The wood surfaces are all polished, not a strand of spiderweb to be found anywhere, and it's surprisingly well-lit considering the flammable contents of the room. There's a spacious desk, a table with a few stools tucked neatly underneath it, and a curious heap of cushions strewn on the floor in front of the hearth, currently unlit.

"Would you care for something to read, Arthur?" Merlin's voice says, and he startles at it, looking around; his dark head appears from behind a stack of books on the desk, smiling.

"Have you a life of Alexander?" he fumbles out, his mind going wholly empty.

"Three, actually. Give me just a moment, I'll find one for you."

Arthur crosses to the desk, eyeing up the lamp set amidst the books. Geoffrey would have kittens to see it. "Does that seem entirely wise to you?" he asks, nodding towards it.

Merlin glances at the lamp and grins. Holding up one hand, he rubs his fingertips together, and golden sparks jump from them as from flint and steel. "Quite," he replies. "How went the tourney?"

The tourney, right. "If you had been there, perhaps you would know."

That earns him a sideways glance and a decidedly sly grin. "Yes, well, you see, Prince Arthur is currently in the northern plains hunting a beast conjured by sorcery, which means until he returns, my days are my own."

"How do you still have a tongue with that kind of insolence?" he muses, what has now become a private jest between the two of them. He gestures to the desktop. "Well, what here is important enough to keep you from the tourney?" Arthur recognises some of Sigan's ancient books amidst the clutter, the scrolls sealed with the raven crest.

"I've finished making fair-copies, and now I've started to translate Sigan's work into Alban. Most of them are written in different languages. I prefer to do it myself, as you can see." He holds up ink-smudged hands with a chuckle, then gestures towards the table. "Sit down if you'd prefer, Arthur, you needn't stand."

Arthur retrieves one of the stools from beneath the table and sets it beside the desk. Indeed, of the three books that Merlin has open on the desktop, one is a lexicon, though he doesn't recognise the other language. "You make the fair-copies and translate them yourself? And you do this for all of them?" he asks, eyeing up the stacked books.

"Mm. Slow work, sure, but I find it…relaxing. The translating is what takes longest, anyways. I have a replication spell to make the fair-copies." He moves to the next page and begins to sketch out an illustration of some sort. It looks like a kind of star chart to Arthur, but he has no idea what the various lines and symbols drawn across the constellations could mean.

He watches with quiet fascination as Merlin spends a moment studying the chart and consulting the lexicon, then replicates the sweeping lines, managing to do it perfectly in single, clean strokes of the quill. Arthur's gaze slides away from the parchment, coming to rest on Merlin's wrists, the tendons on the back of his strong hands, the way the sharp bones move beneath surprisingly fair skin. Blood beats hard in his ears, a dull rushing sound in time with his heart. He hastily leans away and stands up. "A life of Alexander?" he asks, proud his voice comes out steady.
"Ah, right." Merlin sets down the quill and turns to survey the shelves a moment, then plucks a slim book from one of them. "This is the best one." He holds it out, but when Arthur reaches for it, he withdraws. "And seeing as how it means so much to you, O gracious one, I will be at the tourney tomorrow." He sets the book in Arthur's hand.

"And you have my deepest thanks for your patronage, Merlin," Arthur drawls back. He snatches the book from his hand, tucks it under one arm, and leaves the library, beating a hasty retreat to his guest chambers. Once there, however, he sets the book on the bedside table; he wouldn't be able to read it if he tried. He throws himself down on the bed, takes a pillow, and presses it over his face, wondering how hard he would have to press in order to smother himself.

This is, quite possibly, the worst idea that he's ever had.

At least there's only one day left in the tourney. Surely he'll be able to survive that long.

True enough, Leon doesn't return to the house that night, though according to Merlin, it's no cause for worry. "If they've gone to the Cockerel and drunk themselves sodden, like as not he'll stay the night. There's lodgings there as well, and the proprietor's a friend of mine," he explains as they take supper in the hall. "So, tell me of the tourney. Was anyone injured in any of the matches? Who's advancing to the semifinals tomorrow?"

"I am, for one," Arthur replies with a well-earned bit of pride. "So is your brother. Alynor, Bors, and Erec. Lancelot as well. You know, I saw him wearing a lady's favour today."

"That's surprising to you?" Merlin sounds more surprised by his reaction to it than the news itself.

"Somewhat. Half the ladies at court would like him to wear their favour, but he's always rebuffed them, oddly enough." He's always thought that the knights were supposed to pursue the ladies, not the other way around, but amusingly, Lancelot has gained a reputation for being a white hart. "I wonder which one finally managed to bring him to bay."

The younger man snorts. "None of them have."

"What do you mean?" Arthur asks, puzzled. "One of them must have or he wouldn't be wearing their favour."

Merlin cocks his head as though Arthur is somehow being difficult a-purpose. "He's hardly going to wear another woman's favour when he's courting Gwen, though, is he? Like as not it was hers, not a courtier's."

Arthur's goblet arrests halfway to his mouth. "He's what? Since when?"

"Courting Gwen. Has been for the past three months." His eyes widen slightly in dawning comprehension. "Did...did you not know?" When Arthur only gapes in response, he bursts out in laughter, leaning back in his chair for mirth. "Well done keeping abreast of things, clotpole!" he guffaws.

"It isn't a laughing matter, Merlin!"

"And why not?"

As long as the idiot has lived in Camelot, one would think he's learnt something by now. "A knight cannot court a peasant, it's improper. If anyone were to bring it before my father, Lancelot might well be stripped of his knighthood."
Humour evaporated, Merlin gives him unfriendly eyes. "What is so very improper about a man courting the woman he cares for? Simply because she is a commoner, does that make her unworthy of being loved? Or only of being loved by a noble? What is it? Afraid to dirty your illustrious bloodlines?" he sneers, spitting the words as if they leave an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

"That isn't what I meant, and you damn well know it," Arthur snaps back.

"Oh, do I? What did you mean, then? Tell me why it is improper, other than the fact that the nobility looks down on those of low birth as if we are somehow lesser than they are and we are not all people."

He opens his mouth to argue and falters. To say that it was simply the way things were done sounds rather pitifully like an excuse.

At his silence, Merlin continues on, "Perhaps you have forgotten, but Lancelot is not actually of noble birth. Neither am I, for that matter. Does that make him worth less than the other knights to you?"

*That* stings his pride, to imply that he would ever hesitate for one of his own men. "Of course, it doesn't!"

"And what of me? Am I worth less to you than those sycophantic courtiers you call your friends?"

"Come now, you aren't like—" Arthur sketches a gesture in the air. How had this conversation gone so very wrong?

Merlin's eyes narrow, sharp with anger. "Yes, I am. I may have been raised by a lord's family, but I am no more a noble than Guinevere. I am a lowborn bastard born in a village so small it has been forgotten by its own king," he reminds in a cold voice. "I had thought perhaps you had learnt something about humility and honesty, but it seems that I am sorely mistaken." He pushes back from the table sharply, rising to his feet. "I've quite lost my appetite. Goodnight, your majesty."

With that, he strides out of the hall, leaving Arthur staring after him open-mouthed.

Striding out of the hall, intent on shutting himself in his chambers, Merlin nearly collides with Leon as his brother comes near sprinting into the house.

"What are you doing?" he exclaims, looking in disgust at the mud he's tracked into the house.

Leon grips his shoulders. "Where is Arthur?"

"In the dining hall, why?" Merlin snaps back. He doesn't even want to think about that stupid, condescending, classist prat. Anger simmers away in his chest and stomach, mingling with an unexpected, stinging hurt he doesn't care to think too deeply on at the moment.

"Because the King has just told me that there is an assassin in Camelot. Searching for Arthur."

He exhales heavily, shoulders slumping, a neat dose of frustration seeping in. "Maiden's mercy, not again. Is it something to worry on?"

Leon blows out a breath, releasing his shoulders. "Yes. Whoever it is, they've already killed a guard. Broke half the bones in his neck and scarce left a mark. They know exactly what they're doing. Now, nobody knows that he is here with us, but still, we need to—"

Merlin holds up a hand to forestall him. "Tell him yourself. I am going to bed. If it's still an issue tomorrow, let me know." Brushing past Leon's startled expression, he makes his way upstairs.
towards his chambers; if there is an assassin here to kill Arthur, the mood he's in at the moment, he almost wants to help them. Maybe he'll leave the girth strap on his saddle loose tomorrow, let him unseat himself and enjoy a faceful of sand. See how proud Sir William is then.

Surely the cheers of the crowd can be heard all the way in Ealdor when Arthur unhorses Sir Bors, but Merlin, having placed himself firmly amidst the crowds instead of on the field with the other squires and servants, is scarce impressed.

"You don't seem much impressed by Sir William," Lancelot remarks, sitting on his left with Guinevere. He had been unseated by Alynor in the semifinal, watching the rest of the tourney from the crowds until it ends. There's a kerchief tied around his wrist, pale blue and embroidered with chains of small white flowers around the edges; the favour that Guinevere had given him. The sight of it both amuses and irritates Merlin, recalling the previous night's conversation.

Folding his arms with a scowl, he replies, "I think he's a supercilious pig." He turns his gaze away from the pitch towards the knights' tents, watching Arthur duck into the tent. A moment later, William emerges to a roar of cheering, grinning and waving. Merlin smiles a little despite himself; no doubt the man is having the greatest week of his entire life. With Bors defeated, there's only one match left: Arthur and Sir Alynor. He rakes his gaze across the tents...and frowns.

Who is that? Alynor has no squire, which means there is no reason for anyone to be in his tent. A sinking sensation develops in the pit of his stomach, and the nape of his neck pricks. Oh no. "Excuse me," he says, getting to his feet, shuffling pass them and hastening down the stairs. Forcing his way through the crowds to the edge of the pit, he reaches the edge of the pitch, venturing into the brightly-coloured tents. Blood pounds in his ears as he circles around the side of the tent and finds the edge of the heavy canvas, pulling it back just enough that he can see a man clad in armour stride out. Just enough to see the crumpled, misshapen heap of cloth on the floor, a limp hand protruding out from beneath the edges.

Maiden have mercy. Merlin leaps back from the tent and takes off back towards the pitch. Not quickly enough. Just as he gains the edge of the course, he sees the imposter—the assassin, it must be, who else could it be?—shatter his lance against Arthur. For a split second, he hopes that he is wrong, that this isn't what he thinks, but then he sees Arthur slump over the neck of his horse, one hand pressed against his side where the lance had struck.

As Arthur circles back around, Merlin reaches up to grasp the reins, helping him down from the saddle and near dragging him back into the tent.

"I have to be back on the course in five minutes," Arthur gasps out, taking off his helmet and dropping it unceremoniously to the grass underfoot. He winces sharply when he falls into his seat; there's blood trickling through the rings of his mail.

"No, you are not. Arthur, that isn't Sir Alynor. That man has been sent here to kill you, you cannot tilt against him again," Merlin insists, prying the other man's hand from the wound so he can peer at the damage. There's a neat puncture in the mail, right in the vulnerable gap between the chest and shoulder plates, but he sees no splinters of wood in the wound. Which means it must've been metal, some kind of bladed tip on the lancehead.

"I have to, or I forfeit the match."

He cannot believe this. "Did you not hear me? He is trying to kill you. He tipped his lance, that's what wounded you. And besides that, you cannot joust in this state, you are losing far too much
"I have never withdrawn from a match, I do not intend to start now," Arthur replies stubbornly.

Merlin glares at him for a moment, inwardly cursing the bullheadedness of bloody royals. Stepping closer, he puts his hand against the prince's bleeding side, murmuring under his breath. Arthur lets out a sharp gasp, one hand gripping Merlin's wrist hard. "I burnt the wound. It'll slow the bleeding, but not for long. Make the most of it." Staring at the prince, he shakes his head, twisting his arm out of Arthur's grip to lay a hand on his shoulder. "You would risk your life for your pride? You have nothing to prove," he murmurs.

"I have everything to prove. To myself," Arthur replies with an attempt at a smirk, though he's far too pale. "Hand me my helmet."

As the prince advances onto the course, managing to both stay on his horse and hoist his lance, Merlin stares across at the other man who is most assuredly not Sir Alynor. The flag goes up. Arthur has despaired at his use of magic before, but he often forgets that to be a servant is to be unseen. Of all the people at the pitch, not a one of them has eyes for him. "Unbinde þé téage," he whispers under his breath.

The girth of the assassin's saddle comes undone, leather straps slithering apart and trailing loose. The saddle wobbles; the lance's deadly point drops.

Nearly all of the observers come to their feet at the blow, exclaiming as Arthur unhorses the false knight in a great shower of splintered wood. The man crashes headfirst to the ground, tumbles over in an ungainly heap, saddle and all, and doesn't rise.

Merlin sprints around the roaring onlookers to the other end of the pitch, helping Arthur down from the saddle before he falls and gives away the game. He draws one arm over his shoulder, letting the prince lean into his side. "Well done," he murmurs under his breath as they hobble back towards the tent to the sound of thundering cheers and applause. "Now, you are going to sit still and let me look at your damn side before you go out there and reveal yourself, or you'll collapse before you get to the trophy." For lack of proper bandaging, he takes a stray pennant, folds it up, and presses it hard against the wound; working one-handed, he starts to undo the buckles of the armour, easing the plates aside for a better look.

"Will you be alright, sire?" William asks uncertainly, hovering to one side.

"I've had far worse." Arthur sounds genuinely amused; bearing a small, wan smile, he holds out the helmet. "Go on, then. Your people await you."

"That was a kind thing you did," Merlin says in a passably idle tone as William takes the helmet and ducks out of the tent. "What happened to your moment of glory?"

The prince shrugs one shoulder, the corners of his mouth lifting. "Perhaps there is a time for humility."

"You, humble? Will miracles never cease?" he chuckles, and Arthur rolls his eyes skyward. He guides the prince's hand over to hold the folded pennant over the wound; taken by a flush of daring, he squeezes Arthur's hand in his own, letting himself hold on for a moment longer than entirely necessary, brushing a thumb across his knuckles. "You've done well. Truly. Now hold that firm, I'll see if I can find needle and thread."

Outside, the crowds chant William's name.
Arthur reclines back on his elbows, fighting a wince at the ache in his side, but all things considered, he's fair off for having nearly been assassinated again…and *that's* a horrible thing to be accustomed to thinking.

"Well, Arthur, have you sufficiently proved yourself?" Morgana asks teasingly, shading her eyes and smirking at him.

"Until next year, yes," he replies, and she rolls her eyes. Everyone had gotten a good laugh out of the deception once Merlin had explained it all to them; all teasing aside, he *does* feel better, knowing that he has won on his own merit and not simply for who he is. Glancing over at Lancelot, sprawled across the grass beside Guinevere, he understands somewhat better now why the other man had been willing to lie to become a knight. He's had to do near the same, only in reverse. Smiling, he turns his gaze back towards the pitch, watching the brightly coloured tents come down, groundskeepers tending to the well-abused grass. Later, he'll have to attend the farewell feast for the departing knights, but for now, they're all allowed a moment's leisure.

"I must admit I still do not understand what kind of joy men take from this. You are purposefully trying to injure one another...for the sake of entertainment and personal glory," Guinevere says, gazing at the empty pitch. "A man died in the last tourney, and two have died in this one."

Merlin lifts a hand. "One of those men was an assassin attempting to kill Arthur."

She shakes her head, making a face. "Still. A bunch of nonsense, if you ask me. You are all fools. It'd be more fun to play our own games," she says with a sideways glance over at Lancelot. The others laugh agreement, seeming quite amused.

"Games?" Arthur repeats dubiously. He seems to have missed the jest.


He doesn't know.

"Oh, here." She reaches over and plucks a few long stalks of grass, braiding them together into a makeshift sort of quirt. "If you keep still and quiet, you earn a kiss. If you don't, you get a lash," she says with mock severity, brandishing it at him, though the braided grass would do little more than give a slight sting. Drawing her legs up under her, she leans forward and trails the loose ends of the grass along the nape of Lancelot's neck, under his ear. His shoulders tense as he tries not to squirm, biting his lips together on a smile. She draws it lower, over the edges of his collarbone, the hollow of his throat. His mouth twitches, but he gives no sound. "There, see? He's earnt a kiss."

Guinevere leans forward and plants a swift kiss on the tip of Lancelot's nose; the way he smiles, however, tells Arthur that he's received far more than that from her. He wonders how he ever could have missed it. Sitting back, she tosses the plaited grass on Arthur's lap, as he sits to her left. "Your turn."

He picks up the quirt and rolls it between his fingers, casting a glance around the loosely-arrayed circle they had formed. He hesitates only a heartbeat on Merlin. The breeze changes, bringing the scent of churned earth from the pitch, and the memory of the sharp bones in Merlin's wrist rises unbidden in his mind. Fever heat flushes his limbs. Summoning his voice, he tosses the braided grass at Morgana. "I'm not a child," he says dismissively.

The others chorus disappointed noises at him, naming him a spoilsport.
Arthur ignores them, his pulse beating in his ears. He is in full agreement with Guinevere: he is indeed a fool.
Heretics

*Tap-tap-tap.*

Merlin wakes slowly, confused as to why he's awake in the middle of the night, a splash of moonlight on the floor of his chambers; a shadow flutters across it. He sits upright as the tapping sound that had woken him starts again. Swinging his legs out of the bed, he crosses to the window and conjures a small blue flame in his palm.

There's a raven perched on his windowsill outside, tapping its beak against the glass. The soft glow gleams off a spot of colour, and he unlatches the window, pulling it open. With a rustling of feathers, the raven hops onto the inner sill, cocking its sleek black head at him. Looped around one of its legs is a slim braid of brightly-coloured threads with tiny polished beads fastened to the ends in place of bells—Druid work. It's fastened to a piece of folded parchment as well.

Merlin carefully loosens the knotted thread and pulls the parchment free, unfolding it and bringing his light closer to read it. It's written in ogham, confirming his suspicion that it is from the Druids. As he reads over the message, he finds himself smiling. "Stay close, my friend, I'll be back," he says to the raven, which ruffles its feathers and squawks at him.

Quickly, he scrabbles into his clothes; once dressed, he hurries as quietly as is possible out of the townhouse, making his way towards the castle.

It's almost painfully easy for him to get around the guards and up towards Morgana's chambers. He's not sure if he's merely been in the castle so long that he's grown familiar with their movements or if it truly is just that damned easy to do. Either way, he manages to get all the way to the chambers of the King's ward without being seen or stopped by a single person.

It's Guinevere who opens the door when he knocks, rubbing sleep out of her eyes with one hand. "Merlin? What are you doing here, is something wrong?" she mumbles, taking a step back to let him in.

"Wrong? Not at all. Something wonderful, actually," Merlin replies happily. "I'm here to talk to Morgana, will you wake her for me?"

"I'm awake. Byrne." The candles all flicker to life, casting a soft illumination into the chamber as Morgana rises from her bed, pulling a silken robe over her nightgown. "What is it, Merlin?"

He holds out the small note with a smile. "It's a message from the Druids. They're asking you to visit them. There's an ollamh who wants to teach you how to master your visions."

She takes the parchment from him and studies it a moment; he's been teaching her ogham. "An ollamh?" she asks softly, eyes widening in amazement and budding hope. "They can teach me?"

"Yes. I can't because I am no seer, but the ollamh can." He reaches out to take her hands in his.
"This is an opportunity afforded to few. We'd be fools not to take it."

Gwen interjects gently, "But how can we possibly leave to visit the Druids without the King knowing it?"

Morgana says a few words which a highborn lady has no business knowing. Merlin snorts despite himself. Guinevere does have a point, and it is a very real hurdle to overcome. The King prefers to keep his ward close to him, and on those few occasions when she does leave Camelot, she is always sent with an escort of trusted knights who would certainly tell their sovereign if they led her into a Druid camp. If she left without telling him, however, then no doubt he would believe her abducted by some malignant sorcerers and deploy the entire royal army to find her.

"I'm certain we can find a way between ourselves," Merlin reassures, then pauses and smiles a little at Morgana. "We could always ask Arthur."

She makes an exasperated sound, dropping her head into her hands. Though the prince is aware of their magic, Morgana isn't always eager to tell him about it, and despite having become incrementally more comfortable with magic, Arthur doesn't always want to hear about it. Merlin expects its more to do with some stubborn, lingering bit of loyalty to his father than actual unwillingness.

"Arthur knows more about escaping the King's notice than most," he chuckles. Rubbing a hand over his face, he sighs and pushes himself out of his chair. "Well, I am going back to bed before anyone realises I'm here, and if we can't come up with something feasible, we'll tell Arthur."

Morgana scoffs, waving a hand. "Oh, nonsense, you're not going anywhere. Once is luck enough, you're certain to be caught. Stay here and wait for the guard shift, and you can tell me more about this ollamh." When he opens his mouth to protest, she holds up a hand to halt him. "I know very well that my virtue is not in any danger from you, Merlin, so kindly hush and sit down."

He doesn't know all that much about ollamhs apart from what he's read in his books and the few words he's coaxed out of Gaius, but he tells her all he can. They are Druids of the highest rank, equal to a king. In the years before the purge, it used to be that an ollamh had a seat upon the king's council, in Camelot and many other kingdoms as well. Similar to High Priests and Priestesses, they provided guidance in many matters and educated younger generations, which is exactly what they were offering to Morgana.

"You're still my ollamh, Merlin," she says with a smile, grasping his arm.

Merlin shakes his head a little and scratches the side of his neck. "No, no. They have to study for years and years to gain their ranks, and I'm not much of a teacher, am I?"

Morgana doesn't release his arm, squeezing his wrist gently. "Nonsense. You came to me when I had no one, and you threw me a rope when I thought I would drown. So no matter what happens, Merlin, even if this ollamh teaches me everything there is to know about my visions, you are and always will be my best teacher." She laughs softly at the deep flush that's spilling up the sides of his neck into his face and ears; reaching over, she ruffles his hair as she's seen Leon do, and he makes a weak noise of protest, brushing aside her hands.

The three of them continue to speak quietly amongst themselves as they try to conjure a way to leave Camelot without gaining the King's suspicion. Morgana suggests she might pretend to visit Tintagel as the duchy is hers in everything but name, but Gwen reminds her that Tintagel's gentry often visited Camelot and would give away the lie. Any other place she might go, Uther would surely send a honour guard of knights to protect her. "I wish I had been more of a rebellious child,"
she grumbles, chin propped on her fist. "Arthur runs off on his own all the time, and nobody says a word of it. If I tried to do the same, Uther will have half the army out searching for me within a day."

"Oh, please don't start running off," Gwen implores. "I've seen what poor Merlin has to withstand chasing after Arthur all the time."

Morgana snorts. "Yes, well, I have an advantage over Arthur in that people do not immediately wish to kill me upon first meeting me."

"True."

Their continued plotting comes up with very little results, and soon they're all putting out the most outlandish ideas simply to make one another laugh, having to stifle the noise in their sleeves and hands lest a passing guard or servant hear them. By the time the window begins to brighten with dawn's early light, they have very little to show for their efforts. "I suppose we'll have to ask Arthur, then," Morgana sighs, admitting defeat.

"I can put the question to Leon as well, and Gwen can ask Lancelot. They're cleverer than they like to pretend," Merlin suggests as he stands and stretches. He brushes some of the creases out of his clothes, glad that he'd thought to dress before running up here. He can go directly to Arthur's chambers and not have to try and run back to the townhouse. Once Morgana runs her comb through his hair a few times, he's declared free to leave.

Guinevere stands at the door to the chambers, peering out into the corridor. "Ready?" She glances out the door, then waves a hand to him; Merlin quickly darts out and takes several wide paces down the corridor, putting himself a fair distance from Morgana's chambers. Once he slows to a more sedate pace, Guinevere walks over to join him, perfectly idle, as they go down the stairs towards the kitchens. If anyone saw them, they would seem like just another pair of servants fetching breakfast for their master and mistress. "I'll tell Lancelot what's happening when I see him," Guinevere says in a low voice.

"And I will ask Arthur...after he's had his breakfast," Merlin adds, taking the tray in hand, leaving the kitchen to the sound of her laughter.

Surprisingly enough, Arthur is awake when Merlin edges into the prince's chambers, though just barely. He's still in the bed, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes with the heel of one hand. His hair is an utter disaster as always, standing straight out in some places. Not for the first time, Merlin wonders how the hell he sleeps to make his hair look like that in the morning. "Good morning, sire! Up you get, lazy daisy!"

Arthur drops his hand and glares. "Merlin. What have I said about you being chipper this early?"

"Not to be." He sets the tray on the prince's desk and walks over to yank back the covers. It's still warm enough for Arthur to sleep without his nightshirt, and Merlin profoundly wishes for the weather to hurry up and get colder, quickly turning away and opening the wardrobe. "There's something we need to discuss," he says as he pulls out a clean shirt.

"Still don't get it, do you, Merlin? I decide when we need to talk," Arthur replies, sounding marginally more awake as he eats.

"Not in this." Merlin ignores the 'it's too early for your insolence' glare that Arthur gives him and sits on the edge of the prince's desk, snatching a slice of cheese before the tray is slid out of reach.
Once he explains the message from the Druids and the invitation for Morgana to go and learn with the *ollamh*, Arthur frowns in puzzlement. "What do you expect me to do about it?"

Merlin shrugs. "You've gone off on your own plenty of times."

The blond snorts a little as he finishes off the last of his breakfast. "It's different for me, Merlin. I can take care of myself. Not that Morgana can't, but Father doesn't see it that way. However, if what you say is true, then it is best for Morgana to go to this teacher." He pushes back from his desk and goes to change, and Merlin watches him patiently, knowing the prince thinks best when moving around. Retaking his seat, Arthur rolls his left shoulder slowly, making a face as he works the stiffness out. "What about the Lady Evaine?"

Of all the things he'd expected Arthur to say, that is definitely not one of them. "What about her?" Merlin wonders.

"She never comes to court in Camelot, and she obviously has no issue with concealing magic from others. Are there any other ladies in the household? Does she visit other women?" Arthur wonders; when Merlin shakes his head, he nods. "Then perhaps we could say that she...desires the company of another lady, and as it's been many years since she's last seen Morgana, she's invited the King's ward and her maidservant to visit her at Silverpine for a time."

It's so utterly simple, and yet utterly perfect. Merlin half-feels an idiot for not having thought of it himself. "That...could work," he agrees with a disbelieving laugh. "There's a band of Druids that hold a summer camp in the Forest of Brechfa, right on our borders. Wouldn't the King order an escort, though?"

"Not if I accompany you," Arthur replies, a slight note of uncertainty creeping into his voice. "Usually there'd be an escort of four or five, but I could convince Father to allow just myself, Leon, and Lancelot. He wouldn't want to suggest that the prince and his First Knight couldn't protect his ward, and he wouldn't want to risk offering insult by implying Sir Lionel's men aren't capable, either."

Merlin grins, bouncing a little on his toes. "That's excellent, Arthur, excellent!" he exclaims gleefully. "I can let Gwen and Morgana know, and you can tell Leon and Lancelot when you go to training. I'll send a message back to the Druids. To Brechfa!" Without waiting for any form of response, he takes the empty breakfast tray and all but skips his way out of the chambers, humming to himself.

Arthur stares after him, shaking his head. And then despite himself, he laughs. "Very well. To Brechfa."

The fresh smell of pine indicates they are getting close to the Forest of Brechfa, though for all Arthur knows, they've been riding in circles. Merlin rides to the fore of their little party, having left the trail to Silverpine some time ago and following no discernable path.

"How does he know which direction to go?" Gwen muses aloud as they ride between the trees, following the Hellion.

It's something Arthur has been wondering as well, if perhaps Merlin's able to follow their magic the way birds know how to fly southward in winter.

Lancelot clears his throat, and when they look to him, he turns a pointed glance upwards. Arthur
tilts his head back. For a moment, he doesn't see anything of importance at all, but then a flicker of red draws his eye. A knot of red yarn, stretched between the fork of a branch. Curious, he leans back in his saddle, peering behind them, and sure enough, a short way back, another strand of yarn, half-hidden in the dark green of the pine needles. He looks forward, raking his gaze back and forth. There. Red yarn, just a few more paces ahead. Bright enough to be seen by those who knew to look for it, but not so ostentatious as to attract unwanted attention. Simplistic, perhaps, but clever. He couldn't remember ever once looking up at the trees when on patrol before.

"Nearly there now!" Merlin calls gleefully. "One of their elders is coming to greet us."

"Hold a moment, Merlin," Arthur calls; after the others draw rein, he unclasps his cloak and shoves it down into a saddlebag. "You two as well," he says to Lancelot and Leon. He hates having to do it, hates that anyone living in their own kingdom can see Camelot's colours as a thing to be feared, but he knows it's the wisest thing to do. They are here to help Morgana, not to cause a panic.

Riding onwards, they come to a small clearing at the foot of a small, steep hill. There's a man standing there awaiting them, and Arthur knows this must be the Druid elder to welcome them. He looks to be near the King's age, perhaps a few years older by the grey of his hair, dressed in subtly patterned forest colours. There is something very calm, peaceable in his bearing, a quiet dignity which reminds Arthur somewhat of Gaius.

"Iseldir," Merlin says, surprisingly warm as he dismounts. He walks over to the grey-haired Druid and clasps his arm with the familiarity of friends. "It is good to see you again."

"You said we would, did you not?" the man replies with a welcoming smile of his own. He turns to look at the rest of them, folding his hands in the wide sleeves of his robe. "Be welcome, my lady, my lords. And welcome again to you, Sir Lancelot."

Before Arthur can ask how it is Lancelot knows them, something small crashes into his middle, staggering him back a step with a startled huff. "You came, you came, you came," a piping voice exclaims, muffled against his tunic, and the slender arms around his waist tighten happily.

Peering down at a head of dark hair, he finally draws the connection and lets out a surprised laugh. "Hello again, little one."

The Druid boy gives his waist another tight squeeze, then releases him and runs to Guinevere and Morgana, embracing them similarly. He stands between the two women, grasping their hands in his own.

"Mordred has been anticipating your arrival with some enthusiasm," Iseldir explains indulgently. "It was his idea to send a raven with a message for you."

The boy beams. "I'm going to learn with you, too, with Necthana," he adds, looking up at Morgana. "She can teach us how to understand our dreams and even see someone else's and—"

Chuckling, Iseldir holds up a hand to temper the boy's excitement. "Peace, Mordred. You will have enough time to speak to the Lady Morgana in the days to come. Why not return to camp? We'll join you soon. We have some matters to discuss here."

Mordred heaves the deeply put-upon sigh of a child who knows an excuse to be rid of him when he hears one. Releasing Morgana and Gwen, he instead returns to Arthur's side. "Would you like to come see my ravens?" he asks, plucking at Arthur's sleeve. "I've been learning augury, Aglain says I've a natural talent for it. I'm training them."
He glances over at Iseldir. The Druid is already speaking to Merlin and Morgana, and Lancelot is leading the packhorse bearing Morgana's belongings towards the camp with Guinevere, no doubt to say their own private farewells. He's not used to being unneeded, but this is their court, not his own. Arthur also has no idea what augury is, but if it involves training ravens to carry messages, he can assume it's a magic to do with birds. It sounds a great deal less complicated than this matter of visions and dreams, so he nods and opens his hand for Mordred to take hold of, leading him away from the others.

On the other side of the hill, there's a group of some thirty people in the midst of a temporary camp, mostly adults, with a handful of other children. A few give him cautious looks, but Mordred seems to put them at least somewhat ease. The boy tows him over to a slender young pine; there's a half-dozen glossy black ravens perched on the slim branches. Each one bears a colourful jess made of braided cord, but none are bound to their perches. He's not surprised to see there are no cages.

"Here. You can give them some," Mordred says, untying a pouch from his belt and pouring out a small measure of corn kernels into his palm. "I'm getting them used to other people. They'll talk to you, too, if you say hello."

Arthur extends a hand for the boy to trickle the corn into his palm, and he holds it up to the nearest of the ravens, feeling only slightly foolish. "Hello."

It hops closer to him and picks at the corn without catching his fingers. "Hello! Hello!" the bird squawks back, fluttering its wings.

"That's Magus. He talks the most," Mordred tells him matter-of-factly. "The big one up there, that's Calypso. See how he has a crack in his beak? It looks like he's smiling, doesn't it? He's not very nice, though. He pecks."

Arthur smiles as the ravens shuffle around on the branches, squawking and rustling their wings. "They're lovely birds, Mordred."

"I'm glad you came to visit and let Morgana come learn with us. I heard the elders talking, and a lot of them didn't think you would, but I did. They think you're like the King," he adds with a small scowl, brow furrowing, but then he looks up at Arthur with a reassuring little smile. "Don't worry, I told them you're not, I know you aren't."

There is such faith in the boy's voice, a complete and abiding trust; Arthur feels hideously unworthy of it. He rests a hand on one narrow shoulder. "I try not to be," he murmurs. "So, this… Necthana you mentioned. You said she will be teaching you and Morgana?"

"She's an ollamh," Mordred replies with a nod.

Another term he's unfamiliar with, but the note of reverence in the boy's voice tells him it must be someone important. He hopes whoever she is, she will be able to help Morgana with her visions and magic. Arthur pauses and chuckles a little; of all the things he never would have imagined himself thinking… "I should go back to the others. We can't stay very long, though I wish we could," he says gently, surprised to find it true. "Thank you for showing me your ravens, Mordred. I hope we'll see each other again soon."

Mordred turns and winds arms around Arthur's waist, hugging him once more. "I know we will."

Back on the other side of the hill where they'd left the others, another Druid has joined Iseldir, a elderly woman. She's scarcely taller than Mordred, though she holds herself stern and upright, her hair coarse and grey as a mare's tail, caught in a long braid. In one hand she carries a short staff.
made from an oak branch. This must be the ollamh, Nechthana.

"Bow," Mordred hisses, tugging his sleeve.

He nearly says that princes do not bow, but he sees the pleading look on Merlin's face, the quiet promise of absolute vengeance on Morgana's. Coming to stand before the small woman, he gives a courtier's bow, one he would usually accord another royal.

The corners of her mouth curl the slightest bit, and though it is hard to read expression in the deep lines of her face, he thinks she is amused by him. "Well met, Prince Arthur," she says, gazing at him unblinking. Her eyes are so dark he cannot discern between pupil and iris, polished black stones, and he can see himself reflected in her gaze. "Look at you. All betwixt and between. You have done a very wise thing, bringing Lady Morgana to us."

"It is not the first time Prince Arthur has done us kindness," Iseldir says in an idle tone, placing a hand on Mordred's shoulder; the boy grins smugly.

Arthur straightens up and takes a step back from the diminutive woman. He's not entirely sure what it is she sees in him, but he finds her glittering black gaze unnerving. "We cannot stay, I regret to say, though I wish you the best of fortune." He turns to Morgana. He had planned to simply wish her well and to tell her to send a message when she was ready to return, but it all flies neatly out of his head when she embraces him. For a moment, he forgets what to do with his arms, returning the hug belatedly. He can count on the fingers of one hand how many times she's hugged him like this since they were children.

"Thank you, Arthur," she says warmly. She loosens her grip but catches his face in her hands and plants a kiss on his cheek before letting him go entirely, laughing at his scowl.

Arthur grumbles in half-hearted irritation as he scrubs at the smear of carmine he knows to be on his cheek. Every damned time. "Ask Mordred to send one of his ravens when you are ready to return, and we will come escort you home," he mutters with feigned ill-grace. He gives a small departing bow to the Druids, then returns to Llamrei and mounts up, ready to be off.

Merlin takes a large, oddly-contoured bundle from the Hellion's saddle and gives it over to Iseldir, holding the other man's gaze a moment. He doesn't say a word, but Iseldir's brows lift in surprise. Arthur is suddenly reminded of the rumours he once heard that sorcerers could speak to each other in their minds. The Druid gives a low bow when Merlin steps away, much to his obvious discomfort.

With that, they leave the Druid camp. Arthur glances behind him as they ride back the way they came, Merlin once more leading them through the trees, and finds himself smiling when he sees Mordred leading Morgana in the direction of the camp by the hand, almost hopping with exuberance. The faint sounds of laughter follow them through the forest. They regain the trail quicker than they had left it, and back on the path, Arthur has the idle thought if perhaps he should start keeping count of all the times he's committed treason. He doesn't think he'll be able to keep up for very long. The thought alone should have horrified him, and yet now he finds it only passing humorous. Gods have mercy on him, he's becoming a heretic.

"Well done, Arthur," Merlin says, bringing the Hellion alongside Llamrei and drawing him from his musing.

"Was it?"

"It was. Thank you for this. Truly."
Arthur hums, hoping it doesn't show on his face how much the simple bit of praise means to him, and he quietly despairs of the fact that the opinion of his manservant means more to him than near anyone else's. "What was that you left with Iseldir?" he asks for distraction.

Merlin gives him a small half-smile. "Oh, things."

Rolling his eyes, Arthur swats at him with the end of the reins. "Will you ever run out of secrets, Merlin?"

"Nah, you'd get bored."

"Of a certainty." Glancing back at the other knights, Arthur takes note of Lancelot's quietly forlorn expression, no doubt missing Guinevere already, and he whistles sharply for their attention. "Well, then, seeing as how we've lost our more delicate companions, why not a race? Last one back to Camelot buys the first round at the Cockerel." Turning forward once more, he reaches over and shoves Merlin's shoulder hard, pushing him halfway out of the saddle, then claps heels to Llamrei's flanks. She takes off into a gallop, full-tilt down the empty road, and Arthur laughs gleefully as the others give chase after him, Merlin cursing him all the while.
Merlin comes to waking all at once, sitting upright and immediately regretting it as the world lurches around him. He leans to one side and retches onto the leafy ground, tasting bile in the back of his mouth. As the dizziness fades, he reaches up to touch the back of his head where a sharp, throbbing pain is focused, wincing as he touches a raw spot, hair sticky with blood. There's a stinging pain in his thigh as well, and as he stares at his leg in puzzlement, the memories crash back onto him in a rush.

The weather had turned cold earlier than usual this year, a brisk chill moving in as summer faded into autumn, but today had been pleasantly mild, one last gasp of warmth before the cold came in for good. Arthur had suggested one last good hunt before they all became occupied with the harvest and the preparations for winter. They had started off in a larger party with several other knights and nobles, but as was wont, they split up into smaller groups and spread out in search of game. Leon, Merlin, Arthur, and Lancelot had ended up on their own, venturing far off from the others. They'd stopped to rest the horses, and Arthur had followed Merlin down to the river, idly complaining about harvest time being one of the worst times of year for raiders and bandits. As if summoned by his words, an arrow had come hissing out of the undergrowth from the opposite bank, striking Merlin square in the thigh, a thankfully pathetic shot. He'd scarce had time to shout before at least a half-dozen men had come charging down the bank for them. He had been drawing his magic to him when a terrific blow caught him from behind, sending him collapsing into darkness.

"Merlin? Merlin, can you hear me?" Lancelot asks, summoning him back to the present. From the tone of his voice, it's not the first time he's said Merlin's name trying to gain his attention. The other knight is crouched on his heels beside him, one hand on his shoulder. His other arm is bound up in a makeshift sling made from his cloak, held close to his chest, and just a few paces away, there is Leon, but...

"Arthur, where's Arthur?" Merlin demands, struggling to his feet despite Lancelot's attempt to keep him seated. Standing makes him dizzy all over again, but he manages it, ignoring the bright spots around the edges of his vision. "I said, where is he?"

"They took him." Leon holds up both hands as the younger man rounds on him, hands in fists and a shimmer of gold dancing through his eyes. "Hold, Merlin!" he warns. "He's all right. We can still get him back."

Merlin narrows his eyes. "All right? How can he possibly be all right if he's been captured?"

"Because of this," Lancelot interjects, calmly stepping between the brothers. He holds up a slightly crumpled scroll of parchment, handing it to Merlin. "It's a ransom note, addressed for Uther. We caught a rider bearing for Camelot just before you woke. Arthur's been taken by a man named Hengist, he leads a band of outlaws."

"But—"

"If Arthur has been taken for ransom, then he's going to be all right, because you can't very well trade a dead hostage," Lancelot insists, overriding Merlin's protest. "And I've heard of this Hengist before. He's not an idiot, and he will know that if Arthur is killed, then Uther will stop at nothing to avenge him."

Shoving a hand back through his hair, Merlin paces away from the pair of them. The pain in his
leg and head is already fading as his magic works subconsciously to heal it, driven by the sickening knot of worry and fear in the pit of his belly. He unrolls the parchment and reads over the crudely scrawled words. Lancelot's right. It is indeed a ransom note for the king, demanding a payment of gold to be delivered to the Vale of Denaria in exchange for the safe return of Prince Arthur. There's a slight weight rolled up in the bottom of the parchment: a gold pin wrought in the shape of a sun, a tiny piece of sunstone in the centre. Merlin closes his hand around it, feeling the points of the rays digging into his palm.

Turning on heel, he marches back over to the other two. "The rider, where is he?" he demands; Lancelot points to an unconscious man propped up against a tree, lashed firmly to it with a length of rope, also looped around his ankles. He'd been so still, Merlin hadn't even noticed him before. Snatching up his quarterstaff and one of the waterskins, he walks over to the man, pulls out the cork, and pours water over his head until he comes awake with a startled, sputtering gasp. "Where is Hengist?" Merlin demands, not bothering with niceties.

The outlaw squints up at him, dripping water and looking rather like a half-drowned rat. He's probably not even six-and-ten, Merlin realises, a small spark of pity lighting in his chest. The boy spits out a few choice words, and that spark gutters out. Twisting his quarterstaff sharply, he smacks the boy atop the head with it. Not enough to do him real harm, but enough to set his ears ringing for certain. "Hengist! The Prince! Where?"

The boy shakes his head a few times, blinking dazedly, then mumbles something indistinct. Merlin bends at the waist to hear him. "What was that?"

"He'll kill me," the boy mumbles out.

"I'll do worse to you than that. Look at me." Merlin waits until the boy's gaze lifts to his, his magic surging up against his skin. The ropes tighten around the boy's wrists and ankles, biting deep into his skin, and he knows from the terrified whimper that his eyes have gone gold. "Speak, or I will lay a curse on you." He points the end of the quarterstaff at the boy's chest, then moves it lower until it's level with his belt. He doesn't actually know how to make a curse, at least not in practice, but nobody knows that but him.

"There's ruins! An old castle," the boy gabbles out, his face turning the colour of old porridge. "Past the Vale of Denaria. Hengist made it his stronghold."

"Good lad. How many men?"

"I dunno, I swear. A lot, though. A whole lot." He swallows hard, eyes wide and fearful. "Was... was that really the Prince they caught?"

Merlin stares at him. "Are you saying you didn't know if it was him or not?"

A rapid head shake. "Hengist has never seen him, just heard about him, said we oughta come look in the Darkling Wood." The boy squirms in his bonds. "You're not gonna curse me, are you? I told you all I know, I swear. Hengist don't tell me anything, I'm just a runner, that's all, I promise, I swear, I—"

"Swefe," Merlin says with a flick of the wrist, and the boy sags in his bonds, chin dropping to his chest. Straightening up, he turns to look at Lancelot and Leon. "Well, then. What do we do?"

Leon heaves a deep sigh and waves them both over. Kneeling on the ground, he sweeps aside a bit of leaf mat to expose a patch of soil. Taking up a twig, he scratches a rough map into the soft soil. "I know the ruined castle the boy spoke of. There's only one to be found beyond the Vale of
Denaria that's suited to be any kind of stronghold, maybe a half-day's ride from the vale," he explains, gesturing with the twig. "However, if Hengist does have enough men, then it cannot be easily taken by force."

"Should we take the note to the King, then?" Lancelot suggests; the brothers shake their heads in unison.

"Uther will not pay the ransom. He's far too proud, and he would sooner send soldiers than gold. It'd be a slaughter, and Hengist will certainly kill Arthur the moment fortune turns against him." Leon snaps the twig in his hands, scowling.

Lancelot sighs, resting his chin on one knee as he stares at the map. "What do you suggest, then? It's not as though we can walk in there and kindly ask for him back."

Having sat quietly whilst they spoke, Merlin suddenly lifts his head, eyes widening. "What if we could?" he murmurs. Leaping to his feet, he whistles for the Hellion and quickly mounts up. "I have to go back to Camelot. I know someone who can help us. The two of you wait here for me in case Hengist sends another rider, and I'll be back in a few hours." Without waiting for an answer, he turns the Hellion about and puts heels to her flanks, sending her into a gallop.

Lancelot and Leon both stare after him with mouths agape, wondering what in the gods' name just happened.

Arthur paces the length of his cramped little cell for what feels like the thousandth time, rubbing at the lingering bruises on his wrists from the iron manacles. His dagger has been taken from him, along with anything even remotely close to a weapon, even his belt and his silver bracelet. Beneath his frustration, he's almost flattered that they think him so dangerous. He's actually grateful that he didn't have his sword on him; none of these brutes can get it.

The sword holds a magic of its own. In the wrong hands, it has the power to do great evil. He doesn't even want to imagine what kind of evil a man like Hengist would be capable of doing with it.

Not for the first time, he wonders why Father's not sent some kind of response to Hengist. A dread little corner of his heart whispers Father won't come for him at all, but he's done his best to bury it deep. It's been days. Arthur knows the man's patience won't hold out for very much longer. He's more curious as to why he's not seen hide or hair of Merlin yet, as the fool boy has made it quite clear that he would sooner walk barefoot across broken glass than let Arthur handle anything even remotely dangerous on his own. He wonders if Merlin has magic great enough to defeat so many men. Arthur's not sure how many Hengist has under his command, but from the noise he can hear filtering through the small grate at the top of his cell, there's a fair number.

Liquid splashes down into the cell from the window, and Arthur jerks back from it in disgust, wrinkling his nose at the smell of sour wine, glaring upwards. The narrow window is set high in the wall, but as the cell is set a level below, the window itself sits floor-level to the great hall above. He'd thought to climb through it when he was first locked in, but even if it were not barred, the opening is far too small for even a child to fit through, never mind a grown man.

Suddenly he hears a great uproar of noise from the hall, and then Hengist's resonating voice rises above the clamour, "Look here! At long last, our awaited guest has arrived, the King's messenger boy!"

Arthur inhales sharply, suddenly wishing he hadn't been so damned insistent on being treated a prisoner rather than a guest. However, if he gets on the cot and stands on his very toes, he can just
peer through the narrow grate into the hall; by a rare stroke of luck, he has a clear view of the envoys. The man can't be more than ten years Arthur's elder, perhaps five-and-thirty, wearing finery suited to a middling noble. His hair is twisted in a knot at the nape of his neck, an ivory hairpin thrust through it. Arthur's never seen him before in his life. No member of court, that's certain, but who else would his father send as an envoy?

"And which one of Uther's lapdogs are you?" Hengist asks cheerfully, no doubt in good spirits now that his demands are clearly about to be met.

"My name is Dara," the man replies. "And I am no King's lackey."

All at once, the temperature of the hall seems to drop, and Arthur's heart seizes tightly in his chest, the faint stir of hope vanishing. He grips the edge of the stone window hard, trying to pull himself up to see better.

Hengist leans forward in his seat, glaring at him. "What did you say?"

"I said I serve no King, but I am here for your prisoner."

With a sharp jerk of his arm, Hengist draws a knife from his belt and slams it point-first into the tabletop. The blade is old and ill-cared for, pitted with rust, but the edges of it are honed fine, glittering deadly keen. "I suggest you start talking sense before I have your tongue out here and now," he snarls.

Dara merely lifts his eyebrows, unperturbed; definitely not a courtier, Arthur decides. "Very well. Will you hear my terms?"

"I have already set terms, and Uther had best meet them if he wants to see his little princeling again."

"I am quite certain King Uther would be glad to meet your terms, my lord. If you actually held the Prince hostage."

The entire hall goes silent. Hengist stills. "What?"

His legs are starting to ache from standing on his toes like this, and he shifts his weight impatiently, trying to listen.

Still wholly calm, as if he is not in very real danger of being fed to a wolddeer, Dara continues. "I am the proprietor of an establishment in Camelot called the Pavilion, and the man you hold hostage is not the Prince. He is an employee who I would like to have returned. I'm certain you and your men have been patrons of mine at one point or another, and if not mine then another's. Our profession is...quite widespread, after all."

Arthur nearly falls off the cot. Surely he's not heard that correctly. Surely he did not just hear the proprietor of a brothel claim him to be a courtesan. Surely not.

Hengist leans forward in his seat, gripping the knife hilt so tightly his knuckles turn white. "You lie. We didn't snatch him off his knees in some back alley. He was out in the Darkling Wood, with two nobles and a servant besides. How do you explain that, if he is not the Prince?"

"Hm. Why ever would a courtesan be out alone in the wood with two men and a servant?" Dara cocks his head in a parody of thoughtfulness. "No, you are right, I simply couldn't fathom." He gives Hengist the sort of look one would usually give a particularly slow-witted fool or an ignorant child. "No ransom has been forthcoming, has it? Nor any other response to your demands?" He
spreads his hands before him. "Why do you think that is? Because Uther is laughing at you, my martial friend, safe in his shining white castle with his son at his side. Why would he give you so much as single copper for one of my workers?"

Hengist stares at the other man for long moment, eyes narrowed. "And how do I know you aren't lying?" he asks at last.

"I believe you know I am not."

The hall is utterly silent for a span of heartbeats as the two men hold each other's gazes, a silent contest of wills. Finally, Hengist says in a deeply suspicious tone, "Describe him, then, if he is one of yours."

Dara sounds supremely bored with the entire conversation, yet he sighs and obliges. "About so tall —" He sketches a gesture in the air right at Arthur's height. "Shoulders like an ox, hair the colour of honey, and a mouth made for sin. And an abominable temper as well. I will accede he does bear passing resemblance to the Prince. Matter of fact, it makes him a favourite amongst my patrons, but if he is a royal, then I am the Fisher King."

Hengist's unhandsome face flushes several interesting colours, his enormous fists clenching hard. "If what you say is true, then why should I not just kill him now? And you with him, for that matter?" he demands.

The other man's cool demeanor doesn't waver a degree. "Dead men tell no tales, and dead courtesans earn no gold. I have a patron in Camelot who is...passing fond of him and asks for no other. He's given to me a rather handsome sum to deliver to you in exchange for his safe return. Not as much as you planned to extort from the King, certainly, but enough to make it worth your while. Killing him or myself will get you nothing. You're a passably intelligent man, Hengist. Some gold is better than no gold, is it not?"

"I could kill you anyways. This ransom of yours can't be all that far, now, can it?"

Dara gives him a languid smile. "You could try if you wish, but I assure you, one does not ascend to where I am now by being a fool. I can take him and leave, and you will have your ransom, or you can kill us both and have nothing but two corpses. It is up to you."

Again there is nothing but silence in the hall. Not a single chair squeaks, no leathers creak. Finally, Hengist leans back in his chair, shoving the knife back into the sheath on his belt. "Take your whore, then. One of my men is going to accompany you, make sure you pay what you owe. You try to cross me, and I'll feed you to the beasts in these caverns one piece at a time," he warns, the weight of his tone making it abundantly clear exactly which piece of them he would start with.

Arthur lets out a breath he hadn't realised he held.

One of the men, the one with keys to the dungeon, stands up and escorts Dara out of the hall. Hastily, Arthur climbs down and instead sits on the cot, listening to the faint murmuring coming from the hall above him. Over the sound, however, he can hear footsteps, two sets, coming down the corridor towards his cell, the blessed sound of jangling keys. The door swings open.

Dara's impressively calm façade doesn't give away the slightest flicker of emotion upon seeing him, except perhaps a sort of exasperation. "It would seem sending you on assignation outside the city walls is a mistake not to be repeated," he observes dryly; Arthur ducks his head and does his best to appear contrite. Dara claps his hands together once, like a lord summoning his attendant, then turns and walks away. Knowing a cue when he sees one, Arthur leaps to his feet and makes to
follow.

The gaoler catches hold of his arm when he tries to pass, however, drawing to a sharp halt. "Perhaps we oughta hold onto this one a little while longer. He's prettier than half the whores in Mercia."

Arthur gives brief thought to breaking the man's arm, but before he can even draw away, Dara is at his side. Quick as a flash, he snatches the pin from his hair and puts it beneath the gaoler's chin. The ivory is ornately carved at one end, made into the likeness of flowers, but the other end is sharpened to a point lethal as any dagger. "Patrons pay me for our services. I do not pay them," he says coolly.

The gaoler drops his hand.

"Wise choice." Dara turns and walks away once more, sliding the pin neatly back into his hair, which somehow hadn't fallen down when he removed it.

Stepping out into open air after near four days in a rank cell is a near staggering experience. Arthur draws in a deep breath that doesn't carry the smell of sour wine, cheap ale, or unwashed bodies. The breeze is cold, but he's glad of even that. There's a man waiting at the gates, at least a head taller than him, the haft of a great battle axe shoved through his belt. "Our escort to the ransom, I imagine?" Dara says idly, as though greeting a passing guard; the massive man jerks his chin. "And I'm certain you have orders to dispatch us in a most gruesome and efficient manner should we attempt subterfuge? Splendid. Shall we go? I hate to leave my business unattended overlong."

Any doubt Arthur has as to who would ever be mad enough to concoct this mummer's gambit evaporate when they leave through the gates of Hengist's fortress. Tethered to the remnants of what had once been a wagon is that damned spotted horse, the infamously ill-tempered Hellion. Merlin. Of course. Of course. Arthur didn't know a single other person with the nerve to cast him as some...woman of the night. The moment they are back in Camelot, he is going to lock that little wretch in the stocks for a month.

"Do you have a horse, or shall we walk?" Dara asks of the man as he unties the reins. When he gets nothing but a glower in return, he nods. "Then walk we shall. However, I would suggest you fetch one of those pack mules, unless you intend to carry it all back yourself."

When the man turns away, Arthur casts a glance towards the Hellion, glancing over her saddle; Merlin keeps a spare dagger in his kit, always has. A hand touches the small of his back, just the slightest pressure. He looks to Dara. The other man is still watching the mercenary, but the impassive calm of his expression is message enough. He stays where he is.

The mercenary returns leading a rather pitiful-looking mule, and the three of them start down the trail on foot. Arthur keeps glancing at the woods to either side of the path, wondering where Merlin is, where Leon and Lancelot are. Surely they must be close, they wouldn't leave this to chance. Still, they walk on and on, and he sees neither hide or hair of them.

Abruptly, Dara stops, and the mercenary narrows his small eyes, one hand coming to rest on the haft of his axe. "Easy, dear fellow. We've arrived." He hands the Hellion's reins to Arthur—gripping his hand hard and tight in silent warning—then walks over to a cluster of thick shrubbery on the wayside. Shoving back a tangle of woody limbs, he leans down, grabs hold of something, and seems to pull back a section of the ground. No, not ground. A blanket, now of indeterminate colour, laid over a quickly-dug pit and covered over with leaf litter and topsoil so as to be invisible. Arthur's impressed despite himself. No fool, indeed. In the shallow pit lay four bulging sacks.
The mercenary strides over, crouching beside the hole. Arthur can't see past his broad back, but he knows the man must certainly be opening the sacks, seeing if they were truly full of coin and not grain. When he straightens again, Dara gives him a perfectly cordial smile. "And thus, our business is concluded," he declares. With that, he turns and walks back onto the trail. Taking the reins from Arthur, he puts one foot in the stirrup and pulls himself astride; the Hellion snorts and stamps, tossing her particoloured mane impatiently. He nudges her forward, slow enough that Arthur can keep up on foot so long as he doesn't drag his feet. The mercenary lets them go without a word of protest, hauling the sacks over to the mule.

Once they've ridden a fair distance down the trail, surely far enough to be out of earshot, Dara pulls the Hellion to a stop and laughs aloud, shoulders slumping. "And that is how one does it," he chortles. He jumps down from the saddle and turns to Arthur with a smile. "I'm glad to see you unharmed, your highness."

"Merlin sent you?" Arthur demands.

"Indeed. He's rather clever, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's certainly something, namely a fool, and as soon as I get my hands on him, he'll be a dead fool."

Dara raises his eyebrows but doesn't comment.

"And you, you're actually paying them?" he demands, pointing back in the direction of the fortress. "Are you out of your mind?"

Dara offers him a small, dry smile. "Of course not. There is a glamour cast on those sacks, your highness. A temporary illusion. When Hengist and his men open them, they will indeed see a great deal of wealth. For about two days. After that, the illusion will fade, and they will see that they have been paid with nothing more than stones from yon riverbank. By which time we will all be safe within the walls of Camelot, well beyond their reach. Come along. The others are waiting for us just ahead."

Arthur stares after him a moment, blinking at the casual mention of magic, then follows. Sure enough, Merlin and both of his knights are waiting around a sharp curve in the trail, their horses tied up, along with an unfamiliar grey palfrey that must be Dara's. The moment he and Dara come into view, Merlin lets out a victorious whoop, leaping to his feet. "I told you it would work, did I not?"

"If any of you breathe a word of this to anyone, I swear, I'll have all three of you in the dungeons for a month," Arthur snarls as he marches over, shoving aside the still-laughing young man to untie Llamrei.

"Oh, hell," Lancelot grumbles.

Arthur's grateful at least one person takes him seriously, but it dissipates when he sees Lancelot toss a silver coin apiece to Merlin and Leon. Unbelievable.

He manages to hold his tongue as they ride past the Vale of Denaria and all while they make camp at the foot of the mountains. They could have saved a day by going through the caverns, but after having seen several men eaten by wilddeoren, he has absolutely no desire to try the venture. Once it has gone fully dark, however, and the others are all asleep, Arthur can't keep silent. Striding around the fire, he gives Merlin's side not-so-gentle nudges with one boot until he wakes. When drowsy eyes finally focus up at him, he props his fists on his hips, glaring down at his fool
manservant. "You do just leave them strewn about, don't you?" he demands.

"Huh?"

"People who know entirely too much about you."

Merlin smiles a little. He sits up, gathering his blanket around his shoulders, and gestures to the empty space beside him; still glowering, Arthur sits down. "If you are talking about Dara, then I didn't tell him anything," he reassures in a low voice. "I've never done magic in his presence, either. He simply...knows. I don't know how. Perhaps he has gifts of his own, I couldn't say. But he is a friend, and he has never done anything to make me believe that he means harm. In fact, he does a great deal of good for the crown."

Arthur stares at him. "How on earth could the proprietor of a brothel do any good for the crown?" he asks.

The young man smiles, that sly little smile that doesn't show teeth or dimples, which Arthur has come to recognise as a mark of deviousness. "Because a number of his people can boast of positions in the royal household," he replies. Arthur nearly leaps to his feet in disbelief, but Merlin's hand seizes his arm, holding him still. "Calm. They mean no harm. They turn their attentions on Uther's many visitors. Dignitaries from other kingdoms and such. You would be surprised how a man's tongue will wag when sotted, sated, and sleepy. As I understand it, Dara has been privy to at least three plots to sow discord in times of peace, and given that none have come to fruition, I would say that he's been quite successful in halting them."

Arthur's mouth opens and closes, foundering for words. He can scarce believe what he's hearing, and yet the calm, matter-of-fact way Merlin says it gives no evidence of a lie or jest. He glances across the fire at the sleeping man, scowling, and resolves to question him tomorrow. "How do you know him so well, then?" he asks instead. He can't imagine Merlin ever visiting a bordello; the thought alone twists something unpleasant in his gut.

"Not the way you're thinking," the younger man replies with a smile. "He owns the Cockerel as well as the Pavilion. We're friends, nothing more. You could thank him, by the way. He's only out here because I asked, and he took a great risk going on his own," Merlin adds with a pointed look. He nudges Arthur with an elbow. "Get some rest. I'll take watch. We'll be back to Camelot tomorrow, and since I came up with the plan to have you rescued, you can come up with a convincing lie for the King."

The next morning, as they break camp, Arthur walks over to Dara as the other man is saddling his horse. His hair is unbound, falling in loose waves just past his shoulders, the colour of hammered bronze. "Forgive me if I was ungracious yesterday," he begins, somewhat awkward, not quite certain how exactly to conduct himself. It's not as though he often spends time in such company; however, though he'd never admit it in so many words, Merlin is right. He'd acted the ass. "I was... not in the best temper, and..." Dara smells nice, he notices absently. Like orchids, something earthy and sweet. Mentally shaking himself, he says in a passably steady voice, "You saved my life and managed it without a drop of blood spilled. I'm in your debt."

"That's a pleasant place to have you," Dara replies, rolling out the words deliberately, eyes sliding up and down the length of him, and to his utter chagrin, Arthur feels himself flush to the roots of his hair. "It's no matter, your highness. I imagine that Merlin has told you about the work I do, aside from the obvious, of course. I made an offer of such to the King once. My assistance, not my services," he adds at the look of quiet horror on Arthur's face. "He refused, of course, because what worthwhile aid could a mere courtesan offer a sovereign?" His deep gaze slides over Arthur once more, but more in the way one might measure up a potential opponent. "One hopes that his heir
will learn from his mistakes."

"Why?" Arthur wonders, regaining his voice at last, though it comes out rougher than he intends.

"Camelot is my home as much as it is yours. Do you think I do not care for it simply because of what I do?" Reaching in the pocket of his coat, he takes out his hairpin, holding it up. The top of it is ornately carved, a cluster of tiny anemones, artfully tinted with colour to imitate the flowers. "Your father did exactly what near everyone else does. He sees only the surface of things—" A deft twist of the fingers, and the hairpin is reversed in his grip, showing the deadly-sharp point. "—without bothering to look beneath. But I believe you know a great deal about how deceiving appearances can be." Placing the pin between his teeth, he gathers up his hair with both hands, neatly pulling it back and somehow tying it in a knot around itself so it stays in place, then jabs the pin through as he had yesterday. Just like that, it seems mere adornment, not a weapon.

"More every day," Arthur murmurs under his breath, wondering how he manages it so tidily and if his hair is as soft as it looks. "I…I'd be glad of your aid."

Dara smiles once more, but this time there is something genuine in it. "Good to know." He reaches into a pouch at his belt and withdraws something small, pressing it into Arthur's palm. It's an ivory token, no bigger than a gold coin; etched in subtle relief on each side is an anemone flower. "Show this to any of my people, and they'll bring you directly to me, in case you ever need my assistance. Or anything else," he adds slyly.

Another flush of prickling heat washes through him, and Arthur can do little more than stammer nonsense, tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. He manages something passably close to a 'thank you' and hurries back to Llamrei, stumbling over empty air. He manages to miss the stirrup at first attempt, and he's glad to have the wind in their faces when they head out, able to blame his flush on the cold.

Father isn't at all pleased with their extended absence, though Arthur manages to make a convincing story of pursuing a white hart and forgetting to send a message in their haste to keep its trail. It works, at least in part. Father orders him to take an extra shift on patrol, but suggests they might go hunting for it together another time.

He does put Merlin in the stocks, too. But only for a day. Just on principle.

"Enjoy yourself?" Arthur queries brightly when Merlin comes into his chambers.

The young man gives him a sour look, his hair still curling with damp, a faint smell of vegetables and soap lingering about him. "Immensely, sire," he retorts.

"Good. Since I've had an extra round of patrol this week, my chainmail will need to be cleaned again. My boots, too."

Merlin makes a rude gesture recognised the world over, muttering under his breath about exactly what Arthur could do with his chainmail and boots. He gathers up the offending items, throwing them all in a sturdy basket along with his laundry, but stops when he turns towards the door. "Oh, here. I nearly forgot." Setting down the basket, he crosses the chambers, dips one hand in a pocket, then reaches up to tug at Arthur's collar, the tip of his tongue between his teeth. His knuckles brush the underside of Arthur's jaw, rough and warm. "There. Hengist sent it with the ransom note," he says with a grin. "I meant to give it to you earlier, but it must have slipped my mind when I was being pelted with cabbage."
Arthur touches his collar, confused, then understands when his fingers brush the familiar shape of the sunstone pin, still warm from Merlin's body. Hengist had taken it from him with his bracelet and dagger, neither of which he'd recovered; he'd quietly despaired of losing it. "Thank you."

"Lose it again, and I'm keeping it," Merlin threatens, the curl of his lips belying his words.

Arthur swats at him, and the young man ducks it with a laugh, darting away. He exhales a slow breath as Merlin leaves his chambers, having to lean back against the edge of the table. First Dara, now Merlin... At this rate, they'll kill him faster than any outlaw.
Autumn passes quickly this year, the cold moving in sooner than usual, and there’s a brief rush to ensure that sufficient stock is brought in before ruined by frost. Arthur's days are mostly filled with patrol, as harvest is when raiders and bandits are at their boldest. Aside from that, there is also the usual disputes to be settled in court, claims of being shorted on tithes and food shares, which always appear with greater frequency before winter. And of course, Father expects him to take count of the castle's stock as well. The weather might no longer be fair enough for regular riding parties or hunts, but he doesn't want for occupation.

It'd surprised, amused, and also rather touched him when he returned from court one day to find Merlin sitting at his desk, peering over the reports. Apparently, Sir Lionel quite firmly believed in educating his sons equally, including how to run an estate, and had even allowed them to manage Silverpine for a time. Arthur had shooed him away with halfhearted scolding about a castle being vastly different from a minor holding, but when he found a scrap of parchment tucked in his notes, covered in Merlin's rapid scrawl, well...he didn't throw it away.

He doesn't see a great deal of Merlin during the harvest festivals, Mabon or Samhain. Not to say that Merlin doesn't perform his duties admirably, because he does. It's almost disturbing. When he asked to be dismissed early, Arthur hadn't been able to find an excuse to keep him there, and a part of him knots up unpleasantly at the idea of Merlin going to pass the time with some girl or anyone else.

It isn't until winter's fully settled in and Yule is fast approaching that he remembers what Merlin had told him months before. Do you think I can observe the festivals of the Old Religion here? Vigil. Merlin has begged off his duties not to go get drunk with the rest of the servants or his friends, but to sit vigil.

Staring out the windows at the fresh layer of snow blanketing Camelot, he wonders how on earth anyone could stand to be outside for any extended amount of time.

He doesn't ask Merlin himself, obviously; when the young man asks permission to leave, Arthur grants it without protest. It's passing strange, to attend the Yule feast without his manservant's quiet remarks at his shoulder, making pointed jabs at the other nobles wintering in Camelot and the admittedly ludicrous pageantry of it all. Morgana does well to make up the lack, however. Since her return from the Druids, she's gained a new sort of gravity, an abiding surety of herself she hadn't possessed before. Arthur's glad of it, seeing her truly happy.

"Forgive me, Father, but I believe I've overindulged," he says, forcing a slur into his words. "Might I retire for the night?"

Father waves him off, half in his cups as well and laughing with it.

He makes a show of stumbling out of his chair and walking an uneven line from the hall, but once out of sight of the revelers, Arthur straightens up and makes for his chambers at a brisk pace. Drawing on his warmest attire, he draws on a heavy woolen cloak and leaves as quickly as he'd came, making his way out of the castle and into the upper city, making directly for the de Galis townhouse.

"Arthur." Leon actually rubs a hand over his eyes as if he's not entirely sure the prince stands before him. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"
"No, not at all. Is Merlin about?" Arthur sighs in relief at the warmth inside the townhouse, pushing his hood back off his head.

Leon snorts and leads him back into the kitchens, where it is warmest, and he points out the rear window. Barely visible through the frosted glass in the dark, a tall, lean figure appears to be clearing away the snow from beneath the small quickbeam tree in the far corner of the garden. "Just like every year. Stubborn little wretch. Care for some perry cider? By chance there's some left."

"Just a measure. How long has he done this?" Arthur wonders, jerking his chin towards the window.

A bit of rummaging turns up a bottle which still sloshes when moved. Leon hums thoughtfully, tilting his head as he pours a measure of still warm cider into a glass and hands it over. "Well, he didn't start until we came to Camelot for my squiring, and it was a few months after that, so since he was...two-and-ten?"

Arthur nearly drops his cup. Two-and-ten? He'd barely been a squire at that age.

Not noticing his prince's shocked expression, Leon goes on, exasperation and fondness layering his tone. "The warmer months weren't so bad, save for the damn insects, but in autumn and winter, he'd sit out there in the cold for hours, refuse to come inside. Father used to have to pick him up and carry him in so he didn't freeze to death. I think he's acclimated himself to it by now, though I still worry. Not that it does any good. Little villain is far too stubborn for his own good sometimes."

"Where did he even get the idea?" Arthur wonders, shaking his head. It doesn't occur to most young boys to sit vigil overnight in frigid weather, especially not during celebrations.

Leon shrugs. "Can't say. Perhaps in one of his books." He glances out the window. "If you wish to speak to him, sire, you'd best do it now. Once he settles in, he stays put."

"Right." Arthur gathers his cloak around him and heads out through the kitchen door into the garden. Lady Evaine's carefully tended herbs and vegetables are all reduced to brittle husks of themselves, coated over with frost. Snow crunches softly underfoot as he crosses between the sections of plants towards the lone quickbeam.

The small patch of grass beneath the tree is the only clear bit of ground in the garden as Merlin is busily sweeping aside the snow, his back to Arthur. "Leon, I've already told you, I'm not—"

"Yes, well, I'm not Leon," Arthur cuts him off with a smirk.

Merlin nearly slips on the frosted grass as he whirls around. "Arthur! What are you doing here?" His eyes narrow suspiciously, and he props his hands on his hips. "You said that I was dismissed for the night. If you've come up with some ridiculous chore, I swear..."

Arthur holds up both hands to show them empty and harmless, chuckling. "No, no, nothing like that," he reassures with a smile, quickly tucking his hands back into his cloak. Even with his gloves on, it's frigid cold. He tries to imagine sitting outside like this and shivers at the very thought. "You told me once that you sit vigil during the longest night. I came to see if you truly would do it in this weather. I see you are."

Setting aside the rake he'd been using to clear the snow, Merlin levels a flat, unimpressed look at him. "I don't care to be mocked, Arthur. Not in this," he warns in a low, solemn voice.
"I'm not," Arthur replies quickly. "I'm not, truly." He surveys the patch of dead, frosted grass before the tree's gnarled roots. "So, this is it, then? You sit out here...how long? The rest of the night?"

Still regarding him warily, Merlin nods. "Until the bells ring come dawn."

"Why?"

Another stretch of long silence, the two of them staring at each other, but finally, Merlin replies in a softer voice, "For those who are made to live in fear. For those who have already lost their lives. In Silverpine...it is different because I am free. And here, I am not. Not truly. Betimes, it is hard, and this...this is what I have." With that, he walks over and kneels down on the ground, sitting back on his heels.

Arthur exhales slowly, then eyes up the exposed patch of frozen ground beneath the quickbeam. Taking a deep breath, he steps over and kneels beside Merlin, shivering as the cold immediately leaches into his legs.

Merlin stares at him. "What are you doing?"

"Embroidery, Merlin. What does it look like I am doing?"

"You're not sitting out here with me."

"Mm, but I am."

"Arthur."

He arches his eyebrows at the younger man. "I understand that vigils are normally kept in silence, yes? I know it comes difficult to you, but I'm certain you can manage it." Sighing, he draws his cloak tighter around him, suppressing a shiver. He's very likely mad for doing this, but he isn't about to back out now. He's put himself on this path, and he'll see it through. "Merlin, just...tell me, what do you do? When you sit out here on your own, in the cold and the dark, what do you do?"

Merlin sighs as well, sounding exasperated, but he's given up arguing, at the least. "Meditate, I suppose. Reflect on my mistakes, try to understand. Pray." He shrugs one shoulder.

"Very well, then." Arthur draws up his hood, tucks his hands beneath his arms, and sits back on his heels decisively. He can feel Merlin staring holes into the side of his head, but he refuses to move. He means to do this, damn it. After a span of heartbeats, he hears the rustle of cloth as Merlin settles his weight beside him, his breathing turning slow and measured.

Faintly, Arthur can hear the sounds of revelry and merrymaking going on elsewhere in the upper city, perhaps even from the lower town as well. He knows the guard shift has changed when he hears rounds of bawdy, drunken laughter moving from the castle and down towards the lower town, no doubt making directly for the tavern or the Pavilion. Or both. Arthur wonders what Dara does on Yule, if he only serves certain patrons or opens the doors to all.

His knees are aching. He shifts his weight, trying to find a more comfortable patch of ground. He wonders how Merlin stands it, unmoving as he is, if his wounds ache in the cold. His own bitten shoulder feels stiff as anything, a dull ache spreading down his upper arm and into his chest. *Now we match,* Merlin had said when Arthur had seen the horrific burn on his chest, making light of it. He wonders if the scar hurts, if his ribs ache underneath it. If it does, the young man shows no sign of it. He seems to have gone so deep inside himself he hardly appears alive; only the rhythmic rise of vapor from his breath gives sign that he breathes at all.
Somewhere, in the distance, he hears the horologist crying the hour. It's later than he'd thought. He tips his head back to gaze at the night sky through the tree's naked branches, glittering diamonds scattered across a field of endless black velvet. He thinks about the empty spaces between the stars and grows dizzy, turning his gaze back down to the frosted garden before him.

Pray, Merlin had said. Arthur doesn't know the gods of the Old Religion, surely there are many, but he does know at least one, or technically, three: the Triple Goddess. The Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. They are who Merlin calls on, and he'd even heard Leon invoke them from time to time. There's never been much worship in his upbringing, though some could argue his adulation of his father might pass for a twisted form of it. He's not entirely sure how it goes, what it is he's supposed to do. But surely, if they are goddesses, they can forgive him his inadequacy. He feels that at the very least he ought to try.

I don't know if you can hear me, if you would listen to a Pendragon, and I suppose you'd be right not to. But I wish to confess to you anyways. I'm sorry. I have done wrong by you and your people. I've killed those who have done me no harm. I've profaned your sacred places. I'm sorry. I know that isn't good enough. I cannot undo what's been done, but I can learn from it. I'm trying to. I swear I am. I was wrong before, I see it now, and I'm trying, even though I am still sometimes afraid. Maiden, grant me mercy. Mother, give me strength. Crone, help me be wise. I will understand if you cannot forgive me, but at least have mercy on me. And I will try to be good.

The words come to him from nowhere, and yet they feel right, and though it might well be his own imagination, a sense of mystery passes over him like the brush of some vast, intangible wing, a presence that is as old as the sky above him and the earth below him. Arthur resolves to offer up his own suffering as penance, though it is hardly enough for all he has done. Hours of abject, frigid misery has done well to disperse any romantic illusions he might've had about his purpose for doing this; he had made his offer in pride and vanity. He couldn't hope to match Merlin's discipline, not in this. But he could suffer and endure. That much he could do.

The night wears on hour by hour, and he grows colder, so cold he begins trembling violently. Curling his arms tightly around himself, he hunches over and huddles in on himself as best he can. His bones ache down to the marrow. All his joints lock and stiffen but for his jaws, which he couldn't keep from chattering. Unwilling to move his hands from the scarce warmth they have tucked up under his arms, he uses his chin to work a fold of his cloak between his teeth to quiet the noise.

Eventually, the cold goes away.

There's a great clamour from all parts of the city when the first golden rays of dawn streak the eastern horizon, and from the tower, the bells give a single clear toll to welcome the first day of the new year. In the gardens of the de Galis townhouse, however, there's only Merlin's deep sigh of relief. He lifts his head, craning his neck first to one side, then the other, exhaling a bright plume of silvery vapor into the cold air.

All of this, Arthur sees without truly seeing. Still huddled over himself, he smiles drowsily at a clump of grass; the sparkle of frost is beautiful in the grey dawn light.

"Arthur? Arthur?" Merlin's voice is hoarse but lively. He leans over Arthur, touching his cheek with one rough, warm hand. "Oh, Maiden's mercy, what was I thinking?"

"I'm fine," Arthur insists, or tries to. His lips are numb with cold, and his mouth is full of wool. With an effort, he spits it out. "Let me sleep. I'm tired."

"You're freezing to death is what you are," Merlin replies. "Why didn't you say something, you
clotpole? Come on, let's get you inside."

Firm hands slide beneath his arms, meaning to lift him, but Arthur wakes, struggling. "No. Let me. I can do it."

Merlin stares at him. After a moment, he withdraws his hands and rises to his feet.

It hurts to wake. Arthur uncurls his arms, braces his palms flat on the frozen ground, and levers himself upright. His spine crackles, and he gasps aloud. When he tries to get up, his legs don't obey his mind's order. Wordless, Merlin extends a hand to him; Arthur grasps it, and with a firm yank, Merlin pulls him up.

Every muscle protests any kind of movement, and as his sluggish blood begins moving again, it brings fresh pain like fire into his flesh. And yet, the Longest Night is over, and he's survived it. Arthur takes a deep breath, feeling it sear in his chest, and smiles as best his numb lips allow. "I did it."

Merlin gazes at him for a long moment, and Arthur's cold-sluggish mind can't make sense of the emotions playing across his blue eyes. "Yes, you did." A corner of his mouth twitches. "You did it, Arthur." He slides a firm arm around Arthur's waist and helps him stagger up into the townhouse on numb feet and nerveless legs.

Inside, kindly Clory stands waiting with thick blankets at the ready, still warm as if they've just been pressed with a hot iron. She bundles them both up and ushers them into the sitting room. In a chair by the hearth is Leon, in clean attire and looking surprisingly rested, and he helps them over to sit down on the thick rug in front of the hearth, pouring them both a measure of warm perry cider. Leon gives Arthur a long, inscrutable look, passing him the mug, but there's a trace of a smile to be seen on his face. The hand he rests on Arthur's shoulder is firm and warm, giving him a little shake before retiring to his chambers for a measure of sleep before the day began in earnest.

His hands are trembling so badly he has to hold the mug with both hands to keep from spilling it, and for a while, the agony of his thawing flesh is almost unbearable. He's only grateful that it's just the two of them and nobody else can see. He can't even imagine what Father would have to say about him sitting outside in the cold nearly the entire night. Eventually, though, the pain passes, and soon he's warm again, feeling loose-limbed and drowsy, the fire warming him from without and the perry cider from within.

Sitting beside him, Merlin straightens up, letting the blankets fall back off his shoulders. His ears and nose are red from heat; it makes him look endearingly young. Arthur blinks fuzzily, realising that it has been more than a full year and he has no idea when Merlin's natality is. "Thank you for staying," Merlin says at last. "Though I still think you're a fool for it."

He chuckles under his breath and looks down into his cider. His hands have finally stopped trembling. "Yes, well, you do it every year, which makes you more the fool than I, so..." Arthur leans over slightly and clinks his mug against Merlin's.

The young man snorts. "Fair enough."

Arthur's always been blessed with a hardy constitution, but this winter it fails him. The day after his vigil, his throat is sore and scratchy, and he thinks he's feverish. The day after, he knows he is, and his head feels as though it's stuffed with cotton-wrapped stones. By the third day, Hunith takes one look at him and orders him to bed, for which he's actually glad of. His joints ache, and his
throat is so inflamed that swallowing is agony. He sneezed once and could've wept for how much it hurt.

Merlin installs himself as Arthur's caretaker. Partially because he knows that Mother and Gaius are occupied enough treating the yearly crop of winter illnesses, and partially because he does feel the slightest bit guilty, though it's scarce his fault. He'd warned the damn fool not to sit vigil with him without having prepared for it. With the help of Sam, he moves some of his belongings from the townhouse into the antechamber of Arthur's quarters. It's easier that way, to be near to him. By all rights, he should have been living there anyways, but he'd never seen the point when he had a house.

It's not that the prince's condition ever truly worsens or betters over the next three days. Arthur's fever simply waxes and wanes, fluctuating almost from hour to hour. His cough abates quickest, but his throat becomes far more inflamed, to the point where he can manage only liquids. When it pains him too much to swallow even broth, Merlin brings him lumps of snow to hold in his mouth, letting it melt and trickle down his throat, a trick Mother had taught him.

He sits on the edge of the bed, dipping a cloth in cool water and laying it across Arthur's brow, and he gently cards his fingers back through sweaty golden hair, just scratching nails against his scalp. He's always liked it when Mother did that for him when he's ill. He stills his hand when Arthur stirs faintly, eyes half-lidded and glassy with fever.

After a few slow blinks, Arthur seems to become more lucid, eyes settling on him. "Aren't you afraid to take ill?"

"No. I'm made of sterner stock than you," Merlin teases, meaning to get a rise out of him.

"I know." Arthur nods, unwontedly solemn. "I know you are."

He sighs and smooths Arthur's hair back. "Sleep, sire. Rest." He waits until the prince's eyes close and his breathing deepens, then leans down to brush a feather-light kiss onto his temple. "Prat," he murmurs into soft hair, allowing himself to linger there for a moment before sitting back, surveying his sleeping profile.

Merlin hadn't expected Arthur to actually sit vigil with him. Not really. When Arthur had declared he would, underneath his initial disbelief and suspicion of being mocked, Merlin had felt warm down to his toes, something clenching up pleasantly in his chest, but he hadn't expected it to last. The prince had no issue with travelling roughly when needed, but why would he kneel in a frozen garden all night when there was a feast and wine and pretty maidens in a glorious, warm castle just up the hill? And yet, when he came out of that deep, calm place he went to during his vigils, Arthur had still been kneeling beside him, half-dead from cold and stubborn to the last. Despite his temporary panic and fear, he'd felt a surge of emotion so powerful it'd almost choked him, a great fluttering in his chest like birds taking flight from within his ribcage.

He's not entirely certain it's a good thing.

Arthur's fever finally breaks that night in a drenching sweat, and Merlin once against sits at his bedside, gently running a cool cloth over his limbs and murmuring soothing nonsense.

A thought flickers past, swift as a dragonfly on the wing, how easy it'd be for Merlin to lean over him and kiss him to waking like in one of the tales. He checks the thought sharply, biting it off just as he has all the other times such ideas tried to blossom in his mind, which is far more often than he would like. Even in the tales, the prince falls in love with the fair maiden, not the manservant. And the sorcerer is always the villain to be conquered, not the hero.
Arthur twitches in his sleep, whimpering restlessly. Merlin shushes him on reflex, reaching over to stroke his hair, brushing a thumb along his hairline.

"Why do you have to be so damn good?" he murmurs in quiet despair. "I could handle you being unfairly pretty, but you couldn't have just been a stupid, self-absorbed bastard? I might've stood a chance, then. But, no, you just have to be such a damnably good person." Lowering his hand, he traces a fingertip along the edge of the Questing Beast scar, just visible beneath the open collar of the prince's nightshirt, the skin smooth and waxy where the venom had eaten runnels into his flesh. He'd been willing to give his life. He still would now, if the choice was set before him. Merlin sits back and turns the slim cord on his other wrist, rolling the red crystal pendant between two fingers. He hadn't taken it off since that night. "You're a rotten cheat, Arthur Pendragon," he whispers.

Arthur only moans and turns over, burrowing further into the bedcovers.

Merlin sighs.
The marketplace is always the busiest place in Camelot, but come spring, it is even more so, as that is when traveling merchants and traders, freed from the constraints of winter, arrive to display their wares. "Don't you have duties to attend with Arthur today?" Mother asks as she walks between the stalls, peering around; in one hand, she carries a list of ingredients and supplies for herself and Gaius.

Merlin follows a pace behind her, looking around with some interest of his own. "He's attending court with the King today, so I have the afternoon." Besides the fact that Arthur would never begrudge Merlin spending time with his mother, a surprising soft spot which he isn't inclined to ever take advantage of. "I always enjoy market days, you know that."

"Not when you're carrying everything, surely?" Mother chuckles.

"I'm used to that," he replies, smiling. Arthur always makes him carry everything, so a single basket with only a few things in it isn't much hassle, especially not for his mother. He enjoys learning about Mother and Gaius's medicines, anyways, and some of the traders are selling things that cannot be found in Camelot at all. He wonders if there's a bookseller anywhere about. Something brushes past his waist, and he snatches the back of a grimy-faced young boy's tunic, yanking him to a rough stop. "Give it back," Merlin orders; wide-eyed, the boy hastily puts the coin purse in the basket. He releases the boy, shaking his head.

Mother walks past a stall displaying lengths of fabric, pausing to run her fingers wistfully over a bolt of golden-brown cloth before moving on, and he makes note to return and buy a measure of it later. She'd enjoy having a new gown for Beltane. Morgana will surely lend him the use of her seamstress if he asked; Guinevere would happily assist as well.

"Merlin," she says in a low voice, drawing his attention. "Have you heard the news? The King has sent for the Witchfinder."

"Who?"

She glances around the market and plucks at his sleeve, urging him to step closer to her, lowering her voice slightly. Obviously whoever this Witchfinder is, she doesn't want news of them to become public knowledge. "After the incident with the…ahem, Lady Catrina," she murmurs, "the King feels that the issue of magic in Camelot has gone unchecked for too long, and stronger methods are needed to eradicate it."

Ah, yes, the Lady Catrina. If he lives to be a century old, he is never going to let Arthur forget that he came within a hairsbreadth of having a troll for a stepmother. It's only by luck that Merlin and Morgana's combined magic had been powerful enough to force "Lady Catrina" out of her human guise before she actually wed the King. Or do anything worse. He doesn't even want to imagine what might have happened if Camelot had a troll for a queen. Despite the amusement the memory brings, he frowns. "Stronger methods? How much stronger could he possibly get?" He believes the idea of being burnt alive at the stake, strung up from a gallows, or having one's head lopped off to be quite a convincing argument. Perhaps it's just him.

Mother sighs quietly, shaking her head. "The Witchfinder is in a league of his own, little bird. I've never seen him work, but apparently, he came to Camelot once in the first years of the Purge. Gaius told that I was lucky to have missed him, and a good thing that Arthur was young enough to forget him as well."
Oh. That's…not good. He's not certain he wants to know what 'stronger methods' are. There are not a great many things which are capable of truly shaking Gaius, and Merlin has gained a certain appreciation for his great-uncle's sense of danger. If this Witchfinder is truly fearful enough to unsettle Gaius, then this surely is bad tidings. "When should he arrive?" he asks softly.

"I cannot say. The Witchfinder travels to a great many places in many lands; he might be a day or a fortnight away from Camelot." Their conversation pauses as she purchases a bundle of curious dried herbs from one of the merchants. Merlin has no idea what it is, but it smells strangely. They continue on through the market. "I want you to be careful, understand? If what Gaius tells me is true, then he is a law unto himself. He serves nobody, not even the King, and he has leave to question anyone. No matter who they might be," she adds with a pointed look at him.

"Yes, Mother. I understand," he murmurs. The protection of being half-brother to the First Knight of Camelot and the prince's manservant will do him no good. If Arthur has no use for him after court, he'll return home and renew the protective magic in the library, the glamours he's cast around his magic books to hide them from prying eyes. There are a few things he'll have to hide in the cellar.

"I hope you do," she says quietly, though she doesn't sound wholly reassured.

Merlin shifts the basket and wraps an arm around her, hugging her close to him. "I'll be careful, Mother. I promise."

This time, her smile does reach her eyes, and she reaches up to pat his cheek. "Good lad. Well, this is the last of it. Come along, back to the citadel."

Even after the council is dismissed, Merlin doesn't see Arthur and imagines he must be in a private session with the King, perhaps discussing the matter of this Witchfinder, and he takes the opportunity to seek out and warn Morgana as well.

"What do you suppose he'll do?" she asks as she absently plucks apart a piece of bread left from her lunch.

Merlin shrugs. "Couldn't say. Question all of us, I imagine. I don't think he'd be permitted to torture answers from us without evidence, so as long as he can't find any, we ought to be safe. What have you done with your dream book?"

"Hidden it. My thanks to you, Cornelius," she says wryly, tilting her goblet in a toast to the twice-deceased sorcerer, and Merlin snorts.

One of the scrolls amongst Sigan's belongings had held not any kind of magic, but the early sketches of the plans for the castle itself. Paranoia must have already begun sinking its claws into him even then, for the castle holds a great many secret passages and apertures, constructed and concealed by magic. It makes Sneaking about a great deal easier for Merlin, as one of those passages opens directly into the antechamber of Morgana's rooms.

Lying upon a broad cushion on the floor at the foot of Morgana's bed, Celeste raises her head and gives a soft wuff. Someone knocks on the door.

"Who is it?" Morgana calls.

"Arthur."
They both relax. "Enter."

The prince bears an exasperated sort of frown when he sees Merlin sitting at the table with her, long-ingrained manners putting up feeble protest, but he's long since learned the futility of arguing about the impropriety of the two of them being alone together in her chambers. Neither of them care, as neither hold any desire for one another, and have no intention of ever listening to him anyways. "Well, at least I can tell the both of you together," he remarks, stepping in and closing the door behind him. "The King has informed me that he's sent for someone to help him hunt magic, the—"


"Mother told me," Merlin answers, "and I've just told Morgana." He sits back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. "And if you think to give me a lecture about safety, sire, I've already received one in triplicate from my mother, uncle, and brother. I must say, I am deeply moved by your faith in me. Or lack thereof, I should say."

Arthur snorts. "Well, you do struggle with the concept of subtlety, Merlin, so you can hardly blame us," he drawls in reply, then looks to Morgana. "Have you…seen anything?" For all his former reluctance with magic, he has found a surprising and abiding faith in her visions after the incident with Lady Catrina. She'd seen a banquet table set with rotting food, a wild pig wearing a crown rooting through bones, and most disturbingly, an image of Uther weeping over a deathly still and pale Arthur. It'd been enough to convince him of Catrina's true identity.

"Nothing to suggest we're all about to be escorted to the pyre, if that is what you mean," Morgana replies with a weak smile, rubbing her temples with two fingers. Her visions are most often a jumble of dream images and true glimpses of the future, many of which only tend to make sense afterwards. Necthana had warned her it might be as such, and she has discovered a deeply sympathetic respect for the seers of the Old Religion who had to puzzle through this sort of nonsense regularly. And nonsense is all she's dreamt recently. Frogs climbing out of the wells, chains made of interlinked bracelets, a skull with flowers blooming from its eye sockets… Celeste lopes over to rest her shaggy head on Morgana's thigh, and she strokes the hound's wiry fur, scratching around her collar.

"Well, that's good to know, at least." Arthur ventures over to the windows, and his expression falls. "And I do believe he's arrived."

They both stand and move to the window. In the square below, a man, all in black, stands beside a wheeled, horse-drawn cage. A very large cage, with chains and shackles dangling within it. Merlin doesn't have to stand near to it to know that it's wrought of cold iron, all of it. A chill crawls up his spine and spreads across his scalp, making his hair stand on end.

"I have to go. Father expects me to meet with him," Arthur says in a low murmur, still gazing down into the square. "You two…be careful." With that, he turns and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

"So begins the trial of Camelot," Morgana murmurs.

"So, this…Witchfinder. Where has he been all this time?" Arthur asks as he follows a pace behind his father into the empty council chamber.
"In foreign lands. Wherever the pursuit of sorcery takes him," Father replies smoothly.

"And he does this in your name?"

"No. He is law unto himself. He serves no one kingdom."

Worse and worse by the second. Arthur opens his mouth, then snaps it shut again just as quickly as a deep voice cuts through the air, smooth and cool as a well-honed blade. "Do you smell it?" The Witchfinder steps out from behind a pillar, clothed all in black from his boots to his gloves to his cloak. How long has he been lurking there, waiting for them? "Do you smell it, Uther?" he repeats.

"Aredian," Father says cordially.

"It's all around us, the foul stench of sorcery. It's infected your great city like a contagion," the man continues as if Father hadn't spoken.

Still, Father steps forward and extends one arm to him, which Aredian clasps with the familiarity of comrades. "I welcome you to Camelot, Aredian. Thank you for making such haste to be here."

"Well, let's hope I'm not too late, hmm? For every hour counts in the war against sorcery. Unchecked, it spreads like a disease." He steps past Father, moving with careful measure. A wolf, Arthur realises. That is what Aredian reminds him of, with his sharp green eyes and stalking gait. Some grizzled grey beast, aged perhaps, but made more dangerous for his years. "It seeks out the young and the old, the weak and the able, the fair—" His gaze rakes up and down Arthur. "—and the foul of heart alike. You've grown lazy, Uther. You've grown idle. Your once-noble Camelot is rotten to the core. You stand on the brink of dark oblivion."

A touch dramatic, perhaps, but the stone in Arthur's stomach grows heavier as he watches Father's expression, sees him nod agreement, listening intently to every word out of Aredian's mouth. "I am at your disposal, Aredian," he hears himself say. "The knights will aid you any way they can." And a good thing he's sent Lancelot on long patrol. Leon is an able hand at dissembling, but Lancelot isn't, noble and true as ever. He wouldn't be able to stand the company of this man without giving something away, even without meaning to.

Aredian turns towards him, those cool green eyes taking the measure of him once more. "You must be Arthur."

"I must be."

"You're a great warrior. The finest this kingdom has ever known," he says, thin mouth curling into a passable imitation of a smile; Arthur dips his chin in acknowledgment of the compliment. "So you shan't be offended when I say that I shall have no need of you or your knights. The subtle craft of sorcery can only be fought by yet subtler means, methods honed over decades of study. Methods known only to myself," he adds with a supercilious tilt of his head.

Despite the tightening knot in his chest, Arthur has to bite the inside of his mouth in order to choke back a wildly inappropriate laugh at hearing anyone, even unknowingly, describe Merlin as subtle. Merlin, who once conjured a snowstorm in the midst of summer and transformed a lady into a troll before the entire court.

"We're grateful for your help," Father tells the Witchfinder, and the quick flutter of humour gutters out like a candle in a high wind.

"And I am most pleased to provide it, however gratitude alone cannot keep a man alive. You must put food in his belly."
"Of course. I will pay your price, Aredian. Whatever it may be."

Arthur doesn't even want to imagine it. How does one weigh the value of a life? Had he one set price, or did he charge per head, as with cattle? It's a nauseating prospect. "When do you begin?" he asks.

Aredian gives him a small, sharp flash of teeth; it can't be called a smile by any stretch. "I've already begun."

Despite being only twenty winters, Merlin would say he's faced more than his fair share of dangerous beings. Nimueh. The gryphon. The Questing Beast. The Sidhe. The King. None have ever unnerved him quite so much as Aredian.

He sits in a stiff chair planted directly before the man's desk in the guest chambers given to him by the King.

"You are aware, then, that sorcery has been practiced in the vicinity of Camelot?" Aredian asks, dipping a quill in an inkwell that's set in a skull.

"Yes. Apparently." There's something sharp digging into his back, like a splinter coming off the wood, forcing him to sit ramrod straight.

"No, it cannot be denied. Were you not witness to the spectacle of a foul creature imitating…" Aredian shifts the pages on his desk. "…the Lady Catrina of House Tregor?"

Foul is certainly the word. "I was," Merlin agrees. So was the King, Arthur, Morgana, Guinevere, and near the entire court. Somehow he can't imagine any of them being sat in this stiff, splinterly chair and made to answer questions.

"Then you know that there is magic in Camelot. Can you explain it?"

"No, of course not. How could I?"

Aredian spreads his hands in front of him. "I am quite at a loss to explain it myself." He leans forward slightly, elbows on his desk, eyes Narrowing. "Unless, of course, it was you who performed the magic that caused her to transform."

A prickle of sweat breaks out between his shoulder blades. "It wasn't."

Those cold, sharp eyes don't waver. "Can you prove it wasn't?"

"No. I am loyal to Camelot and my King," Merlin replies, perhaps a little sharper than is wise.

Aredian stares at him unblinking for several more moments, searching for a lie, but there isn't one. Merlin is loyal to Camelot, to all it could become, and his King. He'd never said that King was Uther, however. Finally, he sits back and takes up his quill again, writing in a large, thick book. "Your mother is Hunith, yes? Gaius's assistant."

Merlin forces himself to keep a calm face despite the spike of fear in his chest, the idea of his mother being subjected to even a moment of this man's company. "Yes."

"And your brother is one…Sir Leon de Galis?"

"Half-brother, yes."
"Prince Arthur's First Knight. And you are the prince's manservant."

"I am." He's not certain what any of this has to do with sorcery, but at least they're off the subject of magic.

Aredian writes in the book again, and Merlin wishes he could see the pages well enough to read whatever it is he's put down. "Very well. You may go, that will be all," he announces, setting aside the quill. "For now."

Pushing to his feet, Merlin sketches a half-bow and hastens out of the room.

Arthur doesn't like this Witchfinder in the slightest, but nobody can ever say that Aredian doesn't work quickly. He sits in his smaller seat beside Father's throne, the court gathered to hear the testimony of the three women Aredian has found as witnesses to sorcery. It's an effort not to watch Merlin for his reaction, his manservant standing stiff and unsmiling beside Hunith and Gaius.

"Speak," Aredian coaxes, urging the first of the three forwards. "Do not be afraid."

"I…I was drawing water from the well, sire, when I saw them: faces in the water," the woman says in a small voice, her face drawn and white, twisting her hands before her. "Terrible faces, like people who were drowned, screaming. Screaming."

Aredian touches the shoulder of another. "Tell them what you saw."

"A goblin dancing on the coals of a hearth-fire. It was dancing in the flames, and it spoke, sire. My heart near stopped for fear of it."

"This incident of magic was only the beginning, you see?"

"There was a sorcerer, sire, in the square. There were…creatures jumping right out of his mouth," the third woman announces, sounding near faint.

"And what manner of creature?"

"Toads, Sire. Great green, slimy things as big as your fist."

Toads. The well. Arthur doesn't dare turn his head to look at Morgana, but in the edges of his vision, he sees her draw up a little straighter in her seat at Father's left. Her vision is coming true, though he can't fathom what it serves to warn them of.

"You see? You see? The sorcerer laughs in your face. Even now magic flourishes on the streets of Camelot," Aredian declares, a fervent glitter in his eyes as he steps past his witnesses, coming closer to the throne. Arthur stares at the wretched Witchfinder, wishing he could strangle the man. He'd do it bare-handed if he had to.

"I can scarcely believe it," Father replies in a quiet voice, that same light in his gaze, one that Arthur's learnt to fear over the years. Mirrors reflecting mirrors, the two of them, paranoia and conspiracy rebounding between them.

Aredian holds out his arms beside him. "Yet it is the truth, my lord. Fortunately, I've utilised every facet of my craft to bring this matter to a swift resolution."

"The sorcerer? You have a suspect?"
"Oh, I do, my lord. They stand here among us now, within this very hall." His voice rises, amplified by the acoustics of the hall. "My methods are infallible, my findings incontestable! The facts point to one person and one person alone." He whirls around, pointing an accusing finger. "The boy, Merlin!"

Arthur goes cold all over, all at once, his heart stuttering out of rhythm for a second before taking up a rabbit pace in his chest. He wrestles the fear attempting to choke him and shoves it down hard. "Merlin?" he drawls out, forcing a mocking scorn into his voice. "You surely jest, Aredian."

"This is outrageous! You have no evidence!" Hunith protests, gripping Merlin's arm tightly, edging her body slightly to the side, between her son and the Witchfinder.

"The tools of magic cannot be hidden from me," Aredian replies in a deadly tone, striding over. Despite being far shorter than him, Hunith glares right back, refusing to give ground. "I am certain that a thorough search of the boy's home will deliver us all we need."

"I have nothing to hide from him," Merlin declares, putting a hand on his mother's shoulder. Father nods. "Very well. Guards, restrain the boy. Let the search begin."

A fool Merlin might be at times, but a suicidal fool he's not. Arthur knows that Merlin would have hidden evidence of magic as soon as he heard of the Witchfinder's approach. Though his pulse is still in his mouth, quick and nervous, he doesn't believe Aredian will find so much as a scrap of proof in the townhouse.

Little Elfgifa is the one to answer the door, but her small face goes wide-eyed with fear when she looks past Leon and Arthur to see Aredian and three more knights behind him. "M-my lord?" she stutters out, backing away rapidly.

"Get Beryl and Sam, and tell Clory to wait out in the garden, all of you," Leon orders the girl as they enter; she bolts from the room, swift as a rabbit.

"Comb every inch. Sorcerers are masters of concealment," Aredian barks.

As the knights split up, going in separate directions, Arthur turns to the Witchfinder with a scowl. "There is nothing here. What fool would hide magic in the house of Camelot's First Knight?"

Aredian's cold green-glass gaze doesn't waver. "What fool would practice magic in Camelot at all?" Turning away, he strides down the hall and flings open the doors which lead to the library; scowling, Arthur follows. Merlin's desk is entirely clear save for a bundle of letters bearing the seal of Silverpine, a pen and inkwell, and a stack of blank parchment. Rising from the floor in front of the desk, Allegra lets out a low, rumbling growl, teeth bared in warning, but if anything, Aredian seems almost pleased to see her. "The sorcerer's familiar."

He reaches for his dagger, but Arthur clamps a hand over his arm. "A gift from his lord father," he corrects sharply, refusing to drop his hand until Aredian releases the dagger hilt. "Allegra, come." Still rumbling dangerously, the great hound stalks over to Arthur's side, and he curls his fingers around her collar, feeling the tension humming through her.

Aredian yanks the drawers from the desk, upending them without a thought; once gutted, he turns from the desk and begins surveying the many books on the shelves, yanking them down and rifling through them carelessly, tossing them aside as he goes.

He can only imagine the pained look on Merlin's face, to see his books treated so. Arthur tightens his grip on the wolfhound's collar. "Enough of this, this isn't necessary."
"It is necessary if I say it is." As if to punctuate his words, he casts another book to the ground with a thump; a few pages come loose from the aged binding.

"Here!" a voice calls from elsewhere in the house; Arthur's heart seizes.

Geraint comes down the stairs as they emerge from the library, his face set in grim lines. He holds out a bright band of metal—a bracelet, set with a glittering yellow stone and etched all over with curling symbols. "An amulet of enchantment," Aredian declares, taking it from Geraint with utmost care, as though it is a live serpent. His eyes, however, have a hooded, pleased look to them, and there is an unmistakable thread of satisfaction in his tone when he addresses Arthur. "Here is my proof, my lord. Now we must inform the King."

"Aredian!"

Everyone's head turns at the voice, and Arthur whispers a hoarse curse under his breath. Hunith steps forward, looking small in front of the towering bulk of the knights and the black-clad Witchfinder. She must have followed them from the citadel. "I know for certain that amulet does not belong to Merlin," she declares, lifting her chin. "It is mine. I gave it to him for safekeeping. I am the sorceress you seek."

Aredian bares his teeth in a smile.

"You're free to go."

Merlin rises to his feet and approaches Arthur cautiously, stepping out of the cell as if expecting one of the guards to shove him back in. "What do you mean, I'm free to go? Surely Aredian didn't give up the chase that easily." His familiar gaze searches Arthur's face, able to read him far better than anyone should. "What is it? What's happened? Something's wrong, Arthur, I know it is."

"Merlin…"

All at once, the young man's face goes white, his eyes widening. "Mother?" he whispers, staring past Arthur.

Two guards escort her down the stairs into the dungeons, though neither of them look particularly pleased to do so, eyes downcast. "Say nothing, Merlin," Hunith orders. "Do nothing. Promise me."

"Mother, what's going on? Mother?"

Arthur grabs hold of Merlin before the fool can charge the guards bare-handed; it isn't easy to do, given the fervent strength with which Merlin struggles against him, lean and wiry and slippery as a fish in a stream. Still, he manages to haul the other man up the stairs and out into the corridor. "Merlin! Merlin, enough! Stop it!"

"Let me go! Let go!"

"Merlin!"

Merlin goes still at the shout, echoing in the corridor, and his hands fist around the front of Arthur's tunic so tight the laces creak in protest. "Stop this, Arthur. You have to stop this. If that man hurts my mother, if the King…" He chokes off with a strangled whimper, unable to bring himself to even say it, though Arthur knows precisely what it is he fears. "I'll kill him, Arthur. I swear I will. By stone and sea and sky and all they encompass, and in the name of Maiden, Mother, and Crone.
If my mother comes to harm, I will kill him."

The words, ringing with power, tug at a memory. The night after Ealdor, when Merlin had given Arthur his vow to never use his magic against Camelot. He means it, then. Every word of it. Arthur knows down to his bones that Merlin will do it, even if it means his own execution.

"I know," he murmurs in a low voice, mindful of the guards that might be listening. "I know. I won't let this happen. I give you my word, understand? Now, I want you to go find your brother and stay with him—no," he says sharply when Merlin opens his mouth to protest. "You will go and you will stay with him or with Guinevere and Morgana. I will handle this."

Merlin stares at him for a long moment, then nods jerkily. "So be it. And Arthur? Handle it quickly."

Of all the times Arthur has dined with his father and hosted a guest of Camelot, this meal is easily the worst of them. The food tastes of nothing but ash in his mouth, and the wine might as well be water for all he cares. He's grateful Morgana isn't present, as well, for he has no doubt she would throttle Aredian with one of her necklaces. He hopes Merlin is with her, that Guinevere and Leon have sense enough to keep them both calm.

"I can scarce believe it," Father says idly, sounding not the least bit concerned. More like he's discussing the outcome of a wager or matters of trade in one of the border provinces. "Hunith has served me with unfailing dedication. Without her knowledge, I would not be sitting here today, and nor would Arthur, for that matter. She's cared for him since childhood."

"That is the trick of it, my lord. Sorcery comes in the guise of innocence and kindness, in order to better infest these peaceful halls. What better place to begin than with the very flower of Camelot's youth?" the Witchfinder says, gesturing towards Arthur.

He wishes the man would choke on a fish bone.

Father shakes his head with quiet disbelief. "Gaius vouched for her himself."

"Gaius." Aredian swills the wine in his goblet thoughtfully. "You show great faith in him, sire. Great faith, indeed, considering he was known to practice sorcery."

"I'm well aware of his past, but I have every reason to believe he's turned his back on sorcery."

"Sorcery, perhaps, but not his family. The woman Hunith is his niece, is she not? One will go to great lengths to protect their family. It is why I accused the boy in the first place. She would have hidden herself away indefinitely, but any mother, even a sorcerer, loves her child."

"We must give her the benefit of the doubt, surely?" Arthur grits out.

Aredian gives him that frosted glass glare again. "Why? Anyway, there's a sure way to establish her guilt."

Father's goblet halts halfway to his mouth, and for the first time since the Witchfinder's arrival, a flicker of reluctance crosses his face. "I know your methods are effective, Aredian, but Hunith is a woman, and hardly a robust one at that. Surely she could not withstand such treatment," he says slowly.

Arthur feels himself growing cold again. "What treatment?" he asks, forcing the words past the
tightness in his chest. "What methods?"

Neither of them answers him. He might as well not even be attending the same dinner as them anymore. Unfazed by Father's hesitance, Aredian replies calmly, "It's the only way to rid your mind of doubt."

Cornelius Sigan supposedly used his magic to build the castle itself. Arthur wonders if Merlin is capable of bringing it down on them. He doesn't think it entirely impossible.

The rest of the meal passes in a strange sort of haze, and by the time Arthur is allowed to leave, he's already trying to come up with a plan to have Hunith smuggled out of Camelot. He's sunk so deep in thought he doesn't hear Guinevere calling him until she grabs hold of his arm, shaking him back to the present. "What? What is it?" he asks dumbly.

"Arthur, please... I know you're trying, but please, you must find a way to stop the Witchfinder," she implores. He opens his mouth, but she continues on over him, worry overriding her manners. "He's just stopped Morgana and asked to question her again in the morning, and I don't believe she'll be able to withstand much more of this, sire, she's near to breaking already, between Merlin and Hunith—"

"I know," he says firmly. "That is what he does, Guinevere. He is paid to catch sorcerers. It doesn't matter if a person is guilty or not, he wears them down and brings them to bay however he can in order to get a confession and his gold. That amulet he found, he planted it. I know he did."

Glancing around, he takes her elbow and guides her out of the main corridor into one of the alcoves, lowering his voice to a murmur that won't carry quite so much. "Listen to me. Between my father's paranoia and Aredian's zealotry, I can't call either of them to stop. Therefore, I need you to do something for me."


"Find proof. Take Leon and Merlin with you, even Morgana if you must, and find proof, something credible. I will try to delay them as long as I can, and if all else fails, I will take Hunith from those dungeons myself," he declares. Father can punish him, disinherit him, wall him up in his chambers if he pleases, but Arthur will not let Hunith be executed. Not as long as he has the power to do otherwise. "Aredian's planned the execution for the day after tomorrow, as I'm sure he means to try and entrap Merlin and Morgana as well. Find me something I can bring to my father before then."

Nodding quickly, she gathers up her skirts and all but sprints down the corridor, taking the stairs two at a time. Arthur watches her go, then leans back against the cool stone behind him, tilting his head back. "Maiden, have mercy on us," he murmurs softly.

If she's listening, she doesn't answer.

"How's your mother faring?" Arthur asks. After the stress of the past week, he is grateful to finally be able to enjoy a meal without feeling nauseous, and he believes he might actually be able to sleep through the night.

"Fine. She's staying in the townhouse with us tonight," Merlin says in a low voice.

"Good."

"Thank you. For what you did."
He shrugs his right shoulder, rubbing at the ache which has taken up in the left, right in the muscles beneath his Questing Beast bite. It only ever pains him in the depths of winter or, apparently, whenever he is made sufficiently anxious. "You know, for once, I truly believe Father is glad of that wretched dog you gave Morgana," Arthur chuckles as he stretches out in his chair, his legs towards the hearth and his arms above his head.

Merlin doesn't respond save for a quiet grunt, collecting the dishes from the table.

"I don't know whatever gave Aredian the idea that he could hold Morgana hostage long enough to escape Camelot. Did you see her face when he grabbed her? I think she would've bitten him if Celeste hadn't beaten her to it." As unpleasant as it might be, he's never been happier to see someone be mauled by a ferociously protective wolfhound. Or fall out of a window. "And speaking of, conjuring that frog from his throat was an excellent touch, but it might've been just a touch too many, you know. Though the look on Aredian's face was something to behold," he snickers.

When he receives only stony quiet in response, Arthur heaves an exaggerated sigh, leaning back in his chair. "All right, what's the matter with you now? I thought you'd be in a more pleasant mood, all things considered."

Scowling, Merlin slams down the tray on the table, crockery jumping and rattling. "I am sick unto death of being treated by a damn child!" he barks angrily.

Arthur blinks at him, surprised.

"Leon, Gaius, Mother, even you. All the time, at every turn, this week more than ever. It's exhausting. I've had my fill of it. Despite what you call me, Arthur, I am not an idiot. I know very well the risks I run, as everyone has fit to remind me of them constantly, as though I am ever fool enough to forget them."

"Here now, that's not why and you damn well know it," he interjects, straightening up in his seat, but the young man overrides him, high colour in his face.

"I cannot even breathe freely in this damn kingdom, and I do not need all of you reminding me of the chains I wear when I can feel their weight myself. I am your manservant and your friend, not an invalid for you to look after, and if that is what you think of me, then perhaps you should find someone else to serve you."

And that is just a step too far. He shoves out of his chair and rounds the table in two quick strides. "Merlin!" Arthur snatches his wrist, yanking him sharply a halt when the other man tries to shove past him, and abruptly, they're standing toe-to-toe, scarce a breath of space between them.

Too close. Far too close. Close enough to see Merlin's pupils dilate, flecks of gold like sparks against blue. Close enough to hear his indrawn breath, a barely audible gasp. Close enough to see the pulse in the hollow of his throat leap, for once not hidden by those damn neckerchiefs of his. Beneath his fingers, Arthur can feel a length of cord wrapped around Merlin's wrist, the so-familiar shape of a crystal pendant pressed into his hand, the point of it digging into his palm. His necklace, the one he couldn't find after the Questing Beast.

Blood roars in his ears, and he can feel that hollow place in his chest reverberate like a struck bell, near forgotten until now. Abruptly he thinks of Merlin's busy hands and the sharp bones of his wrists, wonders if he'd be that sharp and callused everywhere, or if he'd be softer, yielding. It'd be easy to find out, so easy. One more small pull, they'd be flush.

Arthur drops his hand. "You're dismissed for the night." How he forces the words out, he doesn't
Merlin's lashes flicker. "Arthur…"

"I said, dismissed," he snaps.

Breathing unevenly, Merlin backs away from him and stumbles for the door.

Once the door shuts, Arthur staggers as though he's taken a blow, backing up blind until the backs of his legs meet the edge of the chair, and he drops down into it, gripping the arms tightly. Forcing out a breath, he leans forward, elbows on his knees, and scrubs both hands over his face. The strain of these events must have fractured his mind. Surely they must have, for it seems he's taken leave of his wits.

Gods' mercy, what's wrong with him? What was that? He has an idea, but the idea of looking at it directly, staring into that particular mirror, isn't something he can handle at the moment. He's not even sure he wants to know what will be reflected back at him.

No, that isn't wholly true. He knows what he wants. He knows precisely what it is he wants. He wants the ban of magic rescinded. He wants to not be the crown prince. He wants Merlin in his bed. He wants so deeply he's near ill with it, knotting up sick and hot in the pit of his stomach.

Looking to the side, he sees a cup of wine left on the table; snatching it up, he drinks it all down in one and hurls it against the wall. It explodes in a spray of crockery shards, droplets of wine smeared on the wall. Shoving to his feet, he goes to do the only sensible thing he can think of. Arthur snatches his cloak out of the wardrobe and slings it around his shoulders—the musky forest smell of loam and ripe berries surrounds him, making his skin burn. He leaves the castle, dismissing the guards with a silent glare.

The Cockerel and the Rising Sun are the two most prosperous taverns in the city of Camelot, but they are hardly the only ones. There are plenty of others. He meant to visit a great many of them. Wine, ale, whatever he can stomach. Some places he avoids, as the gods only know what the proprietors mix into their wares to make them more potent; more than one patron has ended up facedown in an alleyway. Or blind.

It's not enough. He can't escape himself.

It doesn't stop him from trying, though.

His fool's endeavour comes to an end at a disreputable place towards the very edges of the city, a truly rough place, not one such as the gentry sometimes visit for a taste of the forbidden. He staggers out of the building, drawing his hood up over his head, though it's scarce necessary. Nobody knows who he is here, or doesn't care if they do. The ground seems to be moving beneath his feet, and he keeps seeing three wavering figures of single things. He walks for a long time. The city is quiet this deep into the night; after a while, he starts to feel more sick than drunk and has to stop a few times to vomit.

When Arthur gains the main square, he staggers over to the fountain and dunks his head in, scrubbing at his face and rinsing the foul taste out of his mouth. The water is cold and clean, fed from the aquifers beneath the city; it's the best water he's ever tasted in his life. Dripping and shivering, he feels a degree more sober. Not by much, but at least he's only seeing one of things. As he sits on the ground, leaning up against the side of the fountain, the door of a wineshop opens, and a trio of men come staggering out, two supporting the third between them. They're all laughing, and the tallest of the three points them toward the city, raising a slurred cry between
him, "To the Pavilion!"

Arthur watches them go, gazing after them with a mix of bitter envy and longing. The Pavilion. A thought striking him, he rummages through his pockets a moment, nearly dropping the rest of his money, and finds what he's looking for: an ivory token, etched with an anemone flower.

Pushing himself to his feet, only a trifle unsteady now, he starts down the street in the direction the men had gone. He knows where the Pavilion is. Everyone does, even if they would never admit they knew. It's established just between the lower town and the upper city, belonging to both and neither, standing apart despite having no true distinguishing characteristics. He nearly trips on his way up the front steps, and even though some distant part of him burns with alarm, he pushes open the doors and enters the Pavilion.

A pair of attendants, male and female, come to meet him. "Where's Dara?" he asks before either of them can get a word out, holding up a hand to forestall them.

"Master Dara only attends to patrons of his own choosing," the male attendant says in a patient voice which suggests he's had to explain as such a great many times to a great many people.

He fumbles the token out of his pocket and holds it up. "Bring him to me. I want to see him."

The male attendant examines the token, bows lowly, and retreats further into the Pavilion, vanishing through some hidden doorway. Arthur leans back against the wall, hands braced on his knees, and waits, breathing slowly. The female attendant only clasps her hands before her and waits, silent.

"Prince Arthur," Dara's familiar voice sounds, and he raises his head. In the lamplight, his hair shines like burnished bronze, held up with its ivory pin. "Is there aught I can do for you?"

"You said I could come to you if I ever needed your assistance or anything else." Straightening up, he holds out his arms. "I'm here for the anything else."

"My lord, I don't think—"

"I don't care what you think," Arthur cuts him off sharply, then swallows hard. "I'm not here for your counsel. Do you make it a point to argue with paying patrons?"

Dara gazes at him for a long moment, then dips his chin. "As you wish. Come with me, my lord." He grasps Arthur's arm and draws him further inside the Pavilion, too drunk to make much notice of anything, but he's surprised by the clean, calm quietness of the place, only a few fully-dressed attendants to be seen. He's drawn, stumbling, up the stairs and into a richly furnished room, the floors covered by thick rugs woven in a complex pattern that makes his head swim staring at it. "Sit down, my lord, and wait a moment," Dara instructs, releasing his arm.

"I've not seen anyone," Arthur protests.

Dara gives him that deep, inscrutable gaze, and it's Arthur who looks away first. Drunk as he is, he understands what Merlin meant now. Dara doesn't need to be told things. He sees through people, even the parts of themselves they'd prefer to hide. "Sit," he repeats.

This time, Arthur obeys. He sits down on the end of the soft bed, putting his head in his hands with eyes closed. His stomach is rebelling against the rotgut ale he's drunk, though he's already vomited most of it up, and he breathes slowly, trying to steady himself. The door whispers open, soft footsteps on the thick rug. Arthur lifts his head and doesn't know if he wants to laugh or scream or weep. The young man standing before him is probably a few years younger than him, tall and
slender, with curling black hair and deep blue eyes. Oh, yes. Dara can see through him.

The young man inclines his head and gazes up through thick, sooty lashes. "Do I please you, my lord?"

Arthur shudders as he gets to his feet. The young man's a poor imitation, but in his swimming vision, it's near enough. "Don't call me that," he slurs out. He only gets called that when he's done something wrong. Perhaps he has, or is. But he doesn't want to hear it, not now.

"What should I call you, sire?"

He nearly says to call him by name, but the idea of it makes his stomach churn again, feeling ill and flushed all over as if feverish. "That'll do." It's not said with the right amount of impudence, but it will do. He lurches forward, grabs one slim wrist, and draws the young man towards him, willing himself to be lost, just once, only if for a night.

When he wakes in the morning, he's alone in the bed, his head is pounding, and there's a taste of bile in his mouth. He lurches out of the bed, falling on hands and knees, and retches a few times, though there's nothing in his stomach to bring up again. Once his stomach stops rebelling against him, he sits back on his heels. There's a jug of water set on the table, still cold, and he takes several hasty swallows of it, ridding his mouth of that terrible aftertaste.

"Better, my lord?" asks a dry voice from behind him, and he startles slightly, glancing around. Sitting in a chair set unobtrusively in a corner of the room, Dara has one ankle resting on the opposite knee, gazing at him. "I was just coming to wake you. It's still early enough that you can get back to the castle without being seen by anyone important."

"Thank you," he mumbles thickly. His clothes have been neatly folded on the foot of the bed, and he fumbles them back on, roughly doing up his laces. The empty, rumpled bed makes his stomach roll over again, so he sits on the floor to put on his socks instead, searching for his boots.

Dara rises from his chair and crosses the room to him, silent on the thick rug, and crouches on his heels, holding out his cloak. "Go home, my lord."

The weight of Dara's so-knowing gaze is entirely too much to bear, and Arthur hastily tugs on his boots and lurches to his feet. He snatches his cloak, throws it around his shoulders, and strides from the room, forcing himself not to sprint from the Pavilion. There's a door that lets out to the rear, no doubt for the discretion of certain patrons; he makes his way back up to the citadel. By some stroke of luck, it's the guards' morning rotation, and he slips past them into the castle.

To his utter horror, when he comes staggering into his chambers, Merlin is already there waiting for him, laying out clothes on the bed for him. "Name of the Mother, Arthur, where have you been?" the young man exclaims in exasperated relief.

Arthur doesn't move from where he's frozen in front of the door, wishing with everything that he was somewhere, anywhere else.

"I don't know what possessed you to go wandering about at this hour, but the least you could do is leave a note. If it's about last night, I am sorry for what I said. Does that suffice? I was angry and worried about Mother, and I didn't—" He strides across the chambers towards Arthur as he speaks, reaching for the ties of his cloak, but he goes entirely still when he gets near enough to catch the unmistakable scent of sex and stale wine clinging to his clothes. The colour drains from his face,
eyes going wide, disbelief and hurt and betrayal flickering across his expression; he drops his hands from the ties, taking a stiff step backwards.

Arthur feels he might be sick all over again, guilt knotting up in his ill-settled stomach. "Merlin…"

The young man takes another step away from him, arms folded behind his back, and his voice is cold, unfamiliar and sharp, a mask settling on his face. "Your breakfast is on the table, and your clothes are laid out. I'll ready a bath. You stink."

The food doesn't taste of anything to him. Arthur forces himself to eat some anyways, hunched miserably over his plate and loathing himself more than he ever has as Merlin fills the tub with the help of another servant. The silence in the room, broken only by the sound of water being poured into the tub, is painful to hear. Once it's full, the servant sketches a bow and bolts from the room like a frightened animal, taking the buckets with him.

Abandoning the rest of his breakfast, Arthur strips off his clothes, wondering if perhaps he could tell Merlin to burn them. The bathwater is cold. A faint, hastily-stifled sound of pain is uttered from behind him as he sinks down into the water, gripping the edges of the tub. The dim recollection of nails digging into his back surfaces, and he realises, nauseated, there must be marks. Shivering, he grabs a stiff-bristled brush and sets himself to scrubbing that damned smell off his skin.
"I am never letting Arthur send me on long patrol again," Lancelot grumbles. "I leave for scarce more than a sennight, and I return to find that not only did a Witchfinder come to Camelot, he attempted to frame you for sorcery, accused your mother, threatened the Lady Morgana, and then fell from a window after being attacked by that dog of hers. I seem to miss all the excitement."

"Be grateful you did. It was a wretched time. The man had everyone in a fever of paranoia," Merlin replies flatly, poking halfheartedly at the bowl of stewed cabbage before him. He's not eaten more than a bite of it, and he'll have to apologise to Aislinn lest he hurt her feelings.

Lancelot scoffs and takes a long pull from the tankard of ale before him. "Oh, that's good. It's heartening to be home. I never want to spend that many days in the saddle again. Sore as anything."

He sighs deeply and stretches his legs out before him. A sly little smile pulls as his lips. "Guinevere doesn't mind helping me with that, at least."

Still fiddling with his spoon, Merlin makes a vague noise.

"Alright." He takes another drink and sets the tankard down, folding his arms on the tabletop. "What is it? Something's amiss with you, I know it is."

Merlin shrugs. "Doesn't matter. There's naught to be done about it."

"Merlin. Merlin. Don't try to play this game with me, please. I know you too well for it. I know your brooding and your secrecy, so—"

"I do not brood."

"—you might as well tell me now or I will sit here and guess at it until I either get it right or I wear you down. Will believes you've become enamored of someone and are mooning over them. He also believes it's the Lady Morgana, but I know you and her too well to believe that. But it does seem fitting. So…love, is it?"

He sighs. "Would you believe me if I said you would rather not know?"

"Perhaps, but part of being a friend is helping to shoulder each other's burdens, even if only by lending a sympathetic ear." Lancelot reaches over and tugs at a curl of his hair, but then his expression sobered, dark eyes solemn. "Come now, feather, I can tell by looking at you that you've not been sleeping." He gestures to the bowl of cabbage. "You're not eating. I've seen men on their way to the gallows with more gaiety to them. Gwen and Will are worried for you, as is your brother. I've not seen the Lady Morgana yet, but I'm certain she is, too. So…will you tell me who it is you're pining after so miserably, or will you leave us to fret in the dark?"

Merlin toys with the change lying on the table, a sense of guilt wriggling its way through the knots of hurt and yearning and sorrow that've coiled up inside him like twining serpents.

He's done his very best not to think of what had happened between him and Arthur the night of the Witchfinder's death, though with very little success. He'd been cross and tense about all that'd happened, unable to dissemble when Arthur had grabbed him, an unexpected surge of desire roaring up inside him amidst all the other conflicting emotions. And Arthur, standing so near, had seen it. He'd seen, and he'd sent Merlin away. And he'd gone to the Pavilion. The memory of Arthur staggering into his chambers, rumpled and bleary-eyed, smelling of sex and wine, is painful to linger on, and the sight of red nail-marks and scratches down Arthur's back…. Merlin tastes bile
in his mouth to think on it overlong.

He doesn't want to tell Lancelot. He doesn't want to tell anyone, really, more content to wallow in his own quiet misery. Except it's apparently not as quiet as he had believed, if the others are so concerned about him. "Lancelot, if I tell you, will you do me the courtesy of at least trying not to laugh at me?" he asks. One of the silver coins is an old one, probably dating back to the early years of Uther's reign, worn and softened by time.

"Of course."

He balances the coin on edge and sends it spinning with a flick of his fingers. "Arthur."

Lancelot's jaw drops. He stares, eyes wide, blinking rapidly; his mouth opens and closes a few times without speaking. The coin spins, slows, falls onto its side. He clears his throat, then takes another long drink of his ale. "You know," he says as he sets the tankard down again, "somehow, that is not nearly as funny as I thought it was going to be."

"My thanks for that," Merlin says wryly.

"Arthur," Lancelot repeats uncertainly, as if not entirely sure they're speaking of the same person. "Prince Arthur? Arthur Pendragon?"

"Yes, that one."

He runs a hand back through his hair, sweeping it back from his face. "I…I don't…. How? And why?"

Merlin drops his head to the table with a thump. "I don't know why, Lancelot!" he groans miserably. "Swear to me you won't tell anyone else about this, please. Not Guinevere, definitely not Leon," he insists, and once Lancelot nods, he takes a deep breath, reaches over and grabs the knight's tankard, taking several hasty gulps. He's found that it definitely helps to be at least somewhat drunk whenever he has to look at this…unfortunate situation directly. He'd have asked for wine, but he imagines Lancelot would appreciate the story in complete and intelligible sentences.

Giving the ale a moment to sink in, he spills out the entire pathetic story without going into great detail, head resting on his folded arms. It does make him feel slightly better. He can admit that Lancelot is right in what he'd said about friends sharing in burdens. He can't tell Leon—Maiden's mercy, no—Guinevere is too near a sister, Morgana might put a snake in Arthur's sheets, and Will…Will is no friend of Arthur's. They can be cordial enough in each other's presence, but they're not friends. He'd sooner let the rest of the knights use him as a target in an archery session before bringing this to Mother or Gaius.

Lancelot gives him a dubious look, raking a hand back through his hair again, a nervous gesture on his part. "I'm not laughing, Merlin, but…you understand it's hard to fathom?" he says, and Merlin nods. He wouldn't have believed it, either. "So…what are you going to do?"

Merlin clutches at his hair. "I don't know. I don't know," he groans. He sinks his teeth into his lower lip, eyes closed tight against the unexpected prickle of tears. Damn it, this is exactly why he doesn't drink.

What can he do? It hurts to be near Arthur now, to look at him and know. And yet how can he leave? His family is here, his life. It might not be home—home doesn't carry the imminent threat of execution—but he can't just abandon everything simply because he's been spurned. He still has
to protect Arthur, the damn prat; he's not sure he could abide knowing that the noble idiot got himself killed because Merlin abandoned him. It hurts, though.

"Actually…I may just have an idea," Merlin says slowly, raising his head. "Sir Lionel hasn't been well. He took with fever over the winter, and Evaine says he's not fully recovered."

"And?"

"And there's always been a problem with slavers in Brechfa. Recently, they've been returning. Reports of snatched children and such." He sits up a little straighter. "It needs to be addressed, but Lionel's not a young man anymore. Ill as he's been, he cannot go riding hell-for-leather after slavers through the mountains."

Lancelot raises his brows. "So you want to…what? Return to Silverpine?"

"Not permanently, just for a short time. Long enough to handle the matter of the slavers and let Sir Lionel convalesce."

"And you think Arthur will allow this?"

Merlin's jaw tightens, and he has to swallow a few times before speaking. "He will. He can't send his First Knight away for that long, and bastard or not, I'm still a son of Silverpine. We're family. I have an obligation and a duty to them. He'll understand that, if nothing else."

Lancelot is quiet for a moment, drumming his fingers against the tabletop. It makes sense; it makes a great deal of sense. And Merlin is right—if nothing else, Arthur will understand duty to one's family and taking care of one's own. There's no better way to take one's mind off an ill-fated infatuation than to spend days outdoors in the saddle in the cold and rain chasing down packs of rogues. "You're right," he says at last, nodding. "It'd do you well. It's just…you're certain you want to do this?"

Merlin shakes his head. "I don't want to, but I have to. Or I'll break myself to pieces on this," he replies hoarsely.

"Very well. But I'm coming with you."

He jerks his head up, staring at the man. "What? No, you're not. Lancelot, you've just gotten back to Camelot. Guinevere—"

"Guinevere knows you far better than you'd imagine, Merlin, and she understands far more than most give her credit for. She'll understand this," Lancelot reassures, cutting him off. He claps Merlin on the shoulder and presses the tankard into his hands. "To Brechfa!"

Merlin stares at the ale for a moment, then sighs and summons a smile that's near to genuine, hoisting the tankard. "To Brechfa!"

For the second time in less than a fortnight, Arthur finds himself darkening the Pavilion's doorstep. Just as before, there's two people attending the door, dressed in modest dove-grey livery, entirely undecorated but for a small pin on the left breast, a red anemone. They're not the same two that'd attended last time, at least he doesn't believe so, and he wonders, not for the first time, how many people Dara actually has working for him. He draws the ivory token from his pocket and shows it to one of them. "Will you take me to him? There's a private matter I wish to discuss with him," he says quietly.
"Of course, my lord. Just a moment," the woman says. "Tris will take your cloak and jacket if you please."

As she retreats further into the Pavilion, Arthur gratefully hands over his garments to the other attendant. The cloak he'd worn to pass unnoticed, and the jacket for the brisk wind that'd come up today, but it's far warmer indoors, and he's more comfortable without. The woman returns only a moment later, gesturing for him to follow her up a staircase and down a corridor, pointing him towards a closed door at the far end. "Master Dara's expecting you."

He's not entirely certain what he expected a bordello proprietor's study to look like, but it certainly isn't this. Dara's study reminds Arthur rather a lot of Merlin's library. It's polished and clean and well-arranged; there's a vase full of brilliant flowers set on a stand, the windows open to admit the light breeze. The man in question is seated at the desk, sorting through a stack of pages and writing in a thick ledger. The ivory pin is absent today, his hair in some kind of complicated braid tied through with scarlet cord. "My lord," he says cordially without looking up from his writing. "A bit early for it, I suppose, but I'm afraid I must insist that you—"

"No, no, that's not why I'm here," Arthur says hastily, feeling a flush creep up the sides of his neck.

Dara arches an eyebrow, uncannily similar to Gaius, both a query and a rebuke.

He plucks at the edge of his sleeve. "I'm in need of counsel. Honest counsel," he says at last.

"Oh? What a pleasant change." Closing the book and sliding aside the letters, Dara gestures to one of the chairs before his desk. Arthur sits. "So, might it be fair to assume that your excursion here was taken amiss?" he asks, interlacing his fingers beneath his chin, elbows on the desktop.

"That's one way of saying it," Arthur sighs, grateful the man had the courtesy not to say 'I told you so,' even though he had full right to.

"And you come to me for advice?"

Arthur fiddles with the loose thread on his sleeve again. "I don't know who else to speak to," he admits; after a moment's scrutiny, Dara gestures with one hand. Sinking back in the chair, he explains all that'd happened after his…excursion, how everything has been thrown out of kilter now. It makes his banked guilt flare up anew, and yet the words still come.

"And now our dear Merlin intends to return to Brechfa for a time," Dara remarks once he finally quiets; when Arthur stares at him in surprise, he smiles wryly. "I am not called the Whoremaster of Spies without reason. There's very little going on in the citadel I am not privy to, and suffice to say the matter of you and your manservant is…of some interest."

He's not sure if he ought to be flattered or offended. At the very least, he ought to be disturbed by the apparent lack of privacy, but he's also more used to that than most. "He came to me yesterday, asking for leave to return to Silverpine," Arthur admits, swallowing hard. "I…I don't want him to go, but I cannot conceive of a reason to deny him, not truly, and yet..." He huffs out a breath, running a hand back through his hair. "A thrice-tangled knot is what it is."

Dara gazes at him for a long moment, and Arthur forces himself to be still and not to squirm beneath the other man's contemplation, drawing on his years of experience with Father. "Very well. Would you care to sit out in the gardens, my lord?" he asks. "I prefer to when the weather turns fair, and I find it helps me think."

"If you please."
"Mm." Collecting a small packet of letters, a wax tablet, and a stylus, Dara pushes back from his desk and rises to his feet, sweeping out the door and back down the stairs; Arthur follows him. There's a set of glass doors that open into a spacious walled garden. It isn't like the Lady Evaine's garden at Silverpine, or the one at the townhouse, full of herbs and vegetables, militantly tended; this is a leisure garden, made for being admired and strolled through, not for cutting herbs and scraping out weeds bare-handed.

There's a bench set beneath a slender tree, still greening, and Dara sits at one end, gesturing for Arthur to sit beside him. "A thrice-tangled knot, you say. Well, allow me to make this very simple, my lord. What is it you want?"

Arthur wonders for a moment if he'd be able to conjure a convincing lie or at least a half-truth, but then he remembers Dara's inexplicable and somewhat terrifying way of seeing through people. He decides it's not worth the wasted effort. "Merlin," he says plainly.

Dara nods as if he'd expected no less. "Merlin, who intends to leave the city. You want him to stay, be your bedwarmer?" he prompts.

"I wouldn't force him to do anything," Arthur declares firmly, glaring at the man. There are some courtiers who have no issue with bringing unwilling servants to bed, but he isn't one of them. He finds it abhorrent.

"I never said you would," Dara replies, mild as anything. "But it is what you want, isn't it?"

He sighs deeply. "Yes. But that's just it. If there are any two people in Camelot who cannot have a casual dalliance, it is he and I." The matter of Merlin being a man isn't so great a hurdle—if anything, it'd be more easily accepted, as there will be no bastards to muddy the line of succession. Neither is him being a commoner—even unacknowledged, he's still the son of a nobleman and knight, at least as far as the court is concerned. No, the issue lay in sorcery. If anyone were to discover him as a sorcerer, if Father ever finds out his heir has been seduced by magic…. He shudders to think on it. It could very well spark another Purge.

"I never said you would," Dara replies, mild as anything. "But it is what you want, isn't it?"

Dara arches an eyebrow. "And what makes you think there is aught casual about it?"

"I don't know!" Arthur snaps back, then takes a breath, trying to rein in his temper. "I don't know. I..." He twists his ring on his finger, rubbing his thumb across the metal band. "Ever since I was old enough to know my own name, I have known that I am my father's heir. Camelot's future. I've grown up learning and understanding the responsibility that entails. And in all my years, I've scarce done a single thing that isn't in keeping with those duties. Even when I disliked it, even if I chafed at it, I obeyed, because it wasn't about me, not entirely. Not one misspoken word, not one misdeed."

"Very proper."

"Precisely. And yet, in the time I have known Merlin, I have committed more acts of treason against the crown than the most infamous of criminals. And I know very well that Merlin is the one person that I absolutely should not want, that he is the one person that my father would deny me if he knew the whole truth of it." He swallows hard. "What if that is all it is? Some...long-stifled act of rebellion, desiring that which I know I shouldn't?"

Dara's quiet for a long moment, contemplating. "Tis a hard question, my lord. Is it better to be content with one's lot than to desire things one is told one is not fit to receive?" he poses at last, then hums. "It's a question that a great many before you have wrestled with. I have no more answers to it than they. As for the matter of Merlin.... You could always order him to remain in
Camelot. He is your manservant; he'd have to obey you. One doesn't simply leave the royal employ, after all."

Arthur nods, staring down at the grass between his boots. Such a thought had crossed his mind, more than once. He could force the issue if he wanted, make it a royal command. But doing so would undoubtedly earn him Merlin's enmity, and that would surely be far worse. He's already miserable, seeing the veiled hurt in Merlin's gaze whenever he thinks Arthur isn't looking; he doesn't know what he'd do if that hurt turned into bitterness, loathing.

Dara tilts his head back, staring up at the budding leaves above them, casting green-tinted shadows across his face. "But therein lies another trap. You want him to stay because he wants to stay, not because you ordered him," he declares as if reading the very thoughts off the inside of his skull, and Arthur nods again, throat tightening. "Logical. So…do you wish to hear my counsel this time?"

"Dara…"

"Very well. Let him go. You said it yourself, you cannot say with any certainty that this is anything more than the lure of the forbidden. If it is such, then removing the temptation for a while will settle the matter, for as long as it lies within your reach, you'll long for it. This way, if he returns to you, it will be of his own will. And if he does, and your passions have cooled, then you'll know for certain it was only a passing fever."

"And if it isn't?" Arthur demands.

He spreads his hands before him. "That, my lord, will be an entirely different matter. But my suggestion stands. Let him go."

There's far more to it than that. Merlin might very well return without any kind of desire for Arthur whilst Arthur still yearned for him, or perhaps the inverse. They might find there was nothing more to it than the temptation of something improper. Or they might not. He's not certain which is worst. But all the same, Dara's advice applies; no matter how it falls out, he can't force Merlin to stay, not without breaking them both further. He groans and hangs his head, raking a hand back through his hair. "Thank you, Dara," he says quietly. It might not be what he wants to hear, but it's sound counsel, honest and direct, which is what he'd asked for.

"You're welcome, my lord." Dara taps the packet of letters he'd brought out with him, resting in his lap. "I intend to sit out here for a time and read these. One of the attendants will show you out if you'd prefer not to stay."

Arthur sighs, tilting his head back to look at the blossoming limbs above him. The small glimpses of blue sky visible between the tender new leaves reminds him of the quickbeam tree in the garden, a night of frigid vigil. "I'd enjoy staying, but I have my own matters to attend to." He's been so absorbed in his own misery, he's been neglecting some of his duties.

"Until next time, then, my lord."

"Call me Arthur," he says as he departs the garden, drawing the glass doors shut behind him. There's a corridor which leads directly to the front of the house, and he waits near the doors as an ostler fetches Llamrei for him.

As he stands waiting, a gentle voice says from behind him, "Your coat, sire."

Arthur turns to look at the owner of the voice and chokes. The attendant holding his jacket for him is the young man, the one with curling black hair and deep blue eyes, tall and slender. He's dressed
in the same uniform of the other Pavilion attendants. "I...hello." Belatedly, he turns and extends his arms, letting the attendant help him into his jacket.

"Hello again, sire." There's an undercurrent of humour in his voice; Arthur wishes he could remember his name.

As he does up the ties in front, Arthur takes the chance to study him closer. In the sober light of day, he doesn't bear too great a resemblance to Merlin aside from those few surface details, everything about him far softer, gentler, not quite as sharp and callused. Still, he's painfully aware of his own knowledge of what lies beneath the modest grey livery, feeling himself flush. "I...ahem, I want to...apologise if I was at all...." He sketches a vague gesture in the air. "I was...quite drunk and..."

"Kind," the young man replies, a smile pulling at his mouth. "You were very kind, albeit quite sad, which is more than I can say for most of my patrons. And far more than I expected from a prince." He smooths down the front of Arthur's jacket.

"Oh." Arthur clears his throat. "That's a relief to hear, I suppose. Thank you, ah.... I'm sorry, I don't remember—"

"I didn't tell you. I had the feeling you needed me to be someone else." The young man smiles a little, looking far wiser than his years; that does remind him of Merlin, achingly so. "Talorcan. You can call me Tal, sire."


He glances down the corridor to the glass doors which lead out to the gardens where Dara still sits beneath the blossoming trees, reading his letters. "Master Dara is very wise. I hope he's been able to help you. You ought to be happy," he says, then tilts his head slightly, the smile fading into something more solemn. "I don't believe you're happy very often, are you, sire?"

Arthur wonders if Dara makes his employees pass some sort of philosophy test before he allows them to work for him. But then again, he supposes one doesn't become the Whoremaster of Spies by employing fools. He lets out a breath. "I try to be. It's not always easy to do."

"True enough." Tal gives him a small, sly smile. "Will you be happy to remember me?"

Despite everything, it makes him laugh. The night he'd come to the Pavilion, he'd done so in a fit of self-loathing, aching with longing and frightened by the depth of his own desire. The guilt of all he's wrought from it still stings. And yet.... "Yes, I will," he replies truthfully.

"Good." Tal hesitates slightly, shifting his weight, then leans forward and kisses him, quick and chaste. Arthur blinks in surprise, taken aback by the surprisingly tender gesture. "I'm not meant to do that when I'm attending," he murmurs with a smile, taking a step back. He hands Arthur his cloak. "Go and try to be happy, sire."

"I will."

Merlin leaves for Silverpine, Lancelot with him.

Arthur lets him.

It hurts. It hurts a great deal, and yet, he tries to be happy.
He attends court, seeing to petitions and such that end up before him, grievances of noble houses and other matters of state that have fallen under his purview since becoming crown prince. He does have his own estates which he is responsible for, two actually: Bryn, which lies in Denaria, and Eastwaith, in Ascetir. They had belonged to his mother's family and had for generations. His mother had owned Eastwaith, and his uncle Tristan had owned Bryn; both had ended up deeded to him when they died. The third du Bois estate, their family seat, is Snowgate, in the Northern Plains; it lay under the ownership of his uncle Agravaine. For the most part, he leaves his estates in the able hands of their seneschals, but he does visit them from time to time.

There're letters from his seneschals—minor grievances between vassals, arranged marriages seeking his approval, details of the estate's functions—letters from other nobles seeking audiences or planning to visit Camelot, and letters from his uncle and cousin. Uncle Agravaine rarely ever appears in court, preferring to remain at Snowgate; after what happened to his siblings, Arthur can hardly blame him for not wanting to be around Father. His cousin will be one-and-ten this year, and she's quite adamant about fostering in Camelot at least for the summer despite her father's refusal, entreating Arthur to try and sway him as well.

He trains the new crop of young nobles and lordlings that aspire to be knights and observes the squires, making note of which ones have proper ambition. He goes hunting with his friends at court—he doesn't have a great many of them anymore—and entertains the noblewomen which his father presents to him, even though it makes him feel ill at times. No proper arrangements are made, but he does as is expected of him, playing the game of courtship to the hilt.

He tries not to think about Merlin at all. There are days when it's easy to do, and there are days when he can feel his absence like a missing limb and loathes George with everything in him. Still, he tries to let go of it, let it sink below the surface and to the very bottom of the stream like some vast bulwark, dividing the current. Hidden, unseen, and forgotten. Betimes it works; others, it doesn't.

Strangely enough, he's made a friend in Dara. It's easy to see how he and Merlin can be friends, for they both have the same subtle, keen wit and betimes astonishing opinions of things. Small wonder Father had turned the man away. With enough wine in him, he can be devastatingly funny as well, and has tales of former patrons that can make even the most brazen blush. He keeps a private room in the Cockerel for those few he names friends to drink in peace, and there's a fair number of nights when Arthur goes there to share in his company. Dara doesn't dice, but he's excellent at chess and Twelve Man Morris. Leon accompanies him most of the time, though once or twice, Morgana's slipped out of the castle to join them, always with Guinevere in tow.

It's fun. It isn't always easy, but it's manageable. He's...happy. He wonders if the same can be said for Merlin.

"Do you recall how I said I'll never let Arthur send me on long patrol again? Well, I'm amending that statement. I am never going on any kind of hunting trip with you again," Lancelot grinds out, having to close his eyes against the dizzying, swaying, upside-down view of the forest around him. "Can you get us down without breaking our necks? If I die out here, Guinevere will certainly kill me."

"I'm working on it," Merlin grunts.

He groans a little, having to swallow hard as bile rises in his throat. It is never wise to hang upside down from one's ankles shortly after breakfast. "Sometime this morning, if you please."
"Would you kindly shut up?"

"I will when you kindly get me down."

"Unbinde þé téage," Merlin murmurs.

The snare around his ankles releases, the ropes slithering apart. Lancelot lets out a strangled yelp as he drops, managing to somehow strike his chin, chest, and hip simultaneously on the ground when he lands, the air punched out of his lungs. "Damn it, Merlin!" he wheezes, rolling onto his side and trying to catch his breath.

"You wanted me to get you down." Merlin slides a knife into his palm, swinging his arms to give himself momentum, then somehow manages to curl himself upwards and slashes through the rope. He swears loudly as he drops hard beside the knight, wheezing and coughing. "Ow."

"Your fault." Lancelot reaches over and swats his arm, then sits up, rubbing his chest. "Why are we still doing this? We already caught half of those men, and the children who were taken have been found and sent home. I don't think they'll be returning anytime soon."

"I know." Merlin coughs as he sits upright, leaning forward to slash the ropes around his ankles, kicking his feet free. "But there's not just children. One of the older boys, Ren, he told me there were others. Men and women. They were taken ahead."

Lancelot sighs and clambers to his feet, shaking the ache out of his limbs. "Fine, fine. How far?" he sighs.

Merlin gets up and walks into the brush alongside the trail, finding where the snares were tied. "Not that far. These are quick-release knots, and they've not been here long. Still dry," he replies, holding up the ropes. "They know we're after them." He whistles sharply for their horses, both of whom come loping over obediently.

"They have a wagon," Lancelot points out as he pulls himself astride. He gestures to the tracks left on the rain-soft soil of the trail, which they'd been inspecting before their unfortunate encounter with the snares. "That must be how they're moving the rest of their prisoners."

Merlin nods. "That's good for us, then. If they keep going this way, they'll be going into lowland, and as much as its rained, like as not they'll get mired. We'll catch them up."

They ride up the trail at a sharp canter. Lancelot doesn't question their direction. He knows full well that Merlin knows this land far better than him, and more than that, the young man is in his element here, in the wild places of the earth. It's rare that Merlin is ever outside the walls of Camelot without Arthur or the company of others, and the change is notable, a fierce sort of wildness to him. This little quest has done him well, taken the shadow of hurt out of his gaze.

Abruptly, Merlin draws rein, and Lancelot slows beside him. "Hear that?" he murmurs. "Just ahead, over the rise?"

He listens. For a moment, all he hears is the blowing of the horses and the twittering of birdsong overhead, but then he hears it—voices. Several voices, quite irate. "...had come before the rain, we wouldn't have gotten stuck!" one strident voice says above the others. Lancelot grins.

At Merlin's gesture for quiet, they both dismount and lead the horses off the trail, tethering them to a low-hanging branch and arm themselves before creeping up the rise. The voices grow louder the further up they go, and Lancelot knows they must be directly on the other side. Near the top, they both get down and crawl the last bit up to the crest of the hill. The ground is cold and damp, the
smell of slow-rotting leaf litter rising up around them, but it's no worse than what they've been experiencing the past month and a half, chasing the slavers out of Silverpine and halfway across the province. Lancelot's almost used to it now.

Sure enough, on the other side of the rise, there's a large wheeled cage with at least ten people in it, a mix of men and women. The wheels are sunk deep into the muddy ground, too deep for the mules drawing it to pull free. There's only a handful of men present—a headcount puts their numbers at seven—arguing over it. At least two deemed it wiser to take their captives out of the wagon and then push it free, and the others insisted it was folly to do so. One was quiet and tending to the mules.

"What do you want to do?" Lancelot mumbles in an undertone.

"Wait a moment. If they let their captives out, we'll take them by surprise then."

After a heated debate, the slavers come to a compromise. Aiming their crossbows through the bars of the cage, they order one of the prisoners out of the cage to help push the wagon free.

"Maiden's mercy, look at the size of that one," Merlin whispers, staring at the man who steps out of the cage. He's at least head and shoulders taller than the others and built like an oak tree. "He's as tall as Mhera."

"Who?"

"You'll meet her later," he murmurs absently. "I'll take the one with the crossbow first. You go for the one with the keys, and see if you can't get a weapon to the big one. Ready?"

"Let's have done with this."

Seven against two isn't exactly ideal odds. But then, not many have fought against someone like Merlin. The two holding the crossbows are felled first by his throwing knives, another laid low by a terrible blow upside the head from the metal end of the quarterstaff. Lancelot engages the two with swords; they're decent enough, but not a match for a knight. The slaver unfortunate enough to hold the keys is laid out flat by a single, smashing blow from their gargantuan captive, and the last of them makes perhaps the first wise decision of his life and flees.

"Ah, let him go," Merlin says, scarce breathing hard as he retrieves his knives. "If nothing else, he'll warn others not to venture here."

"Good. Then we shan't have to do this again," Lancelot remarks, wiping his sword clean.

"Who are you?" the big man asks, looking between them carefully. He's taken up one of the fallen slaver's swords, though he holds it down at his side, unthreatening.

"I'm Merlin of Silverpine, and this is my companion, Lancelot. We've been tasked with driving the slavers out of Brechfa," he replies with a smile, slinging his quarterstaff over a shoulder and extending a friendly hand.

Lancelot stifles a chuckle as the big man blinks in surprise, taken aback by Merlin's open camaraderie, but then he grasps the proffered hand tightly. His hand's large enough to encircle Merlin's forearm completely.

It's short work from there to unlock the cage and free the others. Aside from some lumps and bruises, none are badly injured, which is rather logical. Damaged goods don't sell for much. They gather up the slavers' provisions, loading it onto the mules, and begin the walk back to the nearest
town, leaving the cage mired where it is. Merlin and Lancelot both walk with them, allowing the youngest of the captives, a pair of girls scarce more than six-and-ten, to ride their horses instead.

"So, my towering friend, where are you from?" Merlin asks as they walk, leading the Hellion by the reins. For once, the spotted menace is near calm, despite her unfamiliar rider.

"Teine," the big man replies in a soft voice.

Lancelot twists Flick's reins tighter around his hand. Teine was one of Camelot's villages, right upon the very border of Essetir; it'd been destroyed by raiders last autumn, likely by Cenred's men, though it'd never been proven and the blame had been lain on raiders after the village's harvest. He'd been one of the soldiers departed to send aid, though it'd done little good. Teine had been razed to the ground.

Merlin's lashes flicker. He knew it, too. "I've heard of Teine, it's less than a day's walk from Ealdor. I was born there. We're all but family," he remarks with an air of joviality that would convince any who didn't know him well.

It works, though; the big man's mouth curls up. "Indeed," he agrees, humoured.

"Well, then, near-cousin, will you tell us your name or shall we guess? I have to warn you, we have an overabundance of imagination between us," Merlin warns with mock severity, gesturing between himself and Lancelot.

The man laughs at that, shaking his head. "Percival. My name's Percival."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Percival. Where are you bound?"

"Nowhere, really."

Merlin smiles, this time with genuine humour, and he claps a hand to Percival's back. "Well, if you would care to accompany us back to Silverpine, I know someone who would be delighted to meet you."

"Good morning, sire!"

Arthur sits up at the sound of a wonderfully familiar voice, rubbing a hand over his eyes to ensure he's not seeing things. "Merlin. You're...you're back," he says dumbly.

"I am. And I suggest you have your breakfast before you attempt any further thought, sire," Merlin snorts as he uncovers the breakfast tray. He walks over to the bed, grabs the edge of the blankets, and flings them down to the end of the bed. "Come along now, lazy daisy, on your feet. One of Bayard's pet lords is arriving from Mercia today, and I'm certain the King will want to parade you before the man."

Tentatively, Arthur rises from bed and walks over to the table. He's aware of his heart beating faster, but no more. Perhaps Dara is right after all, and what he'd felt was only a desire for the forbidden, a summer fever of rebellion. He's not certain if he should be disappointed or grateful for that. "Was your excursion...eventful?" he prompts as he starts in on his breakfast, watching as Merlin shuffles about the chambers, grumbling to himself as he finds very little to clean. George is dreadfully efficient.

"Oh, yes. I don't believe there'll be much issue of slavers in Brechfa again," Merlin replies with
small smirk. "Made a friend. I think you'd like him."

Arthur snorts as he licks sausage grease from his fingertips. He could lock Merlin in the dungeons for a week, and the young man would've made friends of the rats in his cell by the end of it. He looks up from the tray to see Merlin watching him; the raw hurt is gone from his eyes, replaced by something like their old camaraderie. Swallowing hard, he decides to test it. "Well? What are you standing there gawking at me for? My armour needs polishing, and my riding cloak has a tear in it which I expect to be fixed before my next patrol," he orders.

Merlin rolls his eyes and gives a sweeping, dramatic bow. "Of course, your majesty," he drawls out, and a knot loosens in Arthur's chest. As he walks past the table, he pauses slightly, and the darting of his eyes is the only warning Arthur has before the little wretch makes a grab for the last honey-soaked oatcake on the tray.

Luckily, Arthur's faster. Not by much, but still enough to snatch the oatcake and hold it well out of Merlin's reach, leaning back in his chair as the younger man stretches over the table trying for it. "Damn it, Merlin, I already know you steal from my dinner tray, isn't that enough? Does your brother not feed you?" he snaps.

"Just keeping you fighting fit, sire!"

"I am not fat!" Switching tactics, he snatches at Merlin with his free hand and snags hold of the silly red neckerchief he always wears. It's tied loosely, however, and Merlin ducks his head, letting it slip off him like a too-large snare and scrambling back from the table with a laugh. "Out with you! Out! Armour, cloak, now!"

Still laughing, Merlin grabs the basket of laundry and darts out.

Sitting back in his chair, Arthur drops the crumbling oatcake back on the tray and licks the honey off his fingertips. In his other hand, he still has hold of Merlin's neckerchief, the red cloth frayed around the edges and creased at the ends where he ties it, obviously older and well-loved. The fabric's still warm. His pulse quickens again, a tremulous flutter in the pit of his belly. On some mad impulse, he raises the cloth to his face, pressing his nose to it and inhaling.

Loam and musk and fermented berries, the wild places of the earth.

It hits him like a mace blow to the chest. His throat constricts, and he makes a sound that's half laugh, half sob. The dam he'd built against his heart cracks asunder, and the rushing tide of emotion crashes against him. Desire, yes, but more than that. Tenderness, affection, a terrifying longing for more, for intimacy and openness and everything else under the sun. None of it has changed, except for carving itself deeper into him, insidious and anchoring.

Arthur plays out the fabric of Merlin's neckerchief in his hands, rubbing the soft fabric between his fingers. He lets out a low sigh. "Well, fuck."
"Arise, Sir Vidor, Knight of Camelot. Arise, Sir Caradoc, Knight of Camelot."

Father sheathes his ceremonial sword, gazing at them solemn and austere. "You have been accorded a great honour," he intones, his voice carrying in the acoustics of the Hall of Ceremonies. "But with that honour comes great responsibility. From this day forth, you are sworn to live by the knights' code. You have pledged to conduct yourselves with nobility, honour, and respect. Your word is your sacred bond. You will find no one who better embodies these values than my son, Arthur."

It might just be his imagination, but Arthur thinks he hears a muffled snort from the direction of his manservant. He makes mental note to have the idiot scrub the floors of his chambers later.

Thankfully, Father doesn't hear it, continuing on with his speech. "Follow his example, and you will prove yourselves worthy of your title." He's about to dismiss them to the feast, but a new sound filters into the hall, one that Arthur knows all too well: the sound of blades clashing. Before any of them have the chance to react, the doors of the hall are thrown open. A knight strides in, clad in full armour, sword naked in hand; there's blood on the steel. The court parts for him as he approaches, rippling with murmurs and whispers. The newly dubbed knights quickly form a guard around the King, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, but the stranger pays them no heed. He removes his gauntlet, walks directly to Arthur, and casts it at his feet without a word.

Well, then.

Arthur stoops and picks up the gauntlet before Father has the chance to protest. "I accept your challenge," he says aloud; a bit redundant, as he's already taken up the gauntlet, but there's a ceremony to these things. "If I'm to face you in combat, do me the courtesy of revealing your identity."

The knight nods agreement, then reaches up and pulls off his helm. Except that it isn't a him at all. A spill of blonde hair falls free, and the woman tucks the helmet beneath her arm, staring at him with a clear, steady gaze. "My name is Morgause."

The day is clear and sunny, only a few tufts of white cloud to be seen, yet the King's temper is foul enough that he seems to conjure his own thunderhead.

Morgana knows Uther is displeased with every inch of this situation—a woman challenging Arthur, him being unable to contest the challenge, the potential shame of his son and heir possibly being defeated by a mere woman. So, naturally, she's having a grand time. Merlin had met her before she took her seat and told her of the King's fit of temper, trying to stop Arthur from answering the challenge, and how Arthur had made the offer to withdraw to Morgause and her answering refusal. She wonders why this stranger is so determined to face him, and why she feels some distant flutter of recognition looking at Morgause. It's all entirely strange, but she's learned to relish it.

There's a murmuring as Arthur enters the tourney grounds, walking up to face Morgause. Morgana would rather bite off her own tongue than ever tell him so, but he does cut a very handsome figure in battle dress, deep Pendragon red suiting his colouring, sunlight gilding his hair. It's almost absurd. Out the corner of her eye, she spies Merlin and the soft smile playing at his mouth, and
rolls her eyes skyward. She wonders if she ought to tell him he is nowhere near as subtle as he believes himself to be.

"A challenge has been issued and answered," Uther declares, distaste layering every word out of his mouth. "The fight will be to the knights' rules and to the death." He takes his seat. The bell rings.

Within the first full minute of the match, Morgana knows it will not be so easily won. Whoever this Morgause is, she knows how to wield a sword. Perhaps she doesn't match Arthur for strength, but she makes up for it well in speed and grace, able to move swiftly enough to put Arthur off rhythm.

As Morgause presses her attack, a burgeoning sense of alarm swells in Morgana's belly, echoed in the pulse of her blood, until it's all around her like the buffeting of birds' wings. It's rare she ever gets such feelings outside of her dreams, but she recognises it all the same: a warning. *Heed this.* She knows without knowing that the outcome of this will determine far more than they can reckon, a tipping point of *what-might-be* into *what-will-be*.

Gripping the arms of her seat, she stares at Morgause. She knows what a knight's armour looks like. She's seen Arthur in it often enough, has seen Merlin cleaning it. She envisions the leather straps beneath the metal plates, the fastenings holding it in place. When Morgause swings her sword again, Morgana pretends to flinch from the blow, raising a hand to her face, and as the crowd exclaims aloud, she whispers, "*Unbinde.*"

There's a great gasp of awe, and she lowers her hand.

Morgause's armour has come undone, the straps trailing loose over her shoulders, buckles snagging against her chainmail. Suddenly what is meant to be protection has become hindrance. She cannot raise her arms properly.

Arthur changes tack in the blink of an eye, on the offensive rather than defensive, pressing his advantage before she has the chance to recover. Morgause is forced into retreat, awkwardly parrying his strikes. Sidestepping her in one smooth motion, he kicks her left leg out from beneath her. Her sword falls from her hand, and he kicks it well out her reach, shoving her roughly to the ground. Morgause sprawls on her back, and Arthur immediately puts one foot on her sword arm, keeping it pinned as he levels the point of his sword at her throat. "Yield," he orders.

Morgause stares up at him for a long moment; the entire pitch seems to hold its breath. "I yield."

Arthur takes his boot off her arm and sheathes his blade, then holds out an arm to her. She hesitates a moment, then grasps the proffered hand, letting Arthur draw her to her feet. Uther scowls ferociously, but there's a murmuring of approval from the rest of the crowd, and Morgana sees some people nodding.

The thundering pulse of urgency dissipates. The clamour of bronze wings fades.

Exhaling slowly, she relaxes back into her seat, closing her eyes a moment. When she opens them again, Morgause and Arthur have walked to the edge of the challenge ring, the woman knight pausing to speak to him. Hopefully she's accepting her defeat with dignity and thanking him for his mercy. Morgana gets to her feet and makes for the stairs.

She doesn't see Arthur's face go white at Morgause's words.

Arthur might not readily admit it, but he is a creature of habit to those who know him well enough.
After what Morgause had said at the tourney grounds, Merlin knows there's only one place the prince will be: the Hall of Portraits.

It's a long, narrow room in the seldom-used north wing of the castle, closed off to most of the servants and guards, and given that Arthur only ever goes there when the King is well-occupied elsewhere, it's fair to say that he's not explicitly permitted to be there, either. He still has a key, though Merlin doubts that he obtained it in an entirely proper way. He only knows of it himself because he'd followed Arthur after the prince had stalked off in one of his little fits.

The handle turns when he tries it, confirming his suspicion, and he sidles into the room quietly, easing the door closed, careful of the rusted hinges. The exterior wall is full of windows which let in bright spills of spring sunlight, rendered strangely mottled and half-shadowed by the grime-clouded glass. The interior wall is lined and stacked with portraits of the rulers of Camelot, different generations clustered together. At a guess, Merlin would say they went back some 300 years. Arthur's at the far end of it, gazing solemnly up at one in particular—the late Queen Ygraine, his mother.

Her portrait is the only one covered, hung with drapes of sheer black muslin, testament to the perpetual mourning surrounding her presence. The drapes are pushed back for the moment. Merlin comes to stand beside Arthur, gazing up at it.

It's a well-done portrait. She wears a gown of deep blue that brings out the hue of her eyes and a slender gold crown with sapphire points; her pale golden-white hair is coiled up in an elegant, complicated twist, a few locks hanging loose. Her eyes have a look of mischievous humour about them, lips slightly parted as if in the next instant she might laugh or smile. The resemblance between mother and son is unmistakable.

"She died before I ever opened my eyes," Arthur says in a low voice. "I scarce know anything of her."

"Your father?" Merlin suggests.

"He refuses to speak of her. It must be too painful for him. Sometimes...sometimes it's as if she never existed at all. I never even knew I looked like her until I found this place. I followed my father here one day, when I was a boy. Stole his key, made my own." He toys with said key, hanging from a slender chain around his neck. "I still have a sense of her. As though she's part of me."

"She is," Merlin insists gently. "It's the same with me, with my blood-father. I never knew him. My mother doesn't speak of him, either. I only ever asked her once. She wept. I couldn't bring myself to ever ask again after that."

"You had Sir Lionel," Arthur points out.

"I did. And you had my mother." At the surprised and vaguely guilty look the prince gives him, Merlin smiles. "I might be the fool from time to time, but I'm not blind." It had irked him at first, when he was younger, a strange sort of jealousy eating at him, but he'd come to understand it as he got older. In a way, he's almost grateful for it now, glad his mother hadn't been quite so alone in those years they were forced to be apart and glad Arthur had known at least a measure of a mother's love in what he could imagine was a very lonely childhood. "Is that why you're entertaining this idea of finding Morgause again? To see what she knows of your mother?"

Arthur opens his mouth as if to argue, then closes it again and glances away. "Is that so wrong?"
"No. Not at all." Taking up his courage, Merlin lays a hand against Arthur's arms, folded tightly across his chest. "I only ask that you think first. What better way to set a trap than to bait it with that which you desire so greatly?"

"You believe she means me harm?"

"Why would she challenge you?" Merlin prompts, remembering what Morgana had told him, the terrible sense of urgency that'd come upon her during the match.

"She could've meant to prove herself," Arthur protests, albeit feebly.

He scoffs. "You saw her fight. She doesn't need to prove anything. If she'd won, do you think she'd have slain you? Or would she have asked a boon of you? She knows you're a man of honour. She'd make you give your word because she knows you'd hold yourself to it. If she means no harm, she'd tell you freely, not bait you."

Arthur's quiet for a long moment, his face turned away. The brittle sunlight filtering through the clouded windows catches on his hair, gilding each strand and making an aureole of it. It's so easy to forget that he's scarce three-and-twenty, a young man. Finally, he lets out a heavy sigh, shoulders dropping. "Let's go before someone comes searching for us," he says quietly. "Fetch your quarterstaff and my sword, and wait for me in the practice field."

Merlin inwardly sighs but nods and makes for the door. That's fair. A few vicious bouts of sparring will take his mind from it as well as anything else. Still, he's hardly looking forward to the bruises he's sure to earn.

Behind him, Arthur gazes at his mother's portrait for one last moment, then closes the muslin drapes and follows.

Morgause departs Camelot the day after her loss.

Merlin can't say that he's exactly sad to see her go. Something about her makes him...anxious. It's not any one particular feeling that he can name, just a general sense of disquiet, the same sensation he gets when standing in places of the dead. Morgana seems just as unsettled by her, though she still seems disconcerted even now. He tries asking her about it, but she waves him off as merely overthinking. Fretting like fishwives, Mother would say of them.

For over a sennight afterwards, Arthur is in a state, moody and irritable. Merlin knows he's only sulking, but he still has to deal with the royal prat's temper, mainly in the form of sparring and bruises.

"Do you think she's...like you? This Morgause, I mean," Leon proposes as they walk through the city towards the lower town. The weather's fair enough for a ride, but there's a dampness to the air which suggests rain.

Merlin shrugs one shoulder; the other is still sore and stiff with it. "Might be. I'd think I'd have noticed, though."

"Not if she can hide herself. She wouldn't be the first." Leon reaches over and taps the centre of Merlin's chest; beneath his tunic lies the burn Nimueh had given him, long healed over into a shiny scar.

Fair enough. Nimueh had been able to conceal her magic from him when they first met, and if she
hadn't revealed it to him, she likely would've been able to do it again. Perhaps Morgause has done the same. It might explain why she challenged Arthur so blatantly, using his own sense of honour to lure him out of Camelot rather than try to ensorcell him. "If she is, she gave up the chase easy enough. Now, if she comes back…" He shrugs. "We'll see."

"Hopefully not. I don't know about you, little villain, but I've had enough excitement for a time."

Merlin shoves against Leon's side. "Will you stop calling me that?"

"Well, brother, you—look out!" Leon snatches his arm and yanks him to the side just as a horse-drawn cage rattles past at a sharp clip. He says a handful of unfriendly words Evaine would've washed his mouth out to hear. The cart stops out in front of the Rising Sun, and the large man driving it climbs down, going inside.

The nape of his neck prickles, and Merlin taps his brother's arm. "Look," he murmurs, staring at the cage.

Huddled in a corner of the cage is a young woman in rags, bound in shackles with chains bolted to the floor of the cage. Her dark hair hangs in unwashed tangles, and she has a sunken, hollow look to her. One of her arms, pale and slender, is marked with a triskelion—a Druid mark.

"A bounty hunter," he murmurs. Uther has long since made it known that he will pay a handsome reward for the capture of anyone with magic. Merlin feels nauseous thinking of it; he can't imagine how it feels, being bought and sold like cattle, much less knowing he's just arrived at the abattoir. "Is there nothing we can do?"

Leon grasps his arm tightly. "No, and I beg you to stay out of it. Bounty hunters are dangerous men. Leave it be," he says.

Merlin lets himself be drawn away, Leon's arm a firm anchor around his elbow. As they walk past the cage, the girl's eyes follow them, full of deep, drowning sorrow.

Merlin wakes to the sound of rain drumming on the roof and a hand shaking his arm. "Ohuh? Wha'?" he slurs out, squinting blearily in the flickering too-bright lamp in front of him.

"Get up," Leon's voice whispers, low and strident.

"Leon? What in seven hells…?" Merlin yaws as he sits up, swiping a hand over his eyes; his brother is well-awake, dressed and half-sodden with rain, curly hair slicked down, boot splattered in mud. "What is it?"

"Just…get up, would you?"

Yawning and starting to be irate as well as confused, Merlin climbs out of the bed and follows Leon out of his chambers, coming barefoot downstairs into the foyer. He halts on the bottommost step, staring.

Huddled in the folds of Leon's cloak, looking very small and frail, the Druid girl stands shivering, her dark hair plastered down with water. Deep red burns encircle her slender wrists where the cold iron manacles had scalded her.

He turns to look at his brother, staring at him darkly. "Stay out of it, Merlin. Leave it be, Merlin. Don't get involved, Merlin," he mocks. "Damn it, Leon, what happened to not wanting any
"Shut up. Come help me," Leon growls quietly. He pushes past Merlin and walks over to the girl, putting a gentle arm around her shoulders. She looks terrifically small against him.

"In the library. Come on," Merlin mutters. He walks down the corridor into the library, pushing the doors closed behind them. "Byrne." The lamps and hearth burst into life, filling the room with warmth and light; tucked under Leon's arm, the girl's eyes go wide, staring at him in awe and disbelief.

"Sit down by the hearth, dry off a bit," Leon murmurs gently. "I'm going to talk to my brother."

Clutching his cloak tightly to her, she shuffles over to the hearth and sits down on the cushions. Allegra lopes over, sniffing the girl curiously; once satisfied, she flops down beside the girl, dropping her shaggy head in her lap. A small, watery giggle slips out of the girl, stroking Allegra's coat.

Merlin steps out into the corridor and slides the doors of the library shut. Once it clicks shut, he turns and punches Leon in the shoulder. "What in the hell are you doing?"

"Ow," Leon hisses, swatting him back. "I'm helping her, what do you think I'm doing?"

"Bounty hunters are dangerous men, leave it be," he quotes back accusingly.

Leon sighs, sweeping his wet hair back out of his face. "I know, I know, but..." He heaves a sigh, shaking his head. "I kept thinking about her in that cage. I kept thinking that it could very well have been you in there. And she was...so very sad. So sad. I couldn't just leave her there, Merlin, I couldn't. I had to do something." The corner of his mouth quirks in a ghost of a smile. "And you've created your fair share of trouble lately, I imagined it was my turn."

Merlin snorts and covers his face with a hand, biting his lips together on a smile. "Alright," he murmurs. "There's the door in the cellar that leads to the city tunnels. We can hide her down there if need be, since I'm certain that bounty hunter will come looking for her."

"Wait a few days for him to settle, and then I can take her to the Druids," Leon prompts, and Merlin nods in agreement, rubbing a hand over his hair. "Thank you."

"Mm." Folding both arms across his chest, Merlin stares at the closed doors of the library for a moment, then glances back at Leon. "What are you going to tell Arthur?"

"I'm not going to tell him anything."

"What—?"

"What he doesn't know shan't harm him," Leon says firmly, cutting off any further protest. "It's nothing to do with him anyways. Now, I'm going to stay here with her. She's frightened, and I'd rather not leave her alone."

Merlin props both hands on his hips, eyeing his brother critically. "You're going to stay here? What are you going to tell Arthur about that, then?"

Leon smirks. "I'm not. You are. I'm certain you can come up with something."

Unbelievable. "I am liking this less and less," he sighs, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. He's not had nearly enough sleep to deal with this yet. A part of him is relieved to know the girl is
safe with them, and yet he has the sinking feeling that this is going to be a great deal of trouble for all of them.

Smiling a little, his brother claps him on the shoulder. "You begin to understand how I feel in dealing with you when you get into your antics, then," he replies.

It makes him smile despite himself. "It's a good thing I love you, you know that?" Merlin sighs and runs a hand through his hair again. "Alright. Fine. Maiden have mercy on us both. You stay, and I'll manage Arthur. I suppose I can tell him you've taken ill, so don't go wandering about the market. Now, I am going back to bed, or I shan't be awake enough to convince Arthur of the time of day."

He starts to step past, heading for the stairs, but Leon catches him by the arm and tugs him into a brief, slightly damp embrace. "Thank you, villain," he murmurs.

"Call me that one more time, and I won't help you with anything at all," Merlin grumbles as he ascends the stairs.

Leon only laughs.

Come morning, after Merlin leaves for the castle, Leon goes in search of more suitable clothes for the girl. She'd fallen asleep in front of the hearth in the library, Allegra curled up beside her. He'd been loath to move her, so he'd only covered her with his cloak and let her sleep.

Beryl and Elfgifa are both too small to have anything that would fit her, Clory too large, but Leon knows his mother invariably forgets some of her possessions whenever she makes a visit to the city. A search of the wardrobe in the guest chambers turns up a faded blue kirtle, one she wore when gardening; there are faded grass and dirt stains on the skirt and the edges of the sleeves that haven't come out. A little spacious, perhaps, but tighten the stays and it'd suit fine.

He knocks lightly on the door of the library. "My lady?"

"Come in." She's still sitting in front of the hearth, though it'd burned out in the night, still holding his cloak around her shoulders.

"Good morning," he greets, stepping in and closing the door behind him. "Forgive me, but I neglected to ask your name last night."

"Freya."

"Freya. My name is Leon. Ah, here." Leon holds out the kirtle to her. "It might be a bit large on you, but it'll do you better than that," he says, nodding towards her ragged, torn dress, barely preserving decency in places.

"It's lovely. Thank you." She takes it from him and gently strokes a hand over the faded, soft-worn fabric. "Does it...is it your wife's?"

Leon chuckles. "No, no. I'm not wed. It's my lady mother's. She always forgets something whenever she visits. That's the dress she wears when working in the garden."

Her head lifts slightly, a spark of interest coming into her eyes. "A garden? You have a garden here?" she asks.
"Yes, we do. Would you care to see?" He can't take her outside the house, but the garden is walled in and private enough. Nobody would know she was here. Leon thinks on how Merlin is always more himself when out of doors and away from walls made by man; Druids inhabit no cities, only their camps out in nature. Freya nods eagerly, and he smiles. "Well, then. I'll step out and let you change, my lady."

She colours slightly, holding the kirtle closer to her. "I'm not a lady," she mumbles.

Leon only smiles and steps out of the library, closing the doors to give her privacy and waiting in the corridor. A moment later, she steps out in the borrowed kirtle. She's both shorter and slighter than his mother, so the hem of the kirtle covers her feet, the sleeves fall over her hands, and the neckline falls a little off her small shoulders. He offers her one arm as if escorting a courtier to a ball, and she smiles a little, taking his arm and letting him lead her out to the garden. Leon knows he's done the right thing when she takes in a deep breath of fresh air, a true smile coming to her lips. Freya releases his arm and walks over to the nearest section of herb plants, kneeling down on the grass; she runs her palms over the tender tops of the plants, smiling. "It's so lovely," she says happily. She plucks one of the basil leaves and holds it to her nose, inhaling deeply.

"You should see her garden at Silverpine," Leon replies with a chuckle. "The old garden was near this size, but it wasn't to her liking, so she remade one of the courtyards. Hired a mason to pry up all the paving stones and built it all herself from there."

"That doesn't sound like a highborn lady to me," Freya remarks, sounding both awed and amused.

He shrugs one shoulder, sinking down to sit cross-legged and reaching over to tug out a small sprig of weeds. "Mother does as Mother does," he replies. That's what Father had always said of her whenever Leon had wondered why his mother didn't act like other noblewomen: *Evaine does as Evaine does, cub*. He grins a little more and adds, "She also taught me how to pick locks." Her mouth outright falls open at that. "Is that a Druid tattoo you have?" he asks, nodding towards her arm. It's covered by her sleeve now, but he'd seen it before. "Were you born a Druid?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?" she demands a touch sharply, her shoulders drawing up.

He sits up a little straighter. "Forgive me, my lady."

"No, I'm sorry," Freya murmurs, rubbing a hand over her arm.

"I understand what it is to keep secrets," Leon reassures. "If you wish, you may ask me anything you'd like."

She's quiet a span of moments, fingers plucking absently at the grass, then asks hesitantly, "Do you have magic? Like your brother does?"

"No, not at all. His gifts are his own. Merlin's…quite singular."

Freya regards him through her lashes, dark eyes intent and solemn. "You aren't frightened of him? Even though his power is greater than you?"

The question is posed in all seriousness, yet Leon can't help but to laugh. "Afraid of Merlin? Maiden's mercy, no. Never," he chuckles. "He is my little brother. There's nothing I fear from him. To be true, I fear *for* him more than anything else. He possesses a streak of…rash nobility that wills itself out at the worst of times."

A flicker of emotion crosses her face, there and gone before he has the chance to identify it; some of the tension goes out of her body, shoulders relaxing. She reaches over to touch one of the
flowering plants, brushing the tiny blooms with a fingertip. "You said your mother has a garden at Silverpine. Where is that?"

"It's my family estate. It's in the neighbouring province, just to the south of here." He points in the direction of home unerringly.

"Tell me about it?"

"Silverpine?" he wonders, and she nods. "Well, it's not a large holding by most standards, but we've never wanted for anything. Near a third of it is wild, mountains and forest. It's kept in sheep, wool and meat, but we also have orchards, apples and pears. I was born there. We didn't come to Camelot until I was of age to become a squire." Leon smiles a little, leaning back on his hands and tilting his head up to look at the sky. "I've always thought it's one of the most peaceful places. The mists come down off the mountains and cover everything, and all the world seems to go soft around the edges. The lake is always cool and clean, and sometimes the waters are so clear you can nearly see all the way to the bottom."

"My home was next to a lake," Freya says quietly. "And mountains, too. In the winter the storms whipped up the water into waves so tall you'd think they were going to crash down and take away all the houses. But in the summer...wildflowers and light."

There's a note of longing in her words, a wistful sorrow that he's heard before. He doesn't ask; he can imagine well enough. "Perhaps once it's safe to take you from the city, I'll bring you to Silverpine."

"Perhaps," she murmurs, a strange tinge of sadness to her voice.

Before he can ask what troubles her, he hears Clory call to him from the kitchens. It's later than he'd realised. She'll have lunch ready for them by now. "Would you care for lunch?" he asks instead, and Freya nods, brightening once more. He rises to his feet, brushes off his trousers, and offers her a hand up. "Believe me, my lady. Once you've tasted Clory's cooking, you'll feel a new person."

Freya lets out a faint laugh as she rises.

Her small hand lingers in his, soft and warm.

Leon doesn't want to believe Merlin's warning.

How could a girl like Freya, so small and sad and kind, become some ferocious beast? How could she be the one to viciously slaughter five people? It makes a nauseating sort of sense when he thinks about it—the Druids turning her away, the cold iron scalding her so badly, the deaths beginning with her freedom—but he can't stand the idea of it. Even when Gaius explains the curse to him, he wishes he could cover his ears, ignore the words.

And then the warning bells begin to ring.

He runs towards the sound of guards yelling and the sound of boots on the ground, heart pounding hard enough to ache against his ribs. Freya screams. The sound goes through him like a crossbow bolt. He comes around the corner just in time to see the Bastet—it isn't Freya, not the girl who'd clapped in delight when Clory gave her strawberries—rear up on its hind legs and lay Hengist out with a single clean swipe of its claws. Arthur shouts orders, and the knights move to surround the creature, swords at the ready. The Bastet roars, claws flashing.
He manages to move again, running forward even though he has no armour, no weapon, not even his dagger. Arthur lunges forward, sword aimed for its breast, but the Bastet swats the blade aside, slashing for the prince. The blow would've torn him open, mail or not, had it landed. Leon gets there first, and he feels the white-hot burst of pain in his arm, the very tips of the beast's claws raking his arm as he heaves Arthur backwards. The Bastet's shriek reverberates in his very bones, and he sees a glimpse of a sword being pulled out of its side in a wash of blood, a knight scrambling back from the answering swipe of claws.

A pair of wings open, huge and terrible, and with tremendous buffeting of wind, it takes flight from the courtyard.

"Leon, what—?" Arthur starts, sounding baffled.

He doesn't wait to hear the rest of the question. Ignoring the blood seeping out of his arm, he scrambles to his feet and runs, bolting out of the courtyard and towards the townhouse.

When he flings the door open, sprinting directly through into the garden, he's greeted with the sight of Freya lying in the grass beneath the quickbeam tree, hands clutch ed over her side; blood runs out between her fingers, thick and fast and dark against her pale skin, near-black in the moonlight. "Forgive me," she sobs. "I tried to tell you. I'm a monster."

"Shh, shh. None of that," Leon rasps out, shedding his jacket and covering her with it. It's already ruined, and he'll never wear it again after this.

"I wasn't always like this." She grasps at his hand, slick and sticky with blood, her eyes pleading. "There was a man. He attacked me. I didn't mean to hurt him, but I thought he was going to kill me. His mother was a sorceress, and when she find out that I'd killed her son, she cursed me to kill forevermore."

He shakes his head quickly, his other hand pressed against her side. "It wasn't your fault. You aren't to blame. You'll be all right." He lifts the edge of the jacket to peer at her side, but it's too dark, and there's far too much blood.

Freya shakes her head. "It's too deep. Please go," she implores.

"No. I won't leave you here." Wrapping his jacket around her, he lifts her up into his arms. She hardly weighs a thing, as if she's made of something less substantial than flesh and bone. There's someplace they need to go.

He doesn't know how they make it out of Camelot without being pursued by anyone; a foggy corner of his mind wonders if Merlin is responsible for that.

Freya stirs in his arms when he finally stops and kneels down on the grass, dew soaking into his trousers. Her bloodless lips curl up the slightest bit. "You remembered," she whispers, gazing at the lake and the faint blue outline of mountains beyond it.

"Of course." He shifts her against him, letting his wounded arm rest against his side. He'd wrapped his shredded sleeve around it as best as possible, already sodden red. He can't bear to look beneath the jacket again at her side. "There must be something I can do to help you," Leon says softly.

"You already have," she murmurs in a thread-thin voice. She rests her head against his shoulder, reaching up to touch his cheek with cool fingers. "You made me feel loved. I never thought I would feel that again."
Leon swallows painfully. "Please...I don't want you to go."

"I'm here," she whispers. "I'll always be here." Freya relaxes against him with an exhale, a last breath as soft as a lover's sigh.

He's not certain how long he sits there, face pressed against her hair as her skin grows cold against him and the blood grows tacky and thick. When a hand touches his shoulder, Leon raises his head slowly, dazed, to see Merlin standing beside him, eyes full of tears; one hand holds a bundle of faded blue cloth, faintly stained with grass and dirt.

Without a word, Merlin sets about collecting armfuls of mast from the forest behind them, tender greening branches, ferns and soft bracken. And flowers. As many flowers as can be found. There's a small boat on the shore, half-hidden in a tall stand of reeds, and he lines the bottom of it with all he's collected. Feeling numb down to his bones, Leon wades into the shallows of the lake and lays Freya in the boat. In the gown, it's impossible to tell she's been so badly wounded. She looks no more than a girl, sleeping. He takes a sprig of yellow flowers and tucks it in her hair behind her ear. Hands on the prow, he wades deeper out into the lake, pushing the boat out onto the waters.

"Wæcce on sæbát bælfýr maest," Merlin whispers as Leon slogs ashore, beginning to shiver; the boat begins to burn despite the damp and the greenery.

He sits down on the grass, watching it drift further and further out, until the heavy mist swallows the boat entirely, only a faint glow of flame visible.

Merlin lowers himself to the bank at his side; he doesn't ask to see Leon's wounded arm. "The lake is a gateway to Avalon," he murmurs. "The land of eternal youth and beauty. What do you suppose will be there?"

"Wildflowers," Leon whispers, his voice sounding rough and foreign. Tears make hot tracks down his face, dripping onto his arm and stinging in his wounds. "Sunlight. Mountains. And a garden."
"Nervous, sire?"

"Shut up, Merlin." Arthur braces his hands on the edge of the battlements, watching as the first of four royal parties ride down the road towards Camelot. He hadn't been nervous, but his ears are still burning from Father's words. Now he's got a prickly knot of unease settling down in the pit of his belly. It's hard enough living with Father at times; having five kings all in the same hall…. "Listen, I expect you to conduct yourself with a measure of decorum, Merlin, and I am aware you know how to, so don't act otherwise." He turns and jabs a finger at the young man's face to emphasise his point. "And under no circumstances are you to be exercising your…talents."

Merlin arches his eyebrows, but he nods agreement, giving a little bow from the waist. He almost appears as though he was raised by a noble instead of a barn cat, scrubbed up and brushed down and in his uniform. Excepting, of course, the hat. Arthur's not seen the hat since that first unfortunate night, and he's quite certain it'd ended up as kindling.

"Who's this arriving?" Arthur asks, jerking his chin towards the approaching party. He knows the answer, of course, but he's also quite certain Father will string Merlin up from the north tower if the fool boy gives offence to one of the dignitaries.

"King Alined of Deorham," Merlin replies unhesitating, leaning his arms against the battlements, smirking a little at the surprised glance Arthur throws at him. "I had to take lessons as a child too." He nudges Arthur with an elbow and points; there's another entourage coming from the east road, large enough not to be any happenstance travelers. "And that, I imagine, would be King Olaf of Anglia. Doesn't he have a daughter?"

"Oh, yes, and if you value your hide, Merlin, you'll keep your gaze on the floor and hands in your pockets." Arthur's heard rumours about the beauty of Princess Vivian…and the protectiveness of King Olaf as well. If he believes even the least of them, then the man is not to be trifled with. He takes a deep breath and straightens up, rolling his shoulders. "I have to go to the square, stand with Father to greet them," he says, then faces Merlin, holding his arms out. "Good?"

Merlin reaches up to fix his collar, then tugs at the bottom of hem of his vest to straighten it. "There. After you, sire."

Directly into a potential serpent's nest.

How wonderful.

Princess Vivian is indeed as beautiful as she's rumoured to be.

However, beauty is as beauty does.

Arthur's never understood that saying as well as he does after having only a single conversation with the princess. He steps out of the guest chambers, holding the door for Guinevere to join him, then closes the door. For a moment, they're both completely silent, staring at each other, then both of them start laughing, hastily muffling their voices with hands and sleeves so their lady guest doesn't overhear. "Maiden's mercy, she's worse than Regeane," he remarks, leaning back against the wall. He would gladly take an entire sennight of Regeane's company over this little shrew.
"She's...certainly a unique individual," she manages to say with a straight face, though her voice wavers with humour.

He drops his head back against the wall, still grinning. "No matter what happens, Guinevere, do not allow Lancelot anywhere near her. I've yet to see his chivalry fail him, and I'd rather not see it fail now." There is no provision in the knights' code which prohibits a woman from challenging a knight; he wonders if there's one to prohibit a knight from challenging a woman.

"Of course, sire," she agrees, still giggling.

Shaking his head, he straightens up and heads down the corridor towards his chambers. As he walks, he says a silent prayer for Morgana; she's to be seated next to Vivian at the feast tonight. He's not sure who he needs to pray for more: Morgana, that she'll have the strength to restrain herself, or Vivian, that she might be lucky enough to not earn the complete and utter enmity of Morgana. Speaking from personal experience in such matters, he'd sooner face another Questing Beast.

The sooner she's out of Camelot, the better.

Morgana wonders what it is about Arthur that seems to simply draw trouble the way flesh draws flies.

If it wasn't for the fact that the peace of the five kingdoms is at stake, she would relish every second of a besotted, lovestruck Arthur making an utter fool of himself. However, she would far prefer it if he was mooning over the actual object of his affections and not that...wretched harpy of a princess.

"Destiny and chicken," she repeats, shaking her head as she walks up a hallway, Celeste trotting along beside her on a silk lead. She finds that moving about helps her mind to work, and she prays Merlin's had luck in discovering the spell and how to undo it. "Maiden have mercy on you, Arthur. If we make it through this unscathed, I will clearly have to educate you on voicing affection."

Hearing said voice, she glances down the adjoining corridor and bites her lip on a smirk when she sees Arthur strolling idly towards the stairs with that nauseating expression on his face. He's followed closely by Leon, whom Merlin has no doubt given the delightful duty of keeping the prince from making a public spectacle of himself, and the tall knight looks as though he wishes that he could drag Arthur out to the courtyard and dunk his head in the fountains until he comes to his senses. Or perhaps just hold him under until the bubbles stop rising.

Once they're out of sight, she tugs lightly on Celeste's lead, deciding to double back and return to her chambers. Princess Vivian believes dogs to be filthy creatures not meant to be kept indoors. Celeste is aware of Morgana's dislike of Vivian and emulates it. So, to keep the peace, she'll keep plenty of space between both bitches.

"Oh, I know, I know, love," Morgana coos as she unclips the lead from Celeste's collar, the hound giving her mournful eyes. "It's only until the treaty is signed, and then she'll be packed off to her own kingdom. Once she's gone, we can all go out on a picnic together, and I'll ask Merlin to bring Allegra for you to play with, my word on that." She kisses the top of Celeste's shaggy head, then leaves the chamber, closing the door.

As she starts in the direction of Princess Vivian's guest chambers—she'll keep Her Majesty
occupied for a time, at least—the sound of Guinevere's voice reaches her ears, unwontedly harried, and overriding her, Vivian's sharp, biting tone. Frowning, she hurries towards the source, comes around a corner, and stops dead in place, mouth dropping open.

Oh, no. Maiden, Mother, and Crone, no.

Vivian is striding down the hallway at a brisk pace, making directly for Arthur's chambers. In her nightgown. And nothing else. She's barefoot. Guinevere is trailing after her with utmost distress writ on her face, obviously trying to stop her. "As if I should care for the opinions of a serving girl!" Vivian snipes, wrinkling her pert nose as though she'd smelt something unpleasant. "My lordly love does not care what I wear, only that I am near to him, my heart's delight."

It's a good thing Morgana hasn't eaten breakfast yet, or she surely would've been ill.

"Princess Vivian!" she exclaims, forcing her tone into one of jovial excitement, and Vivian halts in surprise, turning to look at her curiously. "How wonderful to see you, my dear. I was just coming to visit your chambers, to see if you would...care to view the palace gardens with me."

"I don't like gardens, but even if I did, I could not, for I have to see my beloved. It's written in the stars, he and I, together. Vivian and Arthur. A love for all time."

Out of Vivian's view, Guinevere makes a face as though she's just bitten into something rotten; Morgana heartily empathizes with the sentiment. Still, she forces herself to smile and nod. "Oh, of course, of course, and how not, such a dazzling beauty such as yourself? However, might I offer you a touch of advice?" Morgana asks, then gestures Vivian closer and leans in conspiratorially. "Having known Arthur since my youth, I have learnt his tastes as well as my own, and though you do indeed look stunning, your majesty, Arthur would truly go weak in the knees to see you attired as the future queen you are, his future queen."

Vivian cocks her head and smooths a hand over her nightgown thoughtfully, then nods, beaming eagerly. "Yes, yes, of course. You're absolutely right."

Morgana nods encouragingly, putting a hand on her shoulder and gently guiding her back the way she came, gesturing fervently to Guinevere with her free hand. "So return to your chambers with Guinevere and allow her to dress you, and I'm certain that your...love...will be unable to resist you."

"Indeed, he shan't! You have my deepest thanks, my lady. Come, girl! My lord awaits me!" Vivian declares, striding back down the corridor.

"Right away, your majesty," Guinevere replies, then turns to stare imploringly at Morgana, hands spread in a helpless gesture.

Mind scrambling, Morgana points towards the east wing and mouths Arthur's name, then jabs a finger at Vivian's rapidly retreating back and then towards the west wing. It's a very large castle, excellent for avoiding one another, and though it's hardly a foolproof plan, it'll allow her the time to find Merlin.

Gwen nods, then quickly hastens to catch up to Vivian.

Once the two are out of sight, she has to retreat into an alcove, press her brow to the cool stone wall, and screams into her teeth. This is absolutely ludicrous. Once this debacle is over, she is going to demand Arthur give her a damned medal of valor. A flash of red fabric breezes past her. Snapping upright, Morgana lunges out, snatches the back of Merlin's collar and neckerchief, and
yanks, earning a strangled yelp from him. She heaves him out of the main corridor into the alcove beside her, holding up a hand to forestall any outrage on his part. "Princess Vivian has been enchanted as well," she declares.

"What? Oh, no," Merlin groans, scrubbing a hand over his eyes.

"Indeed. I saw her in the corridor just now. She was going to visit Arthur's chambers to declare her love for him. In her nightgown," Morgana adds, and Merlin makes a strangled whimper in his throat, grabbing at his hair. "It's only by the gods' mercy I convinced her not to, but she's quite determined to make her statement to her 'love.' I have Guinevere staying close to her to keep her from creating a spectacle, but she won't be deterred for long. She's quite a single-minded little shrew. Please tell me you've found something in your books."

"I have. Oh, I have," Merlin sighs, sounding exhausted and nearly ready to weep. "There are over 600 love spells to be found in my books, near a quarter of which involve a lock of hair. If we guess wrongly in which enchantment was used, there are quite a wide variety of consequences, none of which are the slightest bit pleasant, and a few could actually end up in death."

Morgana closes her eyes and resists the urge to turn around and beat her head into the wall until her headache lessens. As she briefly wonders if it would be at all feasible to bind and gag Vivian in a cupboard until the treaty is signed, a thought rises into her mind. "Merlin?"

"Mm?" He sounds just as despondent, hands covering his face.

"The one who threads an enchantment can unthread it, no?"

"Except in the cases of some greater magics, yes," he mumbles.

She takes his wrists and tugs his hands away from his face. "Then why do we not confront this Trickler and demand he undo the spell?" she prompts, and his eyes widen, lips parting in shock. "You and I together can overpower him, and he cannot declare against us without revealing himself."

Merlin clasps his hands around hers, grinning. "If we were not in the corridor, I would kiss you," he says gleefully.

She rolls her eyes skyward, swatting at him in exasperation. "Oh, hush, you'd do no such thing. Quickly now, the treaty is to be signed at the feast tonight, which means we have only a matter of hours."

"Then we do this now."

Trickler isn't hard to find. He is in the antechamber of Alined's chambers, no doubt biding his time until it came time for him to reap the fruits of his magical labour. "Ah, if it isn't the beauteous Lady Morgana!" he greets her warmly, giving her a most charming smile; he gives no attention to Merlin at all. A fool indeed. "My master is currently in the council hall if you've need of audience with him, I could certainly escort you there."

Morgana smiles right back at him, the same smile she gave to noblemen who had the audacity to try and court her. "Oh, no, no, thank you. I seek an audience with you."

He gives his strange little giggle. "Oh? And what might this lowly jester do for you, O gracious lady?"

"Will you not sit and speak with me?" she asks with a gesture towards the table, holding his eye.
Magic tingles along her skin, and the chairs slide back of their own accord. A dangerous gambit, perhaps, but one she has confidence in. A servant accusing another servant is one thing, but the king's beloved ward being accused of sorcery by a common jester of another king's court, and during peace talks, no less?

Trickler's face goes the rather sickly colour of old porridge, throat working as he swallows.

Acting as though he'd accepted her invitation, Morgana seats herself at the table and interlaces her fingers idly before her; Merlin edges closer to stand just at the edge of her vision. "It has come to my attention, you see, that Prince Arthur…hasn't quite been himself. Nor has the Princess Vivian," she says, keeping her gaze steady upon the jester. "It is a situation that simply must be corrected with all urgency, you see. It would be most unfortunate if their conditions upset the signing of the treaty, wouldn't you agree?"

She doesn't look away from him as she speaks. It's one of the few tricks she's bothered to learn from Uther, the art of staring down one's opponent unblinking until they begin to crack beneath the pressure. Some are sturdier than others. Trickler is not. However, of the reactions she'd expected from him, an attempt to physically attack her hadn't been very high on the list. The nervous darting of his eyes is all the warning she has. Trickler lunges forward, going for the sword that Alined has left upon the table. Decorative or not, the blade will still be sharp.

Merlin, however, is faster.

In a motion too swift for her to even follow, he snatches the dagger from his belt and slams it point-first into the tabletop through Trickler's wrist, pinning him neatly. The man lets out a strangled squeal of pain not unlike a baby rabbit caught in the falcon's talons. "Longsword is a bad option in close quarters," Merlin says in a near-conversational tone, leaning in and keeping his weight pressing on the blade. "Now, when I pull my blade, you are going to bleed. Quite a lot. So many veins in the wrist, I'm afraid. However, if you go to the physicians' quarters directly, you will live. Of course, my mother and uncle could always be…preoccupied."

"You would not believe the week I've had," Merlin continues. "Having to manage the Prince, mind the King's temper, all the preparations needed for this…it's near unfathomable, true enough. My patience, such as it is, is worn quite thin. So I will tell you once. Princess Vivian and Prince Arthur. The enchantment. Break it."

"My master…he will kill me," Trickler stutters out, voice strangled with pain. His entire body trembles, yet he strains to be still and not struggle, wound himself deeper.

"What do you think I will do to you?" Merlin grips the hilt of the dagger tighter, twisting it just the slightest bit. Morgana can hear the blade grinding against bone. The weaselly man bites his sleeve to muffle another squeal. "There are many other kingdoms. Choose one of them. Before you leave, however, you will break the enchantment. Or I will break you. Do we have an understanding?" he asks, and Trickler nods jerkily. "Excellent. Now I suggest you run." He yanks the dagger out with a sharp jerk of his arm—there is indeed quite a gush of blood—and immediately, the strange little man clasps his other hand over the wound and flees the room.

Once the door swings shut, Morgana leans back in her chair, exhaling a breath she hadn't realised she held so long, and tilts her head up to stare at Merlin in silent accusation.

Merlin only shrugs, using the edge of his tunic to wipe the blood off the blade.
Well…whatever works, she supposes, then smirks. Jealousy truly does bring out the worst in some people.

Everyone breathes easier once the last of the royal parties depart Camelot, and it is no surprise that the celebrations continue on for a long time afterwards, many toasts are made in honour of the treaty, and despite their many visitors, there is no shortage of spirits to be found in the great hall. It isn't long before near the entire hall is halfway in their cups, laughing and jesting amongst each other, a few even singing. Normally, Arthur would gladly count himself amongst the well-inebriated, especially once Father orders one of the best casks brought up from the cellars. Tonight, however, he finds the heat and noise an almost physical weight against his skin, making him near nauseated. He endures, however, remaining seated at Father's side until it's polite for him to excuse himself, then makes a hasty retreat from the hall.

It's still early enough in spring for the nights to be cool, and he breathes in deep as he emerges outside, grateful for the dark and quiet. Still, it's not quite private enough to suit. He knows precisely where to go for that. There's a small orchard in the palace gardens, only a dozen trees, but they're all lovingly tended and bear an abundance of fruit. When he was a boy, one of his favourite things to do was to try and 'steal' apples without alerting the gardeners, and Morgana used to put their blossoms in her hair. Looking up at the neatly trimmed trees with small, unripe fruits, he smiles to think what Lady Evaine might think of this courtly idea of a working orchard.

"There you are. You know, you're going to miss the good wine," Merlin's amused voice says from behind him. "What are you doing out here?"

Arthur shrugs, reaching up to brush his fingers over the leaves of a low bough. "I'm not quite in the mood for revelry tonight. And I'm certain Father's still none-too-pleased with me at the moment, so it's best to let his temper cool before sharing his company overlong. Wine doesn't help in that matter, either."

That earns him an amused snort. "True enough." He wanders into Arthur's vision, walking over to lean back against a tree trunk; his lips curl slightly, looking around the orchard. Arthur wonders if he's having the same thoughts. "How do you feel?" he prompts.

"Considering that I was enchanted to imagine myself in love one of the most repugnant termagants in the kingdoms and very nearly ruined a peace treaty that's taken decades to forge? Well enough, thank you," he remarks, chuckling despite it not being all that humorous. Arthur tilts his head to eye his manservant curiously. "So, tell me, how did you get the Trickler to undo it?" The strange, ferrety little man had seemed quite terrified of Alined, and considering he'd vanished from Camelot in the dead of night without telling a soul, he still is.

Merlin gives that damnably sly smile of his and shrugs, toying with the hilt of his dagger. "I have my ways."

Chuckling, he reaches up to pluck one of the unripe apples and pelts it at Merlin, who ducks it with a laugh of his own. "You and your secrets, Merlin," he muses.

"Yes, yes, me and my secrets. Tell me, what was it like?" Merlin wonders, sounding genuinely curious now. "How did it feel, I mean?"

Arthur tilts his head back a touch, contemplating. "Strange. Have you ever had a dream so real it almost seems like being awake, and yet a part of you knows it isn't? And everything seems just slightly out of kilter?" he poses at last, and Merlin nods. "Quite like that. Not quite…real."
Looking upon it now, what he'd felt for Vivian wasn't at all like love, though in his ensorcelled mind it'd certainly seemed so. It was similar to sticking one's head inside a bell and pulling the rope, a great, reverberating clamour of false desire that'd driven out all else, reason included. It wasn't something quiet and steady like the slow growth of ivy up a wall, working into the spaces between the stones of the self until it was anchored so deep that removing it would surely do more harm than good and it becomes hard to remember a time it wasn't there at all.

"Arthur?" Merlin's gazing at him with puzzlement, head cocked and brow furrowed slightly, and Arthur realises that he's staring at the younger man. "What? What is it?"

Arthur doesn't answer, merely steps closer until he's right in Merlin's space, close enough to feel the warmth of him in the cool air. That strange fluttering sensation is back again, stronger now, like a flock of birds taking flight in his chest, the feeling of something being missing, and yet he knows it's so very close. He lets his gaze roam over the familiar sharp angles of Merlin's face, the mop of curly hair, those damn ears. Aware of Merlin's growing nervousness, Arthur places both hands on the sides of his neck, holding him in place.

His head tilts, their lips meet.

For a terrifying second, there's no reaction at all…and then Merlin's mouth moves against his, hands lifting to grasp his arms. Arthur makes a sound he's never made before, low in his throat. His lips part against Merlin's, who opens in kind, all gasping breath and darting tongues. Deeper and deeper, Arthur kisses him, pressing close as he dares, arms dropping to curl around Merlin's waist. The hollow part of his chest is full to brimming with light, and Maiden have mercy on him, it is glorious.

Merlin's hands flex, fingers digging into his arms, then slide up and press flat against his shoulders, pushing him away gently yet firmly. Arthur pulls back, letting Merlin retreat even as his heart sinks. The young man takes a deep breath, flushed, and when he speaks, his voice is rough. "You ran away from me," he accuses, staring at him, and there's an undercurrent of hurt there, a wound not quite healed.

Arthur lowers his arms, half-forgotten guilt tightening up in his chest. He opens his mouth, then closes it again. This isn't a conversation he wants to have out here, where anyone might see them. "Come with me," he says. "Please."

Merlin gazes at him for an agonizingly long moment, then nods.

The walk back to up to his chambers is both the longest and shortest walk of his life, and a part of him half-feels as though he's the condemned man walking to the gallows. Merlin closes the door and leans back against it, gazing at him, waiting. Arthur paces the length of his chambers a moment, raking a hand back through his hair. He's never been good at this, damnit.

"I ran from you," he begins at last, knowing he has to try. "I did, and you're right on that. I can't excuse it, but I…I didn't know what else to do."

Merlin's voice is soft. "You could've stayed."

"No." Arthur shakes his head, staring at the ground. "No, I couldn't have. I was wrong for it, and I hurt you in doing it. For that, I'm sorry, but I wouldn't change it. I wouldn't because if I hadn't, then I wouldn't have realised that what I felt wasn't some…infatuation, the temptation of something forbidden to me. It's why I let you leave for Silverpine. I didn't know if it was real, and I didn't want to earn your resentment." He pauses and rakes a hand through his hair again, frowning. "I shouldn't have kissed you like that, either, without knowing how you feel. I want you to know that
you don't have to...reciprocate if you don't want to. I shan't force you to do anything, not in this, and you have my word on that. If it's no, Merlin, then tell me now. I'll understand, I—"

He doesn't get the chance to finish. In all honesty, he doesn't even recall what it was he meant to say because Merlin is pressed against him, hands clasped on his neck, his mouth seizing Arthur's. He staggers back against the unexpected assault, grunting as he collides with the bedpost. A painful twinge runs down his back, yet it's secondary to Merlin's presence, warm and eager, flush against him. "Merlin, what—I—I thought you wanted to talk?" Arthur gasps when Merlin's mouth slides away from his, tracking a hot, damp path over his jaw.

"Shh. Talk later," Merlin whispers hoarsely against his neck. He undoes Arthur's belt, sword dropping to the ground with a clatter. "Fuck now."

Eminently practical as always.

Afterwards, when they're both wrung out and wonderfully exhausted, Arthur cards his fingers through Merlin's sweat-damp hair; it's longer than he usually wears it, curling in charming profusion. "You know, I had planned to court you," he remarks, winding a lock around his fingertip.

"Mm, no," Merlin mumbles back, his eyes vague with pleasure.

"No?"

"No. I've seen you court those noblewomen your father steers you to, and I could never decide if I wanted to laugh or be sick," he says with a smile, resting his chin on Arthur's chest. "So the answer is no. I'm not a courtier. I never have been, and I never will be. I don't expect to be treated like one. I'd rather not be, to be honest."

Arthur smiles a little, not sure if he ought to be offended or not. He runs one finger along the length of Merlin's spine, sweat-slick and flushed. His smile fades, lips turning down. "Are you still angry with me? For going to the Pavilion?" he asks in a murmur. That was one of the things he'd meant to talk about before Merlin made his...convincing argument to do otherwise.

Merlin rolls onto his front and props himself up on his elbows, plucking absently at the sheets. "I wasn't ever...angry, exactly," he replies slowly, weighing his words. "Hurt, of a certainty. I was more upset with myself for letting you see. Will you tell me why, though?"

He sighs softly, tilting his head back on the pillows, staring at the bed canopy for a moment. He'd barely understood it himself when he'd gone running to the Pavilion. "I was...frightened, I suppose. I've never felt so much about one person. Or wanted so badly. I've never been allowed to want so much before. I didn't know what to do with all of it, so I tried to escape myself to get away from it. Some awful, wretched part of me said that I was betraying my father, betraying Camelot, because you're a sorcerer. I hated myself for it, all of it, even when I was there, but...I didn't stop, either. To be true, I don't even know why I went now, except perhaps to punish myself."

"For what?" Merlin frowns. "For desiring someone?"

It sounds absurd when he says like that, but Arthur nods. "Yes. I've never had something that was mine. Just for me and me alone," he explains, not certain how he can put it into fitting words. Hearing his own words and realising what he might've implied, he adds, "Not that you're mine, exactly. I didn't mean—you're not—"

Callused fingertips touch his mouth, silencing him. Merlin shakes his head slightly, lips curling up.
"Clotpole," he murmurs. Leaning in, he presses soft kisses all over Arthur's face: temples and brow, cheeks and jaw, the bridge of his nose and the backs of his closed lids, the corners of his mouth. Arthur takes a trembling breath, throat tightening, an unexpected prickle of heat behind his eyes. If Merlin notices, he doesn't say anything, merely moves closer and rests his head against Arthur's shoulder, one arm curling over his middle.

Arthur's never fallen asleep with anyone like this—what'd happened with Tal didn't truly count, as he'd not so much as fallen asleep as passed out—and there's a near terrifying intimacy to it. Feeling Merlin's limbs go slack, heartbeat slowing, breath deepening and leveling out…it conjures an unexpected swell of tenderness in him. He slides his fingertips feather-light through black hair, letting himself relax into the bed, matching his breathing to Merlin's.

Sleep comes easier to him that night than it ever has.
Seven Devils

For the first time in years, Arthur has a nightmare such as he had as a child, sitting upright in bed with a strangled gasp, the sound of a whetstone scraping over steel echoing in his ears. His heart's beating too fast, and there's a slick of cold sweat between his shoulder blades. The taste of blood tinges his mouth.

"Arth'r?" Merlin murmurs drowsily, raising his head. "What's wrong?"

The sight of Merlin—sleep-flushed and soft-eyed, the crease of the pillowcase imprinted on his cheek—makes it simultaneously better and worse. All Arthur had felt last night seems to burn away like thin mist under strong sun, a cold weight sinking down into the pit of his stomach. He shivers all over. "Nothing," he replies. Pushing back the blankets, he climbs out of the bed and starts tugging on his clothes.

Merlin sits up, his gaze sharpening as he rouses. "It isn't nothing. What is it?" he asks gently, moving to the edge of the bed and reaching out to touch Arthur's back with his fingertips.

He pauses a moment, working a tunic between his hands, then takes a step back to sit down on the edge of the bed. "Merlin…I'm not certain we should do this," he says at last, the words bitter and ashen in his mouth.

"What?" He hears the rustle of sheets as Merlin shifts closer to him, but he can't stand to turn and face him. "All you said last night…and now you want to take three steps back? Why? What's wrong, Arthur?" Merlin asks, smoothing a hand down Arthur's back. He shudders at the touch, and the hand withdraws.

Arthur stares down at the floor for a long moment. "Have you ever witnessed an execution, Merlin?" he asks in a low voice.

"I have."

"When was the first?"

"The first day I came to Camelot, when we moved our household to the city for Leon's squiring," is the quiet reply.

He swallows hard a few times, attempting to force down the knot in his throat. "I used to play with the servants' children when I was a boy. Father never approved, but the other nobles didn't bring their children to Camelot often. After I finished my lessons, I used to run away from my governess to play with them. There was one girl…Senna. Her name was Senna. She was just a little older than I was. She used to make me crowns from plants from the palace garden, braided them out of bindweed."

He closes his eyes for a moment, still able to remember her as she had been the last time he'd seen her all those years ago: curly brown hair and freckles on her nose, proudly boasting of the pretty blue kirtle her mother had made for her.

"One day, I went out to the gardens, and Senna wasn't there. And my father came to fetch me. He said one of the maids had seen her using magic, making charms, and she was going to be executed. He told me I was going to watch. Your mother spoke against it, I remember. So did Gaius. But Father said I had to learn that sorcery was ever-present, that it came in the most innocent of forms to try and trick me. He brought me out to the balcony, bade me watch as they took her to the
"I still dream of her sometimes," he murmurs, swiping dampness off his face with the back of one hand. "I can still see her being walked up to the block. She looked up at me, and she was so sad. And I didn't do anything. I didn't help her."

He can't bring himself to turn and look at Merlin, but he feels the bed shift slightly, and then Merlin's arms come around him, chest pressed against his back. Merlin doesn't speak, doesn't move, only holds onto him tightly, so still he might've been keeping a vigil. Perhaps he is. For himself, for Senna, for Arthur, for all they'd been and all they'd lost. The sun creeps across the floor of his chambers, and a deep-buried knot of guilt and shame begins to uncoil.

At length, Merlin's breath stirs his hair. "You were a child, Arthur. You couldn't have done anything. You can't blame yourself for what your father did," he whispers, his voice raw with tears. Arthur curls his hand around one sharp-boned wrist, feeling the scar where Merlin had let his blood to make a sword that could kill the dead. "I've dreamt of you, Merlin. Dreams where it isn't Senna at the block, it's you. And I can't...I don't know if I'd..." He shakes his head, unable to bring himself to say that he's not certain he'd be able to survive Merlin's death, that it would break something in him that would never be healed again.

Merlin's arms tighten around him, and he rests his chin on Arthur's shoulder. "I have lived in Camelot for over half my life now. I was playing this game long before I became your lover, and I can still play it now. Look at me. Look at me, Arthur," he urges, and Arthur turns his head, meeting his eye. "I'm not so afraid of losing something that I won't try to have it."

Gazing into the young man's familiar face, stubborn and earnest, Arthur sighs and tilts his head forward, resting his brow against Merlin's, breath warm and shared between them. "Promise me," he murmurs softly. "If something happens, if you're ever discovered, promise me you'll get out of Camelot. I don't care how you do it, just...promise me you'll live."

"I swear by stone and sea and sky."

"Thank you," he breathes.

They sit there in silence for a time, holding and being held, and then Merlin presses a kiss to his temple. "Breakfast?" he offers.

It's a blatant and deliberate change in subject, yet it works. Reminded of its existence, his empty stomach rumbles. "Mm. Honey and oatcakes?"

Merlin chuckles as he untangles his legs from the sheets. "Yes, yes, I know."

Leaning back against the bed, Arthur watches him dress. There's something absurdly tantalising in
it, watching red scratches and teeth-marks vanish beneath clothing, knowing they're still there. After Merlin leaves, he draws on his tunic and sits at the table to wait. For once, Merlin is actually prompt in returning, and without being told, he sits down at the table as well, helping himself to some of the fruit.

"So," Arthur muses as he bites into a sausage, "if I'm not permitted to court you, then what do you suggest?"

"I'm certain you can imagine something," Merlin replies with a smile. "And it's not that you can't court me. Just don't treat me like I'm something I'm not."

Arthur leans back in his chair, staring at the younger man. He's not certain how he's supposed to court Merlin...without courting him. "You do enjoy making things difficult, don't you?"

"Can't let you get bored, can I?"

"If there's one thing you have never been, Merlin, it is boring." He traces a finger along the edge of the plate, glancing downwards. "Will you stay?" he asks quietly.

"I can't. Leon would wonder, and I don't think it wholly wise to let him know about this."

Arthur doesn't have to fake a shudder. He doesn't even want to imagine how his First Knight would react to knowing that Arthur's bedded his younger brother. He's quite certain that weaponry and bodily harm will be involved. "Absolutely not," he agrees, then sighs, disappointed though he knows it's reasonable.

Merlin reaches over to lay a hand on his wrist, squeezing gently. "I can move some of my things to the antechamber, stay a few nights, and spend the balance of them at home. I did it when you were ill, and by rights, I should be staying there anyways. I can say you've finally worn me down." He withdraws his hand and eyes up the near-empty breakfast plate, a slow grin playing at the corners of his mouth. "So, might I actually have one of those this morning?" he asks, nodding towards the still-warm oatcakes on the tray, soaking in honey; smirking, Arthur turns the plate towards him.

"And all it took was bedding you."

"Shut up, Merlin."

Spring passes, ripening towards summer, and it is...strange. An entirely good kind of strange, Arthur's happy to say. He's never had a lover before—oh, how Morgana would crow to know he's been a 'maiden' near as long as she—and he relishes in it, soothing some deep ache of loneliness he hadn't even realised he carried and berating himself from ever having run from it in the first place.

There's an awkwardness to it at first. After so many blissful hours abed together, they lose the trick of being cordial in public and are overly cool and polite with one another to make up for it, trying to hide how well they know each other now. Arthur catches Leon glancing between them with small frowns, no doubt thinking they are quarreling; he wonders how much more distraught the man would be if he knew Arthur was truly thinking on how many hours or days it'd be before he could lock his chamber doors and tumble Merlin into bed again. A part of him is quietly ashamed of how much he enjoys Leon's ignorance, the private elation of a secret unshared.

Still, they find their balance in it. Arthur finds it best to make a sort of game of it, one of patience and restraint, so when he attends court with Father, he's able to actually listen to what's being said...
rather than get lost in his own imaginings.

"You look tired, Arthur. Have you not been sleeping?" Morgana asks in that playfully malicious way of hers as they fall into step on their way into the council chamber. She tilts her head slightly, eyeing him with the intensity of a kitten waiting for an insect to make the first move. "Something keeping you up?"

"Dreams of you, naturally," Arthur replies, mimicking her tone exactly. "Though one could call them nightmares, if one were so inclined."

Lips curling, she makes a rude gesture with one hand when Father's back is turned, then straightens up and folds her hands in her lap, every inch the highborn lady. Arthur smirks as he takes his place beside Father's chair. He doesn't need to look across the gathered court to know Merlin is there, standing between Hunith and Leon, drawing his attention like a lodestone pulls iron shavings.

Strangely enough, the first man to come before the court isn't a noble or an emissary, but a commoner. Arthur shifts his weight, wary. The court rarely ever takes audiences with peasants first, which can only mean the man has something important to tell them. As it is, the man looks like a skittish deer as he stands before the King, twisting his hands together. "My, ah, my name is Joseph. I'm a herder from the northern plains, sire. Three nights back, we were camped beneath the walls of Idirsholas—"

"I'm not sure I would've chosen such a place," Father remarks with a chuckle, seeming more amused than anything.

"Good pasture is scarce at this time of year, sire…" the man fumbles out.

Boredom is seeping into the King's tone. "And what is it you have to tell me?"

Joseph swallows hard, twisting his hands harder, knuckles white. "While we were there we…we saw smoke rising from the citadel."

"And did you see anything else?" Gaius asks, breaking protocol by speaking out of turn, but Father doesn't rebuke him, which doesn't bode well.

"No."

All the humour has evaporated from Father's disposition, straightening up in his chair; Arthur's sense of foreboding deepens. "Did you go inside?" he demands.

"No!" Joseph blurts out, then remembers himself and ducks his head, going on in a more subdued tone, "No, sire. Nobody has stepped over that threshold for 300 years! You must know the legend, sire."

"When the fires of Idirsholas burn, the Knights of Medhir will ride again," Gaius intones.

There's a ripple of murmuring through the court, and Arthur at last realises why that damn name seems so familiar to him. Idirsholas is a ruined citadel in the northern plains; he'd seen it years ago as a squire when he went to visit his uncle, as the road to Snowgate goes directly past it. One of the older boys he'd been with had teased him, warning him not to venture away from the camp at night or old Medhir and her knights would snatch him up for supper. Sir Kay, his father's First Knight, hadn't laughed, however, and the rest of their escort had eyed the ruined citadel with deep wariness.

"See to it this man is fed and has a bed for the night," Father orders, and a standing guardsman moves to escort Joseph from the hall, leaving a stir of murmuring in his wake. Once the doors of
the council chamber shut, he turns to Arthur. "Take a ride out there."

Arthur's stomach sinks. "Why?"

"So we can put people's minds at rest."

"Surely this is superstitious nonsense?" he prompts, testing just how seriously Father is taking it. He hadn't been nearly so cautious of Cornelius Sigan's tomb, so for him to treat this with such suspicion isn't a good sign.

"Gather the guard and do as I say."

Quite seriously, then.

Thus dismissed from court, Arthur leaves the council chamber; a few steps ahead of him, he sees Merlin and Gaius side-by-side, speaking in low tones. Merlin's words grow clearer as he approaches. "...Uther so worried?"

"Because the Knights of Medhir are a force to be reckoned with," Gaius answers in warning.

"So you believe the story as well?" Arthur asks as he joins them.

The question earns him the damn eyebrow, a look which always makes him feel all of ten years old again. "It's more than a story," he replies firmly. "Some 300 years ago, seven of Camelot's knights were seduced by a sorceress's call. One by one, they succumbed to her power. At her command, they became a terrifying and brutal force that rode through the lands leaving death and destruction in their wake."

The older boys had never told him that part of the story. "What happened?"

"It was only after the sorceress herself was killed that the Knights of Medhir finally grew still. If what Joseph says is true, then something has awoken them, and I fear for each and every one of us."

Arthur exchanges a glance with Merlin and sighs heavily. "How wonderful."

"So, what do you think of these...Knights of Medhir?"

Merlin winds the Hellion's reins around his hand, contemplating Arthur's question. As if sensing his unease, the Hellion prances underneath him, tossing her head and champing at the bit. He gives her a nudge with his heels, letting her prance forward a few steps, and Arthur draws up beside him, putting a little distance between themselves and the other knights. "I think it's a very real danger if they are awake," he replies at last. "I don't know if our weapons will do much of anything against them. Except perhaps your sword, which I trust you have?"

Arthur nods, reaching down to put a hand against the hilt of his sword. He tilts his head slightly, thoughtful. "So...are they living or dead?" he wonders.

Despite the solemnity of their task, he smiles a little; two years ago, Arthur wouldn't have ever thought to ask him such a thing, wouldn't have asked Merlin anything other than to keep up and keep his mouth shut. "Both. Neither. They exist between the two," Merlin replies with a shrug.

"Like the wraith?"
It sounds similar to me, though I couldn't say for certain without knowing the original spellwork.” He's not had the chance to do much experimenting on his own, but Sigan had recorded a method of his own invention used to weave different kinds of magics together, meshing different spells and enchantments into one another like mixing dyes to make new colours. He wonders if this Medhir had done something similar to create her knights. Longevity, inanimation, perhaps some kind of preservation.

Arthur's mouth curves up. "Shall I see if I can find her manuscripts for your library as well?"

Rolling his eyes skyward, Merlin swats his arm with the end of the reins.

The prince's humour evaporates, and he nods forward. "There it is. Idirsholas."

It had probably once been a glorious castle, Merlin thinks, but 300 years of neglect has set it largely to ruins. There's towers and walls half-crumbled, whole sections of rooftop caved in, windows shattered and gaping. Any roads that had come in or out of it have long since overgrown, so it seems entirely isolated, a dark stone island in a rolling sea of greening grass. "Have you ever been here?" he asks quietly, swallowing hard.

"I've seen it when I've visited my uncle Agravaine. This road here goes directly to Snowgate," Arthur replies, gesturing towards the road they're currently on; in a corner of his mind he knows that his cousin is going to be furious that he came all the way to Idirsholas and didn't visit her. "Do you…sense anything?" he asks, looking towards the castle.

"No, but we might not be near enough to it." Merlin sounds as though he thoroughly wishes he doesn't have to come any closer.

"Let's get nearer, then."

"Ah, I was hoping you wouldn't say that."

The gates have long since fallen in, and they leave their horses tethered outside the walls, having to climb over it on foot instead. The interior of the castle is similarly decrepit. Merlin hears the scrape of steel and leather as the knights draw their swords, Arthur included, and he unslings his quarterstaff, holding it in both hands. If the knights are truly awake, it will hardly do him any good, but he feels better with it in hand. "Do you hear that?" he murmurs.

"Hm?" Arthur grunts, eyes flicking around the crumbling courtyard.

"A sort of…trembling sound." It's almost as though the very earth around them is vibrating, reverberating in the soles of his feet, shivering in his bones. The nape of his neck prickles, scalp tingling. "Something's happened here."

"There's nothing growing," Arthur says in realisation.

Merlin glances around the courtyard and swallows hard when he realises that Arthur's right. Three centuries, nature should've begun taking the castle back, but there's nothing. There's no grass sprouting up between the cracked pavers, no vines growing over the crumbling walls. The trees that'd probably once been part of a decorative garden are long-dead instead of overgrowing their partitions. And there are no animals, no scurrying movement from the shadowed corners or fluttering wings from high points.

"Let's go in. If Joseph saw smoke from the citadel, it'd be coming through here," Arthur says, pointing towards what had probably been the main hall.
The interior is dark and musty, a thick layer of dust and grime accumulated on every surface to be found. He doesn't see any disturbances in the filth to suggest that anyone has ever been there, but that doesn't mean much of anything.

In the middle of the hall is a large brazier, full of ashes; pulling off his glove with his teeth, Arthur reaches down to touch the ashes, running them through his fingers. "Well, it seems this part of Joseph's story is indeed true," he remarks, though Merlin can't tell the difference. "But I don't see aught else. Perhaps it was just...travellers passing through in need of a roof for the night."

A near-painful thrill of cold runs up his back, and Merlin feels everything shudder around him like a reverberating bell. He turns in place. "Perhaps not."

Seven figures, masked and cloaked, stand in perfect formation between them and the doors. The air around them seems colder than the rest of the hall. As one, they draw their swords. Merlin hesitates only a bare second before slinging his quarterstaff over one shoulder and drawing his daggers instead. He hears Arthur swear aloud, and Medhir's knights launch their assault.

The hall isn't that spacious, making combat a challenge in not accidentally injuring one another. Merlin does his best to stay at Arthur's back. He might not be able to handle a sword for himself all that well, but he still knows how to acquit himself in a battle. If nothing else, he can parry a strike, which is precisely what he does. At the next tremendous swing—it'd have cleaved him in two if it'd landed—Merlin crosses his daggers to catch the blade and twists, dragging it out of the knight's hands. Seeing his chance, he lunges forward and plunges his left dagger into the bend of the knight's neck, the vulnerable join between the helmeted mask and the rest of the armour, where the thick veins lie.

There should've been blood. There should've been some kind of reaction. There isn't. He might have well been stabbing a straw tick. There's hardly any resistance, no tearing flesh and grinding bone, and he smells something hideously old and musty, desiccated flesh. The knight lets out a guttural roar and backhands him across the face with one gauntleted hand.

Merlin staggers backwards, the world narrowing down to pinpricks of light, the inside of his skull pummeled by bronze wings. By the goddess, what a blow, he thinks distantly as he falters, tasting blood. A hand yanks the back of his jacket, dragging him away from the knight. He realises foggily that it's Arthur hauling him towards the doors, and glancing back, he sees splashes of red on the floors in two shades, blood and cloth, and seven black figures advancing. "Ahríes þæc!" he slurs out, swinging out one arm and clapping his hand against the doorway.

With a great cracking and grinding of stone, the entryway collapses, an enormous cloud of dust filling the air. He knows it won't keep them there for long, but it'll at least give them the chance to get away. The abrupt sunlight is dazzling, making his still-ringing head spin, but he manages to keep his feet under him, stumbling alongside Arthur. By the time they cross the courtyards, he's able to stand upright on his own, scrambling over the ruins of the front gates and towards the horses. He fumbles the Hellion's reins free and hauling himself astride, and he follows the bright red of Arthur's cape as they ride from Idirsholas at a gallop, making directly for the treeline on the opposite side of the main road.

Once safely inside the trees, Arthur dismounts and promptly takes his frustration out on the surrounding shrubbery, drawing his sword and attacking a thicket with it, swearing an impressive streak. Merlin slides off the Hellion and leans against her, grateful for her solid bulk, and waits. The outburst might not be productive for anyone, but he knows well that Arthur gets over his fits of temper faster if he's allowed histrionics over it.

With said temper properly vented, Arthur sheathes his blade and takes a hand back through his
hair. "We need to get back to Camelot. We'll have to leave the rest of the horses, the men…ah, seven hells on it!" he snaps, then draws a deep breath, visibly settling himself again. "We return to Camelot, assemble reinforcements. Not that it's going to do much, but at least we'll be able to prepare somewhat, perhaps find a way to trap them, shut them out or—what happened to your face?" Properly looking at Merlin for the first time, Arthur steps closer and reaches out to cup Merlin's chin, tilting his head towards the light.

One thumb brushes the corner of his lips, and it sends a hot pulse of pain through his mouth and up his cheek, throbbing dully in time with his heartbeat. "Ah." Merlin tilts his head away from the touch. "One of the knights struck me."

"Break any teeth?"

Carefully, he runs his tongue around the inside of his teeth. "Loosened a few."

"Don't fuss with them." Arthur smiles a little, giving a wry chuckle. "Your first battle-wound, eh? Give it a few hours, you'll turn some interesting colours. Here, wash your face. You've blood all… here," he says, gesturing in the vicinity of his own mouth and tearing off a strip of his tunic.

Merlin dribbles a bit of water on the cloth and wipes at his chin and mouth with it, wincing as he touches his split lip. "Did your sword not fell any of the knights?" he asks as they mount up once more and carefully ride out of the trees back onto the road. He doesn't see anyone else leaving Idirsholas yet, which means they have the lead, at least for now.

"No. I ran one through, and it slowed, but it didn't fall. I think I only wounded it."

He frowns, confounded. He wishes he could find out how this Medhir had created the knights in the first place. They exist between life and death, but perhaps if they are driven by the power of life, then the blade won't do as much damage, as it is forged from life as well. It might not kill them, but it will certainly still wound them. It's better than nothing, at any rate.

As if sensing his thoughts, Arthur leans over to lightly swat his arm. "Don't tie yourself in knots over there. You can't be expected to know everything," he reassures. "For now, we have to return to Camelot before the knights catch us up."

The sound of the horses' hooves clattering on the pavers is entirely too loud. The castle square is always a bustle of activity, and even at night, there are guards on rotation and servants tending the last of their duties. Now, however, it's entirely silent, the still forms of people lying all about—knights, servants, guards, courtiers, everyone.

"What…on earth…?"

"Are they dead?" Merlin asks, his voice echoing slightly in the courtyard as he dismounts the Hellion.

Arthur loops Llamrei's reins over a railing and walks over to the nearest prone form, reaching down. Beneath his fingers, there's a steady pulse in the servant's neck, and her breathing is deep, even. "No, they're alive. They're…sleeping. They are, all of them, sleeping," he exclaims in realisation, turning slowly in place. "What the hell is going on? Come on, Merlin. I need to find my father."

Merlin catches his arm before he makes the stairs. "You go look for your father, I'm going to find Mother and Gaius. This must be a sickness," he says.
"Go," Arthur agrees. If this is some kind of illness, then the physicians would certainly know something of it, or would at least have an idea of it. Merlin darts away, and he makes directly for the council chamber, knowing where his father is most likely to be found.

There's more people asleep inside the castle, on the staircase and in the corridors, leaning against the walls. It's disconcerting to see, as if they've all decided to simply stop in the midst of their day and lay down where they stood. His father isn't in the council hall, but he finds Leon there along with several other members of court. Just to reassure himself for Merlin's sake, he pauses to make sure Leon is indeed breathing before moving on, deciding to next look in Father's study, then his chambers if he isn't there.

"Arthur!" Merlin's voice echoes up the stairwell.

"Here!" he calls back, and the younger man comes darting up the stairs, springing over a sleeping courtier. "Well?"

He shakes his head. "Mother and Gaius are both asleep as well," he pants out, leaning over to brace his hands on his knees. "Have you seen anyone awake? Your father?"

"No. He isn't in the council hall. I'm going to his study now. Come with me."

As they head in the direction of the King's chambers, they find Lancelot in the corridor, and around the corner, lying in the half-open door of Morgana's chamber, is Guinevere, her head pillowed on a stack of folded clothes. Arthur stops at the sound of movement from inside, holding an arm out to halt Merlin as well. A soft laugh escapes him, however, as Celeste comes loping out of her mistress's chambers, tail wagging and tongue lolling in greeting. "I suppose this sickness doesn't affect animals, then," he remarks, ruffling her ears. When he peers inside, he sees Morgana asleep in her chair at her desk, chin to her chest. "Get Gwen up onto the bed, I'll move Morgana." It's the least they can do, he supposes.

Once both women are comfortably laid on the bed, Merlin whistles towards Celeste and makes a sharp gesture with one hand. "Stay. Watch."

Obediently, the hound springs up onto the foot of the bed and lays down between the ladies like a furred sentinel.

Arthur chuckles. "Remind me to let you have a word with the kennel master. Come on."

Much like Morgana, they find the King asleep at his desk in his study, slumped over in his chair. Grasping his shoulders, Arthur sets him upright, giving him a gentle shake. "Father? Father?" he says to no response. The man's still breathing, however, and it seems he's no more harmed than any of the others they've come across.

"It must be an enchantment," Merlin says, leaning against the desk. "Everyone in Camelot falling asleep where they stand like this? It must be. No sickness can spread through an entire city and affect every single person in the course of a day."

"That doesn't reassure me." Arthur eyes his father, uneasy with speaking of magic directly in front of him, asleep or not. Taking Merlin's arm, he draws the other man out of Father's study and closes the door between them.

"It should. If I can identify the spell used, I can break it. It shan't be that hard to do, there's few magics of this magnitude. I just need to get to the townhouse, my library. It'll be in my books."

Ah, right. He should've known better than to doubt Merlin and that damn library of his. The young
"Excellent. To the townhouse, then. I know I've warned you against using magic in Camelot, but trust me, this is the definition of extenuating circumstances," Arthur remarks with a weak chuckle. "Whatever you need me to do, I will."

"As much as I enjoy hearing those words from you, Arthur, I believe we now have a larger issue at hand," Merlin says, and his voice sounds strange, strung tight and sharp.

"What are you...?" Arthur notices that Merlin's staring out the windows, and he moves forward, nudging Merlin aside to see what it is he's staring at so intently. His heart drops into the pit of his stomach. Riders, bearing for Camelot. Eight of them. Even at this distance, however, he recognises the ragged forms, all in black, and the horses they ride upon, the same horses they'd been forced to abandon at Idirsholas. "Oh, gods' mercy," he rasps.

"There's only meant to be seven," Merlin points out. "Gaius said there were seven knights, and there were seven knights in Idirsholas. The eighth...must be the one who conjured them. That's the only person they would obey."

Arthur shakes his head slowly, a sense of despair welling in him. "Camelot is undefended. My father... This will be the one of the first places they'll come to search for him. We have to get him somewhere safe."

"Listen. Listen to me." Turning from the window, Merlin takes him by the shoulders and pulls him away as well, giving him a small shake for his attention. "We'll have to split up. You stay with your father. At the end of this corridor, there's a servants' stairwell which will lead directly down into either the kitchens or the laundry, I don't know which. Take him down there and hide him. I'm going to the townhouse to find the counterspell."

"What about the knights?" Arthur demands, hating this idea already.

Merlin bites his lip, wincing as he bites the scabs on his mouth. "I can construct barriers as I go. They shan't last long, and if this sorcerer is powerful enough to rouse the knights, they'll be powerful enough to break through, but it will give us both time," he answers at last.

It's a plan, at any rate. It's better than nothing. It doesn't mean he has to like it, however, and half of it sounds hideously uncertain. Arthur feels near ill with unease, wanting to keep Merlin close to his side. Still, he grasps Merlin's shoulder tightly, digging his fingers in hard, attempting to convey all he means to say through it. "Go, then. And...damn it, Merlin, for once in your life, be careful," he insists.

"I will," Merlin promises, curling one strong hand around Arthur's arm. "Now listen, if the knights reach you, kill the sorcerer first. Their power is what drives the knights. Kill the sorcerer, and it should fell them all."

"I will. Now go. Go!"

Swift as a deer, Merlin turns and sprints away. Arthur stands in place for a long moment, holding his breath so he can listen to the young man's footsteps fade. Once out of earshot, he goes back into the King's study. He can't hope to carry Father on his own, but Merlin isn't the only one with intelligent ideas. Walking over to the wall, he yanks a tapestry from its hangings on the wall, pulls it over to Father's desk, and heaves the man's sleeping weight out of the chair and onto the tapestry. Twisting the corners around his hands, he drags his father out of the study and into the corridor. "Oh, gods' mercy, Father, no more second helpings," he grunts.
True enough, there is a servant's stairwell at the end of the corridor, surreptitiously positioned in a slight recess in the wall; he's likely walked past it a thousand times and never once seen it, which is exactly how it's meant to be. Descending is slow going, as he has to be careful not to lose grip on the tapestry. Hiding the King in the servant's quarters is one thing, dropping him down a flight of stairs is another.

The stairs do indeed lead directly into the laundry, and there are laundresses asleep amidst the washing. After a moment's debate, he pulls Father over to a heap of linens which he devoutly prays are clean, throwing the slightly-damp cloth over him. Once he has his father hidden entirely beneath the sheets—they smell of soap, so they are indeed clean—Arthur bundles up the tapestry and shoves it into a cupboard, putting it well out of sight. He might end up mucking out the stables for a month, but if anyone ever thinks to look for the King of Camelot in the laundry room under the washing, Arthur will do it with his bare hands.

"Oh, seven hells," he exhales forcefully. Drawing his sword, he sprints back up the stairs into the corridor, setting himself to wait in a position that's well away from the staircases and the window. He isn't going to fight the Knights of Medhir in the damn laundry room, and at least this way, he might have the chance to kill the sorcerer responsible before they all ambush him.

He tenses warily when he hears footsteps coming up the corridor towards him at a rapid clip. Only one set, however, and far too light and quick to be a knight in full armour. Grinning with relief, he lowers his sword again. Merlin's found the counterspell already, then. Hopefully it shan't be something too impossible to execute.

Except it isn't Merlin that comes around the corner. It's a young girl, surely not any older than four-and-ten, barefoot and in a short, ragged kirtle that's soaked with disconcerting dark stains, though she doesn't seem to be wounded. And in one hand, she carries a knife such as hunters use, the blade dripping, red splashed over her hands and up her arms.

A dozen different questions flicker through his mind at once—who's blood is she covered in, why does she have a knife, what is she doing here, why is she awake—but only one manages to find its way out of his mouth. "Who are you?" Surely this cannot be the sorcerer who summoned the knights. The eighth rider he'd seen had been an adult, certainly.

The girl turns to look at him, and he's seen less hatred his enemies' eyes on the battlefield. Her lip curls in a snarl, and with a neat flip of her wrist, she reverses her grip on the knife. She charges for him at a dead run.

He doesn't think to raise his sword at all—she's a girl, and she's small—but she has no such qualms about attacking him, despite him being head and shoulders taller than her and surely twice her weight as well. Without missing a step, she leaps up, seizes hold of his sword arm, and yanks with her entire weight, forcing him off balance, staggering. Arthur clutches at the back of her kirtle, trying to pull her away, but drops his grip with a shout when she plunges her knife into his arm. She doesn't have strength enough to fully puncture the mail, but the blade point still makes it through, jabbing deep into his bicep. For such a small thing, she's terrifyingly strong and has the determination of a bulldog. However, he is a knight of Camelot and will not be bested by a child. Looping an arm fully around her waist, he wrenches her from him and slings her roughly to the floor.

She rolls to her feet, neat as a cat, and wastes no time in running for him again, knife in hand. She climbs up him like a tree, and writhingly agile, she manages to get herself onto his back, one arm reaching around. He knows that she means to slit his throat and seizes the wrist holding the knife, squeezing hard enough to hear the small bones grind together and break, forcing her to drop the
knife. Giving up on any pretense of mercy, Arthur takes a broad pace backwards and slams his back—and the girl—into the wall as hard as he can stand. The girl cries out at the impact, loosing her grip, and he pulls himself free, backing away. Tenacious as anything, the girl picks up the knife in her unbroken hand and scrambles to her feet.

He finally gets his sword up between them just as the girl charges for him once more, dazed and staggering…and impales herself directly on the blade, running herself through. Her eyes go wide enough to show whites all around, the knife falling from her grasp once more. Both hands curl limply around the sword, confusion written across her face, and she makes a choked sound that might've been an attempt to speak before her eyes roll back, limbs going slack.

He lowers his arm with her dead weight, pulling the blade free. "Gods' mercy," he says quietly, staring down at the girl. Now that she's still, he notices something he hadn't before: a Druid mark, tattooed on one bare ankle.

This day cannot possibly get any more absurd.

"I can't believe Morgause was responsible. I didn't get the slightest sense of magic from her before. I wonder if that's a gift High Priestesses are taught, masking their magic."

"I can scarce believe I was stabbed by a child," Arthur remarks, shaking his head as he sinks down into the bath. The heat of the water makes his myriad bruises throb, but it also takes the ache out of his muscles as well. "And a Druid no less. I thought they were peaceful folk." He scrubs at himself gingerly, avoiding the wound on his arm so the softening scabs don't break.

Merlin hums, thoughtful. "Most are, but some have abandoned that. Close your eyes." He pours an ewer of warm water over Arthur's head, then takes a ball of soap and works a lather into his hair. "I received a letter from Iseldir last week. He warned me that there was a magic-user, Alvarr, hoping to mount an attack on Camelot, trying to recruit Druids from different camps, particularly the young ones."

Arthur turns and stares at him. "You never told me about that."

"I was going to," Merlin protests. "I was just…distracted, with all that's gone on. Besides, if the spell broke after you killed her, then Morgause must have used her as the source for the sleeping spell, which might well mean she's working in league with this Alvarr. Or at least, she's swaying followers of her own. Dunk your head."

He does and comes up streaming water. "If she is as powerful as you say, though, she's certainly a coward. Conjuring herself out of Camelot the way she did?"

Merlin tugs at a clump of his hair in reproof. "It isn't cowardice to know when you are outnumbered. Once the sleeping enchantment was broken, she had no hope of achieving anything other than her own death, even with the knights," he points out.

"It's a dangerous thing to admire your enemy, Merlin. Just remember that." Exhaling sharply, he shakes his head, flinging water, and hears Merlin curse softly behind him. "Seven hells on her, anyways. Leave it for another day. I'm quite thoroughly exhausted with talk of this. Have we not earned at least a brief spell of grace, or will we be forever uncoiling others' plots?" Leaning back against the edge of the tub, he tilts his head back to look at the young man. "How's your lip?" he asks, reaching up to touch the corner of Merlin's mouth. His split lip has scabbed over in unsightly blackish-red, and there's a hideous line of mottled bruising running up his swollen cheek where the
knight's gauntlet had struck him.

Holding the edge of the tub for balance, Merlin leans over him and kisses him, slow and leisurely. "Does that answer suffice?" he asks in a low voice.

"Mm, I believe I'll need further convincing."

Merlin is more than happy to oblige.
"Mind your footwork."

"I am," Arthur grits out, shaking the sting out of his wrist where Merlin had landed a blow with the end of his quarterstaff. Not nearly as hard as he could've, of course, but enough to smart.

"No, you're not. It isn't like wielding a sword, Arthur. You've got to be more mindful of your balance," Merlin explains. To prove his point, he spins neatly on heel and swats the prince across the backs of his thighs with the staff, making Arthur leap away with a small yelp. "Again."

With the weather warming, they've been spending more time outdoors, and after some persistent nagging on Arthur's part, they've begun sparring again, though it's also become training as well, Merlin teaching Arthur the finer points of using a quarterstaff, and Arthur educating Merlin on using a sword without injuring himself. Both of them have improved, but Merlin's yet to win a sparring match with a sword, just as Arthur's never won one against him with a quarterstaff. When using their weapons of choice, they always end on a draw.

Arthur swings towards his head—again, as though he's using a sword, unbalanced. Merlin ducks beneath the blow and sweeps the prince's legs out from under him with a neat swipe of his staff. Arthur goes to his back hard, and Merlin plants the end of the quarterstaff against his chest, pinning him neatly. "Mind your footwork."

There's an enormous burst of laughter from behind them, and a gleeful young voice exclaims, "It seems I've arrived just in time!"

Merlin whirls on heel, raising his staff on reflex, and is confronted with the sight of five riders at the edge of their clearing: four men and a young girl. She's the one laughing, and the sound seems entirely too large and raucous to come from such a small body. The men wear surcoats of dark blue emblazoned with a white phoenix over leathern armour, and they bear small smiles of their own, though they seem more amused by the girl than Arthur.

"Bellegere?" Arthur gets to his feet, abandoning his quarterstaff as he crosses the clearing towards them. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

The girl jumps down from the saddle and immediately runs to embrace him, flinging her arms around his waist, unheeding of the sweat and dirt, and even more surprisingly, Arthur hugs her back despite scarce showing open affection otherwise. "I promised you I would come to foster at Camelot for a summer, did I not?" she asks once she releases him.

Merlin realises this must be Arthur's cousin, the one he writes to so often. They don't look much alike, with her straight black hair, dark eyes, small and slight, and he hadn't realised she was quite so young, either, perhaps two-and-ten. Curious now, he plants his quarterstaff in the dirt and leans against it, observing.

"Uncle Agravaine didn't send a missive," Arthur observes in a pointed tone, arching an eyebrow at her.

She folds her arms and raises her chin a touch. "What Father doesn't know shan't harm him," she replies loftily.

"Bellegere!"
Immediately, she props both fists on her hips, glaring up at him with a ferocious scowl, and Merlin rescinds his earlier opinion. She looks very much like her cousin. "He's never at Snowgate, so he's hardly going to give much notice to my absence! And it isn't as though I have absconded in the middle of the night on my own. I left a letter with the steward to give to Father, if he bothers to return at all this summer, telling him that I was going to Camelot and that I was taking my guard with me, and we would return come summer's end, before my natality." Her glower lessens, and a pleading note creeps into her tone. "Please, cousin, let me stay. I'm going slowly mad sitting at home, on my own, doing nothing but watching the crops grow. I cannot stand it another day longer."

Arthur is quiet for a long moment, arms folded over his chest as he gazes down at the girl, fingers drumming against his arm. Finally, he exhales a long breath and puts hands on his hips. "Very well," he accedes at last, then holds up a hand when Bellegere grins. "However, we are going to send a letter back to Snowgate telling your mother and father you've arrived here in one piece and have been permitted to stay, and if they should send for you to return home, you will go without fuss, understood?"

Merlin doesn't think she listens to a word he's saying, fit to wriggle right out of her skin in elation, and she flings herself forward once again, hugging him tightly around the waist. "Yes, yes, yes, I promise, I promise! Thank you, Arthur! See, this is precisely why you're my favourite cousin."

"I'm your only cousin."

"Semantics."

Arthur chuckles and ruffles her hair, then frowns once more, raking his gaze over her. "And just what on earth are you wearing?" he asks.

Too busy being amused by the exchange, Merlin hadn't given much attention to her attire, but now that he is, he understands what Arthur means. Bellegere is wearing a frayed tunic and jerkin which both appear too large for her, cinched at the waist with a belt, whilst her breeches seem too short, not to mention homespun. None of it looks fit for a noble lady, with the exception of her boots, which are made of fine leather and clearly the only thing actually her own.

"Oh, these aren't mine. I took them from the steward's sons." Bellegere makes a face as though she's just bitten into something rotted at the dinner table. "Mother had another of her fits and took away all my trousers again. She says I need to start wearing gowns and gave me a riding dress," she replies with utmost disdain, lip curling.

"What's so wrong with that?" Arthur asks in a mirth-choked voice.

"It's orange and it has ruffles. I look like a grouse."

Merlin turns his head into his elbow and bites his sleeve to keep from laughing aloud, muffling a snort against his arm.

Arthur doesn't laugh, though his shoulders are shaking with it, and he reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose. When he's once more in control of himself, he lowers his hand and clears his throat. "I'll see to it you have some clothes," he says at last. "If nothing else, I'm certain one of the pages or squires will have something of measure for you. Come on, let's return to the citadel."

At a gesture from Bellegere, the four men who'd accompanied her dismount and start walking their horses towards the city, one of them leading her sturdy pony as well. Merlin falls into step beside them, allowing Arthur and Bellegere to walk ahead of them. Had it been anyone else, he might've
been at least a little stung to be so easily forgotten, but the sight of Arthur so happy more than makes up for it, and he knows they've not seen each other in near two years. So, rather than embitter himself over it, he listens to them talk as they walk back towards the gates.

"I'll put you in quarters down the hall from my chamber, and you'll need a bath and proper attire before you're shown to court," says Arthur, an arm around her shoulders. "And if Father should ask, then you will say absolutely nothing about your… absconding. I'll tell him it was my idea to bring you here and I convinced Uncle Agravaine to agree and merely forgot to inform him of it, alright? It's only a stroke of luck for you that they don't speak to one another, or we'd surely be caught out."

"Will he put you in the stocks?" Bellegere asks gleefully.

Arthur tweaks her hair. "No, he shan't, you little beast, and I'd appreciate you keeping such suggestions to yourself."

"So that's the prince, then?" asks the man walking nearest to Merlin. He's a big man, shorter than most but built like an ox, his grizzled red beard shot with grey. "I've heard of him."

Merlin nearly asks what exactly he's heard but holds his tongue, knowing he's being tested. "You've just seen more than most ever do," he replies instead.

The man grunts. "As have you," he says with a nod towards Bellegere.

He holds out a hand. "Merlin of Silverpine."

"Roland of Snowgate." The man has a grip like iron, his hands well-callused. "So, what are you if not a noble?"

"I'm the prince's manservant. And you're the captain of her honour guard, I take it?" Walking this close, he's noticed Roland bears a silver braid on the collar of his surcoat which the other three lack. Hardly a surprise, too, for the other three appear to be green as summer grass, likely fresh from training; one doesn't even look old enough for his voice to have changed yet. It makes him wonder about this Agravaine.

"Aye, I am."

"Well, Captain Roland, I'll tell you this. The Rising Sun has the strongest ale and the liveliest gaming tables, the Cockerel has the best wine and stew, and the Pavilion has the loveliest… garden," Merlin explains, gesturing in the appropriate directions with his staff. "The guardsmen's quarters are just there."

Roland chuckles as they enter the palace square; an ostler comes to take their horses. "Right, then. You have my thanks, lad."

"Of course."

Arthur's voice rings in the square. "Merlin!"

Roland's eyes flicker slightly, and he claps a hand against Merlin's back. "Mind the young mistress, won't you? And watch yourself, too. She's a stubborn one."

Merlin smirks. "Oh, I've plenty of experience there." Shouldering his quarterstaff, he climbs the stairs and hastens to Arthur, who's waiting at the foot of the interior staircase with Bellegere. "Yes, sire?"
Merlin, show my cousin to her chambers and see to it her belongings are moved there promptly whilst I arrange for a more suitable wardrobe," Arthur says with another amused glance at her pilfered attire, then touches her shoulder. "I'll see you shortly, beastie. No running off." With that, he leaves them.

Immediately, Bellegere turns to eye him up and down like he's an enemy she's taking the measure of before engaging him in open combat, eyes slightly narrowed. In the brief moments of her evaluation, Merlin weighs his own options, accounting for what little he'd seen of her in the clearing and how Roland spoke of her, and decides to treat her just as he does Arthur. So, he clasps his hands behind his back and eyes her right back, brows raised slightly and saying nothing.

She bears it about as long as Arthur would've. "Well?" she barks, propping small fists on her hips. "Aren't you going to show me to my chambers?"

"Are you going to move?" he retorts, mimicking her tone. "You are standing in front of the stairs, m'lady."

Blinking in surprise, she glances over her shoulder at the staircase. "Oh. Well, then. Go on," she orders, taking a step to the side.

Merlin gives a small, sardonic bow. "My everlasting thanks." He ascends the stairs two at a time, as he always does, hearing her smaller boots follow him up. The skin between his shoulders prickles from the weight of her stare. Without waiting to see if she's keeping up with him, he heads in the direction of Arthur's chambers, deciding which room to put her in. Not so distant as to be dismissive, yet not too near to overhear anything...inappropriate.

"You know you're supposed to walk behind me, don't you?" Bellegere asks as she hurries alongside him.

"I do," he replies.

"You're not a very good servant, are you?"

"No, not really."

"Why are you Arthur's manservant, then?"

"Because the King is quite a single-minded man." Merlin turns down the corridor, walks to the third door, and opens it. "Here is where you'll be staying. Prince Arthur's chambers are just further."

Bellegere walks into the middle of the room, turning in a slow circle to survey every inch of it. "It'll suit," she says at last, using that same haughty voice Arthur likes to use when he's trying to be regal and aloof.

"Pleasant to know. As soon as your cousin returns with clothes, you'll have a bath."

She pivots on heel so sharply her hair fans out behind her, eyes narrowed, a flush creeping up her neck. "You do not tell me what I will or will not have."

In his mind's eye, he pictures one of those large, horny toads found at the edge of ponds and lakes, taking in air and puffing itself out to make itself seem larger and more frightening that it is. In other words, a bluff. "You're dressed like an urchin and you smell like a stable. You'll have a bath before you go anywhere, or you'll like as not be taken for a scullery maid and put to scouring pots in the kitchens," he replies, putting hands on his hips to imitate her earlier posture. "And speaking from
personal experience in such matters, trust me when I say you'd rather have the bath, if only for the sake of your fingernails."

Bellegere continues to glare at him for another moment, but then she relaxes, her angry flush receding. A smile plays around her mouth; inwardly, he knows he's made the right decision in his handling of her. "You said your name was Merlin?" she asks, bounding over to sit on the edge of the bed, swinging her booted feet off the floor.

"I didn't, nor did you ask, but yes, it is. Merlin of Silverpine," he answers with a smile of his own. "And you are the young Lady du Bois."

She scrunches up her face in displeasure. "Don't call me that. My mother is Lady du Bois. I'm not a lady."

"You appear to be one to my eyes."

Bellegere folds her arms, scowling at him. "Just because I am a girl doesn't mean I'm a lady, Merlin. Ladies are supposed to wear gowns and gossip and embroider," she explains as if speaking to a particularly slow-witted simpleton.

Merlin snorts loudly, earning a look of surprise from her. "You must not know a great many ladies, then," he replies, thinking of Morgana in her mail and armoured corset, running one of Kanen's brigands through with her sword, of Evaine on her knees in the gardens, removing an infestation of weeds with a vengeance, hands blackened with dirt up to the wrists. He wonders if Bellegere has ever met Morgana; he'll have to tell Arthur to introduce them.

The girl eyes him dubiously, perhaps wondering if she's being mocked in some way, but rather than say aught of it, she changes subjects instead. "I saw you sparring with Arthur. I've never seen anyone best him in a match before," she says, sounding truly fascinated now.

"I've only ever bested him with the quarterstaff. I'm scarce more than useless with a sword," Merlin replies in amusement. "Though I can still throw a knife better than he can. It's the only blade I can wield with more skill."

"Show me," she demands in a happy, eager way.

Chuckling, he slides one of his wrist knives out into his palm, flicking it around neatly to proffer her the hilt; Bellegere turns it over in curious fingers, tracing a fingernail over the engraving on the flat of the blade. She presses the pad of her thumb against the edge and winces when it draws blood, though she doesn't seem overly bothered by it, sticking her thumb in her mouth. "Easy," he remarks, holding out his hand for it back.

She places it in his palm. "How do you keep it up your sleeve that way?"

Merlin turns back his sleeve to show her the sheath strapped around his wrist. "There's a catch here. I have others, but I shan't tell you where I'm hiding them," he replies with a wink, and she grins, raking her gaze up and down him curiously. "Kindly don't say anything about it, though. Strictly speaking, I'm not meant to have them, but Arthur allows me to keep them as long as they are kept private. Now, if I am not permitted to address you as Lady du Bois, might I be allowed to call you Bellegere?"

She ponders that for a long moment. "You may," she replies at last, lofty as any highborn lady. "You call my cousin by his name as well. You aren't meant to."

Merlin shrugs and spreads his hands. "I do a great many things I'm not meant to do. All you need
do is ask my brother. I'm quite the villain."

That earns him another of those guffawing laughs which sounds far too huge to come from such a small chest, and Merlin can't help but to laugh as well, taken in by her effervescence. Her laughter halts abruptly when someone knocks at the door.

However, it's only Arthur, closely followed by Guinevere. Merlin smiles. If anyone can manage this contrary little girl, it'd be Gwen; she has a set of clothing folded over one arm, hung neatly so they wouldn't crease. It looks to him like the livery a young nobleman might wear, nothing orange or ruffled in sight. "Wonderful to see you're capable of getting along with someone other than your brother, Merlin," Arthur drawls, though there's a genuine gleam of humour in his eye. "Cousin, this is Guinevere. She'll be looking after you for now. I have to attend court with my father today, so you settle in here, get yourself tidied, and we'll make a day of it tomorrow, yes?"

"Alright."

"Excellent. Merlin, with me."

As they walk down the corridor, the sound of Bellegere's strident tone follows them, insisting that she is not a lady, do not address her as such. Merlin hides a smile as he falls into step beside Arthur, not behind him.

This is going to be an interesting summer.

On the nights when Merlin stays in Arthur's chambers, he takes his dinner with the prince, avoiding the cook's notice by smuggling his portions onto the tray after her back's turned and hiding the second goblet in his coat. The real trick is to get the lot of it up the stairs to Arthur's chambers without either spilling or dropping anything. He's become quite adept at it.

Arthur straightens at his desk when Merlin walks in. "Is that supper? Excellent, I'm ravenous."

"You always are. Stewed venison," Merlin announces as he takes the cover off the dinner tray and sets out the wine, taking the second goblet from his coat, carefully wedged under his arm so he wouldn't drop it. "So, your cousin seems…pleasant."

Arthur chuckles as he pours a measure of wine for them. "She can be ornery," he accedes. "Not at all like you, then?"

That earns him a flat, unimpressed glance, but then he smiles and shrugs one shoulder. "Fair enough. It's not been easy for her, that's all. Uncle married later than most nobles do, Aunt Thea is some years younger than him, and they've not…" Arthur hesitates slightly, brows drawing together. He rubs his thumb against the ring on his forefinger, tapping his nail against the band. "They've been wed for near five-and-ten years now, and Bellegere…"

He doesn't finish, shaking his head, but Merlin understands well enough. That many years with only a single child, and a girl, no less. From what he'd learnt drinking with Roland at the Cockerel that afternoon, Agravaine is scarcely ever within his own home, and the lady of the house isn't always…well. However, judging by the way Roland said it, Merlin suspects her ailments are more mental than physical. For the most part, Bellegere is left to her own devices. It sounds a painfully lonely life.

"What do you think of her?" Arthur prompts, changing topics.
"I think she's proud," Merlin says slowly as he walks around the prince's chamber, snuffing the majority of the candles. "Largely because she has little else. Lonelier than she'd admit. And angry as well."

"Angry?"

"Quite." Merlin notices the puzzled expression Arthur wears and sighs, walking back over to the table and stopping behind the other man's chair. "She's angry at her father for never being present, she's angry at her mother for being unwell and unable to bear another child, and she's likely angry at herself as well for not being the son and heir her father wants and for being unable to be the daughter and lady her mother wants. All in all, I believe the only person she isn't angry with is you, and that is because you're likely the only person in her life who loves her in her entirety."

"Oh," Arthur says, his voice rather small. "What makes you believe you know so much of her?"

Merlin leans over the chairback to plant a kiss atop Arthur's head. "Because I know you, and she is very much like you. Only less of a clotpole, of course," he adds with a chuckle. When he doesn't get an eyeroll or a jest in reply, Merlin reaches down and places a hand on one shoulder, squeezing gently. "If you wish to do well by her, then say nothing of it. She's much too proud to admit to any of it, and then she will be angry with you, which sounds a terrifying prospect to me," he admits.

Arthur snorts into his wine, smile returning. "You've no idea." When Merlin tries to walk past his chair, intending to sit down, he hastily sets the goblet aside and wraps both arms around his waist, tugging sharply.

Merlin squawks as he lands in Arthur's lap, nearly upsetting the dinner tray. "What are you doing?" he laughs. The blond doesn't answer, only hums happily as he noses at the nape of Merlin's neck, blowing softly into his ear. It makes him shiver in delight, and a knowing smile creeps across his face when Arthur's fingers play over the hem of his tunic, sliding underneath. "Oh, you prat, I thought you were ravenous."

"Mm, it can wait."

It's a good thing that Merlin rises early in the mornings, Arthur muses. If left to his own devices, he could sleep 'til midday, and yet Merlin is able to wake almost before the birds do, it seems. Whilst waking up to cool sheets isn't something Arthur enjoys, for once he doesn't mind, given that Bellegere decides to wake him herself by sneaking into his chambers and taking a running leap onto his bed.

Arthur lets out a string of words one should never say in a lady's hearing when her sharp knees dig into his back. "Those are my kidneys, Bellegere. I will thank you to get off them," he groans out.

"You promised me the day. The sun has risen, the day has begun," she points out as she clambers off the bed.

"How did you get in here?"

Merlin's cheerful voice cuts in. "I let her in."

Arthur squints in the unfairly bright sunlight as he sits up, making out the slightly bleary figure of the other man. Merlin is setting out breakfast at the table, having helpfully brought a second, smaller portion for Bellegere. "I've taken the liberty of clearing your schedule today, so you may spend it with your cousin," he says in that damnably cheerful voice of his; he winks at Arthur when
Bellegere isn't looking, too busy making short work of her breakfast.

Arthur makes sure her gaze is elsewhere before sliding out of the bed, hastily tugging on his trousers. "You couldn't have warned me first?" he murmurs in an undertone as he dresses.

"Where's the entertainment in that?" Merlin chuckles, holding out a coat for him. "Don't worry, I'd have put you in your smallclothes before she saw anything." He wriggles his fingers. "So, if you are to be occupied with your cousin, does that mean I have the day off?"

Arthur cuffs him lightly on the ear, smirking. "Not at all. I'm certain you'll be able to keep yourself busy," he replies.

"Prat." Merlin steps back and turns to face Bellegere, giving an exaggerated flourish of a bow, making her snort. "I'll take my leave, then, shall I? You can leave the tray, I'll be back to collect it later. Enjoy yourselves and kindly stay out of trouble."

Arthur shies a grape at Merlin's head, who hastily ducks it and leaves the chamber, his laughter fading down the corridor. He casts an appraising look over Bellegere whilst he eats. "I see you've found more appropriate attire today." Matter of fact, he's quite certain those are his clothes, or had been a few years ago. He hadn't grown into himself until he was nearly knighted, going from the shortest of the squires to the second tallest behind Leon in the course of a year. It suits her well.

She beams happily, stroking the sleeve of her tunic. "They're lovely, aren't they? Lady Morgana gave them to me, said they belonged to a former squire. She wouldn't tell me who, but look." She sticks out one leg with a snort, showing that her trousers, whilst loose on her slimmer frame, are barely tucked into her boots. "I am taller than he was."

Arthur resists the urge to roll his eyes skyward. Definitely his clothing, then, and definitely Morgana's doing. Damned harpy. Licking the last remnants of breakfast off his fingertips, he pushes back from the table. "I have something for you, cousin."

Bellegere straightens in her chair, eyes brightening. "A present?"

"Yes, a present. I meant to send it to you for your natality, but seeing as how you wish to be so damnably stubborn," he says, arching an eyebrow at her, "I might as well give it to you. Stay there."

She bounces eagerly in her seat as he goes to the cupboard and unlocks it. There are only two objects in it, and only one is for her; the other is to be for Merlin, if things go accordingly. He takes out the handsome leather case and walks over to the table with it, aware of Bellegere's enthusiastic eyes on him, setting it before her on the table. "I have something for you, cousin."

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Near squirming, she flicks open the clasps, lifts the lid, and gasps softly. The interior of the case is lined with padded silk to protect its contents—a bow and a quiver of arrows. It's a short bow, such as a horseman might use. Or a young archer. It's made of white yew, tipped with ram's horn, the string braided horsehair greased with beeswax; beside it, the quiver is sturdy buckskin, holding a dozen arrows of birchwood, straight as a die and fletched with peacock, each one tipped with razor-sharp steel.

Bellegere takes the bow from the case. "Is it truly for me?" she asks in a small voice, cradling it like it might well dissolve into smoke should she treat it too roughly.

"Of course. I had them tighten the draw from your last one. You've been practicing, I trust?" he queries, sitting on the edge of the table.
She nods rapidly, running a fingertip along the bowstring, plucking it. "It's so beautiful, Arthur. Will you take me hunting with it?"

"Later. I'll take you down to the training field first, let you practice. Never go out with an untested weapon, you know that." Arthur reaches out and lightly tweaks her hair, making her swat at his hand. She's left most of it loose today, only putting in two small braids at the front to keep it out of her face; he wonders if she actually assented to Gwen braiding it for her.

"Well, then, let's go," she says, immediately springing out of her chair and snatching the quiver out of the case, slipping the belt over her head.

He chuckles as he follows her out of his chambers, watching her bounce on her toes as she walks. "Are you enjoying Camelot so far, cousin? Is it different from Snowgate?" he asks, thinking of what Merlin had said about her being lonelier than she would admit.

"Oh, yes. There are so many people," she remarks in surprise, eyes widening slightly. "After the training field, can we go to the guardsmen's quarters? I want to show Roland. He has been helping me maintain my archery practice at Snowgate, and he's promised to give me a training sword and teach me forms once I'm four-and-ten."

"If you'd like. Also, since when do you have your own honour guard?"

"Since last spring. Mother kept making a fuss over me going riding by myself, and she wanted Father to take Rabbit away from me, but I convinced him that I was old enough to have my own guard instead. I chose Roland for my captain, and he picked the others so he can train them himself," she chatters on, which makes Arthur feel somewhat better about this Captain Roland of hers.

"Rabbit?"

"My pony. He's grey and has long ears." Perfectly sensible. "Merlin told me he has a horse as well. The Hellion. Did you give her to him?"

Arthur snorts at the mention of that spotted menace of a horse. "No, no. The Hellion was a gift from his father. She's a lovely beast to look at, but she's the only creature I've met more ill-tempered than you," he adds, then winces as she punches his side none-too-gently. The topic does give him an opportunity, however, to pose a question that's been itching at him since last night.

"So, tell me. What do you think of Merlin?"

"He's an awful servant," Bellegere replies, wrinkling her nose slightly, but she's smiling, too. "And he's better with a quarterstaff than you." Ah, he's never going to live that one down. "He's odd. I like him," she says decisively.

Arthur laughs and puts an arm around her shoulders. "So do I, beastie. So do I."

Merlin might keep his vigils during the festivals of the Old Religion, but there is one yearly celebration that he doesn't have to miss and is grateful not to, in all honesty—Arthur's natality.

By some stroke of luck, it seems the prince is actually fit to enjoy himself this year, as Arthur had always ended up brooding previous years. It's another example of his remarkable ability to be utterly contradictory—when he should be at his highest, all his self-possession and conceit slides away into a guilt-tinged sulk usually lasting the entire week. Merlin's never asked why; he doesn't need to. However, the presence of his cousin has done wonders for Arthur's demeanour over the
summer. Perhaps he's finally learnt that despite the loss which accompanied him into the world, there are a great many people who are glad of his birth.

As the festivities wear on, set to last most of the night, Merlin lets his gaze roam over the great hall, seeking out familiar faces. There is Morgana standing with Guinevere, speaking with one of the female tumblers who'd just performed. There is Leon, sitting with the other knights and laughing over some jest. There is Lancelot, leaning against a column and speaking with Percival, one of the guards on duty in the hall. A frown tugs at his lips when he finally picks out Bellegere. It isn't hard to do, as she looks to be the only unhappy person in the hall. What is it with this family and their inability to be collectively happy?

As is appropriate, she's been seated at a table with the youngest members of the peerage, girls of noble birth near her own age. Another year or two, they'd be playing games of courtship in earnest; some are making starts at it already, batting their lashes and making eyes at the young noblemen. Bellegere looks rather forlorn in their midst, watching the other girls flirt and giggle with something akin to longing. None of the young men pay her any mind, either. Because she is Lady Belligerent, loud and contrary and prickly as a thorn bush. Because she is very like her cousin, proud and clever and not terribly good at flirting.

Merlin takes a step closer to the table, leaning over to fill Arthur's cup. "You should see to Bellegere," he murmurs lowly as he bends down, keeping his voice pitched just so only Arthur could hear.

Arthur straightens in his chair, head turning as he looks for her, and Merlin can almost see the empathy on his face. He pushes back from the table and makes his way towards her table; Merlin follows him at discreet distance.

Bellegere visibly brightens at his approach, smiling at last even as the other girls all blush and giggle at the sight of Arthur, hardly able to look at him straight. "Are you enjoying yourself, dear heart?" he asks; she's the only person he ever addresses by terms of endearment. The names he calls Merlin don't quite fall under that bastion.

"I am now. Will you sit with me a moment, cousin?"

"Only if you promise me a dance at the next turn."

She wrinkles her nose but agrees, and he sits at the end of the bench beside her. Merlin leans back against the wall to observe, fighting his own mirth. He's seen Arthur do battle against impressive odds, all manner of beasts and foes, and yet he's not certain he's ever seen the prince quite so uncomfortable as he is surrounded by a gaggle of adolescent girls. He looks as though he'd sooner wrestle a rabid bear. Deeply amused by his unease, Bellegere shamelessly urges them on, eyes sparkling with mischievous glee. When she mentions the Questing Beast—Merlin had regaled her with the story at her behest, of course leaving out his own involvement—the resulting squeal is near-deafening, and they naturally beg to see the scar. Some are more insistent than others. Finally, flushing somewhat, Arthur loosens the ties of his shirt and eases open the neckline enough to reveal part of the mark.

"Prince Arthur," says one of the bolder girls out of the lot, "do you not have another scar you might show us?" She reaches out to touch his knee, just below an old, long-healed scar he'd earned when he was still a squire, which runs in a curved line up to his inner thigh.

Merlin turns around and presses his brow against the wall so he doesn't laugh aloud, biting his tongue near to the point of drawing blood.
"No," Arthur replies flatly, ears bright pink. He levels a glare at Bellegere. "It's not funny."

"Yes, it is," she giggles into her cup of well-watered wine.

By the time the celebration winds to a close, it's only a few hours before dawn, and a great many of the guests have drank themselves sodden, having to be half-carried out by their companions and servants. Merlin is one of the few still sober, though he's pleasantly warm from the perry brandy Arthur had given him earlier; of course, he is given the task of escorting the prince, who is most assuredly not sober, back to his chambers, an arm clamped around his waist to keep him walking in a straight line. He's only grateful that Arthur hasn't become so inebriated as to become overly affectionate with him, a common side-effect of the drink.

"Do you think he had fun this year?" Bellegere asks in a drowsy voice, walking at his other side. Her shuffling step is due to weariness, not wine, thankfully. "He doesn't always."

"Oh, he did, I'm certain of it, and I think we have you to thank for that. You make him very happy," Merlin replies.

She follows him right up to Arthur's door, having passed her own chamber, and watches as Merlin gives Arthur a nudge inside, turning him in the direction of the bed. Hopefully he'll be able to make it that far without help. "If I ask you something, will you answer me true?" Bellegere prompts, watching her cousin stagger away.

Merlin blinks and leans his back against the doorway. "If I can, I certainly will try."

"How long have you been bedding him?"

He opens his mouth, closes it again without a sound; Bellegere gazes up at him with her deep black eyes, waiting. "Would you believe me if I said I wasn't?" he asks at last, and she shakes her head, lips curling up.

"I shan't tell, if that is what you're afraid of. I know you must keep it a secret." She smiles warmly, glancing back into the chambers; Arthur's made it to the bed, sprawled face-down on the coverlet, snoring. "You make him happy as well. He's...lighter."

"Nobody else has noticed," Merlin observes.

At that, she gives a most unladylike snort. "Most people are idiots."

"True enough." He tilts his head back against the doorframe, realising that he's not yet answered her initial question. "Since early this spring, though we've been... tangled for some time before that."

Bellegere seems inordinately pleased with the knowledge, nodding sagely to herself. "Will you take care of him?" she prompts with a note of worry colouring her tone.

"I will," he murmurs.

"Good. He needs looking after." She glances up and down the corridor, though they're the only ones still awake and sober, then lurches forward and hugs him hard and tight. For such a slim girl, she has a ferocious grip, digging her fingers into his back and pressing her head against his middle. Merlin embraces her back, though not quite able to manage her compressive strength. Bellegere holds onto him for only a span of heartbeats, then quickly withdraws, stepping back and straightening out her jerkin. "Don't tell anyone I've done that," she mutters. "Goodnight, Merlin."
"Goodnight, Lady Belligerent," he replies, and she makes a rude gesture likely learnt from her cousin. Grinning, he eyes her up and down. "You know...you're really quite clever."

Bellegere nods as she makes for her own chambers. "Yes, I know."

Agravaine never does send anyone to Camelot to retrieve his daughter. True to her word, however, after the feast of Lughnasadh, Bellegere returns to Snowgate. Before she leaves, she wrests a promise from Merlin that he will write to her as well and that when she is taller, he will show her how to use a quarterstaff well enough to best her cousin in a match.

Summer continues to ease down into autumn. Merlin relishes the shift between seasons, and there are times he goes riding outside of the city on his own just to breathe in the sweet smell of ripening hay and churned earth. He doesn't even mind accompanying Arthur on patrols to hunt the looters and raiders which always appear in flocks come harvest time. He, Leon, and Lancelot make bets on who can capture the most; by the time winter begins, he's earned nearly thirty silver from them. It's...fun.

The arrival of cold weather provides him with an excuse to stay in the castle more often, insisting the constant back-and-forth between the townhouse and the castle is bound to make him ill sooner rather than later. The cot in the ante-chamber of Arthur's rooms, however, remains empty and unused; Arthur's bed is far more comfortable.

"You know, if you keep staring at me, I shall begin to think there's something wrong with my face," Merlin points out after they've finished their supper, lacing his fingers together under his chin; the prince has continually gazed at him throughout the meal, head tilted slightly to one side.

Arthur doesn't rise to the bait, still eyeing him up, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He has that damn look about him again, a look which Merlin has recognised means he's plotting something. Which is never a good thing. For all his strategic and tactical ability, he has this bizarre, inherent ability to make even the simplest of plans go hideously awry in the most horrifying ways.

It makes Merlin nervous, rather rightfully so, he believes. "Shake your head, your eyes seem to be stuck. Why are you staring at me like that, Arthur?"

"Close your eyes."

Merlin arches his eyebrows, doubly nervous now. "I will not." He's learnt his lesson about closing his eyes around Arthur, especially with the prince's...unique and betimes wicked sense of humour.

Arthur raises an eyebrow right back, and they continue to gaze at one another for a long moment. Finally, he rolls his eyes skyward and pushes back from the table. "Very well. Be that way if you wish." He tugs at the chain around his neck, freeing it from his tunic; Merlin narrows his eyes. There's only ever one key on the chain, the one to the Hall of Portraits, but now another's joined it, a small, plain one. Arthur uses it to unlock a cupboard which Merlin knows full well is empty—or is meant to be, anyways.

"What are you doing over there?" he asks.

"Hush. You didn't want to close your eyes, you don't get to ask questions now."

"Prat."

Chuckling, Arthur takes something from the cupboard, nudges the door shut with his elbow, and
returns to the table with whatever it is he holds, holding it behind his back. "Move your plate."

"What do you have?" Merlin asks, tilting his head to try and see behind Arthur, but the prince leans to the side, keeping it out of sight.

Arthur rolls his eyes skyward. "Will you just…?"

"Oh, alright." He slides his plate and cutlery aside, moving his cup as well, then folds his hands neatly before him, prim as any courtier.

Arthur sets whatever it is he holds down in the empty space provided.

He lets out a soft exhale. The book is bound in dark unadorned leather, the binding well-done and made to last. When he opens it, the pages are made of thick, expensive paper. And are blank. He rifles through them curiously, finding them all blank. "Arthur, what…?"

"You've made fair-copies of Cornelius Sigan's work. Perhaps one day someone will make fair-copies of yours," Arthur says, retaking his seat.

"Oh…." Merlin runs his fingertips over the thick leather, tracing the edge of the cover, then opens it again, turning the blank pages. There's a length of ribbon sewn into the top of the binding, an attached page marker. If it's looked after, it'll last for years upon years, just like the ones in his library.

"Merlin?" A thread of nervousness winds its way into Arthur's voice. Leant back in his chair, he looks the picture of ease, but he's tapping his thumb against the arm of the chair, ring clicking against the polished wood, and his other hand is raised to his mouth, subtly biting one knuckle, an anxious habit of his.

Merlin carefully sets the book to the side, then shoves out of his chair and crawls over the tabletop to Arthur. It's entirely needless; it likely would've been easier simply for him simply to stand up and step around. As it is, he scrapes his shin against the edge of the table. It's worth it, however, to hear Arthur's delighted laugh as he wraps his arms around Merlin, pulling him close. "It's lovely, Arthur, it's perfect. I adore it," he murmurs, punctuating his words with soft kisses all over the prince's face. "But I have to ask, what is it for?"

Arthur chuckles, tucking his hand behind the crook of Merlin's knee, tugging him closer. "Three years, and it took me questioning your damned brother to find out when your natality is," he remarks.

"Oh." Merlin flushes a little, ducking his head in embarrassment. "I…forgot?"

"Only you could forget your own natality, Merlin." Arthur kisses the side of his neck. "By my count, however, I still owe you two more years. What would you like?"

Immedately, he shakes his head. "Oh, no, no, Arthur, you don't have to do that. I've already told you that I don't wish to be treated like—"

"Like a courtier, yes, I know," Arthur finishes for him, nodding. "You've told me, but this isn't me courting you. You've given me gifts." He tilts his wrist, letting the light catch on his natality gift from Merlin: a small golden pendant in the shape of a sun dangling from a long sinew cord, matching the sunstone pin he still wears on his collar and replacement to the necklace Merlin had stolen from him. "Am I not permitted to do at least that much in return? So, tell me, is there anything you want?"
He drags his fingers through Arthur's hair, still able to smell the lavender oil from his bath. "No, nothing." There's very little he truly wants. He's always appreciated what he has, knowing there are others who lack so much. What he desires above all else is his freedom, the liberty to be the entirety of himself without fearing his own death. However, he knows it would only spoil their night, and he's content to wait for that anyways.

A thought occurs to him, and a smile creeps across his face. "Actually...there is one thing I'd care to have from you."

"They won't find it suspect, you dismissing them for the day?" Arthur asks. He takes off his cloak as he steps into the de Galis townhouse, shutting the door behind him. There's no smiling Elfgifa waiting to take it for him, so he folds it over his arm.

Merlin's waiting for him inside, sitting near the bottom of the staircase with Allegra sat next to him begging for an ear-scratch. "No. Leon and I give them days of leisure from time to time, usually when Leon is on long patrol," he replies with a smile. Nudging Allegra's head off his lap, he stands and extends a hand to Arthur. "Come. This way."

Arthur has been in the de Galis townhouse on only four occasions: when he spoke to Sir Lionel about the wraith, when he hid himself there during the tourney, when he sat vigil at Yule and made himself ill in the cold, and when he tried to keep rein on Aredian during his witch-hunt. He's never been there, however, when both Leon and the household staff are absent, and he's never once set foot inside Merlin's room. However, this is what Merlin has asked of him in lieu of another gift—one night together in his own bed, his own home.

"Out," Merlin orders, and Allegra trots out of the room, having followed them up. Once she's out in the corridor, he shuts the door and leans back against it, gazing at Arthur as he peers around.

The room isn't terribly large, but it suits Merlin, fits him just right. There are a few books stacked atop various surfaces, shelves bearing small, innocuous keepsakes, scattered bits of clothing. The bed is covered by a quilt, made of squares of fabric in various colours and patterns, scrap cloth. Instead of a lamp, however, there's a shining orb the size of a man's fist, giving off its own light. It reminds him uncannily of the light that'd appeared to him in the mortaeus caverns.

When Merlin notices his gaze, he steps closer, reaching out to touch it with one finger. Its light fades like a candle slowly burning out, and sat on the bedside table is a solid orb of clear glass. "Trick I developed myself. Useful for reading myself to sleep." Merlin sits down on the edge of the bed, running his hands over the quilt.

"Will you...?" Arthur gestures to the glass orb. "I liked that."

Smiling, Merlin reaches out to touch the glass again, and it illuminates from within, glowing with a soft blue-white light like a captive splinter of star.

"Do you know what this brings to mind?" Arthur asks, and Merlin shakes his head. "The caverns in the Forest of Balor, and the light you sent to guide my way."

The younger man's ears turn brilliant pink, a flush spilling down the sides of his neck; Arthur can't help but to kiss him. Hands at Arthur's waist, Merlin slides back onto the bed, drawing the prince up onto the bed and rolling over atop him.

It's different this time somehow, slow and sweet and almost painfully tender. Arthur's surrounded
by Merlin, the warmth of his body and the wild smell of his skin, the humming golden presence of his magic pressed up against him in an intimate caress across every inch of his skin. He runs his hands up the span of Merlin's back, sweat-slick and overheated, feeling his muscles ripple and flex as he moves over Arthur, eyes blown wide and dark. The blue-white glow of Merlin's light-stone casts curious patterns across their skin. Arthur gasps, spine bowing, and Merlin's eyes spark gold behind his lashes.

Afterwards, Merlin sleeps deep and peaceful beside him, half-curled on his side with one arm and leg thrown haphazardly over Arthur. The light-stone glows softly from the table, the only light in the room. He strokes Merlin's curls out of his eyes, smiling softly. *Like a wool-blind ewe,* he muses. Despite the lingering haze of satisfaction, a chill brushes over his skin beneath the quilt, a frost-touched feather tickling along his backbone, and he knows that this respite of theirs, this period of grace, is coming to an end. They've not done all they're meant to do, and that destiny is coming for them whether they like it or not.

*Please,* he prays, drawing Merlin's warm, pliant body closer to him. *Please, I beg of you, no more losses. Whatever I must do, whatever price I must pay, I will do it. I will give until I break if I must.*

As if wakened by his desperate prayers, Merlin stirs against him. "Arthur?" he murmurs.

"Promise you'll stay with me," Arthur whispers fervently, lips pressed to curling black hair, smelling the clean, wild scent of him. "Promise. Don't leave me."

"I am here. I'm not leaving." Merlin reaches further around him, embracing Arthur with his entire body, like ivy twining around a tower.

"Always?"

Merlin nods, brow furrowing at Arthur's urgency. "Always and always."

*Please,* Arthur prays again, eyes closed. *Please.*
"Merlin, come here a moment."

He raises his gaze from the chainmail he's fastidiously cleaning. It's one of the few tasks he actually does himself, finding the repetitive motion of it soothing, not to mention it gives him the chance to renew and strengthen the protective magic he's woven through every ring and rivet. Arthur's sitting at his desk with a spread of pages and letters out before him, and he recognises some of the seals stamped on the pages. "Oh, no," Merlin replies, shaking his head, and Arthur gives him a look that's half pleading, half exasperated. "I said no. I promised Will I would go to the Rising Sun with him tonight once I'm done with this, and I will not desert him simply because you, in all your perversity, find it so damnably arousing to hear me discuss matters of state."

"Oh, shut up and come here," Arthur laughs, not even bothering to argue Merlin's claim. He knows full well that every time they've discussed politics together before, the conversation has ended with them breathless and sated and not always in bed. "I want you to look at this, truly. Just…indulge me, would you?"

Merlin scoffs, setting aside the cleaning rag. "As if I don't do enough of that already," he mutters, then gets to feet and crosses to the desk, making sure to stay out of reach; Arthur rolls his eyes knowingly. "Very well, what is it?"

"A thrice-tangled knot that's going to give me a headache before daybreak, I'm certain." He gestures to the scattered mess on his desk and rakes a hand through his hair. "Father's passed it off to me, said that it will be an excellent test of my statesmanship."

"Which means he doesn't want to deal with the headache of it himself, and should it go awry later, he can blame you?"

"You have been paying attention."

"Indeed." Sighing defeat, Merlin walks around the desk and seats himself in Arthur's lap, leaning back into him, and the blond puts an arm around his waist, hand on his hip. "So, show me this tangled knot he's put upon you."

The prince reaches over and tugs a map out of the general clutter on his desk. It isn't just a map of Camelot, but of the other Five Kingdoms as well, displaying nearly half of Alba. "See this territory here?" He gestures to a small range of mountains that isn't in Camelot at all, but rather stretched between Nemeth, Essetir, and Kent, just where the borders of the kingdoms all meet. "These are the Feorre Mountains, and they are demanding sovereignty."

"Sovereignty?" Merlin repeats incredulously. "What…?"

Arthur nods understanding, resting his chin on Merlin's shoulder. "It's an oft-disputed territory. It's belonged to nearly every all of these kingdoms here, even Camelot at one point, not only because it sits on the borders, but because the passes through the mountains are vital."

"Control the mountains, control trade?"

"Precisely. And now they claim that they've never truly belonged to any of the kingdoms, they've merely been an unwilling vassal and that they are their own sovereign nation and should be treated as such."
Merlin frowns, tilting his head as he surveys the map. "But what's this to do with Camelot, then?" he asks, confused.

"Well, part of the territory they're claiming as their own is within our borders. Just here." He leans forward and traces one fingertip over the map just along the edge of Camelot's border, near the Forest of Balor.

"There's nothing there, though, isn't there?"

Arthur shakes his head, frowning in consternation. "No, nothing. No settlements, no pasturage or usable farmland, just a few acres of forest and rocky ground at the foot of the mountains, which is why my father doesn't really care one way or the other, but we're still receiving missives and envoys from them. The people who live there, they call themselves Feorrans, and are asking us to acknowledge their rights to their own land, whilst Nemeth and Essetir are asking us to stay out of it. Kent has less stake in it than we, so they're ignoring the entire situation." He scowls at the map, shaking his head. "I don't know why they're so damn insistent on it anyways. It wouldn't be much of a kingdom."

Merlin hums, reaching out to trace a fingertip over the mountains. "I do," he murmurs, and Arthur arches his brows at him. "It isn't so much about sovereignty as it is about belonging, belonging to themselves and no one else. They're tired of being passed around the common cold. And the way it is now, the mountains split between Nemeth and Essetir... just think. Should it ever come to war between the two, these people might well be fighting their own neighbours, even their own families."

"You sound as though you understand them."

"The desire to have one's own personal freedom? I'm familiar with the feeling."

Arthur doesn't reply, and Merlin internally winces at his own words, knowing that Arthur harbours his own wellspring of guilt, however faultless he is. At length, he speaks again. "What do you suppose I ought to do, then?"

He shrugs the shoulder Arthur isn't leaning on. "See if you can't act the mediator. You said yourself that Camelot has little stake in it anyways, so try to broker peace. Perhaps if Nemeth and Essetir won't acknowledge these... Feorrans' sovereignty, they can come to a peaceful alternative instead."

"Oh, I doubt it. The Feorrans are as stubborn as you. They've refused to give ground so far, and they can't be subdued through force of arms. If nothing else, they do know their own territory better than anyone else. They can spring an assault out of nowhere and vanish just as quickly. There's caverns and tunnels that've never been mapped entirely, not by us anyways, not to mention some of the passes through the hills are so narrow two men can't walk abreast on them, never mind horses or supply wagons, which means a siege is out of the question. It's like catching smoke."

Merlin hums. "I like the sound of them."

"Oh, hush," Arthur laughs, nudging Merlin off his lap. "Off with you, then. Go finish my chainmail and visit your surly little friend."

"Will is hardly little." He doesn't bother arguing the surly remark. He's only just retaken his seat at the table and picked up the cleaning rag when the warning bells begin to ring. "Ah, no," he groans. At his desk, the prince sighs. "There's that headache, I see."
It is indeed a headache, like unto being kicked in the head by a mule, only far worse. Arthur paces the length of his chambers yet again, probably having done so half a hundred times already, raking a hand back through his hair. "I thought your blood-father was dead. Did you not say he was dead?"

"I-I thought he was…"

"Then how is it he currently sits in the dungeons, Merlin?" he snaps.

"I don't know!"

The shout brings him sharply to a halt, whirling around to face the younger man. Immediately, Arthur regrets his anger, for Merlin is swaying slightly on his feet, having to brace himself against the wall to keep upright, face ashen and eyes wide.

"I thought he was dead. So did Mother. Gaius…" Merlin swallows hard, raising one trembling hand to his mouth. "Gaius told us he was. He believed it would be easier for us that way. I didn't know, Arthur. I didn't know."

"I believe you," he replies softly, then closes his eyes. The next words are leaden on his tongue, but he says them anyways, voice low. "Father's ordered him executed come daybreak."

"What?"

He flinches at the horrified gasp, shoving a hand through his hair yet again, tugging anxiously. "He broke into the vaults, Merlin! He used magic to do so, and whoever he was working with has escaped the city already with whatever they took. Father won't stand for it, any of it. There's nothing to be done about it."

"Arthur…please, I…" His voice breaks, and he sinks down to his knees, tears welling in his eyes. "I can't watch him be executed."

"Don't do that," Arthur says, aghast, and hastily strides over to kneel in front of Merlin, grasping his upper arms in a firm grip. "Don't ever do that. Not with me." It makes him feels sick down to the core of his being to see Merlin kneeling before him and begging. As though Arthur is his father.

"I can't watch him die," Merlin repeats.

He tugs Merlin forward into his arms, embracing him tightly, feeling the young man tremble against him, tears dampening his neck. "I know. I know you can't," Arthur murmurs, stroking Merlin's hair with one hand even as his mind scrambles. "Listen. Listen to me." He waits until teary blue eyes meet his own before continuing. "Go and be with your mother. She'll need you now. I… I'll think of something."

Swiping at his face with the edge of a sleeve, Merlin gets unsteadily to his feet and departs, shutting the door behind him. Arthur stays where he is, kneeling on the rushes in quiet despair.

What can he do? Father won't let an intrusion into the vaults go unanswered, especially since this Balinor's partner had absconded with whatever it is they had stolen in the first place. He'll see the man dead, and even Arthur can't sway him from that. But he cannot sit idle, either. To ask Merlin and Hunith both to simply stand aside and watch, to allow the execution, it'd be unthinkable. He could never do it, no more than he could stand to watch his father die when he might prevent it,
nor would he let it go unavenged. In a single dizzying, terrible moment of clarity, he understands Mary Collins and all those who have come before her. The so-called evil of magic has nothing to do with it, only the fierce call of blood for blood, justice for the wrongfully slain.

If Balinor were to escape, then Father would surely send out a full party to recapture him. No doubt he'd ask Arthur to lead it. But there is more to it, he knows; he'd seen it in Father's eyes, that cold flicker of recognition and perhaps something like fear. He wouldn't send Arthur out alone. He'd send Kay, Bevidere, knights loyal to him, not Arthur. He wouldn't be able to lose Balinor's trail so easily with them accompanying him, and he doesn't know the man well enough to say he'd be able to escape a full hunting party on his trail.

Not unless there was more than one trail to follow.

When he goes down to the dungeons, he makes sure to keep his mask on; that's what Merlin calls the cool, distant face that he puts on for the court. The guards tense when they see him coming, straightening at their posts and giving him crisp nods as he passes. He doesn't acknowledge them, keeping himself apart. If they're to have any chance of achieving this mad scheme, he cannot afford to be seen as anything less than the Crown Prince of Camelot, interrogating the condemned prisoner for a final time before his execution.

It doesn't surprise Arthur in the slightest to see Merlin and Hunith standing at Balinor's cell, murmuring softly to him. He imagines that Merlin has learnt how to conceal their passing from unfriendly eyes, to make certain their voices go unheard. He clears his throat as he approaches.

Merlin's head comes up sharply, a brief, near-painful expression of hope crossing his face even as Balinor scowls thunderously. He gestures Arthur closer. A feathering warmth spreads across his skin as he approaches, the familiar caress of the young man's magic.

"Have you come to gloat, then, whelp?" Balinor grinds out.

"Father," Merlin hisses out just as Hunith simultaneously admonishes, "Balinor."

Arthur lets it pass, clasping one hands together before him. "No, I have come to help you escape," he replies candidly.

All three stare at him—Merlin with veiled adoration, Hunith with blessed relief, and Balinor with utter incredulity. "How?"

"First tell me what it is you stole from the vaults and its purpose," Arthur says. With those words, the suspicion in Balinor's expression solidifies back into solid mistrust; though he doesn't shift his gaze away from Balinor, his next words aren't meant solely for the other man. "I will help you escape for the sake of those I care for, but I have a duty and obligation to protect Camelot as well."

Balinor stares at him inscrutably, hands flexing at his side. Merlin's voice is low yet firm, "Tell him or I will."

There's an agonising moment of silence, but then some of the tension drops from Balinor's shoulders, a silent acquiescence. "One third of a triskelion, a magically-forged key," he says quietly.

"A key to what?"

"The tomb of Ashkanar," he says, and Arthur can't quite help his twitch of surprise. Balinor eyes
him and gives a rough, mirthless chuckle. "Know it, do you? Then you know what it contains?"

"I know the wealth and wisdom of Ashkanar were considered to be without equal," Arthur replies carefully, though he knows they are speaking of something else entirely. He knows full well what the tomb contains, having heard the furtive whispers from his father's war room as a child, ear pressed to the door to eavesdrop. He knows, too, who this man is, what he is, for him to desire the last dragon egg. "But I imagine that is not what you are after, is it, dragonlord?"

Merlin and Hunith both stare at him in shock, and he knows they hadn't expected him to know that. They haven't time to mince words, however. Father means for Balinor to die come dawn, and they have only hours.

"The King doesn't know what you are, or he has not told me if he does. Either way, I don't care," Arthur continues. He reaches down to touch the keys at his belt, and Balinor's eyes follow the movement. "I can unlock your cell and set you free, but first you must give me something. I want your word, your oath, that you will forswear vengeance against myself and Camelot."

Balinor's eyes go dark, moving back to his face. "And if I do not give it?"

"Then I can do nothing for you." The soft, pained sound Merlin makes twists in Arthur's chest keener than any dagger, but he forces his voice to remain steady and firm. "I cannot allow you to free a creature that you might well use to destroy us. I have read the accounts of dragonlords going to war, the destruction they were able to unleash upon their enemies. Entire armies consumed by flame, kingdoms losing every last grain to fire, land scorched so black nothing could take root for decades. I cannot bring such a thing upon Camelot."

The man shifts closer to the bars of his cell, reaching up to curl both hands around the bars. His eyes, dark and nothing at all like his son's, bore into Arthur, and he's reminded dizzily of Dara, looking through him into the darkest parts himself. "You don't know me, whelp. What makes you think I will keep to my word?" he poses.

"I expect not only your word, but your binding oath," Arthur replies. He remembers the words Merlin had spoken to him, every one, and he'd felt the stir of magic when they were spoken. "And if you are at all like your own kin—" His gaze flits to Merlin and Hunith. "—then you will keep to it. You will not be forsworn."

"That is all? Renounce vengeance against you and Camelot?" he repeats. Those dark eyes narrow. "What of the King?"

Arthur swallows hard, his stomach knotting over itself, but he forces the words out. "My father's sins are his own. He must answer for them himself."

"So be it, then. By stone and sea and sky and all they encompass, in the name of the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone, I do forswear vengeance against Arthur Pendragon and the kingdom of Camelot."

Again, there is that faint, silken stir of magic in the air, like a breeze blowing past, and with it comes the scent of wild places, of churned earth and fermented berries, but something else as well, something musky and reptilian and not quite human. Arthur represses a shiver and reaches for the keys on his belt. "Merlin, you will go with him to the tomb. Your brother has horses waiting for you outside the east gate," he says as he unlocks the cell, though he keeps one hand on the door, staring at Balinor through the bars. "And I am going to need your coat."
Of all the ways Merlin has imagined meeting his blood-father over the years, riding hell-for-leather after a thief intent on stealing a dragon egg which they are apparently responsible for as the last of a near-dead race of dragonlords is a scenario not even his feverish young imagination could have conjured. Of course, when has his life ever turned out the way he expected it to?

He looks up from the pheasant slowly roasting over the fire as Balinor returns. For such a large man, he's able to move with surprising grace and silence. "Same tracks. It's Borden, true enough," he confirms.

"Should we carry on after this?" Merlin asks, nodding towards their dinner.

Balinor tilts his head back to survey what little of the sky can be seen through the forest canopy. "No. It's too dark. Borden might be a liar and a thief, but he's not a fool. This is rough terrain, and he'll not risk his horse trying to ride at night," he replies, sitting down on a clearer patch of ground near the fire. Nearby, the Hellion and the bay gelding Arthur had given Balinor whicker and stamp softly, heads lowered. "We would have had him already if Uther's runt hadn't kept us. Arrogant little beast, demanding an oath from me…"

"Father," Merlin snaps, then stops, taking a breath. "Please. I have to ask you not to speak ill of Arthur."

"You and Hunith might be fond of the whelp, but he's still a Pendragon."

"You don't know him. No more than you know me," Merlin reminds him sharply, and this time, Balinor glances away, unable to hold his gaze. "He helped you escape. He knows who I am, what I am, and he has done nothing to give me harm. Will you hold him responsible for the sins of his father? Should I be held responsible for yours?"

For a long moment, Balinor is silent, turning to stare at him with dark eyes. Merlin can see himself reflected in them twice over, knowing he's overstepped somewhere. Perhaps for the first time, he is very much aware of the fact that he is scarcely two-and-twenty, that he was still a babe in arms during the bloodiest years of the Purge, that he's never witnessed the full extent of it.

"Uther pursued me," Balinor says at last, voice low and gravelly. "He hunted me…like a beast. He asked me to use my power to bring the last dragon to Camelot. He said he wanted to make peace with him, but he did not. He lied to me, he betrayed me, and Kilgharrah died because of it, as did the rest of my—our—people. My blood. My kin. All gone. Because of my folly." He shakes his head once, sharply, a muscle flexing in his jaw. "I'll never be free of it. Betimes it is easier to put that blame onto others than it is to bear it myself."

"I know. And I'm sorry. But you're wrong. They're not gone," Merlin whispers. "Not anymore. I'm here, Father."

Balinor raises his gaze to him, and the corners of his eyes crease slightly in the hint of a smile. "Aye. That you are. And I hope to be a worthy father to you. Very well, I'll speak no more of the Pendragon boy. Now, do you suppose that I am worthy of that pheasant burning itself black on the fire? Shall we eat it now, or when it is entirely ruined?"

Merlin swears aloud as he scrabbles to rescue it, near burning his fingers. For the first time, he hears Balinor laugh, rumbling low in his chest. He separates their meagre supper into portions and sits cross-legged on his blanket to eat. "Why did you trust Borden?" he poses as he picks apart the meat, trying not to burn his fingers. "Surely you must've known he would betray you."

"Aye, I did," Balinor agrees. "I did not trust him at all, and yet…I had few choices. He found me
some months ago, told me of the tomb and what lay within it. He had discovered who I was through some means, I could not say how. He showed me the other pieces of the triskelion, told me where the last one lay and should I help him, I would be entitled to my share of what lay within the tomb. As it should rightfully be."

"Why you, though? Surely he could've found anyone to help him."

The snapping of the fire doesn't quite cover Balinor's soft sigh. "Because he knew who I was, what I had been. The last of the dragons, slain on my account… I see now that he meant to play my guilt against me, and he succeeded at that. But how could I refuse? If there is even the smallest hope that the dragons might be reborn, it is my solemn duty to do what I can to kindle it. A dragonlord alone in the world is a terrible thing."

Merlin offers what he hopes is a reassuring smile even as his throat tightens. "Not alone now."

"Indeed. And speaking of being alone, I heard that…prince…mention a brother. Hunith married, then?" Balinor asks. He says the word 'prince' with utmost distaste, but it's a sight better than the names he had used before.

"No, no, Mother's never married. Leon is my brother, but we aren't blood-kin," Merlin replies. At Balinor's puzzled glance, he explains the ruse, how Mother had left him with the de Galises to keep him safely away from Uther and Cenred alike, how Lionel had claimed him as a natural son, raised him in Silverpine with Leon. Balinor seems deeply amused by it, nodding along. "Will…will you tell me about them?" Merlin asks once he finishes. "The dragonlords?"

"Aye, I shall. Ah, my son, there's a great deal we have to discuss." Balinor shifts to put his back against a tree, leaning against it and stretching his legs towards the fire. "I hope the dragonet will be a female," he says quietly.

"Why?"

The man chuckles softly. "A female dragon will lay eggs, of course. Their future will be ensured." At Merlin's look of puzzlement, he continues on in a surprisingly patient voice, "She will not need a mate in order to do so."

"As a hen does even without a rooster?"

The look of utter mortification on the man's face would've been hilarious in any other situation, and even as it is, Merlin has to bite his lip on a giggle as Balinor replies with utmost indignity, "Dragons are not poultry!"

"Arthur."

He lifts his head in surprise at the sound of Morgana's voice, but sure enough, she is standing in the doorway of his chamber. "Morgana," he says, a touch warily. She never visits him without cause. "New gown? Colour suits you."

"Yes, thank you. May we speak?"

"Of course." He gestures towards the chair set on the opposite side of his desk; Merlin likes to sit there and chatter on whilst Arthur sorts paperwork. He watches her as she crosses the room, taking the chair.
She looks weary, he realises. There are purple smudges beneath her eyes, grey-green gaze listless, and her thumbnails have been bitten down to the quick on both hands. She's broken herself of the habit over the years, but she still bites her thumbnails. Morgana doesn't speak for a long moment, staring into the middle distance as her fingers tap a discordant rhythm on the arm of the chair; Arthur holds his tongue. "Where is Merlin?" she asks at last.

"On an errand. He'll be back."

Her gaze cuts to him sharply, a spark of temper rising. "Don't play this game with me, Arthur," she warns. "I will win, and you will regret it. Where is he?"

Sighing deeply, he rests his elbows on the table, lacing his fingers together beneath his chin. "He is with his father," Arthur replies at last, inwardly cursing his own folly for not telling her. When Morgana arches an eyebrow at him, he amends, "His blood-father. They departed from Camelot three days ago."

She blinks at him, lips parting, but then her expression cools into understanding. "The thief who broke into the vaults, the man Uther ordered executed," she says, then shakes her head, despair creeping into her eyes; his nape prickles uneasily. "Damn it, Arthur. Tell me what happened."

Merlin doesn't recall the ride back to Camelot.

It all seems a haze, details sliding in and out of focus. One moment he's riding through the Darkling Wood to the standing stones, the next he's dismounting the Hellion in the square, and then he's halfway up a staircase with a warm hand on his arm and Lancelot's gentle voice breaking through the roaring silence, though he doesn't hear a word the man says. "Is Arthur in his chambers?" he asks; his own voice sounds strange to him, hoarse and quiet. Wordlessly, Lancelot nods and releases his arm, letting him pass. He continues up the stairs, following the way he's walked a thousand times already, stepping into Arthur's chamber and shutting the door behind him. The world comes back into sharp-edged clarity.

Arthur's there, standing before his wardrobe and putting on his jacket against the evening chill. The sunstone pin is affixed to its collar, matching the pendant dangling from a cord around his wrist, matching the colour of his hair. At the sound of the door, he turns. His gaze searches Merlin's face, haggard and pale, and he inhales sharply in understanding, not a word spoken.

Merlin crosses the room towards him. His legs give way beneath him, all the strength going out of him, and he sinks down to his knees, wrapping both arms around Arthur's waist, pressing his face against him. Arthur's strong arms curl around him, holding hard and tight, one hand cupping the back of his head. They stay like that for what feels like an eternity. Distantly, Merlin hears voices, raised and agitated, from the corridor, coming closer. He doesn't care.

"I'm sorry." Arthur's voice, rough and thick. "I'm so very sorry."

Merlin closes his eyes, tightening his grip.

The voices outside grow louder, nearer—familiar ones. The door of Arthur's chambers swings open without anyone knocking, and an irate Leon strides in with a harried-looking Lancelot trailing after him. "Gods' mercy, one would think—" He stops in his tracks, staring at the scene before him. His face goes blank with shock. And then understanding dawns. "Absolutely not."

Arthur lowers his arms. "Leon…"
"No," he repeats flatly, as if saying the word enough will make it so. "Oh, no."

Merlin releases Arthur's waist and gets to his feet. "I would speak to you about this," he says hoarsely, turning to look at his brother.

"No." An angry flush rises in Leon's face, staring at Arthur. One hand moves to the hilt of his sword in an unconscious gesture, breathing harshly.

For his part, Arthur doesn't react to the subtle threat beyond an expression of guilt and sorrow. Lancelot edges closer to Leon as if ready to restrain him. Merlin sidesteps between prince and knight, arms spread slightly in a warding gesture. "Don't," he pleads. "Leon, please, I beg of you, don't. I cannot bear it now, please."

Leon stares at him for an endless moment, hand flexing around the hilt of his sword, but then he turns on heel and stalks out of the chamber. "I'll stay with him," Lancelot says in a low voice, then turns and hastens after Leon, shutting the door of the chamber behind him.

Merlin presses the heels of his hands against his eyes until he sees white stars behind his lids, a sob hitching in his throat. "Oh, goddess help me, I can't..." he moans.

Arthur's hands curl over his shoulders. "Don't think on it now, Merlin," he murmurs softly, turning him around and guiding him towards the bed. "Come here. Lay down, and I'll fetch your mother."

Merlin lets himself be led over and sits down on the bed, aware of Arthur stroking his hair, murmuring softly to him. He lets himself curl up on the bed, pressing his face into a pillow, breathing the scent of Arthur and the lavender oil from his bath. He doesn't hear Arthur leave, nor does he hear anyone return, but when a callused hand touches his hair, he raises his head to see Mother there, her eyes full of tears. Merlin releases the pillow and crawls over to her, laying his head in her lap as though he is a boy again, pressing his face into her skirts to muffle his sobs.

"Oh, Merlin mine," Mother whispers, and he feels dampness drip into his hair as her tears fall.

When he wakes, it is still dark, not yet dawn, he is still in Arthur's bed, though Arthur isn't in it with him. He sits up slowly, rubbing at his eyes with one hand. He feels strangely hollowed out; his grief is still there, but it's sunken deep down into him, scraping out its own place in him and settling there. "Arthur?" he calls; his voice is hoarse, raw from weeping. He remembers sitting with Mother, mourning, falling asleep with his head in her lap, stirring faintly when she left.

"I'm here." Merlin turns towards the sound of his voice to see the prince approaching the bed in his nightclothes. He makes a face as he rolls his left shoulder, stretching his arm above his head. Something snaps faintly in his shoulder. "Oh, much better," Arthur sighs in relief. "You are never sleeping on that bed again. I've slept better camping in the forest on patrol." He drops his arm back down to his side and gazes at Merlin with endless sympathy in his gaze. "Are you alright?"

"I don't know," he replies softly. "I think I will be, eventually. You slept in the antechamber?"

Arthur glances downwards, shrugging one shoulder. "I didn't know if you would want to be alone."

"No. No, I don't. Please." He draws back the bedcovers.

Without a word, Arthur gets in beside him and slides in close. One arm settles over his waist, hand spread across his belly, and soft breath stirs the short curls at the nape of his neck, warm and humid. "I should've told Morgana. I was remiss not to," Arthur murmurs. "She came to me after
you left with him, said that she had a dream that she couldn't make sense of, that you were in it. She didn't know what it meant, something about crossways."

"A crossway is a single point many futures can unfold from. She wouldn't have been able to know which would happen until it had already begun," he replies softly. "What did she see?"

"You. Kneeling alone in a ruin of stone and weeping."

The words strike him surely as a blow, and he tightens his hold on Arthur's hand until he feels the small bones shift, knowing he must surely be causing pain. Slowly, he relaxes his grip again, and as he does, Merlin begins to speak, haltingly at first but then growing steadier.

He tells Arthur of how he and Father had tracked Julius Borden to the tomb of Ashkanar. How they'd caught him up as he tried to enter the tower, unaware that it was rigged with hidden traps, and left him there to venture inside on their own. How they'd found the dragon egg, still whole and unharmed and alive as the day it had been sealed in four hundred years ago. How Borden, waking from his drugged sleep, had followed them in and fired his crossbow at Merlin's back, only to have Balinor come between them, taking the bolts in his chest. How Merlin had killed Borden with his magic and, upon Balinor's dying insistence, taken the dragon egg and escaped the tower as it collapsed on itself, becoming an eternal cairn for the thief and the dragonlord alike.

When he finally runs out of words to say, Arthur doesn't say anything, doesn't offer useless words, merely tightens his grip and gives no mention of the tears dampening the pillow. For a stretch of time, they lay in silence, holding and being held, and Merlin feels a little more of his grief ease away. "I have to speak to Leon," he says at last, finding his voice once more.

"Not now," Arthur insists, arm tightening over Merlin's waist. "I have a training session this morning. I'll pair up with him, let him vent his temper first."

"No sharp edges. And have Lancelot there."

There's a moment's silence. "You told Lancelot." It isn't a question, but Merlin nods anyways, and Arthur lets out a soft exhale, breath skimming warmly over his skin. "I suppose I cannot hold you at fault for that. I spoke to Dara." He presses his lips to the nape of Merlin's neck. "Alright. I'll keep Lancelot near. It wouldn't suit for the prince to be killed by his own First Knight, after all."

It's meant in jest, he knows, but Merlin shivers at the thought of them killing each other nonetheless. Arthur's arm tightens around him a little more in silent comfort and apology, realising his stumble. He interlaces their fingers and squeezes tight, eyes drifting closed. He doesn't sleep again—he doesn't think he can, not yet—but he lets himself relax into the solid, steadfast warmth of Arthur, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, matching the even depth of his breathing. Behind his closed lids, he's aware of the room growing lighter, and he hears the soft sound of birdsong outside the window.

Arthur lets out a sigh against his neck. "I have to…"

"I know," Merlin murmurs. "Go on."

With gentle, careful motions, Arthur disentangles himself and climbs out of the bed, dressing on his own.

Once the door of the chamber whispers shut, he lays there for a time, feeling the sheets grow cool beside him. They should've consulted Morgana. He should've thought of it, not Arthur. What might have happened if he had? A crossway had many futures spreading from it, like branching forks in a
road. Was there one in which his father lived, had they done something differently? Might Balinor have been able to one day return to Camelot, wed Mother as he'd wanted to? Hatch the dragon egg that he's hidden amid the standing stones in the Darkling Wood, brought about a new age for the dragonlords?

Merlin turns over onto his back and presses the heels of his hands against his eyes until the world swims in black-white-red-grey streamers behind his lids. It doesn't matter. What is done cannot be undone, and he cannot lay here and wallow in his own misery, wondering what might have been. Madness lies that way.

Pushing back the blankets, he sits up slowly and strips off his clothing, inspecting the myriad of bruises and small scrapes he'd acquired. The tower had begun collapsing from the moment he'd moved the egg from its pedestal, another of Ashkanar's traps, and he'd shielded the delicate egg and the life in it with his own body in fleeing. Nothing's broken that he can tell, nor are any of his wounds severe enough to warrant visiting Gaius—not that he'd want to, at any rate. Knowing that Gaius had lied to him, to Mother, for all these years leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, a spark of anger nestled in his chest. It shan't be extinguished for some time.

Quietly resolving to bear the pain on his own as penance, Merlin climbs out of the bed and goes into the antechamber, putting on fresh attire. The narrow bed is unmade, rumpled where Arthur had no doubt shifted half a hundred times trying to be comfortable; the thought makes him smile. His quarterstaff is propped in the corner, and his knives are all laid out on a cloth atop the table, each one clean and newly sharpened, the leather sheathes oiled and mended. The familiarity of arming himself is soothing in its way, the repetition of something unchanged, and he feels more himself with them once more in place beneath his clothes, quarterstaff settled across his back.

It's well into the morning when he finally brings himself to leave Arthur's chambers. Having been ignored thus far, his stomach is griping noisily, and he makes in the direction of the kitchens, wondering if there'll be any leftover breakfast for him to filch from Cook, or if she'll have already started on lunch. Perhaps he'll bring some to Mother as well. She did as he did in times like this, neglecting oneself in grief. She'd be able to stand telling her what Father had said of her, wanting to wed her, make a life for themselves as they might've had all those years ago. It hurts to think of it now, but it might become comfort later.

To Merlin's surprise, however, as he descends the stairs, he hears Lancelot and Arthur's voices intermingled, coming closer. When he hastens his step, rounding the corner, he sees Lancelot steering Arthur in the direction of the physicians' chamber. He has to guide him, seeing that Arthur has one hand pressed over the left side of his face, blood spattered on the front of his gambeson and sticking darkly in his hair, the right eye squinting for pain.

"I am fine, it's only a scratch," Arthur insists even as blood runs between his fingers, threading bright red down his wrist. "Nothing bleeds like a head wound, that's all. It'll stop in a moment."

"It was an unfair blow, and you know it," Lancelot replies sharply. "And if you call this a scratch, then I am afraid to see what you call a real wound."

"So am I," Merlin adds pointedly as he approaches. Arthur stops firm in his tracks, forcing Lancelot to halt as well, suddenly appearing far more uneasy than he had a moment ago. "Let me see."

"Merlin, it's merely a scratch—"

"Arthur."
Caught between Merlin and Lancelot's combined resolve, Arthur sighs and lifts his hand away from his brow, wincing as his palm sticks with the tackiness of blood. Merlin hisses through his teeth and yanks off his neckerchief, pressing it into Arthur's hand. "That is going to need stitches. Lancelot, get him to Mother, and tell me, where is my brother?"

"He should be in the armoury still," Lancelot replies. "I told him to stay there until he could control his temper."

"Good. I believe I'll assist him in that," Merlin says, taking his quarterstaff in hand and making towards the armoury.

Anger makes for a satisfying alternative to sorrow, he finds.

Gaius washes the gash on his forehead with something that smells acrid and herbal. It stings like seven hells. Then Hunith, with her steadier hands, takes a strand of wax thread and puts three stitches in. Which also stings like seven hells. It's not like to scar, thankfully, but he feels it ache in time with his heartbeat. Arthur fights a wince as he carefully holds his goblet against his temple, the cool metal helping to soothe the ache.

Once he finishes turning down the bedcovers and snuffing most of the candles, leaving only the hearth to light the chamber, Merlin approaches his chair, clearing away the remnants of supper. "What did the King say about this?" He reaches out to run a fingertip feather-light over Arthur's brow, ruffling his hair but not touching the wound.

"Not much. I told him it was merely an accident and largely my fault." Arthur catches Merlin's hand in his, stopping him from retreating with the tray. "And you? I understand you and Leon had a…discussion in the armoury." That's putting it politely. Whilst he'd been getting his stitches, a nervous Sir Bors had come to inform him that there was an unholy shouting match going on in the armoury and that perhaps it was not wise to let the brothers remain in a room full of weaponry. However, they'd both emerged alive, if not wholly unharmed. Leon will have those bruises for a good while.

Merlin snorts, setting down the tray and leaning his hip against the side of the chair, arms folded across his chest. "The word 'discussion' implies that we had equal parts in the conversation," he replies wryly. Which they hadn't. All in all, Leon had probably managed to get in three sentences, and he likely regrets them as well, considering Merlin's reaction to what he'd chosen to say. "He questioned my taste in suitors," he says at last when Arthur continues to gaze at him curiously. "And I told him in no few words that my taste in suitors is absolutely none of his concern."

The prince hums. "I have a creeping suspicion that you are putting it very kindly."

"I am, but it means the same. Brother or not, he has no right to dictate my life to me, nor does he get to decide who I can and cannot take to my bed." He opens his mouth as if to continue, then closes it again, pressing his lips together. His ears redden. Arthur nudges him in silent question. "I, ah…I told him that I could very well hire myself to the Pavilion and make a month of his wages in a night on my back, and he could not stop me if I did."

"Merlin!"

"I was making a point on personal freedom, nothing more! I wouldn't ever actually…" He brandishes one hand in obscure reference to his threatened actions. "Besides, Dara would never let me. I'm far too adept at dissembling. He'd send me to spy for him."
Arthur folds his arms on the table and lowers his head to them, shoulders trembling as he fights down laughter, biting his sleeve to muffle his giggles. When he is in control of himself once more, he sits upright. Merlin is still leaning against the side of his chair, arms folded and pointedly pretending not to notice Arthur's obvious glee. "Well, then, I imagine your point has been sufficiently made." A mental image of what Leon's face must've looked like at those words surfaces, and he has to take a deep breath to restrain himself once more. "I take it I needn't worry about him braining me with a practice sword at our next training session?"

"Not if he values his life," Merlin replies, but then his tone grows more solemn. "It's true, though. I belong to myself and myself alone."

Arthur blinks up at him, surprised at the faint note of warning. "I know. I know that." He's fully aware of the fact he can be an arrogant prat, but he's never been so conceited as to think that Merlin actually belongs to him. The young man might play the servant well enough, but in his heart of hearts, he's never suffered himself to be tamed and never would.

"Good."

Leaning over in the chair, he tilts his head slightly to rest the unhurt side of his face against Merlin's waist and hums happily when the young man rakes gentle fingers through his hair in response. "What's that?" he asks when he notices Merlin's other hand is absently plucking at a cord around his neck, one which hadn't been there before.

"Hm? Oh." Swallowing hard, he tugs it free of his tunic and neckerchief, leaning down so Arthur can see. Dangling from the cord is a signet ring; Father has one just like it, engraved with the Pendragon crest. This one, however, bears a different crest: a triskele, like unto what the Druids mark themselves with, except it is formed of three dragon heads rather than coiled spirals. "The sigil of the dragonlords," Merlin murmurs softly. "It's Father's. Though I suppose it's mine now. I...I can't wear it yet." He tucks the ring back under his tunic, adjusting his neckerchief over it.

Arthur knows it has nothing to do with the risk of being discovered. "You will. So, where exactly do you plan on keeping the rest of your...inheritance?" he asks, not daring to actually say the words aloud.

"Here in your chambers."

He blinks. "Beg pardon?"

"That's what I forgot to tell you this morning. When Cornelius Sigan constructed the castle, he didn't just create what you see. There's more to the citadel," Merlin explains, a small smile playing at his lips. "Hidden passages, secret chambers. I found the sketches he made in his books, the plans for them. Some had notes. The first prince of Camelot, he had a lover that the King forbade him, so he asked Sigan to create a hidden room between their chambers and passageways connecting them so that he could still visit his paramour without the King knowing. It'll still be here. All we have to do is open the door."

"Merlin, I have lived in these chambers my entire life. There is no other door."

"None which you can open. It has to be opened by magic. The first prince?" Merlin grins widely. "His lover was a sorceress."

Arthur laughs aloud at that. Oh, how history does repeat itself. "Very well, then. Go on, show me."

Stepping away from the chair, Merlin approaches the far wall—a perfectly blank stretch of
unbroken stone—and reaches up to run his hands over it, brow furrowed as he traces lines over the 
surface of the wall, slowly moving from one side to the other. Near the left corner, he stops, 
tapping his fingers against the stone. A smile crosses his face. "Here. It's here." Pressing a palm 
flat to the wall, he says in a clear voice, "Onhlídan."

There's a grinding of stone and a small eruption of dust that sends them both stepping backwards, 
coughing and sneezing. When it settles again, Arthur gives a surprised, pleased laugh. A section of 
stone has slid back and into the wall, revealing a narrow passageway. "Well, I'll be damned. How 
did you do that?"

"There's a marker etched in the stone. It isn't visible, but you can feel it. Come on." Merlin takes 
Arthur's hand in his own and holds the other out before him; a small blue flame appears above his 
open palm, illuminating the passageway ahead of them. It is a narrow corridor, tight enough that 
Arthur has to walk behind Merlin rather than beside him, his shoulders almost touching the walls. 
Five-and-twenty paces into the darkness, and suddenly the closeness disappears, and Arthur knows 
that he's standing in an open space, though he can't see anything other than blackness, even with 
the bluebell flame.

"Byrne," the young man murmurs softly. There's a brief smell of burning dust as a dozen ancient 
candles flicker to life, illuminating a small but luxuriously furnished room, fit for a royal's 
paramour.

"Well, would you look at this?" Arthur remarks, turning to survey the chamber. "Is there another 
entrance anywhere?"

"Yes, that door there. It would've led to Sephare's chamber." Merlin points to the small door tucked 
in the opposite corner of the room. "She would've come in through there, then opened the other 
doorway for Aleyne."

Arthur raises his eyebrows in amusement. "Sephare and Aleyne? Precisely how much have you 
been reading about this?"

Merlin grins right back. "They're both mentioned in Sigan's journal a number of times. They were 
all good friends, apparently. Before he went mad, of course."

"Of course." Stepping forward into the chamber, Arthur reaches out and runs a hand over the 
coverlet. Though old, with the chamber sealed from all sides, there's no rot, no damp or evidence of 
moths and vermin, only a coating of dust. He wonders how many times this Aleyne had walked 
through the darkness to be with his lover, if Sephare had a protective and martially-inclined brother 
he had to contend with. "You'll keep it in here, then? Will it be alright?" he asks.

"Yes, of course." Merlin's voice thickens slightly. "Father said it can live for more than a thousand 
years."

"Ah, Merlin." He steps forward and rests his hands on the younger man's shoulders, gently stroking 
the curve of Merlin's neck with his thumb. "I give you my word that you'll see it hatched. I swear 
it."

"I believe you." Merlin hastily swipes a sleeve over his face, brushing away tears. "I hope it'll be a 
female. He hoped it would be."

"Why?"

"If it is, then she'll lay eggs. There'll be a chance for their kind."
Arthur frowns. He might not have ever seen a dragon for himself, nor would he claim to know much of anything about them, but he does know how procreation works and the necessities for it. "Wouldn't there have to be a male as well?"

"I thought the same, but no. A female dragon will lay eggs even without a mate."

"Like a hen?"

It seems a perfectly logical comparison to him. He doesn't understand why Merlin laughs so uproariously.
Seeds to Fiber

Arthur scowls down at the laces of his vest as he tries for the third time to do them up right. When done up the correct way, the laces crisscross over the front of his tunic in a tidy little pattern that actually looks quite striking, depending on what colour he's wearing. He wonders how the hell it is that he's capable of besting each one of his knights in single combat yet he cannot do up the laces of his damned vest the right way. "Merlin, are you certain this is wise?" he asks as he yanks at the knot he's somehow made, scowling.

"It is," Merlin insists. Placing the saddlebags on the table, he walks over to Arthur and untangles the snarled laces, setting them right with the ease of repetition; Arthur scowls a little more at the unfairness of it. "Everyone has noticed that you and Leon have been treading softly around one another. They all know you've quarreled over something, and I'm to understand that a few are even placing bets as to the cause." He chuckles when he sees the prince's eyes narrow, almost able to hear Arthur scheduling extra patrol shifts for the responsible parties. Smile fading, he adds in a softer voice, "I know you've been worrying about Bellegere and your uncle. It'll do you good to come away from it, even for a day."

Their regular letters from Bellegere had come late last month, and she'd sent only a single letter, addressed to both of them. Only a few lines, written in a trembling hand: Lady Thea du Bois had drowned herself in the river near Snowgate, having taken a private stroll without her maidservant and burdening herself with stones to ensure she sank. The prince had tried and failed to convince the King to let him go visit his cousin and uncle, causing a lingering animosity between them.

Arthur raises his brows critically. "And you want us to go to a tavern. What's wrong with the Cockerel or the Rising Sun?"

"Everyone knows who we are in the city." Merlin smirks, flicking the end of one lace playfully. "This way, if you two get more ale in you than sense and come to blows, nobody will throw me in the stocks for knocking your thick heads together. It'll be fun."

"Fun," he repeats under his breath. "Alright. Come on, then."

Out in the courtyard, Leon is waiting beside their horses, murmuring to his palfrey. An ostler is holding Llamrei and the Hellion's reins, eyeing up the spotted menace warily, mindful of his hands near her mouth. More than one careless stablehand has gone to Gaius to have hands bandaged and fingers stitched after dealing with her. Merlin sends the boy off and manages the saddlebags by himself, mounting up; she snorts impatiently, stamping her hooves and dancing eagerly under him, ready to be off. The moment the other two are on their horses, he puts heels to her flanks, hearing the other two shout indignantly after him.

The idea is that they are out on a small hunt, just the three of them, which isn't uncommon. Many people know that the prince and his First Knight have been friends since their squiring, and of course they would bring along the servant half-sibling. The truth of it is, Merlin's managed to convince them to take a jaunt outside of Camelot to try and resettle themselves, just as they had when they visited Silverpine after Ealdor. It's easier to do in a place where all eyes are not upon them at all hours, wondering, the constraints of expectations and propriety always weighing on them. It's precisely why Merlin is able to handle Arthur's bouts of temper where all other servants buckle; he knows Arthur only vents his temper on Merlin because he cannot shout at who he's truly angry at without raising diplomatic hell.

There's a fair number of small villages near the city, near enough for them to ride out to without
taking half the day, yet still far enough for nobody to recognise them on sight. In their current attire, hardy yet not luxurious, they look no different than any other commoner in search of a drink. When they enter the modest tavern, nobody gives them a second glance, save for an appreciative barmaid.

Merlin gestures to an empty table. "I'll fetch us a round. You two stay and play nicely," he orders, brandishing a finger between the pair. Arthur's mouth twitches, and Leon's eyes roll skyward. When he returns to the table, the two are quietly trying to ignore one another without making it obvious they're doing so. Merlin huffs in exasperation. Maiden have mercy. Maybe he should knock their skulls together; they might actually see sense then.

"You're not drinking, Arthur?" Merlin asks, sliding one full mug over to him.

The prince shrugs, tracing a finger along the handle of his mug. "You've spoiled me, I'm afraid. Wine and perry brandy. Or perhaps applejack," he adds with a smile. "Though I suppose it's a good thing that they don't serve that here. I doubt I'd end up in someplace as friendly as Lady Evaine's garden, nor would I be woken by someone as kind as Sir Lionel."

Leon snorts into his mug.

"You've no place to laugh," Arthur reminds, aiming a half-hearted kick at him under the table. "I seem to recall you being dragged out to the fountain to be dunked right alongside me."

"Yes, I know. Still, I think it'd be worth it to see you sing a few verses for your people. A royal show they'd never forget."

"I did not sing," Arthur protests.

Merlin grins, a bloom of warmth unfurling in the pit of his belly. "Oh, yes, you did. Not very well, I might add, but there's a certain inebriated charm to it. Of course, I've never heard it sober, so that might just be the applejack speaking. I'd certainly like to hear it again."

Arthur gapes at the brothers with utmost betrayal, shaking his head in disbelief. "Traitors," he mutters, then pauses a moment, frowning. "What did I even—?"

The door of the tavern slams open. The other patrons around them suddenly go quiet, and Merlin sees Leon's face change, shoulders tensing. He turns in his seat to look at the door.

The man in the doorway is built like a bull, all thick muscle and sinew, in boiled leather with a wicked knife thrust through the belt at his waist. "You're overdue for payment," he says, snatching the barmaid by the back of her kirtle, catching some of her hair in his fist as well; Arthur shifts beside him, tension seeping into his frame.

The young woman tries not to whimper, her head forced back. "I-I don't have it. We've not had patrons as we used to." Her voice is strung high and brittle with fear.

"I'll not ask again!" He gives her a rough shake, making her yelp in pain.

"Oh, hell," Merlin whispers under his breath. He slides his mug away mournfully and slides a knife into his palm, wishing he hadn't left his quarterstaff lashed to the Hellion's saddle outside. Exchanging a glance with Leon and Arthur, they both nod in silent agreement. He turns more fully in his seat, lining up the throw, and hurls the knife across the tavern. The blade hisses through the air between two patrons and slams into the wall scarce an inch away from the brigand's nose.

Near every head in the tavern swivels to face them as Arthur stands up. "Take your hands off her
"And if I don't?" He twists his fist a little harder around the young woman's hair, making her whimper.

Leon rises to his feet as well. "I know you aren't the most intelligent of men, but I presume you can count high enough to recognise that you are outnumbered," he replies; Merlin stands, sliding another knife out into his palm, hidden against his leg.

The man releases the girl's hair, puts two fingers in his mouth, and whistles piercingly loud. There's a stir of movement outside, and then no less than a dozen more men enter the tavern, the other patrons having taken their leave when they could.

"You had to say something, didn't you?" Merlin grumbles.

A surprisingly cheerful voice issues from the vicinity of his left. "Well, this certainly is an interesting situation, isn't it?" says another patron, rising to his feet as a smile spreads across his face.

"You should leave," Merlin suggests.

"Mm, probably so." He drains the rest of his mug, smacks his lips, then cocks back and hurls the empty tankard with unerring accuracy, smashing into the nearest brigand's face.

It's like throwing a lit taper into a dish of lamp oil. The tavern erupts into chaos, cursing and shouting, raining blows left and right. Arthur and Leon end up back-to-back, and Merlin finds himself beside the other man, who's taken up a chair and is smashing aside the brutes as though he's swatting flies. "What do they call you, then?" he asks between blows, as though they are a pair of farmhands splitting wood.

"Merlin."

"Gwaine. Duck!" he exclaims; Merlin immediately ducks, and Gwaine snatches a full jug off the bar, smashing it over the head of another attacker, spraying them both in wine. "Ah, what a waste, eh?"

"Arthur!" Leon's shout draws them both. The mercenaries have separated the two, and the leader has a knife in hand, advancing on Arthur. Before Merlin can even begin to reach for his magic, Gwaine makes a leap up onto the table and throws himself at the leader, sending them both crashing over onto the floor in a tangle of thrashing and swearing. Taking up the chair that Gwaine had abandoned, Merlin lays out the last two mercenaries, joining Leon and Arthur as they haul the two men apart.

The leader of the mercenaries lying senseless, a massive bruise on his brow, and Gwaine lurches to his feet, grinning. "And that's how one does it," he declares, then falls backwards, his head striking a bench with a loud thump. However, the greater concern is the knife that is embedded in his upper thigh.

The next several minutes is a flurry of activity. He hears Arthur and Leon apologising to the owner of the tavern and promising to reimburse her for what they'd broken and the lost wares, the other patrons helping to drag the unconscious mercenaries outside. Merlin doesn't give it much attention, kneeling down beside the unconscious form of Gwaine. Though it's not advisable, he draws out the knife and quickly presses his neckerchief over the wound, using his belt to hold it in place.

"How is he?" Arthur asks, touching his shoulder.
"Not well."

"Well, we'll take him back to Camelot with us, have him looked after."

Once their debt is settled, Arthur and Leon manhandle Gwaine up onto the saddle of his horse and lash him in place, and Merlin leads the gelding alongside the Hellion, the reins tied to her saddle to keep them close. As they're riding away from the tavern, Leon remarks in a long-suffering voice, "You truly just can't restrain yourself, can you, Arthur?" There's a lilt of humour in his voice despite his exasperated expression, and the corner of his mouth twitches.

Arthur laughs, that deep, full-throated laugh few people ever hear. "Bold words coming from an aider and abettor of magic," he replies.

"Prat."

"Hey!"

Amusing as their bickering is to hear once again, Gwaine, still unconscious, is looking frightfully pale. "Hold," Merlin calls, looking at their new companion. He draws reins on the Hellion and dismounts, going to examine the man. Arthur and Leon turn back to return to his side. "We need to stop a moment. He's losing a lot of blood." The bandage he's bound around the man's thigh is already sodden. "If he keeps bleeding like this, he shan't make it back to Camelot."

Arthur takes a moment to survey their surroundings. The road's empty as far as can be seen in both directions, out of sight of the tavern and any other buildings, and there's no sound to suggest there's anyone in the surrounding forest either. "Go on, then."

With quick, deft fingers, Merlin undoes the bandage. The dagger had gone deep, Arthur can see from here, and there is an alarming amount of blood pulsing out. The blade must've nicked something important. Merlin cups his hand over the wound, blood running through his fingers. "Þurhæle dolgbenn," he murmurs; his eyes spark gold beneath his lashes. When he withdraws his hand, the blood flow's near stopped, and the injury is smaller than it had been, the edges healing up. "Leon, look in my kit, needle and thread. Arthur, help me get him down."

Obediently, he moves to start plucking at the knots lashing the man to his saddle. "You keep a needle and thread with you?" Arthur queries, raising his brows as Leon rummages through the Hellion's saddlebag.

The corner of Merlin's mouth lifts. "Ever since the boar."

The knowledge makes him smile, thinking about Merlin going about with a lady's embroidery kit tucked into his saddlebags. "Well, we might as well take a reprieve here, rest the horses. No point in putting in stitches just to tear them riding."

They move off the road proper and to a small clearing only a few paces away. From the well-trampled ground and uniform size of the clearing, it's likely that a great many travelers have taken respite there. Merlin stacks the saddlebags against the roots of a tree, covering it with a spare saddle blanket, and they move Gwaine to lay against them. Leon brings the horses over to a deadfall and loops the reins around the exposed roots, and Arthur sets up a small fire, knowing that Merlin will likely ask for hot water to clean the wound with.

With the horses secured, Leon takes a seat with his back to the deadfall, leaning his back against the moss-carpeted trunk. "Will he live, then?"

Bent over his task, Merlin only grunts. He likely hadn't even heard the question.
Amused, Arthur sits down on a reasonably clear bit of ground and takes out a slim book from his own kit, rifling through the pages until he found where he’d left off; he has faith in Merlin's ability to treat this…Gwaine. He's curious as to what kind of man would simply leap into a brawl uninvited and make great sport of it the entire time as well. When the man wakes, perhaps he'll have the chance to find out.

Merlin hums appreciatively as he uses a measure of heated water to rinse the blood from his fingers and the needle, tucking it back into the small kit beside him. "What are you reading?" He drops down to sit beside Arthur in his curious gangly yet graceful way, rewinding the extra silk thread onto a small spool.

"Hm? Oh, this." Arthur closes the book and rubs his thumb over the cover; there's a spot where the leather's worn smooth and shiny from the repetitive motion, though he hadn't made it himself. "I found it in the other chamber. It's Aleyne's journal. He wrote poetry about Sephare."

The young man grins. "Did he? Let me see," he says, reaching for the journal.

Arthur snatches it back, holding it out of reach. "Oh, I don't think so. You aren't allowed to read this," he says, grinning. "Royal privileges, you see. Strictly one prince to another."

"Oh, you arse. Fine."

"Poetry, then? Is it at all decent?" he asks, and Arthur nods. A mischievous glint comes into his eye, and he remarks in an exaggeratedly casual voice, "Hm. Lucky Sephare, then. Shame I'm not quite as fortunate."

Arthur scoffs in disbelief, staring at him. "I'm being outdone by a dead man. Unbelievable."

"Well, it isn't that difficult."

"Oh!" Closing the journal, he leans over and swats the younger man's hip with it. "Go, go and find something to do. See to the horses, you wretched fool," he scolds, laughing as Merlin scrambles up and out of reach before Arthur can take another swat at him. Resettling himself, he belatedly recalls the third member of their party and looks across the fire to Leon.

His First Knight is leant back against the deadfall, watching them with a curious expression on his face—exasperation, awkwardness, but also something like amusement as well. When he notices Arthur's gaze, Leon gives a little half-smile. "I begin to understand," he says.

Before Arthur can say anything, there's a groan from their intrepid rescuer, his face screwed up in discomfort as he stirs. One eye squints open, looking blearily around their small camp. His gaze ends up on the horses, where Merlin stands. A small chuckle escapes him. "I'm seeing spots."

"She's called the Hellion, and she's killed a man," Merlin warns good-humoredly, patting his mare's neck.

Gwaine laughs at that. "Sounds like a few former lovers I can name." He groans as he sits up. One hand goes to the back of his head, wincing when he touches the still-tender lump. "Who hit me?"

"A bench. Here, look at me." Merlin moves to sit beside him, grasping his chin and tilting his head to see his eyes, watching his pupils dilate.

"You have my thanks," Arthur says as Merlin continues his examination, working with the same tidy professionalism of a physician. "You saved my life in there."

"Ah, all in a day. Ow!" He jerks his head away, giving Merlin injured eyes. "I've been led to believe that healers are meant to make one feel better, not cause them more pain," he points out,
though there's more flirting in his voice than discomfort. The playfully sad-eyed, pouting expression has probably melted the hearts of many a maiden; to see it turned on Merlin makes something in Arthur's stomach tighten unhappily.

Unaffected, Merlin smirks and holds up something small between his fingertips. "Sliver." He flicks it into the fire and shakes his head. "You make as much of a fuss as Arthur. I swear, I'll never understand it. You lot will hack yourselves to bits and call it entertainment and great sport, only try and stitch you back together again, and you moan without end."

"I do not."

"No, we don't."

"Exaggeration."

All three protestations are said nearly in unison. Arthur, Leon, and Gwaine exchange glances; Merlin rolls his eyes skyward. "Well, you'll live at any rate."

Gwaine sits up the rest of the way and plucks curiously at the bandage on his thigh, only to be swatted away. "You're Merlin. Which of you's Arthur, again?" he asks, looking between the other two men.

"I am. And this is Leon, Merlin's brother. We're on our way back to Camelot. You're welcome to join us," Arthur invites. Having finished his examination, Merlin moves to sit at his side once more. Not so close as to be inappropriate, of course, but near enough their elbows knock together if they both shift at the same time. The tightening in his belly loosens, tangles smoothing out into calm.

"Camelot, eh?" Gwaine hums thoughtfully, cocking his head like a curious bird. "Can any of you point the way to decent tavern there? Preferably one where patrons do not end up stabbed before last round?"

Leon and Arthur sigh in unison; Merlin grins.

"You've only been here two days. You needn't leave so soon, you know." Merlin leans one shoulder against the wall, arms folded as he watches Gwaine gather up his belongings, shoving them haphazardly into a well-worn knapsack on the bed. Sitting neatly at his feet, Allegra observes them with fascination, her plumed tail sweeping the floor in steady rhythm, red tongue lolling in a grin. "You saved Arthur's life, he shan't begrudge you staying here."

"If I'd known he was a nobleman, I wouldn't have bothered," Gwaine grumbles darkly.

"What grudge do you hold against nobles?" he asks. He's not insulted or indignant on Leon and Arthur's behalf. They can both do with a little irreverence from time to time, to remind them they're still only men. But he is curious. Most don't carry that kind of dislike with them unless it stems from a personal grievance. Not merely that, but the hypocrisy of it is intriguing to him. "You're one yourself, aren't you?" When Gwaine swivels around to fix him with a sharp glare, he holds up his hands innocently. "I've not told anyone, it's just your accent, such as it is. You speak too well to be lowborn. Not to mention you can tell the difference between wines. Most don't know anything beyond the different colours it comes in."

Gwaine sighs as he toys with his sword belt, rubbing his thumb against the shiny mark where the hilt rubbed against the leather. "My father was a knight in Caerleon's army. He died in battle,
leaving my mother penniless. And when she went to the King for help, he turned her away." His voice is low, old pain braided with bitterness underlying his words.

"Did you know him?" Merlin prompts gently.

"No, I was too young. All I have are some stories my mother told me."

He taps his fingers against his other arm, contemplating a moment, then says, "It's the same with me and my father. I met him only briefly before he died. He...he'd been banished from Camelot."

"What had he done?"

*Nothing but exist as nature designed him,* Merlin thinks. Deep down in him, far from the light of day, a fever-hot, thorny tangle of resentment and rage tries to unfurl, but he shoves it back down. "Nothing criminal. He served the King."

Gwaine scoffs, nodding as though Merlin's proven his point. "And the King turned on him, eh? Doesn't surprise me in the least."

"Arthur isn't like that."

The other man shrugs one shoulder. "Maybe, but that doesn't make him worth dying for." He stands up and puts on his belt, reaching for his sword. He pauses when he lifts the blade, a small smile playing at his lips when he notices that it's been sharpened and polished, the scratches along the blade buffed out. "I understand you're sweet on him for some inexplicable reason, but nobility, royalty, they're all the same. They have everything in the world yet can't spare the slightest bit for those they're meant to protect."

"Is that what you think? Come here a moment." Merlin moves to the window and crooks a finger; confused, Gwaine comes to his side. He points out the window. From here, they have a view of the training field, knights sparring with one another, guardsmen running drills, squires practicing forms. Arthur is paired up with Lancelot. Their fighting styles complement well, made to work with and not against each other. It makes for an interesting bout. "Do you see that man Arthur is sparring with?"

"Another pet nobleman of his?" Gwaine asks.

"His name is Lancelot. He's a goatherd from the Northern Plains." At the disbelieving look Gwaine casts him, Merlin smiles. "No, I'm not jesting. He's a knight due to some...artistic creativeness on my part," he remarks, winking. "Arthur knows it. He believes as you do, that nobility is defined by action and deed, not rank and title. The King's opinion differs, hence the ruse."

Gwaine's eyebrows go up, an amused smirk crossing his face. "Well, I may have underestimated you, then, my sly friend," he says, clapping him on the shoulder. At Merlin's pointed look, he sighs and relents, "Yes, perhaps your pretty golden princess, too. Perhaps. Ah, either way, I'd best be taking my leave. I've never stayed in one place all that long." He grins as he resumes packing his belongings. "I've been told I wear out my welcome very quickly."

"Not with me, you haven't," Merlin counters.

"Oh? Even after the trouble I caused you?"

He shrugs, smiling. The stunt they'd pulled at the Rising Sun is a memory he'll cherish for years to come; his younger self would've been proud. "You livened the place up. Ask my brother, I enjoy being contrary simply for the sake of it and take unbecoming pleasure in dangerous situations."
Gwaine lets out a hearty guffaw at that. "Of that, clever bird, I have no doubt. Still. I'll be on my way."

Merlin puts a hand against his arm, halting him before he can sling the knapsack over one shoulder. "Just wait. It's already near evening. You shan't make the borders before nightfall, and the trails can be perilous in the dark. Wait the night and take your leave in the morning." He smiles, squeezing Gwaine's arm encouragingly. "I'll take you to the Cockerel. The proprietor's a friend of mine, and I have no doubt that Dara would find you absolutely delightful." In fact, the two squaring off—Gwaine's shameless flirting and Dara's unruffled poise—is very likely to be the greatest entertainment to be found in the city tonight.

Gwaine pauses a moment, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Dara, eh?" He sets down the knapsack. "Well…I'd hate to be rude to your friends."

Arthur doesn't know how it is that whenever things are going reasonably well for him, he always manages to somehow make an utter mess of it. He tries to play back their conversation in his head, wondering where it was he'd gone so wrong; across the chamber, Merlin snatches clothes out of the wardrobe, hurling them in Arthur's general direction without bothering to turn and look. "I didn't intend to upset you," he says at last. He truly hadn't. He had just tried to explain that if Merlin wished to run off for half a day and the entire night again, then he could at least tell Arthur beforehand. Chewing the inside of his mouth, he ventures, "Is it because of what I said about Gwaine?" Yes, perhaps he'd been…a little unkind in speaking of the man, but something about him makes Arthur's very teeth itch with irritation, especially considering Merlin has spent the better part of the past three days in his company.

Merlin pivots sharply on heel to face him. "I can have friends if I wish, Arthur, and I do not have to ask your permission to do so," he snaps.

Ah, yes, that's definitely it. "I never said that you couldn't, I just meant—"

"It doesn't matter anyways. Gwaine is leaving Camelot today. He's told me that he doesn't stay in any one place very long," Merlin points out as he walks over and adjusts the laces of Arthur's vest, jerking at the ties a little sharper than is wholly necessary.

When he starts to turn away again, Arthur catches him by the elbow and gently draws him back. "Merlin," he says. When the young man doesn't look at him right away, he gives him a small, playful jostle, tilting his head to the side to catch Merlin's gaze. "Morgana has always told me I can be unfairly possessive of things, and I'm afraid she's always known me well, betimes even better than I know myself." When Merlin doesn't withdraw from him immediately, Arthur lowers his arm to slide around his waist, resting a hand in the small of his back. "I'd never think to do so, besides the fact I don't even think such a thing is possible. Horses, dogs, unicorns, dragons, why should it be any different with urchins and drifters? It's only that Gwaine…. He's just…"

"Gwaine is that way with everyone," Merlin informs him, the corners of his mouth curling up the slightest bit. He can guess precisely what it is about the other man that pricks at Arthur's jealousy. "Me, Gwen, Aislinn, Percival, Dara, even Lancelot. It's his way to be flirtatious, just like it is your way to be a patronising, supercilious, arrogant—"

"Alright, alright," Arthur cuts him off even as the young man laughs. "So. Am I forgiven then?"

Merlin eyes him up critically, lips pressed together on a smile. "I'll think on it."
"Thank you, I suppose. Jacket? Please?"

Sliding out of his arms, Merlin turns and picks up the jacket hanging over the back of the chair, holding it up for Arthur to put on. This time, when he adjusts the lay of it and fixes the fastenings, his touch is gentle and lingering, smoothing out the creases.

"Now, I have a meeting to attend with delegates from Nemeth and Essetir after breakfast. The damned Feorrans still," Arthur says as Merlin straightens his jacket collar, affixing the sunstone pin. He arches one eyebrow at his manservant, a wryly apologetic smile playing at his lips. "So if you wish to ride out with your friend and see him off to the border, this would be the time."

Merlin smiles. "Now you're forgiven."

Once Arthur departs for the discussions with the other delegates, no doubt involving several long and tedious hours' worth of circular arguments, Merlin does indeed have the Hellion saddled and rides out of the city with Gwaine. "Where do you think you'll go?" he asks.

"Dunno. Depends on which way the wind's blowing, I suppose. I was thinking Mercia. Perhaps Essetir."

He shakes his head. "Dangerous places."

"Perhaps. But I'll get more ale for my money," Gwaine replies with a smirk, and Merlin gives him a flat look in return. "I'm only jesting. But what do you say?" He fishes a coin from the purse at his belt and holds it up, grinning broadly. "Mercia or Essetir. I'll let you call it."

Merlin shakes his head again, this time in amusement, then eyes up Gwaine with a small smile. "You can't imagine living this way forever. You could stay with us, you know. If you told Arthur you're a nobleman, you'd certainly become a knight. You two, you fought well together. Camelot could always use good men in her ranks."

Gwaine huffs a laugh. "No doubt she could. And the offer is a tempting one. But I could never serve under a man like Uther. Like as not, I'd shove him off the battlements first time he walked the walltops."

Oh, if only he knew how tempting that thought really was. It's one Merlin has admittedly considered once or twice himself. It'd only take one unfortunate stumble on a balcony or near a flight of steep stone stairs…. Merlin shakes his head and leans over in the saddle, extending a hand to him. "Fair enough, I suppose. Well, then, I hope we'll see each other again soon, my friend."

Gwaine clasps his arm firmly, grinning. "I'm certain we will. Until then." He winds the reins around his hands and puts heels to his horse, riding forward.

Merlin watches him a moment, but once the man's a few paces away, he whistles sharply. The Hellion shifts under him, snorting, and Gwaine draws rein, turning to look at him curiously. "Heads for Essetir," he calls.

Grinning broadly, Gwaine takes out the coin once more, flipping it high in a flash of silver. He catches it neatly and opens his hand. "Essetir it is!"

He waits and watches as Gwaine's retreating figure is swallowed by the forest before patting the Hellion's shoulder, turning her back towards Camelot. As he draws closer to the familiar white stone walls, a sound reaches his ears, faint and growing loud the nearer he comes.

The warning bells are ringing.
"I just…I don't understand it. Morgana's always been light on her feet. I couldn't trip her up even when I tried to," Arthur murmurs, his voice thick with emotion. "She's walked that staircase countless times, since she was a girl. She used to dance on them."

Standing beside the prince's chair, Merlin remains silent. He recalls what he'd thought not even hours before, about all it'd take to end Uther's reign would be one unlucky stumble near a flight of stairs, and guilt knots up hot and sickly in his chest, irrational though it is.

On the patient cot in the physicians' chamber, Morgana looks somehow smaller, frailer, than she had before, like one of those expensive porcelain figures that'll shatter if the wind blows against her too strongly. The awful gash in her head has already been sewn up, hidden beneath the blue-black spill of her hair, but the true damage lay below, her skull cracked and broken inwards where she'd fallen. She breathes in shallow gasps, so small they're nigh impossible to see, and twice Merlin catches himself holding his own breath to hear hers, just to know she lives still.

"Can you heal her?" Arthur asks, tilting his head back to peer up at Merlin. He sounds so very lost, more a child than a prince.

"I'll try everything I can." He reaches up and touches the firm shape outline in his jacket, small book of healing spells he has tucked there. "Before I do, Arthur, I have to tell you…I don't believe she fell."

Arthur's gaze sharpens in an instant, and he seizes Merlin's wrist in an iron-strong grip. "What?"

"I don't believe she fell," he repeats firmly. "Mother told me that when she examined Morgana for any other injuries, she found none. Nothing, Arthur. Not a scrape or a bruise. If a person falls down the stairs, they are going to be injured." He lowers his voice to a murmur despite the fact they are the only ones in the chamber. "I've fallen on those stairs before, in winter, when they ice over. Magic protects the self. If she'd fallen, her magic would've arrested her descent, protected her."

"You believe someone…attacked her. Struck her over the head and left her at the stairs to make it seem as though she'd fallen," Arthur says, eyes widening with understanding. "Why would anyone do that to her?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well, think on it later. Heal her first, and perhaps she'll tell us who's responsible when she wakes. This spell you have, show it to me."

Taking the book from his jacket, Merlin opens to the page he'd marked with a length of ribbon, tapping a finger against the neat inscription. "Here. Healing the bones will be the most dangerous part, since I have to be careful of her brain, but this will stop her from bleeding inside, at least until I can find a way to heal her safely or Gaius instructs me how," he explains, knowing that Arthur can't read the Old Tongue as he can.

"It shan't harm her?"

"No, of course not. The worst thing that can happen is that it doesn't work and her condition remains the same."

It isn't like Arthur to doubt him, but when Merlin glances down, he can see the prince's frame is taut as a crossbow string, a muscle working in his jaw. His lashes are spiky and wet from the tears he's been stubbornly swiping away before they can fall. "We grew up together. All we've gone
through together, Merlin, all we've lost and endured….” He shakes his head once, and a strangled sound emerges from his throat, somewhere between a sob and a whimper. "I'd give up my place on the throne to have her see another sunrise."

"I know. I know, love." He clasps his hand over Arthur's tightly-clenched fist, brushing one thumb over his white knuckles. Taking a deep breath, he turns back to Morgana, reaching out and placing a hand against her brow. "Ic—"

Lurching to his feet in the blink of an eye, Arthur claps a hand over his mouth, head turned towards the door. Abruptly, he snatches Merlin by the arm and hauls him away from Morgana's bed, up the few stairs into the small chamber Mother sleeps in, hastily shutting the door between them and the main chamber. Turning towards Merlin, he presses a finger to his lips in a gesture for silence, then sinks down to his knees, leaning forward to peer through the cracks in the door. Baffled, Merlin does the same.

Scarce muffled by the door, Merlin hears the door of the main chamber open and shut, and then the King's voice, low and hoarse with grief, "So beautiful."

Fear sinks frigid claws into his spine, and he clutches the book tightly against his chest, heart rabbiting painfully fast at how close he'd been to being caught out in the middle of an enchantment. Arthur nods understanding and repeats his signal, touching his lips with one finger, making a gesture with one hand—they'll stay here, wait him out.

Nodding, Merlin refocuses on the conversation in the main chamber, hearing Gaius's weary voice, "Sire, I wish there was something I could do."

"No, you don't understand," Uther insists, a note of sharpness creeping into his tone, the tone of a king expecting to be obeyed by his subjects. "I cannot lose her. No matter what happens, she cannot die."

"I…I will do everything I can, sire." Gaius sounds so tired, defeated.

"No, Gaius. Whatever it takes. Whatever, I don't care. You must save her."

Merlin tilts his head to the side, peering through the narrow gap between the wood planks. The King is sitting at Morgana's bedside, gently holding one of her hands between both of his own. He doesn't look terribly intimidating or fearsome now, not at all the Bloody Tyrant of Camelot, merely a man exhausted and heartsick.

"If I knew a way—"

"You're not understanding me, Gaius. Cure her. I don't care what remedy you use. In all these books there must be something…" There's a stretch of silence, heavy as an anvil. When Uther speaks next, his voice is low, furtive. "Something in the Old Religion?"

Merlin's gaze snaps sidewards to Arthur, finding the prince staring back at him with similarly wide eyes, lips parted in shock. He hadn't misheard that, then. Almost as one, they turn their gaze back towards the door, straining their ears to listen on.

"Are you suggesting…?" Gaius sounds equally as stunned as his unknown audience, scarcely whispering for shock.

"Sorcery, yes."

"I-I know she's dear to you, sire, but surely you're not going to risk everything for Morgana?"
"Gaius, you don't understand," Uther repeats again, sounding strained, then heaves a sigh. There's a creak of wood, footsteps moving from one side of the chamber to the other and back again. Pacing. "There's something you should know," he says at last, hesitancy lading each word. "Something I've told no one. Morgana…" The footsteps halt. Another deep sigh. "Morgana…she is my daughter."

The entire world seems to cease for a moment, and Merlin can feel the room tilt around him. Beside him, Arthur's gone wholly still, only the pulse in the side of his neck giving away the fact he still lived. One of his hands grasps for Merlin's blindly, taking hold and squeezing so hard he thinks the bones might well crack.

In the main chamber, the King goes on, "It was while Gorlois was away. He was on campaign against Mercia in the Northern Plains. Her mother, Vivienne, grew lonely, and Ygraine was… distant from me after…" His voice trails off softly.

At the mention of his mother, Arthur twitches, his jaw tightening, fury in his eyes. Merlin reaches over to press his free hand over the prince's mouth, shaking his head quickly, keeping tight hold of his hand to prevent him from rising.

"I've said enough. The people must never know who Morgana really is, for Arthur's sake."

*For Arthur's sake.* Oh, the bitter irony of those three words.

"I assure you, sire, your secret is safe with me," Gaius murmurs, still sounding rattled.

There's another shuffling of footsteps, the door opening and closing, and then silence. Only then does Merlin lower his hand from Arthur's mouth, though the prince's ferocious grip doesn't lessen. Until abruptly it does, Arthur snatching his hand away and pressing both hands over his face, raking back through his hair.

"Arthur…"

"Don't!" he half-shouts, voice cracking. Arthur shudders all over, pressing a fist against his mouth and biting one knuckle. "Leave me," he whispers; Merlin opens his mouth, reaching for him, but the prince jerks away from him sharply. "I said, leave me. Go…away. Do whatever you wish, just leave me be. Please, Merlin. Just go."

The words pluck a chord of memory, something he'd said once before when his world was shaken so vigorously. "I'm here, Arthur," he murmurs, withdrawing his hand. "I'm here."

Arthur nods quickly, eyes closed.

Picking up the book, Merlin hides it within his jacket and leaves the small room. Mother's returned and is sitting at Morgana's bedside once more, and she startles when he comes down the steps.

"Merlin, what—?"

"Not now, Mother, please. I…I can't," he murmurs as he walks past her.

The hallways all seem too narrow, too close, stiflingly hot despite the pleasant weather. It's been a great many years since Merlin's felt himself grow ill at being within manmade walls, yet he recognises the sensation, tightening in his chest and slowly strangling the breath from him, like being simultaneously drowned and smothered. Breaking into a run, he makes his way out into the main square, gasping in lungfuls of open air. He might still be surrounded by walls made by man's hand, but at least he can see the sky again, feel breeze against his skin.
As he takes deep breaths, bent over with hands on his knees in an attempt to steady himself, there's a great clattering of hooves, people exclaiming loudly. Merlin raises his head at the sound, catching sight of a familiar figure riding hell-for-leather into the square. "Gwaine? What in seven hells are you doing here?"

Gwaine draws rein sharply before Merlin, his horse lathering and near-spent. Not that the man looks any better, his face drawn and haggard, clothes clearly slept in. "Merlin, where's Arthur?" he demands, leaping down from the saddle and striding over. His hands grasp both Merlin's arms hard enough to bruise, fingertips digging painfully into his flesh.

"He's—" With his sister. Someone cracked her skull with a brick. "—he's with a friend of ours. She's injured. Gwaine, what—?"

"There's no time. Bring me to the damned King if you must, but tell them they have to make ready. There's an army riding for Camelot."
In the course of only a few hours, the entire council has relocated to Father's war room, a large map of Camelot covering most of the table surface, with small carved pieces of wood set up like chess pieces on a very real board. "How many men?" Father demands.

"Twenty thousand, easy," Gwaine replies, "marching along this way." One finger traces through the Ridge of Ascutir and through the forest, directly towards Camelot.

"And you are certain it is Cenred?"

"Aye. That's the standard they're marching under."

Father scowls down at the map, absently dismissing Gwaine with a wave of the hand. Arthur casts him a pointed glance as he goes, silently shaping Merlin's name with his lips; Gwaine nods and lets himself be escorted from the chamber.

"The border patrol hasn't returned?" Father asks.

Leon shakes his head. "No, sire, and I fear they shan't."

As they begin to discuss strategies and formations, Leon listing off the number of soldiers they have already in the city, councilmen adding which of them have forces close enough to be in the city within two days, Arthur stares at the map, frowning. He knows already that Father shan't attempt a treaty, refusing to give ground in his own kingdom, but his stomach grows heavier the longer he gazes at the path between the oncoming army and the city. "Sire," he says at last, interrupting the conversation. All eyes turn to him. "Two days isn't enough time to muster the full army and move out to meet Cenred in open field, especially if he is moving them at a forced march. If we try, like as not we'll be caught out either in the forest here or in the lowland below the ridge here," he says, drawing a fingertip along the map. "We're outmanned, we cannot risk being outmaneuvered as well."

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Father demands of him, his gaze firm and unyielding as iron.

Arthur swallows hard and forces down the quiver of nervousness in the pit of his belly. A part of him feels like a boy of ten winters all over again, sitting at his first council meeting and terrified to speak out of turn. "Ready the city for siege." His voice comes out steady, full of conviction he doesn't quite feel. "The castle is our strongest weapon. No army has ever taken Camelot."

Father's eyes narrow slightly. "The outlying villages?"

"Give them refuge within city walls. Homes can be rebuilt and crops replanted, but a life cannot be restored once taken. We take in as many as we can, wait to close the gates until the last moment. Archers on every walltop, formations at every gate," Arthur goes on, ideas settling in place. "We build a barricade between the city proper and the lower town in case of retreat. We hold the city and drive them back from here."

There's a long stretch of silence, broken only by the soft sound of Father's fingers drumming against the tabletop, staring at the map. Arthur silently implores any gods listening that Father will heed him. If he shall only ever hear my words once, let it be now. Finally, Father takes a deep breath, his shoulders straightening.

"Prepare the city for siege."
Released from the war room, Arthur immediately falls in step with Leon, issuing direction. Haste is of the utmost importance. If they're to have any chance of holding the city, they will have to work quickly. "Have torches and pitch at the ready at every gatehouse. If they breach, we ignite their ranks. Go," he orders; nodding, Leon strides off. Blue flashes in the corner of his vision. "Merlin!"

Almost immediately, the young man is at his side, out of breath as though he's sprinted up every flight of stairs and down again. "Yes, sire?" he gasps.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Catching his breath, Merlin sketches a vague gesture in the air with one hand, though what it is he means to communicate, Arthur hasn't the slightest idea. "Mother and Gaius, infirmary," he says at last, straightening up. "I went to the council hall, but you weren't there, so I went to assist them."

"Father had us shift to the war room," he explains, understanding why he's not seen hide or hair of the young man. "Come along, then, with me." He needs to go down to the training ground, address the squires. He doesn't need any of them getting underfoot and getting themselves killed for some misguided idea of glory. Perhaps he'll set them to 'guard' the infirmary.

Merlin's gaze is steady and solemn, glancing at him as they continue down the corridor. "It's true, then? A siege?" he asks, and Arthur nods, his stomach tightening uneasily. He blows out a breath, shaking his head. "Then it was all a ruse, then? The delegate Cenred sent to settle the issue of the Feorrans, the banner of peace he offered coming here?"

"Quite the ruse," Arthur muses darkly. As soon as Gwaine had given them warning, Father had ordered the delegate from Essetir seized and questioned. Except when they entered the man's chamber, they had found him dead at his table with a goblet of wine and an empty vial before him, which Gaius identified as hemlock. "Gods' mercy, if we had another two days..." he says softly, then stops dead in his tracks. Arthur seizes hold of Merlin's arm, yanking him to a stop as well. "Would a High Priestess know about Morgana?" he demands; when Merlin frowns, confused, he jerks the young man's arm roughly, shaking him. "You said you can recognise others like you. Would a priestess be able to do the same?"

"I—yes, of course, but—" His eyes widen in understanding. "Morgause. You believe Morgause...?"

"A terrific coincidence, isn't it? The one person who might have foreseen Cenred's assault on Camelot is nearly killed the day before his army crosses our borders, and yet none know of her gifts except for those who would never betray her. Unless there's someone who could know, if they could sense it." Even if Cenred is a vicious man, Arthur has to admire the man's tactics, sending a delegate to perpetuate the idea of peace between their kingdoms whilst planning to murder the king's ward. He's not just spun a ruse, he's planned a damned coup.

Merlin's eyes widen, and he swears a lengthy colourful streak, using several words even Arthur didn't know. "Of course. That's why they cracked her skull. They had to wound her in a way that would stop her visions." He pales, lowering his voice to a intense murmur, "Arthur, if Cenred is working with Morgause, and Morgause has allied with Alvarr, then there will be sorcerers in his ranks. They will be using magic."

Arthur says a few colourful words of his own, then turns back to Merlin. "Go and tell your mother and Gaius, let them know, and I'll tell Lancelot and Leon," he instructs. There's little point in trying
to argue with Father now, and at the moment, he's not sure he trusts himself to hold any kind of private conversation with the man without losing his temper. His skill at dissembling only goes so far. "Go. Now, quickly, go."

As the prince strides off, Merlin makes for the physicians' chamber with full haste, knowing he's likely to find at least one of them there, tending to Morgana. If not there, he'd find them in the infirmary hall. The nape of his neck prickles just as he round the corner and runs full-front into another person, sending them sprawling the floor. "Forgive me, I didn't see you," he says, reaching down to help the boy up.

Once on his feet, the boy doesn't release his hand, gripping tight and grinning. "I've been looking for you, Emrys."

He stares at the boy, the curling dark hair and keen blue eyes, the smile so familiar to him. "Mordred?" he hisses in shock, recognition dawning. The young Druid is in the midst of his Colts' Years, halfway between a boy and a young man, and he hardly looks the same person. "By the goddess, what are you doing here? How did you even get into the city?" There's little chance anyone would remember him now, nor would they recognise him if they did, but still, he's a Druid in Camelot. Has he taken leave of his wits?

Mordred eyes him as though he's said something very odd. "The gates are open," he replies, as though it is quite obvious. "Necthana sent me, the elders have something that I'm supposed to give you."

"What? What are you even—?" This is not a conversation to have in the middle of a busy corridor. Even in the midst of a siege, there are always ears listening for gossip. Taking Mordred by the arm, he pulls him aside and into an empty chamber, shutting the door. "Explain, now, and as neatly as can be done. We've precious little time."

Mordred takes a deep breath, then says in precise tone, "A sennight ago, the ollamh Necthana gathered the elders and summoned me. She told them that she had been sent a vision of warning by Taliesin, the keeper of the Crystal Cave. She wouldn't say what he had shown her, only said that it was essential that I go to Camelot with all haste and bring you this." He reaches into his cloak and holds up a small, lumpy bundle of wrapped cloth, tied with cord. When he sets it in Merlin's hands, he can feel the tingle of magic from it. "It's an enchantment of great healing, magics we had thought lost. Is it important?"

Merlin lets out a soft sigh, tightening his grip on the bundle. "Mordred...you've no idea. Come with me." Slipping back out into the corridor, he makes directly for the physicians' chambers, Mordred keeping close on his heels. Nobody stops them or gives Mordred a second look, not with the flush of urgency on them all.

In the chamber, Morgana is still pale and motionless in her bed, and Guinevere sits beside her, holding one of her hands. Mother and Gaius are both absent, no doubt readying the infirmary hall and gathering their own supplies. "Merlin? What is it? Who's—?" She pauses, staring at Mordred with dawning recognition. "Mordred? Is that you? What's—?"

"I'll explain everything to you later," Merlin promises, finding a clear section of tabletop and untangling the bundle, rolling out the cloth: a cord made of different herbs braided together, a string of dead-nettle leaves, a smooth chip of oxhorn, a small vial of oil, and a piece of tough, leathery hide. There's words burnt onto the leather as though someone had written them there with a red-hot iron rather than a quill. Reading over it, he recognises the workings of a powerful spell, far beyond the simple healing spells he's performed before.
"Can you do it?" Mordred asks, peering over his shoulder at the spell.

Healing magic isn't easily done. Gaius has spent a lifetime studying it yet he can only do so much for certain injuries. Merlin thinks of certain spells akin to a waterwheel, his magic the stream. It's the stream that turns the wheel, but in the end, the water ends up back in the stream, nothing lost. This, however, is different, because the water is not being returned to the stream, it's being dammed, redirected into her, feeding her body the energy it needs to heal. If he's not careful in how he does it, eventually, the streambed will run dry.

Merlin runs his fingers over the scorched words and nods. There's little he actually needs to do, as it's more of an enchantment of transference than proper healing, but the caster must be strong enough to endure the strain of the spell, which will draw on his strength and magic in order to heal Morgana. "I believe so. Go stand at the door, make sure we aren't interrupted," he instructs, and the lad bobs his head quickly, hastening over to stand watch at the chamber door. Gwen glances between them, uncertain, then moves to stand beside Mordred. She'd be able to tell a more convincing lie if needed.

Taking a steadying breath, Merlin ignites the candles around Morgana's bed and uses the nearest to light the braided cord of herbs. Once it burns a moment, he blows out the flame, leaving a smoldering end sending up sweet smoke around them. Carefully, he parts her lips and places the oxhorn beneath her tongue, then ties the dead-nettle leaves around her neck. Daubing the fragrant oil on his fingertips, he murmurs a soft blessing, anointing Morgana's brow, lids, and breast with it. Thus readied, he places one hand against Morgana's head, cupping his hand around the wound, closes his eyes, and reaches.

"Ic þe þurhhæle þin licsare mid þam sundorcræftas þære ealdaþ æ."

Immediately, he can feel the spell drawing at his strength, and he relaxes into it rather than fighting the flow, taking from him and giving to her. Around her neck, the dead-nettle leaves shrivel into dust. The candle flames leap high, and the smoke around them seems to curl in patterns, spirals within spirals, writing out words in a language long-lost to man. When the connection breaks, Merlin sways in his seat, lightheaded and chilled all over, and he bows forward, head between his knees as he tries to catch his breath.

Drawing in a deep breath, Morgana wrinkles her nose in distaste, turns her head to the side, and spits out the oxhorn. "What in the hell was that?" she exclaims, squinting up at him balefully. "I'd sooner lick one of the pavers in the courtyard."

Guinevere lets out a joyful, relieved sob and runs across the chamber to fling both arms around her mistress. Smiling, Morgana embraces her in return, but then her expression turns serious. "Cenred is marching on Camelot?" she asks, looking between their faces.

"That's right," Guinevere confirms, sounding amazed. "How did you know that?"

"I was not truly awake, but I could hear what went on around me." She turns her head to meet Merlin's eye unblinking, silvery-green and full of steel. "I've heard everything." She reaches over to take one of his hands in hers, the other still holding Gwen's. "You were right, Merlin. I didn't fall. It was that man, the delegate from Essetir. He stopped me by the stairs, struck me with a piece of stone. Where is he?"

"He's dead. Poisoned himself the moment we realised Cenred's ruse," Merlin replies, understanding her pointed questions. Like Arthur, she is dissembling, setting the issues at hand apart. There will be time to deal with the revelation of her parentage later on, when they are safe. Now, however, Camelot is their foremost concern.
Morgana nods, then casts aside the blanket, swinging her feet to the floor. "Gwen, go to my chambers, ready my armour and sword," she instructs, then holds up a hand to forestall Guinevere's protest before she can even voice it. "I know I've only just woken, but believe me, I've the strength of ten men right now," she says with a sly glance at Merlin, who chuckles; obediently, Gwen departs. "Mordred, I wish we could've reunited under more amiable circumstances, but I'm glad to see you again all the same."

"And I you, my lady," the lad chirps back.

"I doubt you'll be recognised now, but I'll thank you to stay near us all the same. Merlin. We have an army to prepare for. Take me to Arthur."

By the time Arthur retires to his chambers, he feels as though he might burst apart at the seams. Whilst it brings him utmost joy to know that Morgana is whole and hale, knowing that she is his sister and his father, their father, has lied to both of them for so many years…. Propriety be damned, he wants to take Father by the shoulders and shake the answers out of him, demand to know why. Camelot must come first, though. Morgana is right in that. Their kingdom is under assault, and they cannot afford to be distracted now. There will be time enough to settle it later.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he massages his temples with the heels of both hands, trying to ease away the headache that's threatening to crack his skull. He ought to get some sleep, knows he'll need to be rested for what tomorrow will bring, yet he cannot quite bring himself to move from his desk just yet. He's never been able to rest well the night before a battle. Siege. He's never been in a siege, not a lasting one, not with an entire city full of innocent people and refugees depending on them. What has he done?

The door opens and closes quietly. Soft footsteps cross the chamber towards him, and the desk creaks as Merlin sits on it, settling his weight. A gentle hand smooths down the back of his hair to the nape of his neck, resting there. Arthur lifts his head to look at the younger man, his manservant, friend, protector, lover, and the knowledge of what he's done sinks its claws a little deeper into him. "I've committed them to a siege, Merlin," he rasps out. "It was Father's choice, but I was the one who spoke of it first. Siege engines, battering rams, catapults…. There's going to be casualties—"

"Shh. Arthur, stop. Worry is not a wise counsel." Merlin moves his hand and lightly brushes the backs of his fingers over Arthur's cheek. Perhaps he's just flushed for nervousness, but the young man's hands feel cool against his skin, and he tilts his head into the touch gratefully. "I trust you. More than any man," he reassures. "Uther agreed to what you told him because he knows you are right, and I? I have faith."


Merlin nods, his gaze never straying. In the low light, the blue of his eyes is almost violet, and there are sparks of gold in his gaze, stars in an evening sky. "In you. In us. In our destiny. It is your fate to be the greatest king Camelot has ever known. Your victory here will be remembered…by every age…'til the end of time."

He says it with the utmost confidence, sure as the sun will rise in the east. Arthur wishes that he could have such faith, wishes he knew how to believe the way Merlin does. He can't put that much stock in himself. But if Merlin can believe in him that deeply, then he can have faith in Merlin. Arthur grasps the young man's wrist lightly, holding the rough-callused hand to his cheek and turning his head to brush his lips against the palm. "Stay with me tonight," he murmurs.
The second day passes in a tense haze. Provisions are gathered, barricades are erected, weapons are distributed, and soldiers are set their positions. The gates are left open as long as possible, largely due to Arthur and Morgana's insistence. Refugees fill the city. As the sun sinks towards the west, Cenred's army is finally seen from the walltops, a vast dark wave seeping out from the forest like infected blood from a wound. Uther orders the gates closed and barred, and Camelot prepares itself for siege.

In his chamber, Arthur finds himself gazing towards the window. He can't quite see Cenred's army from here, but he knows they are there. He doesn't pace. For all the anxiety that's plagued him the past two days, all that's left in him now is stone-steady calm and determination. "Was that Mordred I saw with you?" he wonders, having caught glimpse of a half-familiar face shadowing his manservant.

Giving the prince's armour one last perfunctory examination—and strengthening the protective magics in it—Merlin chuckles wryly. "Oh, yes. He brought me what I needed to heal Morgana, and despite both of us insisting he leave, he's quite determined to stay." He throws Arthur an amused glance through his lashes. "He says he'll serve as my squire. The fact that a squire is attendant to a knight and that I am not a knight nor have any aspiration to be one makes very little difference to him." He straightens and picks up Arthur's gambeson, holding it out. "Come here."

Despite everything, the idea of the gangly youth serving attendant to his equally gangly manservant makes Arthur smile. "Do you truly believe there will be sorcerers in Cenred's army?" he asks as Merlin brings him the chainmail next, easing the mail over his head. "Would Morgause allow it?"

"Yes," he replies frankly. "It is what I would do." When Arthur gives him a surprised glance, he shrugs one shoulder, fixing the fastenings of one vambrace. "Camelot's army is not trained to fight against magic. If I wanted to overcome you, I would send in sorcerers who know how to wield offensive magic. They'd be behind the foot soldiers, paired up with units of heavy cavalry and spread along the line to support the advance."

"Shock combat," Arthur muses. "How would we recognise them?"

Merlin pauses a moment, contemplating it. "Like as not, they shan't wear armour. Leather, perhaps, but not mail or plate. Iron and steel don't...hold magic well," he ventures, searching for appropriate words. "It's why I've never cared to fight armoured. Doubtful they'd carry weaponry of their own. Perhaps staves."

"I should look for you." Arthur chuckles at the look of surprise on Merlin's face, having clearly missed the parallel. He had fretted on it a great deal in the past, the young man standing out in a team of knights as the only one without armour or blade, though he'd come to understand it more after knowing Merlin's magic. Vulnerable yet not, protected from within and not without.

Seeing the likeness now, Merlin begins to smile a little. "Yes, I suppose you should." He touches Arthur's chest, fingertips just brushing the cool mail, smile fading away. "Will you not let me accompany you?"

"No. I want you here in the citadel."

Arthur had turned the thought over and over again. A part of him doesn't want to let Merlin out of
his sight, wishes to keep him close at his side, yet he knows he cannot. It isn't a matter of ability; he
knows full well that Merlin is capable of holding his own. But Merlin's skill lies in open combat, where
his quarterstaff gives him greater reach and his knives offer range. He's never fought in a shield line,
shoulder-to-shoulder in formation. Merlin would be more hindrance than assistance, and there's too
great a risk would see him performing magic. Especially when one considers the fact that Father is
going to be fighting in the vanguard with him.

Seeing Merlin's quiet displeasure, Arthur places two fingers beneath his chin and lifts the young man's
gaze to his own. "I want you here, with Morgana and Mordred, safeguarding the citadel. You did it once
before, when the Knights of Medhir rode on Camelot. If we cannot hold the lower town, we are going to
have to retreat back to here. Will you do that for me?"

Merlin exhales slowly, nodding. "I will. Just...be careful." Managing another small smile, he jabs
a finger at Arthur's chest, though it's barely felt through his layers. "I've spent a hell of a lot of time
cleaning this damned armour, so I expect you to bring it back in one piece, clotpole. No holes."

"Yes, sire!" Arthur draws in return. "And I expect you to have a hot bath waiting for me when I
return, understand?"

"Of course." Solemn once more, Merlin turns and picks up the sword resting on the tabletop,
proffering it to him hilt-first. It isn't their sword, merely unadorned, mortal steel; the other, he only
uses when it is needful. It feels wrong to wield it otherwise. "For the love of Camelot," he
murmurs in a low voice.

Arthur takes the hilt, feeling the familiar weight of it. "For the love of Camelot."

"Will it hold?" Morgana asks, using a rag to wipe fatty salve from her fingertips.

Stepping back to survey the symbols, Mordred nods. "Once the doors shut, yes. Not forever, but
it'll hold."

Drawn on either side of the citadel's main doors are mirrored warding sigils, made not with ink or
paint but a mix of soot and animal fat from the kitchens—one for protection, one for strength, one
for holding and affixing, each leading into the next like links in a chain. Once the doors close,
they'll form a tether between the sigils and create an invisible shield wall that'll hold out any
invaders. As Mordred says, it will eventually be worn down and broken, but it's all they can do
without making it burningly obvious that magic is at work. Should the invaders reach the citadel,
the shield will earn them enough time for at least some of the people to reach the siege tunnels.

"Well done," Merlin says with a nod, eyeing their work. The symbols seem to glitter around the
edges, and when he looks at them from the corner of his eye, they glow with soft golden light.
"This is the last of them. All the other entrances have already been sealed up." They've repeated the
symbols on several interior doors as well.

Removing the last damning evidence of sorcery, they make their way back inside towards the
infirmary. Merlin can hear the sounds of battle from elsewhere in the city, the low thud of catapults
being launched, the shouting of men, the ringing of steel on steel. A part of him wants so
desperately to damn Arthur's request, take his staff, and make his way down to the frontline,
ensure that his recklessly brave and noble prince emerges whole and unharmed from the battle, lay
waste to anyone who dared come near him, sorcerer or soldier. A warm presence leans against his
side, and he glances down to see Mordred edging nearer to him whilst attempting to be subtle in it,
face pale, a smudge of greasy black on one cheek. Not a boy, not a man, a coltish in-between
creature, confronted with true war for the first time. "Come, little one," he says gently, putting a hand on one sharp-boned shoulder. "I'm sure Gaius will appreciate a set of steady hands."

As they're passing the squires and youngest guardsmen assigned to protect the infirmary, the entire citadel seems to shudder around them all at once. Merlin gasps aloud, the shock running up his back like a flick through a rope. Mordred abruptly clutches his hand, nails digging into his palm hard, and a few paces ahead, Morgana drops the bandages she'd been unwinding. They've felt it as well, yet nobody else seems to notice.

[What was that?] Mordred's voice drifts across his mind, strung high with fear.


[It came from below the earth. Is that possible?]

Merlin drops his gaze to the floor, realising the boy is right. The magic had come from below. They aren't above the siege tunnels, not here, but there are caverns beneath the castle. As well as… [The burial vaults,] he and Morgana think in unison.

At the entrance, a guard screams.

[Stay with Morgana!] Merlin orders Mordred, giving the boy a push towards her with one hand as he unslings his quarterstaff with the other, running towards the sound.

In the square, the guards are backing away slowly, uncertain and fearful as skeletons advance on them. Merlin wonders for a moment if he's finally gone mad, but no. Skeletons. Bones held together by magic rather than flesh and sinew, some old and greyed with time, others with ragged scraps of skin dangling from them; they carry the stink of the grave with them, musty air and slow decay. "Hold!" he commands sharply. "Hold your ground! Protect the citadel! Stay to your posts!"

As he shouts aloud, he throws a mental command to Morgana as well.

[Anyone who can hold a weapon had best do so now. Someone has summoned the dead from the crypts. We're under attack from within. Hold the citadel, I'm going to the vaults.]

Places of the dead always make his skin prickle. Tonight, it feels as though every inch of his skin wants to crawl from his body. The power he'd felt grows stronger as he sprints down the stairs towards the burial vaults, filling the air with a high, crystalline sound, throbbing in opposite rhythm to his own pulse.

When he bursts into the vaults, there is a man standing in the middle of the chamber, and planted into the stone floor is an engraved wooden staff, twisting and spiraling up into a branched crown, glowing light nestled within the interlocking tines. The butt of the staff is embedded into the floor as though it is no more than soft sand, stone cracked and split around it. That is the source of the magic he can feel and hear all around him. Like the blood-forged sword, it holds its own power, separate and singular, magic pulsing through it like a heartbeat pumping life into the risen dead.

For a second, the crypts swim in his vision, and he stands on the Isle of the Blessed, gazing up into the boughs of a great tree, limbs bearing fruit like blood, the centre around which the isle is built. And then he blinks and stands in the burial vaults once more.

["Traitor!"] the man bellows in voice and mind, echoing in the vaults. He must be Alvarr, leader of the renegade Druids; Morgause would trust no one else with an instrument of such power.

"Deserter! Filth! You betray our kind!"

"I seek to save our kind," Merlin replies, descending the last of the steps, taking his own quarterstaff in hand. "This is not the way! Magic is not meant to be used this way, and when you
do so, you only serve to harden people's hearts to it. Answering violence with violence will lead only to ruin, you have to know that!" He starts towards the rowan staff, but Alvarr advances to meet him, one hand going to the hilt of his sword. Merlin stops, staring. "Don't do this, Alvarr. This isn't the way."

Alvarr shakes his head, mouth curling in an empty, bladed smile. "This is the only way."

Tightening his grip on the smooth, strong yew wood in hand, Merlin shifts stance and raises the quarterstaff, though he doesn't point it towards the other man just yet. "Don't. So many of us have already died here. No more," he says one last time.

With a hiss of steel over leather, Alvarr draws his sword. "I think not. I choose violence."

Inhaling sharply, Merlin points his staff towards the vault roof. "Feoll bu brand!" he shouts, and in a terrible cracking of stone and earth, the ceiling caves in.

Merlin has seen battle before. A great many times, actually. It never could've prepared him for the aftermath of a kingdom invaded. The presence in the city is one of stubborn endurance and tenuous hope and lingering unease, all wound up around one another like the tangled yarn of a skein, shifting with each change of the wind. And yet, they've survived and intend to continue doing so.

Mother commands the infirmary, having made impromptu apprentices out of several maids and even some of the squires. Gaius tends solely to the King, wounded by a final javelin when the last of Cenred's forces were pushed from the city. Arthur splits his time between his father's bedside and reassuring members of the council and the gentry, some of whom call for revenge against Cenred, others wanting another cleansing of magic from the kingdom. With Uther bedridden and Arthur playing peacemaker with court, Morgana takes charge of reparations, and many gaze after her with a mixture of relief and adoration and gratitude.

Merlin's own time is well-occupied, helping wherever and however he can, mostly in distributing rations to their refugees and helping Mother in the infirmary. When the dead had risen in the citadel, many of the citizens and refugees had been injured. He tries to stay near to Gwen; Tom had been counted amongst the fallen, struck down defending the citadel when the dead rose. The strength of women is different from men, deep and abiding, and she's endured with it so far. Still, sorrow clings to her edges, shadows her step.

They are in the square dealing out rations when Gaius comes outside, looking as though he's aged another ten winters in the course of two days. The old man crosses the courtyard to where Morgana is issuing direction to the new guard shift. Merlin is too far away to hear what Gaius says to her, and outwardly, Morgana shows no sign of distress at his words. However, he is familiar enough with her to see the stiffening of her shoulders, the straightening of her spine, mouth thinning just the slightest bit. She says something to Leon, then turns and follows Gaius back into the citadel, moving with that precisely restrained stride which says she would've sprinted.

Merlin glances at Guinevere, observing the scene just as closely, and when she looks to him, her eyes are full of quiet understanding. "Go. We can finish here," she insists gently, then turns and calls for Mordred. The boy's made a fixture of himself with them, insisting that if his camp needed him then the elders would send a raven for him.

Murmuring thanks, he hands the basket over to the lad and goes inside. The castle is hushed, a sense of quiet despondence lingering. Merlin has half a mind to go directly to the King's chambers; he'd find Arthur there. Still, he finds himself walking to the prince's chamber instead, steps so
familiar he could follow them blind. One hand lifts to knock, but then he decides against it, opening the door. The chamber is still and quiet, the bed made and the desk undisturbed.

Merlin nearly turns to leave, then stops—Arthur's sitting on the floor in the space between the wardrobe and the other wall, knees drawn up towards his chest, arms around his legs. The breath leaves him in a soft sigh. He walks over and kneels down in front of the prince, knees nearly touching the toes of his boots. Arthur's face is drawn and pale, a study in conflicting emotion, faint tremors running through his frame. Silently, Merlin reaches out, fingertips just brushing against his knee.

All at once, Arthur lurches forward into him, burying his face in the crook of Merlin's neck, arms clutching tight around his waist. Merlin strokes his hair with one hand, the other rubbing up and down his back, feeling Arthur shudder with muffled sobs, tears damp on his neck.

Outside, the bells begin to toll.

The king is dead.
To Suffer, To Hope

The rain is coming down in steady rhythm when Lord Agravaine arrives in Camelot with his daughter and some twenty men-at-arms.

Arthur stands in the courtyard to greet them, uncaring of the rain. Ignoring any kind of protocol, Bellegere dismounts from her pony and near sprints across the way to embrace him, burying her face against his chest. Waiting at Arthur's side, Merlin can see the relief on the newly-crowned king's face, ducking his head to hide it and embracing her just as tightly in return. Though he's done well to keep up a strong façade for the court, grief still shadows him, a second cloak laying over the Pendragon red.

"Thank you for coming to Camelot in such short order, Uncle," Arthur says as Lord Agravaine joins them, their party moving indoors and out of the rain. "Your men will be shown to the guardsmen's quarters, and we have chambers prepared for you and Bellegere."

"No thanks are needed, sire," Agravaine replies, lowering his hood; Merlin gives him a curious glance, finally seeing the man he's heard so much about in person. Bellegere takes after him, black-haired and dark-eyed, but there's something sharper about him, lacking the softness his daughter has. It's hard to imagine that he's at all related to the fair and golden Ygraine with smiling eyes Merlin has seen in the Hall of Portraits. It makes him wonder what Tristan must've looked like. "In times like these, we must keep to our own in order to get through."

Arthur gives a weak smile and shakes his head. "You can dispense with the honorifics, Uncle. We're family," he insists.

"Of course. This must be the Lady Morgana. Ah, forgive me. Princess Morgana," Agravaine corrects as he gives a courtier's bow, kissing her hand lightly. "Whilst it brings me little joy to know that my late good-brother strayed from my sister, I am pleased to know my nephew hasn't been alone in his grief and hope that you might come to consider me family as well." His voice is surprisingly warm.

Morgana's lashes flicker slightly, the only sign of her surprise—no doubt she'd been imaging a far different greeting from him—but she recovers and offers a polite smile touched with genuine warmth in return. "Nothing would please me more, my lord."

Merlin feels a tug on his sleeve, and he glances down at Bellegere. She'd quietly migrated around Arthur to stand between them, one hand subtly tucked behind her back and grasping for his own. He places his hand in hers, her grip immediately tightening as though he's the only thing keeping her in place. Her other hand has a similarly ferocious grip on the edge of Arthur's cloak, knuckles white on the red cloth.

"Uncle, this is my manservant, Merlin. He'll show you to your chambers and see that your belongings are moved in promptly," Arthur says, gesturing to him; Merlin bows accordingly. "I'm certain you're hungry after your journey. We can take supper together in the hall once you've settled yourself."

"Delightful."

Recognising his cue when he hears it, Merlin steps forward. "Right this way, my lord, my lady," he says. Despite Arthur's constant bemoaning otherwise, he does actually know proper decorum and all the subtle delicacies involved in serving attendant on nobility and royalty. It's simply that he
never actually bothers to do so, at least not where Arthur is concerned. However, since he knows that Arthur holds his uncle in high esteem, he will behave and act according to his station for once. So he keeps a docile pace, leading them up the stairs and to the chambers that had been already aired and tidied in preparation for their arrival. "Right here, my lord," he says to Lord Agravaine. "Shall I have your possessions brought up?"

"That shan't be necessary," Agravaine replies, then gestures to the man who had unassumingly trailed along with them, lingering alongside. "My attendant, Sayer. Show him about tomorrow, and he'll see to my needs for the duration. You may see to her, however, as she lacks her own maidservant." That last is said with a pointed sidelong glance at Bellegere, who clasps her hands behind her back and says nothing, head bowed slightly.

Merlin schools his expression blank, affording another bow. "Of course, my lord. This way, my lady," he says.

She follows him along to the chamber at the far end of the corridor, but when he opens the door, Bellegere's face falls. "I cannot have the chambers I held last time?"

The disappointment in her words makes Merlin frown. "It is appropriate for you to be placed near to your lord father."

She looks to the floor for a moment, then nods in understanding. "Very well." There's a knock at the door, and they both turn to see Sayer, Agravaine's servant, standing in the doorway holding a large trunk which can only be hers. "Thank you, Sayer. Just there, please. Merlin will see to it," she says, nodding towards the table.

The man carries it over and sets it on the table with a thump. Sayer is taller than he is, of height with Leon, but he's as thin as a reed, dressed in dark grey livery, entirely unadorned but for a silver phoenix pin at the collar. There's a sharpness about him, as though his edges might cut anyone who laid hands on him. Grey-blue eyes stare at Merlin unfalteringly. "I'll meet you in the morning to show you about the castle," Merlin offers. It'll be easier to get everything done in the early hours, before the entire castle wakes for the day.

Sayer bows without a word and leaves the room.

"I've never heard him speak," Bellegere remarks. "I'm not certain if he's mute or not, but he's been Father's attendant since before I was born."

Merlin turns to look at her now, puzzled and slightly concerned by her subdued demeanor. Bellegere looks different. It isn't just that she's grown taller, or that she's beginning to look a young woman instead of a girl. There's a...fadedness to her. Like Arthur, grief has shadowed her over, lent her a new gravity and depth. "Are you well, Bellegere?" he asks, opening the trunk. She clearly packs like her cousin as well, things thrown in without a care as to how it all fit.

"I'm not certain," she replies frankly, still honest as ever. "What happened to...to Mother, and then the invasion, the King's death, and Father moving us here...?"

"It's a great deal happening in a short time."

"Yes, well...I'm certain I'll be alright. You needn't worry." She crosses to the chair and sits down, staring at the unlit hearth in front of her. "So, Lady Morgana is truly the princess now?"

He picks up a large yet lightweight case, no doubt her bow, and goes to set it on the desk. "That's right. She still very much herself, though."
Uther had managed to hold out for near three days after the siege, despite the damage done by the javelin, partly from Gaius's treatment and his own stubbornness. Merlin doesn't know what Arthur and Morgana said to him in those last days, only that the King's final decree both acknowledged Morgana as his daughter and legitimized her as a Pendragon and a princess of the blood. He's not asked about it and doesn't intend to yet, not whilst the wound is still so raw for both of them. The announcements had been made quietly, and there'd been a second ceremony after Arthur's coronation for Morgana. If Uther had been fearful of some kind of backlash against her, his concerns are unfounded. The news has been received with little fuss and no dispute so far, only an increase in the number of suits for her hand. The people of the city love her even more now, if possible.

Merlin continues to sort through the jumbled mess of her things. When he uncovers another small box tossed amongst her belongings, it rattles when he moves it. "I fear you've broken something, Bellegere," he says, untangling the box from the tunic it's ensnared in. He would say it's a jewelry box, but the day Bellegere wears jewelry is likely the day that Arthur decides to exchange his chainmail for a gown.

"It's my chess set. The pieces are loose," Bellegere murmurs without looking his way.

Weighing the box in hand, Merlin thinks of the pointed comment Agravaine had made towards his daughter. "You are of age to have a maidservant of your own, aren't you?"

"Yes, but the girls Mother chose were all wretched, and then we were too occupied with the journey here. I don't mind not having one."

Unlike some royals he can name. "Maybe so, but it's still expected. Perhaps you can speak to Gwen or Morgana. I'm certain they can help you." He crosses over to hand her the box, and she takes it from him absently, holding it in her lap. Sighing softly, he brushes his fingers over her damp hair, smoothing it behind one ear. "Would you like me to send along Guinevere to help you get ready for dinner?" he asks.

"I'll manage."

Arthur gazes out the windows, listening as rain drums a steady beat against the panes, the occasional tongue of lightning forking across the sky, followed by the deep roll of thunder. He's always enjoyed the rain, at least when indoors. He's just raised his cup to his mouth when a set of strong hands close over his shoulders, squeezing firmly, and he nearly inhales his wine instead of swallowing it. "Seven hells, Merlin!" he sputters. "Don't do that!"

Standing behind his chair, Merlin chuckles. "I didn't think a clumsy oaf such as myself could ever startle a mighty hunter like you, sire," he replies, drawling out the last word in that impudent way of his.

"You didn't startle me," Arthur grumbles, resettling in his chair. A low appreciative groan is pulled from his throat as Merlin applies firm pressure against his shoulders, thumbs pressed into the aching knots just below his neck, slowly working them loose. He's had the most dreadful tension headache the entire day, doing nothing but listen to the damned council argue in circles without ever getting any closer to resolution. If that's what Father had to listen to day after day, no wonder he'd always looked so weary. "Ow, ow, ow, easy!"

"Sorry," Merlin says without sounding the least bit apologetic, but his grip does ease up somewhat. "How was the council today? Still arguing?"
Arthur grunts, taking another deep pull of wine. "I had to end it early, or I am fairly certain that Morgana would have garroted someone with her necklace." That earns him a snorting chuckle, and he grins, still gazing out the darkened windows. It's only early evening, yet the skies are the deep grey of unburnished steel, the colour of a migraine. "If they argue like this over road repairs, I can't imagine how they'll sound when I repeal the ban of magic."

The slow-steady massage halts. "You aren't lifting the ban now," Merlin says flatly.

Baffled, Arthur tilts his head back to get a curious upside-down look at the younger man. "What do you mean? Why would I not?"

Heaving a sigh, Merlin resumes his massage. "Think on it. You've only been king for two months. Not that you haven't proved yourself capable so far, but Uther was king for a great many years, and for a great many people, the only king they ever had. After an invasion backed by magic, the people might well think you've been ensorcelled by Morgause or something of the like. To force growth is to kill it," he says, releasing one shoulder to ruffle Arthur's hair gently.

He scowls towards the window, tapping his ring against the side of his goblet. "I hate when you're so damned logical," he grumbles, and Merlin chuckles. "Very well. How long would you suggest I wait, then?"

Merlin is quiet a moment, pondering, then declares, "A year. No." One hand moves to cover Arthur's mouth even as he opens it to protest. "A year. That's time enough for the people to recover from Uther's loss and to know that you are their king and your own self. I've waited this long, Arthur. Another year shan't do me any great harm."

Reaching up to lay one hand over the younger man's, Arthur sighs again. Merlin's right, but that doesn't mean he has to like it. Another tongue of lightning flares across the sky, the thunder almost simultaneous with the whip-crack; the windows rattle in their frames. "Very well. A year," he relents at last. "But I'm going to move towards it in the meantime. The raids on the Druid camps stop. No more executions. If anyone is accused of sorcery, they'll be given a trial, and the punishment shall fit the crime, if there is one at all." He thinks again of Senna and her bindweed crowns. What dread magic could a girl of nine winters possibly have known? What awful charm could she have made from flowers in the palace garden? How many more like her have ended up at the block, the pyre, the gallows, for nothing?

"Good. That's good." Merlin leans down and presses his lips to the top of Arthur's head, his arms sliding around the prince's neck, hands resting lightly against his chest. "Mordred is still here as well. He has his ravens about. You can use them to communicate with the Druid elders, make a start with them."

Arthur nods. He'd nearly forgotten about the boy's predilection for feathered beasts. Even with Alvarr slain, he imagines that Morgause will be recruiting for her ranks as well, calling more sorcerers to her cause. Not to mention, his relation to the Bloody Tyrant of Camelot has been reason enough for sorcerers to declare their personal wars against him. It'd do well to give the Druids a reason to believe his reign will be different from Father's. "I'll expect your help in that, Emrys," he remarks with a smile, laughing when Merlin tweaks his ear in playful reproach.

"Anything else I should add to the royal agenda?" the young man asks.

He drums his fingers against the arm of the chair. "The council. I'm fairly certain some of those men have had their seats since my grandfather's rule. It's time for some new blood, no?"

Merlin laughs gleefully, tightening his embrace. "You may be a stubborn one, clotpole, but at least
you're stubborn about the proper things." His warm breath ruffles Arthur's hair as he leans down to kiss the side of his neck, lips pressed softly over his pulse. "We're going to have a busy year, aren't we? You plan to cut this kingdom open to the core."

"The core is rotten. It's been festering for near twenty years now, and it is past time for it to be drained. Are you ready for it?" Arthur prompts in all seriousness. What he has planned is no trifling matter. It's a massive undertaking, even if it is spread out over the course of a year or even two years. He doesn't delude himself into believing that it'll be easy, either. No doubt it will be an uphill struggle, and there might well even be violence involved, though he prays it shan't come to that. He cannot think to manage it on his own. If he is going to rebuild what was torn down in the Purge, he is going to need a great deal of help.

"I've been ready for this my entire life, prat."

He grins, reaching back to snag hold of Merlin's ever-present neckerchief and tug him into a kiss. That's precisely what he wants to hear.

As fate would have it, his first trial appears not even a day later when one of the guard patrols from Essetir's border returns to the city with a party of bedraggled commoners that were seen crossing the border into Camelot. They claim to be refugees who had taken advantage of the general disorder in Essetir to escape. Under any other circumstances, he would believe it. Essetir does partake of the slave trade, and it's well-known that Cenred will pay good coin for a sorcerer. Now, however, so soon after an invasion, he finds himself conflicted. And he isn't the only one.

"These people might well be spies, infiltrators sent to prepare for a second attempt at taking the city," Agravaine insists. "Cenred might have withdrawn his forces the first time, but now with the King dead, he may see opportunity."

"Have you seen these people, my lord?" Morgana asks in return. Not many had been happy with Arthur giving her a seat at the council, but she's always had insight, and she's never hesitated to tell Arthur when he's acting the ass. He has Merlin to tell him so in private, but she can tell him so in public without running the risk of being flogged. "They have been beaten, starved, abused in the worst ways. That kind of neglect cannot be feigned, and I cannot imagine anyone willingly going through such a thing for the sake of a second invasion when the first has failed."

Arthur rests his elbows against the tabletop, fingers interlaced in front of him as they continue to go back and forth. Insofar, the refugees have been placed in the infirmary, and for the sake of safety, he's posted an extra guard shift. Most are women, a few men and children, and they indeed make quite pitiable figures, some barely able to stand upright upon arrival. Hunith might know if there's aught amiss with them. Merlin certainly would; he has the most uncanny ability to sense ill will in people, him and his 'peculiar feelings.'

The door of the council chamber opens. "Your Majesty," Bellegere says in a tight, cool voice, and Arthur straightens up in his seat, snapping back to attention sharply. She never calls him by any form of address except when she is furious at him or something is deeply wrong. "I would show you something."

"This is a council meeting," Agravaine says frostily, levelling a sharp look at her.

"I am aware of that, my lord, and I would not interrupt were it not important," she replies, bowing slightly. She looks to Arthur. "Your Majesty?"
He can almost feel the disapproval radiating from the other councilmen; he can very nearly hear them now, informing him that a woman has no place on a king’s council, nor does a girl of three-and-ten. "What do you have to show us, Bellegere?" he asks.

She pushes the door open further and leans back out into the corridor, making a gesture. A girl, barely ten winters, shuffles forward on bare feet. She must be one of the refugees, Arthur supposes; she has that same nervous, beaten look the others do, like a skittish animal. The girl's eyes widen when she sees who she stands before, huddling further down into her blanket, starting to edge backwards as if ready to flee.

Bellegere goes to her side and takes one of the girl's hands in her own, drawing her forward instead. "Show them what you showed me, Jehanne." Her voice is unwontedly gentle. "Don't be frightened. You're safe here, I give my word."

Eyes darting nervously around the chamber, the girl plucks open the frayed laces holding the neckline of her ragged gown, then turns her back to them, slipping the garment from her shoulders.

"Gods' mercy," Arthur rasps out; Morgana presses a hand over her mouth.

On Jehanne's freckled back, just below the bony knob at the top of her spine, is a brand, still fresh, the skin blistered and suppurating clear fluid. It takes a moment for the shape of the burn to resolve in his horrified revulsion, but then Arthur makes sense of it—the serpent of Essetir coiled around a sword, the stamp of their slave markets.

"Does that settle your concerns, my lord?" Bellegere asks of her father as Jehanne gingerly pulls her kirtle back up. Her tone, astringent though it is, softens once more when she addresses the other girl. "Go and see the physician. The Lady Hunith will give you something for the burn." Jehanne bobs a nervous curtsey and all but bolts from the chamber.

"Do any of the others bear this mark?" Arthur asks, forcing down his disgust. To brand another person as though they are cattle.… The skin of his back crawls.

"I've not seen any of the others. She was frightened enough to show me."

He pushes back from the table. "Then we shall see together." A few councilmen mutter as they rise to follow, but Arthur ignores them. He wants to see this for himself. Merlin and Guinevere are waiting in the corridor, as the meeting was due to end soon anyways, and they both fall quietly into step with Arthur and Morgana as they make for the infirmary hall, Bellegere leading the way.

"You have to know this is unusual, sire," Agravaine murmurs to him.

"Perhaps," Arthur replies. Unusual or not, he wants to see this for himself before he makes any sort of decision.

When they enter the infirmary hall, Hunith is there; she's been given charge of the refugees' care whilst Gaius manages their regular patients. She's kneeling beside the girl Jehanne, carefully lathering ointment onto the brand, smoothing a square of thin bandaging over the burn. "My lord," she greets, rising to her feet and wiping hands on her apron. "What can I do for you?"

"That mark," Arthur says in a low voice, nodding towards Jehanne, who had fled to the arms of a similarly thin and bedraggled woman, no doubt her mother. "Have you seen it on any of the others?"

"The brand? Yes, sire. On all that have allowed me to examine them so far. Some are stubborn, but I don't imagine they'll lack it," Hunith replies, her voice quiet yet full of uncharacteristic fire. No
doubt the sight of a child being put through such suffering has her protective instincts getting their back up. "The girl's is the newest that I've seen. Others are older, but—"

"Elyan?"

Guinevere's shocked gasp turns several heads, surprised by the unexpected interruption from someone usually so decorous. She's gone quite ashen, eyes wide and mouth agape. Following her gaze, Arthur sees a dark young man rise from one of the cots, looking just as beaten and worn as the other refugees, but there's a blinding smile on his face. Letting out a sobbing cry, Gwen rushes past them to fling herself at the man, pressing relieved kisses all over his face as he laughs and heaves her right off her feet in an embrace. When he sets her down again, she turns back to look at Arthur, wiping at her face with one sleeve. "Forgive me, sire," she sniffles even as she smiles. "My brother, Elyan. I've not seen him for some four winters now."

"Not of my own will, I promise," Elyan replies, then bows at the waist. "Your Majesty."

"As I understand it, this young man is the one to lead these people out of Essetir," Hunith puts in gently.

Arthur steps closer and holds out a hand, clasping Elyan's arm. "I hope you don't mind sharing the tale," he prompts, smiling. "Come along to the council hall, if you would. Guinevere, you're welcome to join us." Once they've all returned to the council hall, Arthur gestures for Elyan to take one of the empty chairs and retakes his own seat. Gwen moves to stand behind her brother, one hand resting on his shoulder, and Merlin, who has apparently taken the opportunity to follow the rest of them in as well, is a familiar shadow over Arthur's shoulder.

"I was captured by Essetir's slavers last spring," Elyan says, reaching up to rub behind his neck, just above where the brand would be. "Mostly I was put to work in a quarry, but once Cenred started planning the invasion, I was sent to work in the castle forges, making weapons and armour. I was sleeping in there by the end of it. I knew once Cenred moved the army out, nearly all of his men would be gone from the castle and the city, so I saw it as a chance to escape. I forged my own keys. All the others with me, they were all prisoners working in the castle as well."

"Even the children?" Arthur prompts, scowling.

"Them as well," Elyan confirms, his mouth turning down into a scowl proving just how much he despises it as well. "It's easier to keep control that way, ensuring none of them made trouble or ran away. Threaten the mothers to control the children, and threaten the children to control the women. We went at night, between guard shifts, and made our run. We tried to go mostly at night, stayed on rougher ground that didn't hold track so well, which is why it took so long for us to arrive, not to mention we had to take cover for a few days when the army retreated back to Essetir. After that, it was simply a matter of getting over the border before a hunting party came after us and not getting killed by the border watch here."

Arthur nods slowly, resolve settling in him. Getting that far in poor health, on foot with no supplies, evading capture and an army. It's damn near a miracle they made it. Spies, they most assuredly are not. "Very well," he says, sitting back in his chair. "Elyan, these people trust you. See if you can speak to them, find out where they were from, what positions they held. I'm certain we can find a place for them until they can be returned home or given more permanent lodging."

"Sire—" Agravaine begins, but Arthur holds up a hand to halt him.

"We'll have them looked after," he repeats firmly.
"Thank you, sire." Elyan stands up to leave, bowing to the council; Guinevere starts to follow him, then glances back at Morgana, who waves her along in silent assent. Bobbing a hasty curtsey, she goes along with her brother.

After the reunited siblings have left, Arthur glances at the angle of sunlight coming through the windows and sighs. "That's enough for the day. Dismissed. We'll finish tomorrow."

One at a time, the councilmen take their leave, bowing and murmuring farewells. Staring after them, Arthur finds himself wondering, not for the first time, which he should have replaced first. He should ask Dara. That man knows everything important about everyone important; he'll have an idea of where to start. Once the door of the hall shuts, Agravaine casts him a dubious glance. "Are you entirely certain that is wise?"

"They didn't ask to be captured, Uncle. We cannot, in good conscience, turn them away now when they ask for our help."

"Of course. Forgive me, nephew, I do not mean to sound unsympathetic to their plight. I mean only to remind you to err on the side of caution."

Arthur smiles. "I know, and I always appreciate your council. But Guinevere is one of the most honest and trustworthy people I know. Morgana has never once had an ill word to say of her. I trust my sister's judgement," he replies reassuringly. Even if he hadn't known it for himself, he would trust Morgana's opinion, just as much as he trusts Merlin's. They have a way of seeing the truth of people, and he can admit that they're better judges of character than himself.

One of Merlin's favourite places to be when he wishes to be alone is the north walltop. There isn't a regular guard shift here, as the north wing is largely unused, so he can walk back and forth as he wishes in solitude, welcoming the calm and the quiet. It's a welcome relief when the constant presence of other people and the weight of manmade walls around him becomes too much. With the wind coming from the north, too, he can smell the forest, the sweet smell of damp earth and mast. Somewhere near, an owl hoots; perhaps a companion of Mordred's, coming to beg an easy supper.

He leans his arms against one of the battlements, staring out at the sprawl of the city below, spotted with pinpricks of light. One hand slides beneath his neckerchief to find the familiar weight of Father's signet ring, rubbing his fingertip over the engraved face of it. It's become a habit of his.

After he'd brought Arthur his dinner, Merlin had taken his leave to go see Guinevere and Elyan, curious to finally meet the sibling he's heard so much about. He and Guinevere had spent quite a few nights in the Cockerel commiserating over bothersome elder brothers. Elyan seems quite a warm person, full of good humour and friendliness that apparently even captivity cannot break. It'll be interesting to see how he gets along with the betimes-prickly Will, as Merlin's old friend has taken over working Tom's forge since the blacksmith's death.

Thoughts of Elyan and Will aren't what worry him now, however. No, right now, he is more preoccupied with thoughts of Lord du Bois.

Merlin isn't entirely certain he likes Arthur's uncle all that much. Even without personal interaction to base it upon beforehand, he didn't think all that highly of a father who would let his young daughter journey halfway across the kingdom with only three green lads and a single seasoned warrior as her guard, or one would let her stay away from home an entire summer without once writing to ascertain she was indeed well and safe. Now that he has met the man in person, that
dislike has found sturdier ground to root in. Mainly, Agravaine's dismissal of Bellegere, his cool
detachment in dealing with her. Merlin doesn't like it, but he knows that there's likely to be some
who are ill-suited to parenthood.

It isn't something he'll bring to Arthur, at least not now. Oblivious the prat might be from time to
time, he does hold a deep and abiding love for his family, part of the reason why he'd invited
Agravaine and Bellegere to Camelot in the first place. He's allowed some leeway there, Merlin
supposes; he himself would be hard-pressed to ever believe ill of his own mother. He shan't cause
strife simply because of his own personal dislike of the man.

What truly concerns him, however, is that whenever Merlin is too near to Agravaine, his
magic...shivers. It doesn't prickle and crawl as it does when he stands in places of the dead, nor
does it flare up in outright alarm as it had when he faced Alvarr or Nimueh. But somewhere down
in the deepest part of himself, his magic shivers to be near to Agravaine du Bois, as though
catching wind of some disturbing presence. Akin to smelling smoke on the breeze in the dry
season, not certain if it comes from a traveler's cookfire or an uncontrolled blaze in the plains.

Merlin frowns and begins pacing once more, plucking at the cord around his neck.

The reaction isn't one he's used to. He doesn't know what to make of it, in all honesty, and he's not
certain whether or not it's even worth mentioning at all. For all he knows, this is some kind of
subconscious reaction to his dislike of the man. Perhaps he's finally crossed the line from fretting
like a fishwife into being truly paranoid, just as Will constantly jests. Taking a deep breath, Merlin
tucks his ring back beneath his tunic and heads back along the walltop towards the stairs.

He'll let it be. Like as not, he's overthinking things.
There are more people staffing the castle kitchens alone than there are in the entirety of Snowgate, or at least so it seems to Bellegere. She's never been around so many people in all her life. Betimes the sheer noise is enough to drive her half-mad. The summer she'd fostered here, there hadn't been quite as many people. Or, truly, there were, but they had all been elsewhere: hunting and questing and patrolling, always doing things that had to be done. Now, as autumn begins to approach, there are fewer places to be and fewer things to do except ready for the harvest and the coming winter. A fair number of nobles are wintering in Camelot as well, no doubt aiming to curry favour with their new king. They're fools to think it will work. Those who strive to numbered amongst his confidantes are precisely the ones who will never achieve it.

She's proud of her cousin. Though she hadn't known a great deal about Uther's rule—she's never truly thought of him as her uncle at all—she knew that he'd been on the harder side of strict, and many of his edicts bordered on cruel, depending on how one looked at it. Many of them have already been rescinded, including the raiding of Druid camps, bounty hunters exchanging captives for coin, and the immediate sentence of death for the use of magic. He means to do more. She knows he does, seeing bright glimpses of ambition about him like sunlight on the feathers of an elusive and iridescent bird.

Bellegere wonders which member of the council he's going to replace next. The old lord he had dismissed was older than Gaius. Drawing her knees up towards her chest, she peers out the window into the palace gardens. Long fingers tweak her hair playfully, and she turns in surprise. "Hiding from your tutors again?" Merlin asks, grinning.

She turns to face him, unfolding her legs from the window seat. "I've finished my lessons already," she replies, trying not to sound quite so sullen.

Still, he frowns a little, tilting his head to eye her up curiously. "What's wrong, dear heart?" Only he and Arthur ever call her that, and though she's certainly too old to be coddled, not that she ever really was coddled in the first place, she doesn't think she'll ever be called 'dear heart.' It doesn't make her feel all that better today, however. "Father's forbidden me from joining the squires," Bellegere replies bitterly, anger knotting up hot and prickly in her belly, fists tightening on her trouser legs. It isn't fair. She doesn't have to be a knight, she just wants to be able to learn those strong-yet-graceful forms and stances, a lovelier dance than she's ever seen in any damned ballroom. Roland could teach her, yes, but everyone knows that the knights of Camelot are the finest to be found in all five kingdoms. "I'm the child of a noble family, why can't I learn with them? That…damn code doesn't say a girl can't be a squire."

Merlin comes to sit on the unoccupied half of the window seat, drawing up one long leg to prop his heel on the edge of the seat, arm hooked around his shin. "Indeed it doesn't. Have you spoken to Arthur?"

Bellegere shakes her head. She doesn't want to tell him, really. Her cousin loves her dearly, she knows it for a certainty, but he still respects Father's wishes. She doesn't want to make him unhappy by bothering him with questions she already knows the answer to. He has enough to worry about as it is without her pestering him. "He lets me have my bow. I suppose I should be thankful for that," she murmurs.

"Well…yes, but…perhaps you don't have to be a squire," Merlin supposes, and she casts him a
puzzled glance. What does that mean? A small, sly smile pulls at his mouth. One arm sort of twitches, almost like a shrug, but when he turns his hand palm-up on his lap, the silver stripe of a slim knife glitters deadly-keen. "Your father barred you from the squires. He hasn't barred you from me."

She holds out her own hand, and he places the knife in her palm. "It's…it's so small," she protests, closing her fingers around the warm hilt.

"So are you," he chortles. Bellegere swats his arm. "Daggers and knives would suit you better than the longsword. I mean it. You are small, Bellegere. You're growing, but you shan't ever be a giantess, you know this. Reach is important. Near every man will have greater reach than you, which means you will have to be much too close in order to reach him."

"How will having a smaller blade help that?" Bellegere exclaims, baffled by his reasoning.

Merlin's other wrist flicks, and a knife thunks into a doorframe opposite their seat. "Because you cannot throw a sword like that." Quick as a viper, his arm coils around her, and she gasps softly at the cool touch of another knife against her jaw, though it's just the flat of the blade, not the edge. "And you cannot draw a sword before I can bleed you." He lowers his arm—the knife disappears some-damned-how—and he rests his chin on his raised knee with a grin. When he opens his hand again, she places the knife back in his palm; a subtle little twitch of his fingers and it's tucked back up his sleeve, vanished again. "Think on it. That's all I ask. We're going to the Cockerel tonight. You can accompany us, if you'd like."

Bellegere brightens immediately. "You'll take me to the tavern?"

He chuckles, lowering his leg from the seat. "The Cockerel is not the Rising Sun. But yes," he admits, rising to his feet. "I'll teach you how to best your cousin at dicing."

Oh, hell, she'll go for that alone.

The Cockerel isn't the Rising Sun. The clientele is cleaner, comelier, and altogether soberer, and there's less chance that someone is going to have a chair smashed over their head by night's end. Bellegere doesn't recognise anyone, but Merlin and Arthur don't take any of the tables, instead going up a flight of stairs towards the back, into a closed room.

"You're late, villain!" Leon scolds laughingly, and Merlin makes a rude gesture in return, grinning. A man with shiny hair and laughing eyes rocks his chair back on two legs, pointing towards Bellegere. "Hey, who's this, Queen Arthur? You haven't gone off and married without telling us, have you? Bit young for you."

Arthur pushes at the man's chair, making him teeter dangerously; he swears loudly and rocks forward with a loud thump, planting all four legs of the chair firmly on the floor. "Shut up, Gwaine. She's my cousin, which means you had best keep a civil tongue in that mouth of yours. Bellegere, this lout is Gwaine. Kindly ignore everything he says, if you would. That's Percival there, and Will beside him. Everyone else you know, yes?"

She does recognise everyone else—Lancelot and Morgana, Guinevere and Elyan. Bellegere smiles as she takes a chair at the large table next to her cousin.

"And I see my favourite patrons have returned," a new voice says as the door opens again, and Bellegere leans around Arthur to see who it is. He's dressed prettily in deep green but not overly
rich like some nobles do; his hair is coiled up in a knot at the nape of his neck, a long ivory pin through it. His gaze falls on her. "With some new faces as well. Lady du Bois, it is a pleasure," he says warmly, extending a hand to her.

Surprised, Bellegere stands and leans forward a little to shake his hand. "Call me Bellegere. How did you…?"

"Dara knows everything about everyone, cousin," Arthur remarks with a grin.

"Certainly not everything," the man demurs, taking one of the last empty chairs. "Speaking of, Arthur, I have some suggestions for that question you put to me."

"And I'll be glad to hear it another time. I'm not discussing a single matter of court tonight. Now, where's the wine?"

Dara laughs at that, a full and husky sound, and he claps his hands twice. Not even a moment later, two attendants somehow appear from a corner of the room bearing trays of cups and large pitchers. The server pauses in handing Bellegere one, but Arthur waves a hand permissively. "Half a cup," he says. When he turns to speak to Dara, however, Morgana takes one of the pitchers, leans over, and fills Bellegere's cup near to the brim, winking.

The next few hours are quite nearly the happiest of Bellegere's life. They laugh and jest and exchange tales varying from comical to outright vulgar, wine loosening tongues and making everything all the more humourous. Gwaine has the most stories out of any of them, except for perhaps Dara. True to his word, when they bring out a set of die and betting tokens, Merlin does show her the trick of outplaying Arthur, though she's quite certain the wine is what outplays him.

Somehow, the conversation makes its way around to the subject of marriage, largely in the form of Elyan jesting that he'd left having a spring maiden for a sister and returned to a married woman, making Gwen and Lancelot both blush and laugh in turn. The wine makes her feel warm and sort of tingling, and she finds herself speaking as well. "You know, I used to wish I could marry you," Bellegere admits, prodding Arthur's ribs. "Then I wouldn't have to wed some prat noble Father chose for me."

"We're cousins," Arthur chortles, more amused than anything.

Rolling her eyes skyward, she swats at his arm and misses the first try. "Royals marry their cousins all the time."

"Usually they're more distant cousins, though."

"Yes, I know that now, but I didn't realise that when I was eight." She hadn't even considered the idea of being queen, only that she wouldn't have to marry some awful turniphead and she could wear trousers whenever she wanted.

Gwen giggles merrily, leaning into Lancelot's side. "Well, you always still can wed him, Bellegere, provided you don't mind sharing with Merlin," she points out; Arthur's mouth falls open, and Merlin knocks over his thankfully-empty cup.

"True enough. I'll let you keep Merlin if you let me have a sword and mail." Bellegere glances sideways and snorts at the look on her cousin's face. Did he truly think they didn't know? One of the first lessons Roland had taught her was that in order to see that which is not there, gaze upon what is. Granted, he had been speaking of watching an enemy's body language to guess their next move, but the same principle applies to a great many things. And she's never seen Arthur look
quite as happy as he does when he's with Merlin. Most simply didn't notice because they never bother to really look at him with intention to see him. If they did, they might notice the way Arthur brightens whenever Merlin comes into the room, or how Merlin will gaze after Arthur with an expression of tenderly affectionate pride when he thinks nobody is looking.

"How long have you all known?" Merlin asks in a strangled voice.

Morgana smiles a slow, pleased smile like a cat licking cream and swills her wine about her glass. "Well, I had this persistent headache constantly plaguing me at night which suddenly disappeared. Quite like magic, one could say," she replies. A flush creeps up the side of Arthur's neck.

Turning in his seat, Merlin reaches over to swat Lancelot's shoulder. "You swore you wouldn't tell Gwen!"

"I didn't!" the other man protests, then casts an apologetic look towards his wife. "Forgive me, but I did promise."

Guinevere gives an understanding nod, patting his hand. "I understand. He does make the most pitiful little face, doesn't he?" she giggles, casting a teasing glance towards her friend, who flushes. "I figured it out myself, Merlin. You started staying in Arthur's chamber even though you said you never would. And those mornings after you stayed, you hummed on the way to the kitchens for breakfast."

Merlin buries his head in his arms. "The rest of you?" he asks, muffled by his arms.

Across the table, Gwaine raises his tankard in a toast. "I heard you lot talking the day we met, remember? Poetry from a dead man?"

"I didn't realise it was meant to be a secret," Percival says with that wide, unexpected grin of his.

Will shrugs his wide shoulders, a wry little smile pulling at his mouth. She doesn't think he likes Arthur all that much, but he's obviously dear to Merlin. "You and that damn humming."

Bellegere puts her head down laughing, seeing the expressions on their faces. She loves them dearly and she knows they are intelligent men, but gods' mercy, they can be stupid.

Soon after, Dara calls for the attendants to come clear the table, and one by one, their merry company begins to depart, drowsy with wine and ready for their beds. Bellegere is feeling warmly weary herself, watching as Leon embraces his younger brother in farewell, and then it's only the four of them: her, Arthur, Merlin, and Dara, who is still mostly sober as well. Arthur and Merlin stumble and trip their way out of the room down the stairs, leaning against one another for support and laughing a little as they get wrongfooted.

"Come along, my dear. I'll walk with you to the citadel," Dara offers as they step out into the cool night air. There's a full moon hanging overhead like a fat pearl, so torches are few and far between, bathing the streets in silvery-grey-white glow.

Bellegere doesn't think twice about tucking her hand around proffered his arm, letting the other two walk a few paces ahead of them, a little unsteady but upright. She likes Dara. He doesn't speak to her the way most do, as though she's a child or too simple to take his meaning. He addresses her in the same manner he might address Arthur. She imagines that if he can talk to her like that, then she can speak to him frankly. "If I ask you something, will you answer me true?" From experience, she knows it is better to ask before she properly asks. Questions make people uncomfortable. Or at least, hers do.
"Of course."

"Are you a courtesan?" Nobody had openly said it, of course, but from some of the things that'd been said earlier, the jests made, she could piece it together for herself well enough.

Dara doesn't hesitate. "I was. Now I work mainly in a proprietary capacity. I take patrons of my own choosing, because I am fond of them, not out of any strict need."

She cocks her head up to look at him. In the moonlight, he's lovely to look at, and his face is openly serene. "You aren't ashamed?"

"No. I know what I am. I know it, and I wear it like armour so it doesn't become a weapon instead. If anything, I am glad for it."

"Why?"

"Girls, bastards, and whores." Dara turns his gaze down to hers, a small, wry smile on his face. "We will always be underestimated by everyone. It won't change today, it shan't change tomorrow. Perhaps not in our lifetimes, perhaps not ever. But if it will not change, then we must use what we have been given and play their own game against them." He stops walking, and she halts beside him, gazing up at him in silent question. They're near the drawbridge, close to the citadel. Merlin and Arthur have already gone on ahead, unheeding, and he gently slides his arm out of her grip. "If I come any closer, the guards will certainly recognise me. They've been at the Pavilion often enough for it. Go on. My reputation is what it is, but yours can still be tarnished. Goodnight."

Bellegere nods as she takes a step back from him. "Thank you, Dara. Goodnight." As she hastens to catch up with her cousin, she decides that in the morning, she'll ask Merlin to teach her how to wield daggers.

Her natality comes with the arrival of autumn. Four-and-ten.

She's of age to be a squire now, yet with Father's edict still standing, she's left standing on the edges of the training field, watching the boys as they're given weighted wooden swords and taught simple forms, laying the groundwork for the more complex manoeuvres to come. A part of her still burns at the bitter unfairness of it. A cooling balm to it, however, is Arthur's gift to her: a set of matched daggers. The blades are narrower, lighter, the hilt smaller to fit her hand. Merlin gives her a belt to hold them and a lesson on the northern ramparts. Morgana's gift doesn't come in physical form: the princess offers to teach her the finer points of falconry. Morgana doesn't enjoy blood sport and has an abiding dislike for hunting, but as it is a popular hobby of other noblewomen, she still knows how.

For a miracle, Father doesn't argue it, and so, with Arthur's encouragement, she goes to the royal mews and chooses a bird for herself. She paces along the mews, peering at the different birds, surrounded by the soft jingling of bells and the rustle of feathers. She turns to look at the royal falconer, a greying man with a scar on his cheek from a fractious hawk, then glances past him. In an emptier corner of the room, there's a boy feeding a clutch of downy fledglings gobbets of raw meat, head bowed intently to his task. Bellegere crosses towards him; he doesn't look up. "Which do you think I should choose?" she prompts.

The boy startles, as if he hadn't realised she was there at all, blinking in surprise. "Ohuh?"

"Which do you think would suit me?" Bellegere repeats, clasping her hands behind her back and
tilting her head towards the birds.

"Oh." Clasping the dish of meat scraps close to his chest, he turns to look about the mews, then eyes her up. Not in the way some of the squires do, as if simultaneously scorning her for her tunic and breeches and wondering what she looks like beneath them, but as though he's actually considering her question. "Have you ever hawked before, uh...my lady?" he says, hesitating over the last as if not certain how to address her.

"No, not for myself."

The boy chews his lip thoughtfully. "Well, these falcons are easiest to train and hunt game bird well," he says, gesturing. "They'll serve you well for it."

Bellegere surveys the falcons he'd pointed out and singles out one, a smallish bird with a dark brown back and head and a creamy brown-streaked breast. "This one, perhaps?" she asks. She cannot name any detail in particular, but something about the falcon is appealing to her, perhaps the fierceness of its large eyes or the graceful sweep of its long wings.

"That'd suit, and she'll be pleasant to watch, too. Have you ever seen a merlin fly? They ring up beautifully."

Her lips curl. "A merlin?" she repeats; the boy bobs his curly head.

"A falcon fit for a lady," the head falconer puts in.

She ignores him. "May I see your glove?" she asks of the boy, and he hands it over to her. She works it on, the thick leather warm from his body, and coaxes the merlin onto her gloved fist, feeling the weight of it on her arm, the strong clutch of its talons on her hand. The falcon cocks its head to stare at her with one glittering black eye. "Oh, yes. She'll suit perfectly."

Bellegere names her falcon Kala. Arthur gets a genuine laugh when she informs him that of all the birds in the mews, she chose his lover's namesake. "You have your Merlin, and I have mine, cousin," she replies loftily.

When she is not attending her lessons or practicing her forms, she is out in the fields around Camelot with Kala, training the falcon and also hunting small game with her bow. Morgana accompanies her; not always, as she now has her own duties as a princess, but when she can. Being on her own, however, is something Bellegere is used to.

She isn't always alone, though. The boy from the mews sometimes accompanies her. His name is Mordred, and he adores birds of every size and form. He likes to collect their feathers and even wears a whistle around his neck made from a hollow leg bone. She'd thought him to be the falconer's apprentice, but he insists that he is Merlin's squire. She almost tells him that squires serve attendant to knights and are of noble birth, then decides against it. The belief will do him no harm. He is one of the few people she knows that will call Arthur and Morgana by name instead of title. When she asks how he knows them so well, he always gets a cagey way about him and changes the subject, and she lets him. She's never had a friend before and doesn't intend to frighten him away. It itches at her a little, but she imagines he'll tell her eventually.

"Why do you admire them so?" Bellegere asks, leaning up against a battlement and gazing upwards at a murmuration of starlings. Mother liked starlings. She had always embroidered them. Quickly, she pushes aside thoughts of her mother, feeling the faint ache in her chest, and turns her gaze
down to the lower town, people rendered as small as children's toys from this height. When she had mentioned her occasional discomfort in constant presence of so many people, Merlin had suggested she try going up to the ramparts for a while, as that was what he did when the same pressure plagued him.

Mordred shrugs as he unties a pouch from his belt and scatters a handful of crumbs and seed out in front of him; within moments, there's a conspiracy of ravens before them, squawking and fluttering. "I admire their freedom," he supposes, crouching on his heels and reaching out to stroke the nearest raven's glossy black feathers with a fingertip.

That much, she understands. When Kala flies, betimes it feels as though she takes Bellegere's own soul right along with her, sweeping along so fast and fine. Mordred was right in that, too. She flies like nothing else, swooping and turning, ringing up high and diving down to her prey.

"Who is that there, walking with Arthur?"

Bellegere turns and peers down into the courtyard. "Lord Joscelin from…Powys, I believe," she replies after a moment's thought. He's one of Arthur's new councilmen, first of many replacements he has in mind. She's not met him personally yet, but Father doesn't like him, so he must be a decent sort.

"Do you think Arthur will give Merlin a seat on the council, too?"

She snorts loudly. "Not if he values his own hide." If he doesn't, no doubt Merlin will have him sleeping in the antechamber for a fortnight. Merlin doesn't presume to rise past his station, even if that station is certainly beneath him. He'd be content to stay at Arthur's side nigh unto the next age, and he'd never once think to ask for any kind of reward or think he even deserved one.

"Hide! Hide!" one of the ravens squawks loudly, and one of the larger ones buffets at it with its scruffy wings in reproach. There's a crack in its beak that almost looks like a grin. Once they realise there is no more food to be found, they take off in a silken murmuring of wings.

Bellegere reaches down and cuffs his shoulder lightly. "Come on. Fetch Kala from the mews, and I'll get my bow, we'll fetch ourselves supper," she tells him, and Mordred brightens, scrambling to his feet.

With all the activity going on about the city, with patrols constantly coming and going in response to the usual harvest-time raiders, people bringing in tithes to the castle, most game has been spooked; Kala manages to take only a single quail. She's tempted to go further afield but decides against it. Father dislikes her being friends with Mordred, though he's begrudgingly allowed it due to Arthur vouching for the boy's harmlessness. Still, sharing company inside the city where everyone can see them is one thing, and going out to the Darkling Woods alone with him is another. So, she hands off Kala to Mordred and takes up her bow instead.

When they make their way back towards the gates, Bellegere carries Kala on her arm once more, the bloodied quail in her other hand; Mordred trails alongside her, a brace of coneys slung over his shoulder. There's a small child out there, chanting some bit of doggerel and swinging a cloth poppet in hand as she makes little towers out of pebbles and twigs. The girl looks up at them as they approach and gasps, dropping her poppet in shock. "Is it alive?" she asks, staring at Kala.

"She is." Bellegere smiles. "See, if you come closer, quietly, she'll turn her head and look at you, and if you move very carefully, she might let you stroke her breast."

The child edges close, extending a grubby hand. Kala shies away and beats her great wings.
Bellegere calms her with a few soft words, but the girl's already backed away, clutching her poppet for reassurance, thumb in her mouth. "Does she bite?" she mumbles.

"Only her food," Mordred reassures, smiling pleasantly. "Her name is Kala. What's yours?"

"Jinny."

"Jinny!" another voice echoes the girl's, loud and strident. Another girl, closer to Bellegere's own age, comes striding over to them. "If you run off one more time, I'll put a lead on you and tie you up with the dogs, I swear I will!" she threatens, grabbing the child by the neck of her little gown like a pup by the scruff. She looks up at Bellegere and Mordred, clearly wondering if they're people she ought to be polite to or not.

"She's got a bird," Jinny says, tugging at the older girl's skirt. There's a likeness between them. Perhaps sisters.

"I can see it. Go back to Wymon and Tam now, and don't run off again!" she orders, turning Jinny towards the gates and aiming a light kick at her rump to urge her along. Jinny waves farewell to them and scurries off obediently. "Sorry if she bothered you…" She eyes Bellegere's bow and the dagger on her belt, Kala on her arm. "M'lady."

Bellegere shrugs. "She didn't. Call me Bellegere."

The girl glances over at Mordred, the coneys on his shoulder. "D'you want me to take care of those for you? My da's a butcher, I can do it clean," she offers, somewhat awkward in it.

"You can have them, if you'd like. This is enough for us," she replies, holding up the quail.

Immediately, the girl's eyes narrow slightly, and her mouth turns down in a scowl. She's got a scar on her lip that makes the expression all the more ferocious. "Keep your damned coneys, I'm no beggar."

"I never said you were!" This is precisely why she doesn't ever bother trying to be nice to people. She swears she'll never understand how Merlin can always be so kind and polite. No wonder Arthur always appears so tired, having to deal with people all day. "I didn't want them to go to waste, nothing more. Like as not I would've given them to someone else on the way to the citadel, but since you are no beggar, I'll take them with me." She pushes past the girl and strides towards the gates; Mordred trails after her quickly, though he wisely says nothing. Jinny is hovering just inside the gates, still clutching her poppet, thumb in her mouth. Bellegere stops beside her, aware of the older girl a few paces behind her. "Do you like roast rabbit, Jinny?"

"Wymon makes stew," the girl replies with a gap-toothed grin.

Mordred whispers, "Bellegere…"

She ignores him and carefully shifts the quail to her gloved hand without disturbing Kala, holding out her now-empty hand to him. He gives her an exasperated look but hands over the coneys by the cord tied around their hind feet. "Then here. You tell Wymon to make stew." She hands the looped cord to the girl, who near shrieks in glee. The coneys are near the same size as she, and when she runs back towards a gawky young man, presumably Wymon, they half-drag on the ground. Hopefully they won't want to keep the pelts, but at least the meat shan't take any harm from it.

"Slow down! You're gonna fall!" the older girl shouts after Jinny, striding forward. She turns to look at Bellegere, her mouth twisting, but then she says reluctantly, "Thanks."
"I wasn't trying to offer insult," Bellegere insists.

The girl jerks her chin in a short nod, scratching awkwardly at her unevenly cropped hair. "Da says I argue too much," she mumbles. It's not an apology, but it'll do.

"So does mine."

A man's deep voice bellows, "Ione!"

She heaves a sigh, making a face as though she's bitten into a rotten apple. "That's him now. I have to go. Bye, m'lady. Uh, Bellegere."

"Goodbye, Ione." Once the girl runs off, Bellegere starts back towards the citadel. People shift aside for her, darting glances cast towards Kala, then her bow and dagger, frowning at her breeches and tunic as well. None of them have a glare to match Father's though, and she ignores them easily, focusing on keeping Kala settled in the presence of so many people, aware of the falcon's talons clenching tightly on her gloved fist.

Mordred keeps pace alongside her, grinning like a loon. "That was very nearly sweet of you, Lady Belligerent," he teases.

"Shut up," she hisses, punching his arm with her free hand. To her satisfaction, he yelps a little and rubs at his arm. Their path back to the citadel leads them past Elyan's forge, and she pauses a moment to watch them. Elyan is carefully stoking the fire, peering at something in the flames, and Will is hammering out what looks to be a spearhead, the ringing of hammer on steel steady as a heartbeat. A thought leaps into her mind as sparks from the forge. She turns to Mordred. "Will you take Kala back up to the mews for me? There's something I need to do."

His brows knit together, but he nods. For lack of a glove, he takes off his vest and wraps it around his hand and wrist. "Will you be long? Roland might cane me if he knows I let you run about the lower town alone," he reminds her in all seriousness. It'd been the only way she could convince her captain not to follow her about at all hours of the day, promising to not go to the lower town on her own and at least keeping Mordred around if she did.

"I'll be fine, it'll only be a moment." She coaxes Kala onto his fist, then turns and retraces her steps, hurrying back down into the lower town. When she finds the butcher's shop, it doesn't take long to find Ione as well, feeding a pair of rather pitiful-looking curs scraps. There's fresh blood on her apron and the front of her kirtle, probably from the rabbits. "Ione!" she calls, and the other girl looks up in surprise, hastily wiping her hands against her apron. "Tell me, do you work for your father?"

Ione shrugs. "Not really. He teaches Tam and Wymon, not me. I just keep the knives sharp and make sure Jinny don't run off."

Bellegere grins, casting a glance up towards the citadel. If a blacksmith's daughter can serve a princess…. "How would you like to come work for me?"
A knock on the door of Arthur's former chambers rouses Merlin from his pleasant half-doze, curled up on his side on the bed in Sephare and Aleyne's hidden room. He doesn't know if it's simply well-crafted acoustics or part of the magic concealing it, but if he leaves the inner door open, he can hear near everything in the main chamber, no doubt a safeguard for the clandestine lovers. Heaving a quiet sigh, he climbs off the bed, gently smoothing a hand over the blue-white shell of the dragon egg, feeling the warm thrum of life inside. They'd agreed not to hatch it until after the ban of magic was repealed and people had adjusted to the change it would bring. Still, even sitting near it makes him feel...better somehow. Easier in his own skin. Livelier.

Once the false wall settles in place, Merlin goes to answer the door. "Hello, Ione. Lost again, or were you actually coming to fetch Arthur?" he asks in good humour. He likes Bellegere's maidservant, such as she is. The girl is just as ornery as her lady mistress; no doubt she wouldn't have ever gained her post due to her pleasant demeanor. However, Bellegere had been insistent—she would have Ione as her maidservant or no one at all. Apparently, stubbornness isn't solely a Pendragon trait.

"Fetching you, m'lord. My lord," the girl corrects herself sternly. Persistent coaching from Bellegere and Guinevere has improved her speech a great deal, and she's learning to read and do sums as well.

"Better, but I'm not a lord, and my name is Merlin. Who are you fetching me for?"

"The princess."

He gestures towards the corridor. "Lead the way."

Despite having only lived in the castle a short time, Ione has learnt her way around fairly well, and she only hesitates once at an intersecting corridor. Out in the palace gardens, Morgana, Guinevere, and Bellegere are taking advantage of the fair weather. The two adult women are sitting on the bench, and Bellegere is sat on the ground, cross-legged in front of Gwen's legs as the other maidservant braids up her hair. "There, see? That's not so hard, and it keeps it all out of your face when you go riding or hawking," Guinevere says, handing Bellegere a hand mirror to observe her handiwork.

Bellegere hums thoughtfully, tilting her head to observe the pinned-up braids. "It'll suit," she says at last, though there's an undercurrent of stifled delight in her words. "Thank you, Gwen." She turns her head to give him a view. "Merlin, what do you think?"

He thinks she looks quite lovely. It's only three simple braids, but they're twisted around one another and pinned in place to give the illusion of being much more complexly woven. It makes her look more of a young woman than a girl. If he tells her so, however, she might well throw the mirror at his face. He smirks and shrugs one shoulder. "You don't look like a street urchin for the first time this week, so better."

She rolls her eyes skyward and makes a rude gesture likely learnt from Gwaine. They've become unlikely companions since the night in the tavern. When he'd sworn at her and been sworn at in return, they'd become great friends. Rising to her feet, she brushes the grass from her trousers. "With me, Ione. Gwen, will you come and show us more?" she asks, tactful in her surprisingly subtle way.
"Of course. Right this way," Guinevere agrees, ushering the girls away.

Once they're out of earshot, Merlin sits on the now-unoccupied end of the bench, smiling as he clasps his hands about his knees. "You summoned me, O gracious princess?" he asks brightly and laughs as she closes her book and swats him smartly across the shoulder with it. She takes to being teased about her newfound title about as well as Arthur takes to being called a prat, something he quite delights in. However, looking at her closer, he observes the lack of colour in her face, the bruise-coloured smudges beneath her eyes. "Tell me true, how are you feeling?"

"Ill," Morgana replies flatly and closes her eyes, reaching up to rub two fingertips against her temples. Though she's learnt well to manage her visions, she still sleeps poorly when they come upon her. "I've dreamt every night for the past four days, and though they are alike, it's never quite the same. I believe it's another crossway. There's more than one road which can be taken," she says at last, squinting at him with one eye. "And I can't...see everything. Some parts of it are...shrouded. I cannot see them clearly."

Merlin frowns. "That sounds odd. Has anything like that happened to you before?"

"No. Perhaps it'll clear soon, once a path has been chosen. Here." She extends an arm, holding out the book, which he recognises as the journal in which she records her visions and the images which appear in her dreams.

Turning to the marked pages, he studies her delicate handwriting curiously. A pack of wolves devouring a dragonet, a flaming sword, a giant breaking a golden crown, a heart being cleaved in two…. He shakes his head, closing the journal and handing it back to her. "I've not the faintest idea what any of this could mean. There's nothing else you can see? Anything that might connect them somehow?"

Still rubbing at her temples, Morgana shakes her head. "That is what is shrouded from me. There's something else there, it's just barely out of grasp." Her lips curl up with faint humour, arching an eyebrow wryly. "I find myself having utmost sympathy for the great dreamers of old who had to endure this constantly."

Merlin laughs agreement, relaxing back into the bench. Despite the seriousness of the topic, a burgeon of happiness swells in his chest until it's pressing against his lungs and raising his heart right up to the very borders of his ribs, as though it might well break free and take flight. In all his life, even in his most fanciful childhood imaginings, he never would've pictured himself sitting in the royal gardens of Camelot, discussing magic and visions with a fellow sorcerer. Even if their talk is couched in more subtle terms, if anyone bothered to listen it'd be obvious they are speaking of something outside the usual. And yet, he's not frightened, not truly.

He's startled out of his pleasant relaxation by Mordred's still-piping voice calling, "My lord!" The lad trips on his own feet as he comes hurrying into the gardens, measuring his length along a late-blooming flowerbed, much to the consternation of the gardener, but he scrambles up just as quickly, righting his clothes as he approaches their bench, short of breath. "My lord, King Arthur requires your presence in the council hall."

What is it with these children addressing him by a title he does not bear? "I am not a lord," Merlin reminds the young man, lightly cuffing him over one ear. "Call me Merlin, I've told you before." If an actual noble heard him being addressed as such, he might well end up in the stocks, if not the dungeons, though he supposes he should count it a victory that Mordred has stopped calling him Emrys and bowing for him. He wonders if Arthur is ever discomfited being shown such obeisance by others. Doubtful.
The boy gives him a hesitant, crooked smile; once he grows out of the gangly awkwardness of his Colts' Years, he'll be a favourite of the lasses. "Yes, sir."

Merlin sighs deeply. He bids an amused Morgana farewell and starts in the direction of the council hall, Mordred trailing after him. "Did our most magnanimous king actually say what he wanted?" It's not as though he actually has anything to do in the middle of the afternoon. With the strictures of magic being gradually lessened—Arthur is champing at the bit waiting for the year mark Merlin had set—he now does the majority of his daily tasks with magic, albeit in secrecy. Everything gets done sooner, and he has near an hour of leisure near midday, when Arthur holds court and debates with his council.

"No, but he wasn't happy," Mordred replies, sounding uneasy about it. Though he knows full well that Arthur is far from Uther, spending over half his life as a hunted breed has left him with a lingering nervousness in regards to kings and their tempers.

Offering a reassuring smile, he claps a hand to the lad's sharp-boned shoulder. "Ah, I'm sure he's just found a hole in his favourite coat and wants to shout at me for not mending it." Mordred smotheres a laugh into his hands, grinning widely, and Merlin gives him a wink. "Go on, little one. I'll set his highness to rights," he instructs. Once the lad darts away, nearly tripping over himself again, Merlin pushes open the door of the council hall.

Instead of the full council, however, he's greeted by only a few faces: Arthur, Leon, Agravaine, Sirs Bors and Gareth, and a wiry young lad clad in forest colours. "You sent for me, sire?" he says courteously, bowing slightly as he takes in the tension in the room.

"I did. Ready my armour and sword, prepare for travel," Arthur orders, turning to face him. His voice has taken on that full, commanding timbre which means he expects to be obeyed now, with not a word of argument from anyone. Still, when his gaze catches Merlin's, he gives a barely discernible nod, silently promising to explain everything later on.

"At once, sire." Bowing once more, Merlin turns and leaves the hall just as quickly as he'd left it and knows without knowing they are approaching the fork in the road Morgana has foreseen.

In the King's chambers, he is in the midst of laying out Arthur's armour when the other man joins him, striding in. "What's happened?" Merlin asks without looking away from his task, placing a sword on the table beside the rest.

"A party of armed men have been pillaging villages on the northwest border," Arthur replies, pacing the length of his chambers like a leopard confined. As he paces, he strips off his vest and tunic, putting on his hardier travelling wear instead. "Bors has been tailing them without success and says that they've now left the borders and moved further into the kingdom, staking their claim. It cannot go unanswered. Gareth and his scout have guessed their headings. We are riding out to meet them directly."

That doesn't surprise him in the least. Arthur has always given the protection of the borders utmost importance, and he won't allow something like this to go on without answering it. Merlin knows too that Arthur has been chafing beneath the yoke of his new responsibilities, his previous freedom curtailed. This excursion solves both in one blow. "How soon?" He holds up the gambeson for Arthur to put on, sliding it neatly up his arms.

" Leon's organizing the knights now. We should be ready before evening."

Merlin twitches his fingers, the gambeson's lacings tying themselves up as he picks up the chainmail. "And will I—?"
"You are coming with, don't even try to talk your way out of it," Arthur cuts him off, giving him a stern glare once the chainmail goes on over his head, his hair standing askew. It makes him look like a rather ruffled hedgepig, and despite the solemnity, Merlin chuckles in amusement.

"Never would have thought to, you prat."

Sir Gareth's scout proves his worth when he leads them directly into the path of the armed party. By the time they catch up, it is well towards noon, which means they aren't going to catch any of the men in camp. Arthur, however, finds an opportunity to formulate a plan of action, giving his knights the chance to regroup and rest their horses as well. "This ravine here would be perfect for an ambush," he observes, gesturing downwards from where he stands on a high point with Leon and Lancelot, who's proven himself to be an able strategist. "Whoever's leading them is knowledgeable enough to evade both Bors and Gareth, so I doubt they will allow themselves to be penned in so easily."

Lancelot gives a low, thoughtful hum, drumming his fingers against his arm. "Hounds and hares," he poses; Arthur raises his brows in silent question. "It's a game we played as children. Those of us named hounds chased after the hares and tried to catch them. The same might be done here. We provoke them into a chase, lead them back into the ravine, and have an ambush lying in wait for them there, hiding along the ridge."

"Good. That's good. Which poses the question of who will be our hare." Not a position he envies, as in his experience, these chases near always end with the hare dead.

"I'll do it."

"You will not," Arthur says immediately, just as Leon turns sharply to glare at the damned fool who'd spoken.

Merlin raises his gaze from where he is sharpening Arthur's sword, sitting on an outcropping of stone not so near as to be an active part of the conversation yet close enough to hear their words. "I will, because I am the fastest runner of all of you," he insists, which is quite unfortunately true. With those long legs of his, he can run like a damned rabbit.

"These men aren't going to chase after a single commoner," Lancelot points out, much to Arthur's relief.

Unfazed, Merlin simply arches one brow in an expression most uncannily similar to Gaius. "You're questioning my ability to provoke someone? I can put on mail and a cloak. A knight on his own would make a pleasant target for them."

"Merlin…"

Rising neatly to his feet, Merlin slides the sword back into the scabbard and walks over to hand it to Arthur. "If you cannot conceive of a better option, tell Sir Gareth I will have need of his mail," he says in a low voice.

They don't conceive of a better option. Though it's Leon who poses the idea to the rest of the knights, they all agree with the plan and find it rather clever and even somewhat amusing, using a child's game to entrap an armed raiding party. Even Uncle Agravaine approves. And of course, it is Merlin who is chosen to play the part of the hare, for the only other person who might be fast enough is young Cerwin, Gareth's scout and a boy of only three-and-ten. Through it all, Arthur
rubs his forehead and tries not to sigh too much.

Thus settled, Gareth lends Merlin his chainmail, as he's the only knight present who is both tall enough and slender enough to be of size with him, and despite Leon's strident protest, the manservant refuses a sword. "I'll go faster without it. The business of swords is yours," Merlin insists, smirking, and tosses his quarterstaff at Lancelot, which he catches with a wry shake of the head. "See if you can't manage to hold onto that until I return."

The others begin to set up the ambush, taking their places around the ridge above the dead-end ravine. Not wanting to be overheard, Arthur walks with Merlin to the edge of their camp, out of sight. "You'd best run fast, hare," he says in a low voice as he throws his cloak around Merlin's shoulders, fixing the clasp in front. A not-so-small part of him preens to see Merlin in Pendragon red, the dragon bold on his shoulders, bringing out the sparks of gold in his eyes. Beneath the unfamiliar prickle of worry, his mouth goes somewhat dry to see the younger man in battle dress; he understands now why the women always pause to watch when the knights ride out of the city and smile so invitingly when they return.

The corner of Merlin's mouth curls up. "Certainly faster than you, considering the difference in our waistlines," he retorts in an undertone.

"Oh! You—go. Just go." Arthur turns him around and gives him a helpful shove forward, and the young man casts him a small smile backwards before taking off, red cape flashing brightly away into the trees.

There is nothing else to it but to wait, then. He takes his place in the centre, their forces split to surround the ravine on three sides where there is cover, leaving the fourth open for the raiders to run in. Arthur draws his sword and carefully holds it low at his side, waiting. Even as he settles himself to wait, listening for any sounds of approaching men, he can't help but be uneasy, the nape of his neck itching. Rationally, he knows that Merlin has faced far worse dangers than a raiding party, that his magic will protect him better than any sword could. And yet.... He works his fingers around the hilt of his sword, flexes his legs to keep from getting stiff, willing himself to hold steady.

One should never underestimate Merlin's ability to provoke. The sun has scarce moved in the sky when harsh, shouting voices come into earshot, growing louder as they come closer—the sharp jeering and cursing of men on the hunt. Arthur grips his sword hilt tightly, clenching his jaw as he risks peering over the ridge to see Merlin sprinting into the ravine, the raiders in close pursuit. Somehow, the manservant has acquired a short-handled axe of all things, which he brandishes in warning when he comes to the end of the ravine and turns to face his pursuers.

Temptation nips sharply, but Arthur stays, waiting. Not all of the raiders are in the ravine, behind their lines.

A man saunters forward, moving with the smooth stalk of a predator who knows they've brought their prey to bay. "Trapped, are we?" he asks with a smile full of teeth.

Arthur can almost hear the smile in Merlin's voice. "That's the idea."

Now.

The battle doesn't last long. The archers send down a volley of arrows to thin their ranks, Leon brings his flank around to cut off the raiders' escape, and Arthur leaps into the pit with a rallying cry, the rest of the men falling in. Lancelot throws Merlin's quarterstaff across the fray like a spear, the young man snatching it neatly out of the air and taking up a defensive stance at Arthur's back.
"Any injuries?" Arthur says once the last of the raiders are brought sharply to heel, using a bit of cloth to wipe the blood off his blade.

Gareth's voice is laughing as he lifts up scout Cerwin by the scruff of his neck, the boy smiling dazedly, half his face a red mask. "Just a bloodied nose, sire! Caught a spear shaft, no more."

Despite their victory, Uncle Agravaine's face is solemn as he approaches Arthur, dragging along one of the raiders with him. "Your Majesty. Look what we have here." Defeated or not, the man meets Arthur's eye with clear challenge, chin raised.

Holding the sharp-eyed gaze, Arthur recognises him as the one who had taunted Merlin, the head of the party. He's older than most who pursue this manner of life, five-and-forty, perhaps less, his hair and beard streaked with steely grey; the breadth of his chest and shoulders speaks to strength despite his years. "He comes with us," Arthur decides after a moment, sliding his blade home to its scabbard. "We'll deal with the prisoners when we get back to Camelot." There's no reason to think that every band of outlaws might be working under Morgause and whatever allies she's gathering to herself, but there is no reason to dismiss the possibility entirely, either. Though he finds the business distasteful, he'll have the man put to question when they've returned to the city.

"I fear this is no ordinary prisoner, Your Highness," Uncle insists, a strange note to his voice. He reaches out and grabs at a chain around the man's neck, dragging it up and over his head.

A bronze amulet dangles from the length of chain, catching brightly in the sun, and Arthur holds out his hand for it, brow furrowing as the weight of it settles in his palm. This isn't any slavers' medallion, or some trinket to be haggled for in a marketplace. This is castle-forged, solid and lasting. "Well, well," he murmurs, swiping his thumb over the insignia imprinted deep and purposeful into the bronze. His thumbnail traces along the wolf's snarling fangs.

Merlin's voice sounds oddly strangled, issuing from behind him. "What is that?"

"This, Merlin, is the royal crest of Caerleon. Is it not…Your Highness?"

Even after the rest of the camp has gone quiet, Arthur finds himself unable to sleep, sitting awake in his tent. In the soft, flickering light of the lantern, he reads over the words Uncle Agravaine has written for him as he has half a hundred times already, turning them this way and that in his head. It just doesn't _sit right_ with him. Somehow, they've set up a dangerous gambit, and no matter how he shifts about the pieces on this board, he only ever comes up with a stalemate. As he reads the words yet again, his free hand comes up to his mouth, and he finds himself indulging a habit that he'd thought broken years ago, biting the knuckle of his forefinger.

The tent flaps open and fall shut again. A warm body sits close yet doesn't touch him. "Lay down."

Lowering his hand, Arthur shakes his head. "Not now, Merlin."

"Will you just—?" Merlin reaches over and snatches the parchment out of his hands, casting it to the corner of the tent before Arthur can snatch it back. Hands on both shoulders, he applies firm, insistent pressure, guiding him back and down until he's lying on his back with head and shoulders in Merlin's lap. "Just relax some. You thinking is dangerous enough, I wouldn't want you to harm yourself."


Chuckling, Merlin starts running his fingers through Arthur's hair, scratching nails _just so_ against
his scalp. "Now stop being a cabbagehead and talk to me."

He heaves out a sigh, shaking his head. "Merlin, I cannot come running to you for advice at every turn," he murmurs. "The kingdom is my responsibility to bear now. Mine, not yours or Leon's or Lancelot's. I have to make these decisions on my own."

That earns him a look of upside-down exasperation. "That is your uncle speaking," Merlin replies sternly, tugging at his hair in reproof. "Arthur, your father did not make decisions on his own. No, listen to me," he insists when Arthur opens his mouth to protest. "What do you think he had a council of advisors for? Just to occupy his time before lunch? They advised him. Yes, the final decision was his own, but he took their view of things into account before he made it. That's all we're trying to do, Arthur. So just…talk to me."

Exhaling slowly, Arthur tilts back against Merlin's lap, gratefully pressing his head into the young man's caressing hands. It does help ease the headache he can feel slowly building up in his skull, the tension slowly easing from his shoulders and neck. "Caerleon's father had peace with us. He was present at the treaty of the five kingdoms, but after he died, Caerleon broke it, and we've been at odds ever since," he says aloud. "He's been raiding our lands with increasing regularity, and he's gotten bolder. I cannot let that go unanswered."

Merlin tweaks his ear. "I never said you should. Go on. Tell me about his kingdom."

"I cannot say much, there's not been much communication between us since the peace ended. But I know they are a strong kingdom. Their army is near equal in number to ours," he adds with a frown. "If it comes to war, both kingdoms will bleed. They'll tear one another apart."

Above him, Merlin hums softly, his fingertips rubbing slow circles against Arthur's scalp. "The territories he's been invading, are they significant at all, other than being on the borders?"

"Yes, in a way. They were signed over to Camelot as part of the peace treaty."

"So, with the peace broken, perhaps he doesn't believe you have right to it anymore, and he sees it as taking what is rightfully his," the younger man supposes.

Arthur blinks. He hadn't considered that. "That…actually makes sense. It makes little difference, though, Merlin. Those territories are part of Camelot now, and we aren't on the borders anymore. This is near the heart of the kingdom."

"What is it that Lord Agravaine suggests you do?" Merlin asks, his tone cooling slightly.

A quiet sigh slips out of him. He knows he can sometimes be a bit unobservant of things, but he's aware of the fact Merlin isn't fond of his uncle. Merlin is always impeccably polite and never gives cause for complaint, but that is proof enough of his dislike, lacking that pleasant informal warmth he shares with others. Still, the manservant has given no offence, so there is no reason to make a fuss. Arthur turns his head against Merlin's thigh, eyes closed briefly. "He suggests we force Caerleon to accept a treaty of our terms. Withdraw all his forces from Camelot, return our territories to us. Surrender Everwick."

"He won't agree to that, will he?"

"Not whilst he breathes, no."

The fingers in his hair tighten slightly. "Then is it also Agravaine's suggestion that Caerleon no longer breathes if he doesn't sign?" Merlin asks in a dark tone.
Arthur reaches up and catches hold of Merlin's arm, tugging at his sleeve until the young man meets his eye. "By coming this far into the kingdom, Caerleon challenges my strength and ability as a king. I cannot let that go unanswered, or I will be seen as weak, not only to our people but to other kingdoms as well. A weak king is a vulnerable king. My father was a strong ruler. His enemies feared and respected him in turn, and he brought peace to Camelot for a great many years. He didn't achieve that by allowing such blatant offense go unanswered," he says firmly, keeping his grip tight on the sorcerer's wrist in emphasis. It isn't a coincidence that all this has happened since he's become king. He knows that he's still young, still untested in the eyes of other rulers, and he cannot risk any of them viewing him as incapable, unable to hold his own borders. He might not have agreed with some of Father's edicts, but nobody would ever say the man was weak.

Merlin gently yet firmly twists his arm out of the other man's grip and instead lays his hand on Arthur's chest. "You've always shown mercy in battle. You've never sought to humiliate your enemy in this way. This isn't like you. This isn't who you are," he murmurs back, gently pressing against Arthur's chest, palm resting over his heart. "Your father might have been a strong ruler, but one thing he never understood is that compassion can be its own strength."

"Do you suggest I let him go, then?"

With a quiet chuckle, Merlin rolls his eyes skyward, a wry smile pulling at his mouth. "What is it with Pendragon men that you only seem to deal in extremes?" he asks of no one in particular; Arthur scowls up at him, brows knitting together. "You have choices other than executing him and releasing him, Arthur. Caerleon is married, isn't he? He has a queen?"

Still somewhat offended, Arthur nods. He remembers seeing the banns some years ago, when their kingdoms were still at peace with one another. "Yes. Anna? No, Annis," he corrects himself. "We're near enough to the castle." Merlin shrugs, spreading his hands in front of him before resuming his petting. "Take Caerleon back to Camelot with us and send an envoy to Queen Annis. If Caerleon won't treat with us, perhaps she will."

That...doesn't sound entirely unreasonable. He's never met Queen Annis in person, but from what he's heard, she has a reputation of being just and reasonable. Surely he'll be able to speak rationally with her. And it's hardly as though she could declare war on them, not if they hold her king hostage and Caerleon was the aggressor to begin with. "It's not often you're right, Merlin," he says, and Merlin swats his chest, "but for a miracle, you may actually have a good idea. It's too late to do so now, but in the morning, he'll offer the treaty to Caerleon. No doubt the man will refuse, but at least they'll have made the attempt. When he does refuse, then Arthur will have him brought back to Camelot as a hostage and send an envoy to Annis.

Merlin hums and leans over to press a kiss to Arthur's brow.

The prisoners are made to walk back to Camelot. Caerleon is the only exception; Arthur allows the other king to ride Llamrei, surrounded by a cordon of knights to ensure he cannot escape. Ahead of Caerleon, Arthur heads up the party on the Hellion, keeping firm rein on the spotted menace. He makes quite the splendid figure, Merlin muses, bringing up the rear of the party, walking alongside Lancelot. For a prat, that is.

"You do know Flick can carry us both, yes?" Lancelot says in an undertone, glancing down at him. He's uncomfortable with Merlin walking whilst the rest of them ride, as though he is lesser than they are, no better than the prisoners. Even the little scout Cerwin has his own placid donkey.
Merlin shakes his head. "I enjoy walking. But do ask me again if we have to run," he replies, earning a snort out of the knight. "Tell me, what do you think of this?"

Lancelot gives a thoughtful hum, winding the loose ends of Flick's reins through his hand absentmindedly. It's a moment before he answers, but that is only because he is giving the question due thought. "I believe the king is wise to seek other courses before turning to further bloodshed," he replies at last, carefully measuring his words, aware that there are some unfriendly ears about. Bending slightly in the saddle, he lowers his voice to a murmur, "Did you see Caerleon's face when Arthur said he would send word to his queen?"

"He didn't seem pleased," Merlin replies, not bothering to contain his mirth.

The other man shakes his head slowly, not quite as amused. He taps the ends of the reins against his palm. "More than that. If I had to wager, I would say she doesn't know what he's been doing here. He might not have told her, or at least not the truth of it."

Surprised, Merlin stares at their captive with new curiosity. In his mind's eye, he recalls the events of this morning. When Arthur had announced his plan to entreat Annis to settle terms, Caerleon had looked quietly furious, grinding his teeth so hard it was a miracle none of them had cracked for strain. Merlin had attributed it to displeasure at being kept as a hostage, at being set aside in favour of speaking to his queen, but there'd been more to it, a flicker of somewhat else. He hadn't thought much on it before, but he does now. Guilt, perhaps?

"If that is true," Merlin says slowly, "then Arthur is soon to be the very least of his worries."

Curious glances are cast their way as Lancelot bursts out laughing.
The sound of raised voices is audible in the corridor even before he even reaches Arthur's chamber. Merlin shortens his steps a bit. He's not meaning to eavesdrop, exactly, merely hoping that the conversation will end, and he won't have to interrupt. There are only a few people Arthur would ever argue with in his chambers like this and not in the council hall—Morgana, Leon, and Agravaine. And no matter who it is, he doesn't want to be in the middle of it.

The door of the rooms swings open, and of course, it is Lord Agravaine who strides out, a thunderous expression on his face. Merlin bows as the man passes, even though it burns at everything in him to do so; he keeps his gaze up, however, following the other man. Agravaine gives him a scalding glare in return, lip curling, then continues on his way, passing so close the hems of his jacket brush Merlin's boots. Gripping the edges of the tray tightly, Merlin waits until the sound of footsteps fades before he closes the last of the distance and uses his elbow to nudge open the door. Arthur is seated at the table, elbows on the tabletop and face in his hands, groaning under his breath. "That sounded pleasant," Merlin says with exaggerated cheer.

Dropping hands from his face, Arthur glares at him halfheartedly even as the corner of his mouth twitches, betraying his amusement. "Shut up, Merlin. Uncle wasn't pleased with my decision to keep Caerleon as a hostage. He says Queen Annis could see it as an act of war and summon their army." He draws the tray towards him and automatically swats at Merlin's filching fingers, though they still retreat with a warm slice of bread.

"And executing her husband wouldn't be seen as an act of war?" the young man prompts in return, brows raised. Either he's not as versed in statecraft as he ought to be or there is quite the flaw in Agravaine's logic.

Arthur shrugs, dipping a piece of bread into his soup. "He's concerned. He isn't the only one. Annis has been known to be a fierce woman, and their army is equal in number to ours. Greater, even. If it comes to war..." He shakes his head, forcing himself to swallow. "It'll be a terrible thing."

"Which is precisely why it won't come to that," Merlin reassures. "Have faith, Arthur. You're a better king than you think. You're doing an excellent job. Everyone thinks so."

"Oh?"

He nudges Arthur's arm with his hip as he circles around the king's chair. "Yes, but don't go getting a big head. Your crown scarce fits as it is," he retorts, then yelps when he receives a sharp swat across the back of his thigh in reproof. Moving out of range, he starts gathering up the various clothes scattered around the chamber, wondering not for the first time how Arthur leaves such a trail of disarray in his wake. "Speaking of, how is our unhappy guest? Has Queen Annis responded to your request for terms?"

Whilst the rest of his men have been put into the dungeons, Caerleon has been appointed lodgings more suitable for a royal prisoner in the west tower. It's the most ideal place to keep him, as the single window is too high to jump from, and there is only one stairwell which goes in or out of the tower. It certainly isn't the most luxurious quarters the castle has to offer, but it is still far more than other prisoners are afforded. Lancelot is appointed charge of Caerleon's guard, and the two servants that attend to the captive king have been chosen for their unique skill set—both are watchers for Dara, trained spies he has placed in the royal household. Under Uther's reign, they had reported only to Dara, leaving the man to work on his own, but now they give information to Arthur and even to Merlin and Leon when prudent.
"He remains steadfastly silent, and a rider arrived this morning. She's agreed to meet with me and discuss negotiations, but she refuses to come to Camelot." Arthur can't fault her for that. He wouldn't want to walk directly into the lions' den either, especially since it means that he would have both rulers of Caerleon essentially at his mercy if she did. It's a dishonorable thing to think, but a few members of his council had suggested that very option to him. "And of course, I cannot go to her. Morgana suggests a compromise. We choose a place near the borders, between the kingdoms. Leon agrees it's the best choice, and I agree."

"Have you an idea where?"

Arthur smiles. "I believe I do."

"Look at this place, Mordred. All these years, and it's hardly damaged in the least," Bellegere exclaims in a hushed voice, reaching out to tug insistently at her companion's arm, peering past the rest of the party to get a glimpse of the castle of Fyrien, the legendary stronghold itself. It's situated neatly up against the edge of the cliffs, empty land stretching out from it in every direction. An ideal place for a meeting of two potentially hostile parties, as there's no way for anyone to possibly approach without being seen. Arthur had chosen the place wisely. "I wonder if the tunnels are still there. I imagine they would be. This place was built to withstand everything."

"I don't know, and we are not going to go looking for them," Mordred grumbles in return. "We aren't supposed to be here at all, and I am not about to get in any more trouble just because you want to go climbing about."

She rolls her eyes skyward and swats his shoulder again. "Oh, come on, where is your spirit of adventure?"

He tugs his hood further down over his head; the salt air from the sea plays unholy hell with his hair. "I lost it in the mire with my first pair of boots," he snipes back.

Walking at his other side, Ione scoffs. "I thought your lot was s'posed to be used to livin' outside and all that. Gone soft?"

"I'm more used to living outside than you are, and keep your voice down." Mordred glares and pinches her arm, making her curse. At least once in a day, he wonders why he ever told them he was a Druid. Well, he hadn't exactly told Bellegere. She'd come striding into his chamber without knocking just like she always did, when he didn't have a tunic on, and had seen his tattoo. And of course, she has the tenacity of a terrier with a rat, so lying had been out of the question.

"I think we should at least go look at the tunnels," Bellegere says thoughtfully, ignoring their bickering. "Just to make sure there's nobody lurking about in them. That's how King Uther defeated Caerleon's forces before, you know."

Ione casts her a puzzled look. "I thought they weren't at war then."

She shrugs one shoulder, tugging her hood back into place when the wind tries to snatch it away. Even in servants' clothes, she doesn't want anyone to recognise her. "They were, but not with this one," she replies, then frowns. "See, this is why you shouldn't have the same name as your kingdom, it's confusing. The old king, King Caerleon's father, he was the one who was at war with Uther. After he was defeated here, they made peace with Camelot and the other three kingdoms, but once he died, Caerleon withdrew from the peace."
Mordred makes a face. "You're right, it is confusing."

A horn sends up a call at the fore of the party, and Bellegere's heart leaps in her breast. Seizing hold of Mordred and Ione, she drags them through the party, slipping between the wagons, soldiers, and porters, until they emerge on the other side. "Look, there she is!"

On the far horizon, just coming over the hill, is a second party advancing from the north. She knows they'll number the same—300 strong, soldiers and servants and nobles and knights—as they should, per their agreement. Overhead, banners snap in the breeze, but they don't sport the proud gold-on-red dragon of Camelot. These banners are blue, bearing a snarling black wolf's head. Queen Annis.

"This is going to be fantastic," she whispers.

Mordred groans.

One thing is certain, Arthur thinks as he surveys the main hall. No one can ever say Fyrien did not have a sense of dramatic aesthetic. There's more than enough space in the hall for both their parties to have a seat at the great, long tables which are still intact and useable despite the years. Both had supplied servants to the task of cleaning away the accumulated cobwebs and grime, setting up torches and setting a fire in the great hearth.

When the doors of the great hall open, he rises to his feet, turning to face the Queen of Caerleon for the first time. Annis is a formidable woman of middling years, clad in a deep blue gown with golden embroidery, a drape of rich fur across her shoulders. She wears only a slender circlet on her brow, but Arthur recognises that proud carriage, that air of authority she carries around her. For a brief second, Arthur feels as though he's a boy allowed to dine at the adults' table for the first time, but then his resolve settles firm and steady, steeling up his spine. "Queen Annis," he greets, inclining his head.

She dips her chin as well, though her eyes don't stray from his, green and inscrutable. "King Arthur. Where is my husband?" she asks, gazing at him. Her tone is steady, passably casual even, but he's not fool enough to believe it.

Without taking his gaze from her, Arthur gestures towards Leon; his First Knight bows and leaves the hall, departing through a side door. A moment later, he returns with Lancelot, his guard, and Caerleon. Arthur had sent for a bath and more suitable clothes for the captive king; the first he'd accepted, the second he hadn't. So Caerleon comes before his queen in the same dark, hardy clothes he'd been captured in. They'd been laundered, of course, but that didn't do much for their appearance; in a hall full of polished steel and richly coloured fabrics, he stands out sharply, a vulture in a falconers' mews.

Arthur watches Annis's face as she turns to face her husband. He sees the way her eyes narrow the slightest bit, sees the tightening around her mouth, and he knows that Lancelot was right. Caerleon hadn't told her of his actions against Camelot. Cutting a glance at Caerleon, he sees the way the man's jaw is clenched tight, hands in fists, how he can't quite meet Annis's eye.

"He's been quite intractable," Arthur says lightly. "I do hope you and I may speak more reasonably."

"Of course," Annis replies, her voice smooth and cold as a frozen lake. Her brows lift slightly. "I wouldn't presume to demand the payment before the bargain, however. You may return him to his
holding. I wanted only to see he was unharmed."

"Annis—" Caerleon hisses.

"I warned you nothing good would come from this," she cuts him off. "You brought this solely upon yourself. If you could not come to terms in Camelot, I see no reason why you should make them here."

Arthur conjures no fewer than a dozen horrifyingly uncomfortable images in his head in order to keep from laughing at the expression on Caerleon's face. He might not have been king long, but he is still fairly certain that laughing in the middle of a peace treaty is not conducive to their goal.

Looking as though they're fighting grins of their own, Leon and Lancelot escort Caerleon from the hall, the captive king silently fuming between them.

Once the door closes, Annis turns to him once more. "Shall we begin?"

Arthur draws one of the chairs out from the table for her. "Of course, Your Majesty."

"She agreed to surrender the Burn?" Merlin asks in awe as he unrolls a clean blanket across the bed that's been theirs these past three days. The feather-stuffed pallet hasn't rotted the way straw would, but gods only knew what might've made a home in it. He knows a spell to clear out vermin, but he isn't comfortable doing magic here, outside of Camelot and in a foreign castle full of strangers.

Arthur chuckles as he rolls his left shoulder slowly, easing the ache out of it. "You know, you and Mordred are the only ones I've heard who call it that," he muses, wondering if perhaps that's what the Druids call the river that runs through the province of Everwick. On maps it is dubbed Coldwater, so named because it is fed by snowmelt and is permanently frigid, even in the midst of summer.

"Nothing burns like the cold," Merlin replies loftily. "What else?"

He sits on the edge of the covered bed and tugs off his boots, pitching them aside. "Well, she's only surrendered up to Coldwater. The land on the other side will remain part of Caerleon. It's more than half the province to Camelot, however, so it suits. Some territory along Landshire as well. Mostly forest, but it's good game land. This castle, as well. As of tonight, Merlin, we are now officially back in Camelot." Leaning back on his hands, he tilts his head back to look at Merlin, watching fondly as he pushes open the windows and makes a face at the squeal of the hinges. Apparently the servants who had cleaned the chamber hadn't thought to oil them. His smile fades, however, as he recalls the rest of their meeting. "After we signed the treaty, Annis asked to speak to me privately, told me why Caerleon began raiding the borders," he adds solemnly.

Merlin frowns as well, catching his tone. "What is it?"

"Well, you were right, for a rare miracle," Arthur retorts; Merlin extolls a rather colourful and unlikely depiction of Arthur's intelligence and heritage. Once the brief tirade ends, he continues. "Caerleon was targeting those villages and townships that had belonged to his kingdom before his father's treaty. We thought he was simply taking what valuables they had, but it's more than that. He was after their food stores. I thought they'd hidden it away somewhere, or burnt it, but they were sending it back to Caerleon."

"What for?"
"Blight." Arthur lays back against the bed, staring up at the dust-greyed canopy above him, holes eaten through the thick cloth. "There's been an outbreak of blight in their crops. It spread quickly through a number of fields. They've contained it, burned it out, but...they've lost over a third of their harvest. Entire towns will starve if they can't replace what they've lost."

"By the goddess," Merlin murmurs quietly as he climbs up onto the bed. "But... why would he not simply...I don't know, bargain with one of the other kingdoms? Make trade with the merchants from Eire? You've said yourself they have quarries of good stone, mines. They're not lacking for material to trade."

He closes his eyes and moves further up onto the bed, reclining back to let his head rest on Merlin's stomach. Even after so many years, he is still betimes amazed by Merlin's ability to be so sagacious and yet still callow. "It isn't as simple as that," he sighs, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Just what part isn't simple?"

Merlin retorts. "Your people are starving; you find a way to get them food."

Arthur opens his mouth to insist, no, it isn't that simple, though Merlin clearly isn't understanding, but closes it again, knowing they'll just end up arguing in circles that way. A memory stirs in his mind, snow in summer and the smell of the sea. "Do you recall the unicorn?" he prompts instead and Merlin makes an affirmative sound. "When our harvest died, what did my father do?"

The younger man is quiet a moment. "He chose to stop giving out rations, reserved it for the army," he says at last, his voice quiet but beginning to understand.

"You asked me the same question then you're asking now. I asked it of my father as well. Do you remember what he told me?"

"That he would sooner starve than beg for help."

Arthur hums. "Just so. Caerleon is a proud man." He almost understands it, at least in part. A ruler cannot be seen as weak to others; to do so courts trouble of all ilk. Cenred had planned to invade when Father was weak, occupied with the issue of the Feorrans and Morgana's slow slide towards death. And yet, how can one think of personal pride whilst the people they're sworn to protect starve? A ruler serves their people just as the people serve them, and he is no Hellene deity to rule a kingdom of the dead. Merlin had said it himself when they captured Caerleon—compassion can be its own strength. The virtue of mercy.

Merlin makes a sound of derision, stroking a hand through Arthur's hair. "Damned fools," he mutters. "Royal damned fools. Well, what do you mean to do?"

Arthur lets out another sigh, rubbing a hand over his face. "I don't know. I'm going to speak to Uncle and the others in the morning. We might be here another few days." He sighs and sits up, turning over to crawl closer to Merlin, looking down into his face. "You would help them, wouldn't you?"

The young man sighs, reaching up to toy with the pendant dangling around Arthur's neck, tracing along the sun's rays. "Nobody deserves to starve. No matter who they are or which kingdom they live in. Yes. I would," he agrees, then drops his hand, gazing up into Arthur's face. The pendant swings, winking gold in the candlelight, reflected in his eyes, so dark they hardly seem blue at all. "But it isn't as simple as that, is it?" He turns over and blows out the candle.
"If we get lost down here, I want you to know that I truly will kill you," Mordred says, voice hushed as to not echo so loudly in the tunnels.

"Craven." Ione flicks a small stone at him, and he makes a rude gesture towards her, which she returns. She starts to climb up a jutting shelf of stone, ascending upwards like some giant's staircase. Mordred stands below her, giving her a helpful shove upwards when she falters, even as she curses at him.

Bellegere turns back to look at them, already having climbed up onto the shelf above them. In her loose trousers, grubby tunic, and frayed jerkin, she looks more herself than she does in silk and brocade. "We aren't going to get lost. I've been marking our way," she reminds him, holding up a piece of chalky white stone. At every branching path and turn, she'd used it to scratch marks on the darker stone of the tunnel walls so they might retrace their steps. "And even if we do, you can use your magic to call to Merlin, and he'll come find us."

Grasping a jut of stone, Mordred braces one foot against a boulder and hoists himself up, carefully seeking out hand- and toeholds in the tunnel wall to climb up. "And if that happens, we are all three of us going to be in an unholy amount of trouble," he grumbles under his breath. For all she is his friend, he believes Bellegere sometimes forgets that neither he nor Ione are first cousin to the King. Mordred knows Arthur's passing fond of them, but he isn't willing to gamble on it as easily as Bellegere. Not to mention, if they are caught, Merlin won't be pleased with them, either. He has no great desire to earn the discontent of Emrys, though Merlin's disappointment is just as disheartening. The two are wholly separate from one another.

Under any other circumstances, he would be more than happy to explore the tunnels. He had been born in a cavern like this in the White Mountains, and he feels at ease in the deep places of the earth. Even though the tunnels have been crudely dug, he can still feel the difference between them and natural caverns. Walls made by man are always separate from those formed by nature. However, this surely isn't the time to do it, when there is half a castle's worth of strangers above them. Queen Annis has already signed the treaty with Arthur, though they're still in discussions over something, but that doesn't mean they should simply drop their guard around Caerleon's soldiers. Their king had been furious, and that anger hadn't dissipated in the least. Who knew if he would even honour his queen's agreement with Arthur?

As they approach another rise of stone, Bellegere nudges him. "Are you angry with me?"

"No," Mordred answers. "I worry, nothing more." It's only partly untrue.

"You fret like a fishwife is what you do."

He elbows her side. "And if I did not, then you would have probably been caught half a hundred times already. You don't plan through things. You need to learn patience, Lady Belligerent."

She wrinkles her nose. "You sound like my tutors," she retorts, then grasps at the stone and begins to climb.

Mordred waits until she gains the lip of the shelf, biting back the sharp rise of temper. If only she knew. He imagines that not having to grow up as a hunted breed gives her the luxury of impatience. He hadn't been allowed to be playfully reckless as she is, not if he wanted to keep his head attached to his neck.

"You're good at this. Are you sure you aren't a squirrel?" Bellegere poses as he gains the lip of the shelf, both quicker and neater than she or Ione had.
He snorts and rolls his eyes skyward, deciding it isn't prudent to tell her that whenever she is at her lessons or away doing whatever it is noble girls do, he makes it his business to scale the castle walls and explore the rooftops.

"I see light," Ione says from ahead of them, craning her neck to peer upwards. Sure enough, there's light coming from above, enough to illuminate her face and play strange tricks in the red-gold of her hair.

Bellegere grins victoriously as she comes to her maidservant's side, tilting her head back as well. "This must be the way into the castle. What part of it do you suppose we're under?"

Mordred joins them and peers upwards. Though the tunnel dead-ends horizontally, it takes a sharp turn upwards now, a wide shaft that goes upwards. In the sides of the shaft, he can see regularly spaced apertures gouged out of the stone. A stone ladder. It'll make for an easy climb, even for clumsy Ione. Over the sound of their hushed voices, debating what part of the castle they'll emerge into, another sound reaches his ears.

"Did you hear that?" he murmurs, grasping Bellegere's arm. Beyond the meagre light of the small lightstone he had brought in lieu of a torch, the tunnels stretch away into darkness, different from the dark of night, a living blackness that has never seen the light of day.

"Hear what?" Bellegere asks, brow furrowed as she looks in the direction he faces.

"I don't know. Something moving." Sound can do strange things underground, he knows, but he had certainly heard movement.

"Rats," Ione declares confidently.

Mordred shakes his head, gripping the lightstone tighter in hand. "Larger than that."

For a moment, they're all silent, listening. There is no sound other than their own breathing and the occasional scutter of vermin elsewhere in the darkness, the faint drip of water and the far-off moan wind over the mouth of the tunnels. "There's nothing there," Bellegere reassures him, though there isn't quite as much confidence colouring her tone now. "Come on. We've been down here too long, you're losing your wits."

Mordred nearly snaps that he does not lose his wits in places of the earth but bites his tongue. The sooner they're out of here, the better. "Fine. Stand aside. I'll go first," he says instead.

"Why you?" Ione retorts, propping her fists on her hips.

"Because I am the best climber of the three of us, and if there's something blocking the way out, I'll be able to move it better than you two. Here, just hold this and wait for my signal." He hands over the lightstone. Stooping down, he scoops up a hand of the fine, powdery loess that dusts the floors of the caverns, dusting his hands with it before he reaches for the first of the handholds in the wall, beginning the ascent.

The shaft isn't small, no doubt made for grown men carrying arms, so he has ample room to move about. Just to see if he can, he reaches out as far as he can with one arm, keeping the other holding tight on the wall, and he cannot touch the opposite wall of the shaft. Uther's army probably could've hoisted an entire wagon this way, he muses as he continues climbing upwards. The higher he goes, the clearer the light above him becomes until he's directly beneath it. Carefully, Mordred reaches upwards, feeling out with his fingers, and he finds a smooth lip of stone. When he reaches further, he finds only more empty air. Gripping the edge tight, he climbs up slowly, eyes closed...
and going only on his touch; light can play tricks as well as sound. There's room enough for him to climb up, and once he's pulled himself up, lying on his belly on the stone, he opens his eyes and looks around. The shaft leads into another small tunnel, more of a hollow than a proper tunnel, and the light comes from a metal grate set in the top of it. He eases himself forward and peers up, looking through the cross-set bars. Smooth stone walls, manmade; the corner of a dusty, moth-gnawed tapestry; a stairwell.

Despite his earlier protestations, he feels a bright stab of victorious glee in his chest. They'd found the way into the castle.

Scooting closer, he starts feeling around the edges of the grate, grinning wider when he feels a set of catches, one on each side of the grate. Unfastening them is no easy task, as they've been left unmoving for however many years, flakes of rust sifting down as he turns them loose; when he pushes up on the grate, however, it lifts with surprising ease, and he slides it aside, poking his head out of the opening.

The grate is set in a small alcove in what looks to be a servants' stairwell, narrow and poorly lit. For a span of heartbeats, he strains his ears to listen for any signs of movement. When he hears none, he retreats back into the hollow. There's just room enough for him to turn around.

At the bottom of the shaft, he can just make out Bellegere and Ione, lit by the glow of the lightstone. Mordred tugs his whistle free from his tunic and blows on it thrice, two short and one long note, echoing softly in the shaft. If it'd been a huntsman's horn instead of a birdbone whistle, it would've been the call to advance. A heartbeat of quiet, and then he hears a responding whistle from below.

Wriggling backwards, he climbs up out of the hollow, standing in the stairwell. It seems to take a small eternity for the girls to emerge, but soon enough, Ione's head and shoulders pop up out of the hole like a rabbit emerging from its warren, a victorious grin on her face. Mordred helps her up and out, and no sooner than she clears the hole does Bellegere emerge as well, wriggling out without waiting for assistance.

"This is the best day," she whispers gleefully, sliding the grate back into place. She tosses the lightstone into his hands. "Come on, let's find out where we are and get back to camp."

"Agreed," Mordred murmurs. He whispers the charm to extinguish the stone's light and drops it into his pocket, following her as they start down the staircase, Bellegere leading the way.

At the foot of the staircase, she comes to an abrupt stop, so sudden he collides with her back and nearly unbalances her, having to clutch the back of her jerkin to keep her upright. Not that she notices. She's gone stiff as a stone, and through the hand on her back, he can feel her trembling. "Bellegere? What is it?" he whispers, feeling Ione tug at his sleeve curiously. When she doesn't reply, he tugs at her jerkin again, this time moving her sideways so he can peer around her, the staircase too narrow to move around her easily. His breath seizes in his throat.

On the landing at the bottom of the stairs, a young man is lying on the floor. At first glance, it almost looks as though he's simply decided to cease in his duties and take a brief doze on the landing. Except his face is discoloured, his open eyes bloodied red and unseeing, and around his throat is a bloody band of raw flesh, raked with scratches.

Even as he reaches out to touch his thoughts to Merlin's, Mordred thinks in a strange, detached way that all he'd wanted to do this morning was go down to beach and look for cockles.
"Report," Arthur orders firmly, staring at Hunith and Leon. He paces the length of his temporary chambers, unable to force himself to keep still. Behind them, Merlin leans against the wall beside the doors, quarterstaff in hand; he's holding an enchantment over the chambers, ensuring that their private words remained private.

Hunith steps forward first. "Whoever strangled the man was quick about it and didn't hesitate. He didn't have time to get his hands up, which means it's likely he didn't see it coming at all. The other marks on his throat are likely self-inflicted. He tried to pull it loose, scratched himself," she adds quietly. "The wound is clean, so I doubt it was rope. Something smoother. Silk, maybe. Or steel thread."

"Steel thread?" Arthur echoes.

Here, Leon interjects. "I've heard of it, though I have never seen it with my own eyes. Smiths work steel out thin and fine until it's no thicker than a thread, braid strands together to make a cord. I imagine it'd make quite a deadly weapon in creative hands. Sire, do you believe it possible that any of Caerleon's people are responsible for this? I understand the king wasn't pleased with the terms of the treaty."

Pacing the length of his chambers, Arthur shakes his head, making a dismissive gesture with one hand. "He wasn't, but he gave me his word that he would uphold it. We've already secured trade with them," he replies shortly. "If Caerleon wanted someone dead, why would he have a camp porter strangled in a servants' stairwell? No, this was done by one of our own. Did you find anything in his belongings?"

"No, sire," Hunith replies.

Arthur stops a moment, biting the knuckle of his forefinger, a nervous habit he only ever indulges in private. "Dismissed. Say nothing of this to anyone, understand? Hunith, if you find anything else, come to me immediately. Leon, find my cousin and her maidservant and Mordred, and you keep them under your personal guard. They are not to go anywhere else unescorted. No one speaks to them except myself, Hunith, or Merlin," he orders brusquely.

"Sire." Leon bows and Hunith curtsies, taking their leave.

Once the door shuts behind them, Merlin reaches out to set the crossbar in place. "You knew him?" he asks in a soft voice. When they had been shown the strangled man, Arthur had looked too shocked, gone too pale for it to be a stranger.

Arthur slows his pacing a moment, his gaze flicking to Merlin, and there's something like guilt there. "Yes. His name is Tal. Talorcan. He's one of Dara's. When I…when I went to the Pavilion, Tal…" He sketches a gesture in the air.

Merlin takes his meaning. "That's all you know him from? He didn't work in the castle?"

"No, no. I've only seen him twice, that first night I went there and when I went to speak to Dara, after you'd left for Silverpine. He was standing attendant then. I don't understand," Arthur says softly, running a hand back through his hair. He stops pacing and drops down into a chair, shaking his head. "Tal…he worked for Dara, but I can't imagine he could know anything that would warrant this." Tal's only purpose here in the camp at all was to listen for any stirrings of trouble, to gauge the level of hostility or goodwill amongst Annis's party, not to actively infiltrate.

Merlin moves closer, reaching out to run a hand over Arthur's back in quiet comfort even as his mind turns, trying to understand. No matter how distasteful some might consider Dara's business,
he knows that the man would never let any of his workers get into something so dangerous without giving him some kind of protection or telling someone. He had only a handful of spies allowed to take on dangerous assignations, and this Talorcan certainly wasn't one of them.

Someone knocks on the door of the chamber, making them both startle from their thoughts. Merlin withdraws his hand and goes to the door to remove the crossbar; Arthur rises from his seat, gathering himself. "Enter."

They both relax slightly, when Bellegere edges in, her face drawn and pale. Behind her stands Leon, with Mordred and Ione lurking further behind him. "She asked to speak to you privately, sire," he explains.

Arthur nods and waves a hand; Leon withdraws and closes the door, leaving her alone in the chamber with them.

"What is it, dear heart?" Merlin asks as he returns to Arthur's side, resting a hand on the king's back, a silent reminder to stay calm. He knows Arthur isn't wholly pleased with his young cousin for her deception, though these events have helped check his temper for the time being; Lord Agravaine, however, is furious.

"It's…it's about that man," Bellegere says softly. "The one we found. I…I think I know why someone…" She makes a vague gesture towards her throat, looking faintly ill. For all her belligerence, she is still only four-and-ten and has lived a fairly sheltered life compared to most. Before today, odds are fair she's not seen a dead man.

Arthur softens as well, hearing the tremor in her voice, and he lifts one arm. Bellegere darts across the room to fling herself into his embrace, burying her face against his chest, and Merlin strokes her hair with one hand. "What is it?" Arthur asks gently, lifting her chin with fingertips.

"That man…I saw him earlier. In the camp, this morning before we went down to the tunnels," Bellegere explains, straightening up and turning to look at Merlin. "I thought he was you, at first. I didn't see his face clear, and I-I thought he was you." Her chest heaves rapidly, eyes wide and overbright, voice climbing in volume and pitch. "I called him by your name, Merlin. In front of all those people, I called him your name, and now he's dead."

Arthur hushes her gently, stroking her hair again, and she shudders, hands over her face. Over the top of her head, he meets Merlin's gaze, sees the same grim understanding in his manservant's expression. Talorcan did look like Merlin. If one wasn't familiar with either of them, he could see how it could possible to mistake them, especially in a dimly lit stairwell. And if Bellegere had addressed Talorcan by Merlin's name in the midst of a crowded camp, it'd be all the easier to confuse the two.

No one had intended to kill Tal at all.

They had been after Merlin.
The journey back to Camelot passes swiftly, and though everyone else in their party is quite happily celebrating their alliance with Caerleon, Arthur is quiet. It's late enough that he can get away with not having on his courtier's mask, as Merlin phrases it. As they make the square and begin to dismount and unload, he takes Merlin by the arm and draws him near. "Here." Arthur presses the sealed case holding the treaty into his hands, reaching down to take a key from his belt. "Take this down to the vaults and speak to Morgana. Tell her what's happened."

"What are you going to do?" Merlin wonders.

"Speak to Dara. He deserves to know as well, and he might be able to say something of this."

"Wait." Merlin catches him by the wrist before he turns away and presses the case back towards him. "You take this and speak to Morgana. I'll go, and I'll bring Dara to your study," he murmurs. He can see Arthur's hesitation, clearly reluctant to have him off on his own when there is more than likely an assassin seeking him, but he squeezes the king's wrist gently. "Go see the council to the castle and speak to Morgana. You shouldn't be seen at the Pavilion now." After a successful treaty like this, Arthur needs to be seen in the castle with his sister and the court, helping to extinguish any doubts of his ability to be an effective diplomat and conciliator. Now that he was king, he'd be under closer scrutiny than before, and he can't be seen slinking off to a bordello immediately upon return to the city. Merlin knows every hidden passage and stairwell; getting Dara into the castle unseen will be a simple enough task.

After a moment's hesitation, Arthur closes his hand around the key and nods. "Very well. There and directly back," he adds on sharply.

Under any other circumstances, the tone would've rankled—being spoken to as if he's a small child and not a man grown. However, he knows Arthur is both angry and uneasy over the events at Castle Fyrien, and it makes him snappish. Therefore, Merlin doesn't argue and dips his chin in acquiescence. "Of course, sire."

In the midst of the bustle, it's easy for him to slip out of the square and make his way through the upper city towards the Pavilion, moving through the narrow alleys between buildings to keep from being spotted by any of the nobles. When he comes to the back of the walled garden behind the Pavilion, Merlin backs up a few paces and makes a sprint towards the wall, managing to scramble up and over without falling, though he does manage to scrape both his shins getting over. There's a young man in the garden tending to a bed of flowers, and he yelps loudly when Merlin drops to the ground in front of him. "I'm here to speak to Dara," he says.

The young man gapes at him a moment, then bobs his head, pointing towards the doors. "Yes, my lord. He's in his study."

"Thank you." Merlin crosses the garden, leaving the young man blinking bemusedly after him.

Dara is at his desk writing in his ledgers when Merlin walks in, and he smiles as he sets aside the quill, though there's a small crease between his brows as well. "I wasn't expecting you so soon after arriving, my friend," he observes. "I trust you were successful?"

"We were, but…" Merlin takes a breath and lets it out slowly, sickly-hot guilt twisting in his belly. "Arthur needs to speak to you. Privately. I'm to show you to the castle."
The other man gazes at him for a moment as though he's looking all the way down through Merlin, but if he sees aught amiss, he doesn't say anything of it. Rising from his desk, he takes down a cloak with a deep hood, drawing it on. "Lead the way, then."

There's a door that lets out to the rear of the building for the discretion of certain patrons. When they gain the castle, Merlin waits until there's a moment of stillness before leading Dara through the hidden door in the larder of the kitchens. The passage is narrow enough that they have to walk single-file, turned slightly sideways because the walls are too close for them to stand full forward. "I've never known this was here," Dara murmurs interestingly.

"Nobody does, save me." Thank you for that, Cornelius. He keeps hold of Dara's wrist in the darkness, counting steps and turns. Reaching out, he presses his free hand against the wall, tracing along the cool stone until he feels the engravings etched deep there, marking the exit. He pushes the false wall out and open, blinking in the light as they step out into the King's study.

"Sit down if you'd like. I'll go and find Arthur. He's gone to take the treaty down to the vaults and to speak with the council," Merlin says as he slides the false wall back into place, hearing it settle with a quiet rasp of stone; Dara sits in one of two chairs set before Arthur's desk, folding his cloak over his lap. He slips out of the study and starts in the direction of the council hall, knowing Arthur's most likely to be there. However, when he rounds the corner, he nearly runs full-front into his king, both of them chuckling at each other in surprise.

Arthur gives him a faint smile. "I've sent the treaty to Geoffrey to be preserved in the vaults, and I've told Morgana we'll have a proper meeting of the council tomorrow, once everyone's rested. They were pleased to see me." The way he says it, that faintly begrudging tone, is his way of admitting that Merlin was right without actually having to say the words, the stubborn prat. It makes Merlin smile as well.

"Dara is waiting for you in the study. Will you require my services any further, sire?" he asks, tacitly asking to be dismissed, and Arthur's expression darkens. Before the other man can voice the protest he already knows is coming, Merlin adds in a lower voice, "I'm going home with Leon, to ward the townhouse." When Arthur only scowls, even though they stand in the middle of the corridor where anyone might come 'round and see, he lifts one hand and sifts his fingertips through the fringe of golden hair, just brushing the frown lines on Arthur's brow. "I won't be afraid to set foot in my own home, and you cannot let this rattle you. I'll be fine."

Arthur takes a deep breath and lets it out in a sharp huff, then nods, drawing up his shoulders. "Very well. I'll see you in the morning," he replies, sounding properly himself again for a moment.

"Goodnight, sire." Glancing about to ensure they are still alone, Merlin takes Arthur's head between his hands, leans up, and kisses his brow, quick and darting.

Arthur gives him a halfhearted push backwards even as the tips of his ears turn pink. "Off with you," he grumbles, and Merlin chuckles, quickly leaping away from the playful swat aimed at him.

Once the sound of footsteps fades down the corridor, Arthur takes a deep breath to settle himself, the brief flutter of happiness evaporating, squares his shoulders, and goes into his study. Dara looks as lovely as he ever does, hair loose over his shoulders, and he holds his cloak draped over his lap, prim as any courtier. There's a small frown lingering at the corners of his mouth, however; he's more than intelligent enough to know that this isn't a pleasant conversation to be had between friends. Arthur takes the chair beside Dara rather than the one behind his desk proper, and as soon as he does, words escape him entirely.

It isn't a question, but he jerks his chin once. "Tal was murdered at the signing. An assassin's work. We believe someone mistook him for Merlin."

The other man inhales sharply, fingers tightening nigh imperceptibly around the folds of his cloak.

"I am so very sorry," Arthur murmurs, and the words leave a bitter taste in his mouth with their pathetical inadequacy. "Did he have any family?"

"None but us." Sinking back in the chair, Dara closes his eyes for a moment, the muscles in his throat working as he swallows hard. After a moment of quiet, he straightens and turns his deep gaze back to Arthur. "You believe that the assassin was after Merlin. Tell me."

"You don't have to do this now…."

The other man waves a hand, dismissing Arthur's protest. "No, no, this helps. I can do no more for Tal now, except to find his murderer and bring him peace that way, and if there is danger, I need to tell my people," he insists. "Pray go on."

Arthur does. He explains all that had happened during the treaty, or at least, near as he can remember it all, how Tal had been found by Bellegere, their suspicions and worries.

When he runs out of words, Dara reaches up to press a hand over his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply. "All right. Very well. I agree that Merlin was the more likely target. For now, let's not look at what has happened but what was meant to happen. I know you have lovers' bias, but I trust in your ability to dissemble. Try to set aside what you feel for Merlin now and look at it from an outsider's point of view," Dara instructs firmly, and Arthur nods. He's not sure how well he'll do, but he'll try. Drumming his fingers against the arm of the chair, Dara says carefully, "Was Tal killed before the treaty was signed?"

Arthur recalls just how long Hunith had said the lad had been dead and counts back the hours. "Yes. Probably the night before."

"Mm. If you had been unable to find Merlin that morning, you would've sent someone to look for him?"

"Of course I would've, I…." Arthur trails off faintly, breath catching in his throat as things begin to unfold in front of his eyes, like a length of thread being unspooled, coming closer to the needle at the end. Merlin had been with him all that day, both easing his nerves and raising his confidence for what would be his first major act as king. If he had just up and vanished, then Arthur would've turned the castle upside down to find him, knowing damn well Merlin wouldn't leave him without reason. And if he had found Merlin dead…. He forces a deep breath, letting it out gradually. Focus. Set it aside. He wouldn't have suspected anyone from their own party; he would've been suspicious of the others first. "They were trying to stop the signing. They wanted to cast suspicion on Annis and her people," he declares.

Dara nods slowly, having watched Arthur intently as his mind churned, no doubt waiting to see where he arrived. "And who would you have blamed? Who in the queen's party would've had a reason to harm Merlin?"


The other man nods again, gaze dark and intent. "Just so."

He presses both hands over his face as he leans back in his chair, pressing the heels of his hands
against his closed lids until red spots bloom behind them. Someone hadn't just tried to scupper the 
peace talks, they might have provoked an outright war between the kingdoms. Tense as things had 
been, it wouldn't have taken much of a spark to ignite them. And other than that, it means that there 
is very likely a traitor in their midst, working against them. "Dara," he mutters without pulling his 
hands away from his eyes, head resting against the chairback. "We have a great deal to discuss."

"How are your charges?" Merlin asks as he rubs an oiled cloth over the tangled straps of his dagger 
sheathes, Allegra's heavy head resting on his thigh. His kit is all spread out on the rug in front of 
the hearth, the daggers laid out in a row on his other side like a string of glittering silver teeth. The 
routine is comforting to him, the reassurance of a task unchanged, especially now that he's 
carefully woven protective magics around the townhouse.

Leon stretches his legs out towards the fire, shaking his head and taking a sip of perry. "Miserable, 
the three of them." He'd been given charge of Bellegere, Ione, and Mordred for the entirety of the 
journey home, and none of them had dared to so much as look in the wrong direction under his 
guard. Having grown up with a younger sibling, particularly one like Merlin, he is quite immune to 
sad eyes and coaxing words, and he has acquired quite the skill in managing troublesome young 
ones. "Lord Agravaine's ordered her confined to her chambers for now. He's not even letting Ione 
see her." He leans forward, elbows on his knees, cup cradled between his hands. "What do you 
intend to do about your 
ward?"

Merlin lays out the last of the straps and picks up a whetstone instead, reaching for the first of his 
daggers absentmindedly. It's strange to think of Mordred as his ward when they're near enough in 
age to be siblings, and yet the lad is his responsibility, not only as his elder but at his teacher and 
protector as well. "I don't know yet," he admits, his gaze flicking unconsciously towards the 
ceiling, Mordred's bedchamber being just above them. "I'll think of something. They were foolish."

Mouth twisting wryly, Leon chuckles and shakes his head. "To hear such coming from you…oh, 
how things do change," he remarks.

"I never smuggled myself along on a political mission I was expressly forbidden from attending," 
Merlin protests, staring at his brother indignantly. Alright, he'd gotten himself into a few… 
interesting situations as a child, but not like this.

"No, but I do seem to recall a certain venture in which we visited a set of ruins known for housing 
wyverns, and no sooner does Father tell you not to go off alone, you up and vanish for hours, only 
to come back to camp after dusk, barefoot, covered head to toe in scratches, and hauling a lamed 
wyvern pip along with you, begging Father to let you keep it because it'd been so cruelly 
abandoned."

A hot flush creeps up the side of his neck and burns in his cheeks and ears. "That happened once, 
and I was nine."

"And then there was that one time with Allegra and Sir Horas—"

"Sir Horror deserved that."

"Naturally, I could never forget the incident with the frogs—"

"Alright, alright, alright!" Merlin cuts him off, raising his voice over his brother's laughter. He 
balls up the oiled rag he'd used to clean his kit and pitches at Leon's face, laughing in vengeful glee 
when the rag falls right into Leon's cup. Sighing softly as his mirth fades, he picks up the
whetstone again and turns a dagger over in his hand. "I'll think of something," he repeats.

The most efficient punishment Lionel and Evaine had ever visited upon him was to bar him from his yew tree and his secret cave. They couldn't forbid his magic, of course, but they'd cut him off from the wild places he loved best. He'll have to do the same, granted in a different way. Mordred loves climbing. The boy's agile as a squirrel and spends almost as much time on the rooftops as those ravens of his. Merlin supposes he'll have to keep the boy from the roofs and ramparts for a time, ban him from the mews. It'll make him miserable, but it'll serve to make the point.

Leon chuckles and settles back in his chair, looking down into his cup with a small pout. Setting it aside, he rises to his feet and carefully steps over the row of blades on the rug. He reaches down to ruffle the top of Merlin's hair. "You'll manage him, villain. I've managed with you, at any rate."

"Ass."

"I love you too."

Almost as soon as he finishes breakfast with Elfgifa, Sam, and Beryl, Mordred is summoned to the library by Allegra nudging at his legs, sitting beside his chair and gazing at him intently with her wise brown eyes. Rising from the table, he follows Merlin's familiar through the townhouse into the library; Merlin is sitting at his desk penning a letter, half-hidden behind his books. That desktop has never once been clear as long as Mordred's been living here. Allegra lopes around to lay at her master's feet. Coming to stand in front of the desk, he clasps his hands behind his back and ducks his head, waiting for his punishment. He knows it's coming, certainly. Both Bellegere and Ione had been reprimanded—Bellegere more so because she is responsible for Ione—but he knows his chastising will come from Merlin, who is responsible for him.

"You know that what the three of you did was foolish and dangerous?" Merlin prompts without looking up from his writing. "You could've been lost down there. There might've been traps left behind. Wild beasts. More than that, you might have been discovered by someone that could've treated you far less than kindly. What if you had come across the person who murdered Talorcan? Do you think they would've treated you any differently?"

Mordred winces. "I'm sorry," he murmurs. "I know it wasn't wise, but..." He closes his mouth before he can say that it'd been Bellegere's idea. It didn't matter. It'd been her idea, but he'd gone along with her and hadn't done anything to stop her. It's just as much his fault. "I shouldn't have done it."

Merlin nods. "You'll not climb on the rooftops or the ramparts, nor will you visit the mews. I'm certain Mother and Gaius have plenty of tasks suited to a young man like yourself."

Which means he'll be scrubbing the floor of the physicians' chamber and scouring the leech tank, but that is still secondary to the first part. No climbing. No birds. If Merlin means to punish him, daresay he's done well in it. "May I...?" Mordred begins to ask, then finds his voice faltering when Merlin's head raises to gaze at him with silent inquisition, one eyebrow cocked. Swallowing hard, he gathers up his courage again and says, "May I at least see to Kala? She doesn't enjoy being handled by strangers, and Bellegere is not allowed to fly her. Ione doesn't know how to hawk."

Merlin stares at him for a long moment, then sighs softly. "Very well. Kala only, no more than an hour, and I will speak to the falconer if I must. Now sit down. You've been falling behind in your lessons." He gestures to the table. A space has been cleared and set with sheets of blank parchment, a quill and ink, and a book. "Start translating," he instructs. "I've marked the pages where you'll
Mordred takes his seat obediently, opening the book. He recognises Cornelius Sigan's writings, though it's written in Hellene, and despite the general unpleasantness of the day, he brightens somewhat. Merlin had made a set of fair copies of Sigan's works and gifted them to Iseldir years ago when they brought Morgana to learn with him under Necthana. He hadn't been allowed to look at any of them then, as the elders all agreed they were too powerful for one so young. However, Merlin has begun letting him study some of the lesser magics, saying that he's powerful enough to at least make a start. They've not actually practiced any of them yet, but he's still allowed to learn the incantations and memorise the rituals.

After two pages, he stops to shake the ache out of his hand. "Emrys?" he ventures. "Did you learn anything about who might've killed Talorcan? Did Dara tell Arthur anything?"

"I've told you to call me Merlin, and what do you know about Dara?" the other man asks, eyes narrowed slightly.

Mordred shifts a little on the stool. "I know he owns the Pavilion," he replies carefully, "and I know that Talorcan worked for him." He doesn't quite want to say that he'd once snuck into the Rising Sun with Gwaine and had heard some of the more inebriated patrons speculating on whether or not the nobles bedded the same courtesans as the commoners or if Dara…serviced them personally. The matter of Talorcan working for him, well…Mordred is used to noticing small details, subtle signals like what his own people use to recognise one another without drawing attention from unfriendly eyes. He's noticed that some members of the royal household have anemone flower tokens on their person, just like the flowers that are planted in all the window boxes of the Pavilion.

Merlin chuckles softly. "Yes, that's right. He's also called the Whoremaster of Spies." He braces his elbows on the desktop and laces his fingers together beneath his chin, a thoughtful expression on his face; Mordred waits to see if he'll be told anything more. "Dara and Arthur…they both believe that whoever murdered Talorcan mistook him for me. Bellegere was right in that. However, they don't believe it was meant against me, personally. It was done with the intent of halting the peace treaty and inciting war between Camelot and Caerleon instead, and I was simply the easiest target which would achieve that goal, compared to Arthur himself or any of the nobles."

That…makes sense, in its way. Merlin is the King's manservant, and even though Mordred cannot imagine anyone trying to attack Emrys, someone who didn't know about his magic might take him for a safer target than a well-seasoned warrior. "So the danger is passed?" he asks, hopeful.

"I don't believe it's gone entirely. Like as not, there is a traitor here in Camelot working against us. However, I doubt they will make the same attempt twice. And they have quite a serious disadvantage." Merlin straightens in his chair, and the air around him seems to glimmer darkly, drawing closer to him like an unseen cloak. Mordred's skin prickles with the strength of the magic rolling off the other man. "I know about them now, and they do not know about me."

Mordred grins.

When he's turned loose from his lessons, he's sent promptly along to Gaius and Hunith, appropriated as their dogsbody for the day. Sure enough, one of his first tasks is to scour the leech tanks. As a Druid, he believes that all forms of life have their purpose, even ones seen as unpleasant or wicked. That being said, however, he is quite certain that leeches are some kind of sadistic jest on nature's part and wishes they weren't so damned useful to a physician because he could absolutely go without ever handling one again in his entire life.
"Here, lad. I'll set them back to rights," Gaius says, taking mercy on him. "You can, however, deliver these to the proper persons. I'm afraid my knees aren't what they used to be, and there are more stairs in this citadel than there should rightly be."

"Agreed." Mordred slides the strap of the physician's bag over his head, holding the small bag gently to keep the bottles from clattering against each other as he leaves the physicians' chamber. He imagines that sooner rather than later Gaius will be retiring and Hunith will be Royal Physician. The man is old enough to have retired twice by now, and there's always a time when elders must pass on their mantle. Perhaps once he's free of his duties, he might go to one of the Druid camps. In the days before the Purge, Gaius practiced magic of great healing, an ollamh in his own right. He would certainly be welcome with their healers.

As he starts up the first of many stairs, Mordred pauses. Merlin has forbidden him from climbing on the rooftops and visiting the mews but not from visiting Bellegere. He's not spoken to her since they left Castle Fyrien. After a moment's debate, he starts in the direction of Bellegere's chamber. She's still under confinement by order of her lord father, though she's at least allowed Ione's company again. He won't stay, of course. He'll just…stop by before he begins his deliveries, let her know that he's looking after Kala, nothing more.

A hand lands on his shoulder, yanking him to a halt sure as a lead on a lymer, and his pulse leaps fearfully when he turns to face the owner of the hand: Lord Agravaine's manservant. Sayer looms behind him like a skeletal grey shadow, his slate coloured eyes seeming unnaturally pale and bright in his dark face, sharp features arrayed in a scowl. "I-I was—I was just…" Mordred stammers. The hand tightens on his shoulder, fingertips digging in painfully underneath his collarbone; his magic flares in quiet alarm. "I'll go," he gasps out.

Sayer's hand moves to the nape of his neck instead, turning him back the way he came and giving him a none-too-subtle push towards the stairs. Mordred staggers, barely catching himself before he goes falling headfirst down the steps. He runs a hand over the nape of his neck, feeling the five achy spots where the man's fingertips had dug in, casting a baleful glance back over his shoulder. The mute isn't looking at him any longer however, and is fixing the cuff of his sombre grey coat. A glimpse of scarlet, so bright against the uniform grey of his clothing, catches Mordred's gaze. A bit of red yarn, tied around one bony wrist, visible only for a moment before Sayer tucks the trailing ends back up his sleeve and out of sight.

Mordred rubs sullenly at the other achy spots on his shoulder as he descends the stairs, his magic settling the further away he gets. Crossing the courtyard, he hears the familiar rustle of wings just before small talons land on his shoulder. "Shoo, Calypso," he scolds, trying to shuffle the raven off his shoulder. "I'm being punished, you're not supposed to be here. Don't you have a mate to be tending to?"

"Bow! Bow!" Calypso squawks, ruffling his wings against Mordred's ear and refusing to budge.

"Bow?" He casts a glance around the courtyard in bafflement, wondering who in the world would have a bow in the middle of the main courtyard. The guards on duty wield pikes, not bows. "What bow?" There better not be some idiot taking shots at his ravens. He'll strangle them with their own bowstring.

"Bow!" the bird repeats, flying off Mordred's shoulder and flapping up to the edge of the rooftop above, squawking loudly as if demanding attention.

Mordred stares up at the idiot bird for a moment, then sees an incongruous sparkle of metal next to Calypso. When the raven pecks at it, the metal glint moves. Calypso lets out another raucous cry of, "Bow!" and pecks at the bright gleam again. This time, something falls from the edge of the
roof and onto the stairs below it. Frowning, he crosses the courtyard to see what the feathered fool has gotten into now. He says a string of colourful words, many of which he learnt from Gwaine at the Rising Sun, when he sees what it is—a short birchwood arrow with a steel head. The fletching is all but ruined, but he still recognises the metallic green of peacock. He tilts his head back to look at the roof.

Calypso ruffles his wings insistently. "Bow!"

He heaves a deep sigh, curling his hand around the birchwood shaft. "Yes, yes, I understand. Bow," he grumbles. Great. He's only one day into his punishment, and he's already breaking the rules. Or, at least, he's about to break them. Merlin is going to kill him.

From her window overlooking the courtyard, Morgana watches the people moving about below her. Her gaze tracks the familiar mop of curly hair as Mordred crosses the square, one of his ravens fluttering about after him.

One hand drifts up to touch the hollow of her throat, fingering the small silver pendant the Druids had gifted to her long ago in her learning with the ollamhs, tracing the spirals of the triskele with one fingernail. Warmth tingles in her fingertips as if to reassure her, but the sharp threads of unease won't be so easily plucked from her thoughts. Still, she turns her gaze from the window towards the candles, unlit in the middle of the day. "Byrne," she whispers.

Power tingles across her skin, delicate and light as the tickle of a feather, and the wicks all ignite as one, small flames burning away merrily.

Exhaling in relief, she twitches her fingers; the flames extinguish themselves in a whisper of breeze. Morgana reaches up to rub at her temples. Gaius's mixtures and draughts had done little for her dreams before she had come into her own power. At this point, they'll likely be as effective as water. Still, something must be done.

Withdrawing from the window, Morgana crosses her chambers to her table, gathering a small piece of parchment and a quill. It takes only a simple enchantment to ensure that no unfriendly eyes can read her message, a little trick of her own invention, partly a glamour and partly a notice-me-not charm. After a moment's hesitation, uncertain what to write, she decides not to waste ink on pleasantries and terms of subtlety, penning a swift message. Sprinkling sand over the parchment to dry the ink, she goes to the window once again, this time picking up a small whistle made from the hollow leg bone of a bird. Mordred had gifted it to her, as well as to Arthur, Leon, and Merlin. When she blows it, the sound is high and surprisingly soft. No less than a moment later, one of the boy's ravens arrives on the sill, rasping a greeting in its hoarse voice.

"I have a message for you, my friend," Morgana says softly, collecting the parchment and rolling it up. Coaxing the raven near, she affixes the small message to the brightly woven jess on its leg. Once she's fastened it on securely, she runs one fingertip over the bird's sleek black head, magic breathing over her skin as she murmurs, "Iseldir."

The raven caws in response and opens its wings, taking flight neatly.

She braces both hands on the sill and watches it fly further and further away, until it is no more than a black grain of sand in the sky. Even after it is lost to her sight, she stays there, staring up into the half-clouded sky, the words of her message still running through her mind again and again. A headache throbs dully behind her eyes and at the base of her skull. Gods be good, Iseldir and the elders will have the answer she seeks. If not….
Morgana dreads to know what it means for a seer to stop dreaming.
Mordred has never been beneath the castle before, and he's amazed at how the entire city of Camelot seems to be built on what amounts to an enormous hole in the ground. There's enough space in the caverns beneath the citadel to fit the entirety of the city and a few townships as well, perhaps a dragon or two. He can tell that even though the chambers below have been shaped and smoothed out over the years, nearly all of them were once natural tunnels and caverns. He's still banned from the rooftops, but perhaps now he has new territory to explore. Right now, however, he's trying not to trip on the stairs because they're not all quite uniform in size and spacing. "Where are we going? Uh, my lord?" he asks, glancing back over his shoulder.

"You can call me Arthur, I've told you before," Arthur replies, amused, "and I am taking you to the vaults." Mordred misses a step in surprise, stumbling on the narrow staircase. The man chuckles a little, resting one big hand on his shoulder to hold him steady. "You needn't look quite so nervous. I said the vaults, not the dungeons," he chortles, looking in turn amused and baffled by his reaction; Mordred huffs out an attempt at a laugh that comes out more like a kind of cough. The king tilts his head inquisitively, arching one eyebrow. "What do you believe is down here?"

Mordred darts a sideways glance at him, shrugging his other shoulder noncommittally. He's heard a number of nightmare tales in Druid camps and sorcerers' enclaves about those who weren't sent to the pyre but dragged beneath the castle, kept captive and tormented for information about others of their kind, never to see the light of day again. He just doesn't think it wise to tell Arthur that.

When they reach the thick, heavy doors, Arthur takes a key from the ring on his belt and unlocks them. He has to lean his weight into opening them, proving just how solid they are. Taking a torch from a nearby bracket, he leads Mordred into the vaults. Rationally, he knows it very likely that the tales he's heard are nothing more than tales, and yet a part of him is half-expecting to see cold irons and a whipping cross, maybe the rack or a breaking wheel. Instead, it is almost like entering the library.

The vaults are large yet give the impression of being smaller, the ceiling low but the space itself wide, the far wall so distant it's lost to a murky grey darkness, full of shelves and cupboards, chests and crates, many of them locked. Arthur gestures towards the nearest of the shelves. "These are some of the most important documents of the kingdom. Treaties, maps, things that cannot be left in the library alone. And here, artefacts of Camelot's history." He nods towards the various crates and chests further back into the vaults. "Back here, however, is what I truly want to show you." With his hand on Mordred's shoulder, he steers the young man deeper into the vaults, towards a door that is, startlingly, made of rowan wood and banded with cold iron.

When he opens it, Mordred inhales a sharp breath. Magic. Even down here in the lonely dark, the magic coming from this small room is enough to take his breath away. The power washes over his skin in a roiling bath, just this side of uncomfortably hot, calling out to his own power. For a moment, he's not aware of anything other than all that power, pushing up against him, winding around his limbs, through his hair, into his lungs as he tries to breathe in air that is both too much and not enough, as though it is more solid than it should be.

After a moment, the power begins to recede, and he becomes aware of a hand on his arm, gently shaking him, and Arthur's voice. "Mordred? Can you hear me, whelp? Are you alright?"

"I'm well, sire," he replies, finding his voice. "It was just...unexpected."

"I suppose I should've warned you that this is where we keep the objects of magic claimed in the
Purge," Arthur remarks wryly. "Do you need another moment?"

He shakes his head, reaching up to grasp at his birdbone whistle on reflex, quiet reassurance to himself, then steps forward into the small chamber, following the other man. The shelves in here aren't as full, but there are still dozens of artefacts. Some he can recognise as tools of the High Priests and Priestesses, blessed objects, but there are also weapons, too, the magics woven in them not quite as benevolent. Over the sound of his own heart, he hears a thin, high sound like a tiny crystalline bell being rung. Turning towards the sound, he follows it in to a large piece of white crystal on a cushion. When he realises what it is, he can do no more than stare.

The king follows him over. "You know it?" he asks, nodding towards the stone.

"It's the Crystal of Neahtid," Mordred says in a small voice.

Arthur's brow furrows a little, gazing at the crystal. To him, it's no more than a particularly beautiful piece of stone, though the longer he stares at it, a dull ache begins to form up behind his eyes, flames reflecting in strange patterns on its facets. "What is it used for?" he asks.

"It's hewn from the Crystal Cave," Mordred explains in the same soft, reverent voice. "It's said to be the birthplace of magic. The womb of the earth, where the Triple Goddess gave birth to the first sorcerer. It has the power to present visions to those of great magic. What is, what was, what will be. In the days before the Purge, seers like Morgana and waking dreamers like the ollamh Necthana, they would gaze into the crystal as a test of their ability. If they were truly gifted by the Goddess, then they would be given a true vision, a sign, after which they would begin more serious studies of their art."

"And now?"

"With it lost, those who hope to achieve the gifts of old must now go into the Crystal Cave itself."

Arthur tilts his head, gazing down at the lad. "And is that different?"

A weak laugh escapes his throat. "If you are learning to swim, would you rather be in the shallow end of a calm lake or in the midst of the open sea at storm? Looking through the veils in any direction can be very dangerous. The visions can drive you mad. Most have stopped sending their acolytes into the Cave entirely." He stops there. To explain to Arthur that there are almost no great seers left, that the gift of dreams is all but gone now, would be unnecessarily cruel.

The other man nods slowly, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Well, then I suppose the only answer is to send it along with Morgana to the Druid camp," he decides at last, folding his arms across his chest and smiling.

Mordred makes a sound in his throat akin to a chicken that's had its neck improperly wrung. "You'd return it to us?" Surely he's misheard something. Perhaps all the fermenting magic down here has impaired his hearing.

"I would. Soon the ban of magic will be rescinded entirely, and I intend to make peace with your people, Mordred. What better way of making peace is there than to give back that which was wrongfully taken from them?" Arthur reaches out to take the crystal from its cushion. It's been there so long, there's an outline of it in dust, a patch of brighter fabric where it'd sat. "Perhaps Morgana failing to dream is a sign that this needs to be done, and I am not one to try and strong-arm the Old Religion." He turns the crystal over in his hand a few times, the facets glittering, light swimming in strange patterns over the smooth faces, and blinks a few times, turning his gaze from it and down to Mordred. "Can I trust you to take care of this?"
"Yes, your majesty," he whispers.

"Good lad." He draws out a silken kerchief and wraps the crystal in it before handing it to Mordred. "Now, keep this out of sight and tell no one. I've informed those who need to know, and other than them, it is best kept secret. Now let's get out of here. Dust makes me sneeze."

"Yes, sire." As they leave the close darkness of the vaults once more, Mordred hugs the crystal to his chest, feeling his magic hum along with its ambient power, warm and comforting. A thought occurs to him as Arthur shoulders the heavy doors shut. "Is this why you brought me down here, sire? For this?"

"Quite." Once he's replaced the torch in its bracket, Arthur locks the vaults and returns the key to his belt. "Merlin had suggested that I send one of the artefacts to the Druids as a gesture of peace and goodwill. You're a Druid, so it seemed fitting to ask you which would be appropriate."

"But…why would you not send him with Morgana instead of me?" Mordred is powerful, but he is not Emrys. The crystal will certainly earn Arthur and Camelot a great deal of goodwill amidst the camps, as will Morgana's presence as his ambassador, but for Emrys himself to appear with terms of peace, that'd be something else entirely.

"Why would I send my manservant on a diplomatic mission and not a princess of the blood who is trained in such things?" Arthur prompts in return; Mordred opens his mouth, then closes it again. "Precisely. I would send Merlin, but how would I explain that? Trust me, I'd prefer nothing more than to rescind the ban of magic now and let Merlin be seen for what he is in front of court and kingdom alike, but these things have to be handled delicately."

Mordred makes a face. "Politics."

"Politics," Arthur agrees, sounding a man who fully knows all the intricacies involved in it, and who is also thoroughly exasperated with it. "Twenty years is a long time, and people learn to love their chains. The last thing I want to do is incite an open revolt, which is why I've spent this past year working towards it, to see how it will be received. Insofar, there's been little resistance amongst the commoners. The court seems split, but I believe there are more in favour of magic than those who oppose it." He smiles a little, a tender expression crossing his face for a brief second; no doubt he's thinking of Merlin. As they regain the main corridor, Arthur stops and claps a hand on Mordred's shoulder. "Don't fret on it, hm? Now scurry and make sure you've everything ready for the journey. Keep firm hold of that," he adds in an undertone, casting a pointed glance down at the silk-wrapped crystal clutched in Mordred's hands.

"I give my word, sire. I'll deliver it to Necthana and the elders myself," he vows fervently.

"Good lad," Arthur repeats, ruffling his hair.

"My lady? My lady?"

Morgana startles from her thoughts when a gentle hand touches her arm, and she turns from the window to see Guinevere standing beside her with a small smile playing at her lips. Chagrined, she realises that her maidservant must have been trying to gain her attention for some time. "Forgive me, Gwen, what is it?" she asks, smoothing her skirts.

"I was going to ask you if there's anything else you wished to bring," Gwen repeats patiently. "I've nearly finished packing your things."
"No, that's everything I need, thank you." She touches two fingers to her temples, gently rubbing circles against the headache she can feel there. It has nothing to do with her visions, though for once she profoundly wishes it was. No, this headache is born entirely of the mortal stress of packing and arranging for travel, not to mention dealing with the damn council again.

She has to give Arthur due credit. Proposing she visit the Druids as his ambassador to arrange terms of peace so that she can consult the elders and the *ollamh* Necthana about her dreams, or lack thereof, without suspicion…it's quite an impressive move. There are still voices of opposition on the council, of course, going on and on with the same spiel about the dread corruption of magic and how they must remain ever vigilant against the evils it works against them, but those voices are much fewer in number now that Arthur's installed his own council rather than Uther's. The general mood amongst the court is one of cautious interest, willing to have faith in their king. She knows this is the last barricade to cross before Arthur rescinds the ban of magic. They've already laid out a plan of action to be taken after, new laws to be written, restrictions to be placed, measures to be taken to ensure that magic shan't be used recklessly or harmfully.

And Arthur has taken a great deal of joy planning a feast to announce both Morgana and Merlin's magic. He knows full well that Merlin hates the pageantry involved almost as much as he hates being the centre of attention.

A knock on the door draws her from her thoughts once again. Morgana takes a deep breath to resettel herself. As uneasy as her absent visions are making her, she cannot keep wallowing like this. She is a princess of Camelot about to embark on a diplomatic mission for the king, not some heartsick girl. "Enter," she calls, straightening her shoulders.

Lancelot enters the chamber and bows, a perfect courtier's bow that Guinevere had certainly taught him. "Princess."

"Good knight," she intones just as solemnly, dipping her chin.

They manage to keep solemn faces for only a heartbeat before they both laugh at the private jest they shared, addressing each other by title and acting with perfect decorum until one of them broke façade. "I've found the rest of the men for your guard. Leon agreed with your suggestion," Lancelot informs her, one hand at rest on the hilt of his sword.

Morgana smiles, though she knows it's not an entirely pleasant expression. "Good. How many?"

"Six. I'll keep watch on them, make sure they don't start trouble."

"And make sure they stay away from Mordred," she adds on firmly. Of the twenty men escorting her to the Druids—five knights and fifteen soldiers—most were Arthur's soldiers to the bone, willing to follow him no matter where he led, even to Druid camps. However, she'd asked Lancelot to find a few who weren't quite so keen. She wants to see just how firm they are in their convictions as much as she wants them to see things are indeed changing.

He nods agreement. They're all quite fond of the young man, and as he is also charged with the keeping of the Crystal of Neahtid, he doesn't need to be given any trouble. "I would've liked the giantess to accompany us. Her and Percival, they could've kept everyone in order," the knight remarks with a chortle.

"Careful when you say that, Bellegere might hear you," Morgana laughs, though she doesn't disagree in the least.

Leon had apparently written to Silverpine after their return to Camelot, and a woman had arrived in
response, assigned to young Bellegere's honour guard to ensure she doesn't end up in another situation as she had at Castle Fyrien. Mhera is the tallest woman Morgana has ever seen, and she can throw a spear farther than most knights. She and Percival have become fast friends since her arrival, a force to be reckoned with, and from what Morgana hears, the Rising Sun is never as crowded as the nights when Mhera and Percival have drinking contests there.

"Everything is in readiness. Shall I escort you to your party, princess?" Lancelot offers primly.

"You certainly may, good sir." Morgana tucks her hand around his arm, walking with him from her chambers and down to the main square where her escort awaits. As they aren't journeying outside of Camelot's borders, it's a rather small party as far as such things go. Arthur is standing on the front steps to send her off, the rest of the court arrayed about the square to bear witness as well. Amongst the observers, she spies Bellegere and Ione, both quietly sulking and casting envious glances towards Mordred, who is standing with the camp porters and almost vibrating with eagerness to be off. Behind them, Mhera looms like a great red-haired shadow.

She listens with only half an ear as Arthur makes the prerequisite speech about working towards peace and such; a familiar sense of feathery warmth brushes across the edge of her thoughts, which she opens willingly.

[Leon knows where the camp is, he has it marked on the map for you,] Merlin's voice eddies across her mind, almost but not quite the same as his speaking voice. [Iseldir sent me a raven this morning. The elders have convened and are waiting for you, including Necthana.]

[Thank you, Merlin. Does the whelp have our offering?] she asks in return. She offers a low curtsey to Arthur and takes his arm to have him escort her to her palfrey.

Mordred's voice breaks between theirs, faintly annoyed but more effervescent than anything else. [Yes, the whelp does.] He's taken a dislike to the nickname he's been given now that he's at last grown out of his Colts' Years, but it is, of course, a burden all younger siblings learn to bear.

Morgana doesn't bother masking her smile as she places her boot in the stirrup and swings herself astride, settling neatly into her saddle. [Then let us be off.]

[Onward to peace,] Merlin agrees, his joy almost singing across their mental conversation. [Goddess be good to you.]

Taking up the reins, she puts heels to her palfrey and rides for the gates.

_Goddess, help me. Maiden, Mother, Crone, I beg of you, help me_, Mordred thinks as he sprints away from what had been a Druid camp, lungs burning from smoke, heart pounding in his ears so loud he almost can't hear the sounds of dying men and women behind him. _Get me to the river._ _Please, just to the river._

How had everything gone so wrong?

Their arrival in the camp had been received with surprising warmth, all things considered. Iseldir, Necthana, and Aglain had been the ones to greet them, the rest of the council of elders alongside. After Morgana had delivered her speech of welcome, Mordred had delivered the Crystal of Neahtid to the ollamh. The old woman had surprised everyone present by embracing him openly. The rest of their party had been brought into the camp as well, soldiers and knights mingling amongst the Druids with some hesitation but mostly goodwill.
Achieving terms of peace had been set aside in favour of understanding Morgana's lack of dreams, a terrible thing for any seer, and Mordred had been horrified to learn that there was nothing wrong with Morgana. Something or someone else was doing it to her. Her fire was burning, but the chimney was stoppered, leaving her with nothing but smoke. Which means Arthur is right—there is a traitor in Camelot, someone working against them to halt her visions and keep her blind to the trap they had all just willingly walked into. No sooner had they come to the realisation that they were indeed betrayed than the slaughter had begun, a force nearly twice their number ambushing them in the dark, slaying soldier and Druid alike.

A scream, high and terrified, is cut short behind him, and Mordred draws in another ragged breath, tears scalding down his face. A part of him screams to go back, to help, but the inside of his skull is still ringing from Morgana's command to run. He has to get back to Camelot, to warn Emrys and Arthur and oh, Goddess, he can smell smoke, the thick, gagging reek of burning bodies.

Mordred can hear the river just ahead, the gurgling rush of water audible even over the screaming. If he can reach the river, he can make it. He knows this river, he can hide there, it'll cover his track and bring him all the way back to Camelot. He just needs to make the river.

Just when he sees the silver glitter of moonlight gleaming off the water ahead of him, someone punches him in the back.

That's what it feels like, at any rate—a hard fist slamming directly into his back between his shoulder blades, driving the air out of him in a surprised huff. He can't seem to get air back in, however, his body unwilling to respond. Seeping wetness spreads across his back, warm and tacky. He staggers, his legs feeling strangely heavy. The edge of the steep bank is there. He hadn't realised he was so close. He'd nearly made it.

The world tilts.

The river is warm as blood, his blood, filling his mouth, current dragging him down, down, into a deep darkness.

"Nicely done," Morgause remarks, honestly impressed. A clean shot from this distance in the dark is quite a skill. Shame the lad had to die; he'd certainly been powerful. More's the pity.

Helios lowers the crossbow with a smirk. "Let the river have him. He'll bleed out soon enough." He pulls one of the bolts from the quiver on his hip and holds it up—the quarrel is wickedly wrought, glittering like a deadly star, barbed and edged to tear deep into flesh. "My own special creation."
Replacing the bolt, he turns to look at their captives. "What do you want done with them?"

Picking her way across the abattoir the Druid camp had become, she comes to stand in front of their captives, put on their knees in the churned earth with every crossbow aimed at them. Morgana's face is pallid, and her scraped hands clutch at the spell-forged collar around her neck, chains connected to the matching shackles on her wrists, another set about her ankles. It'd taken three men to hold her in order to shackel her. The serving girl is in tears, clutching at her mistress and staring at one of the fallen knights; when she looks up at Morgause, however, her tear-filled eyes are full of incandescent hatred. The curly-haired man is still gazing towards the river where the other traitor had been shot down.

"What a stroke of fortune this is," Helios remarks. "The Bloody Tyrant's chief murderer and his traitor princess with her wench."
"Arthur is no tyrant," Morgana hisses back, her fingers white-knuckle around the chains. "And if you wish to see blood, undo these chains and face me yourself!"

"Be silent, the both of you," Morgause orders sharply. And to think she had once believed they could rule together, bound by the ties of magic and sisterhood. With Morgana at her side, they could dangle Cenred and Helios like poppets on strings, wield the old magics with ease. Perhaps she could still be turned to their cause. The taint of those accursed Pendragons might run deep, but surely they could still be scoured away.

Helios grunts and shoulders his crossbow. "Shall we kill the knight, then?" he asks.

"No. I did not have you spare him just to end him now." She admires Helios, in a way. He is a strong commander, an excellent strategist. However, he does have this unfortunate tendency to be impulsive, not a desirable trait to be coupled with battle-lust. "He is a prize in and of himself. The First Knight of Camelot, commander of the knights. He will be most useful," she points out.

After a second's consideration, he nods agreement. "Very well. We take him with us. And we'll see how well Camelot's birds can sing," he adds on with a darkly eager glare towards the kneeling knight. He casts a second glance towards the serving girl, an entirely different sort of eager. "Our friend said the boy would have something with him. Some enchanted stone. Shall we look for it?"

"No." Morgause has already turned away from them, walking further back into the recesses of the caverns, stepping past the simple hearths and woven sleeping mats even as a part of her is quietly disgusted at what their once-noble breed has been reduced to. Following the deep thrum of power in the air, she finds a narrow gap in the wall of the cavern, a well-hidden breach which opens into a deep crevasse. Reaching her arm into the darkness, she slides her hand along the smooth stone, feeling her way blind, until her fingertips touch metal that is warm despite the coolness of the cavern. Power thrills up her arm, bright and burning.

Curling her hand around the blood-warm metal, she eases it free and holds it aloft. Torchlight dances over the Cup of Life, the air around it glimmering faintly with magic. She smiles, slow and pleased. "We have our prize."

"Do you think it will take her very long? Morgana, I mean?" Arthur uses the heel of his bread to soak up the last bit of soup at the bottom of his bowl, licking his fingertips. Cook's stewed chicken could make a strong man cry, and he'd swear to that. It's almost strange how quiet the castle seems without them. Not that it's exactly any emptier, only a handful of people absent, but perhaps he's not realised until now how much time they spent around one another. He isn't used to not holding council without Morgana's subtle wit at his elbow, Leon and Lancelot not jesting with him during training, Mordred not constantly stirring trouble with Bellegere and Ione, Guinevere not chattering with Merlin as they go about their duties, and all of them not having their regular drink together in the Cockerel.

Merlin's voice makes a strange little echo as he leans into the wardrobe, hanging up the rest of Arthur's clothes. "I doubt it. Iseldir and Necthana are both on the council of the elders, they know what you're about. Mordred being there will help, as will returning the crystal." He turns to look at Arthur with a warm smile. "Thank you for asking him and letting him go with Morgana. He's missed the camp," he says as he crosses the chamber to the table. Instead of clearing away the dishes, however, he pulls out another chair and sits down instead, stretching his long legs out until his feet rest against Arthur's, playfully nudging the other man's ankles with his toes. "If the Druids make demands, will you agree to them?"
"Depends on what they demand. What do you imagine they'd ask for?" The Druids have never appeared to him a particularly demanding people, but of course, there's also a good chance that they've only done well to bury their desires under the far more demanding task of surviving in a hostile world. He knows well from days in court that one can harbour a spark of ambition unknowing until it is kindled by an offering of power.

"Háligweorc."

Arthur raises his brows. "Bless you."

A foot jostles his calf. "It means sanctuary. It's a very, very old law that would give them the right to control certain territories within the kingdom," Merlin informs him, taking on that educational tone he usually only voices when instructing Bellegere or Mordred. "Imagine it like having one kingdom broken up into many smaller pieces, and those pieces are scattered throughout the other kingdoms, and even if those pieces lay in different lands with different laws, they are considered a whole and follow the same laws within their borders."

Raising his cup to his mouth, Arthur grunts softly. He's not certain how much he likes the sound of that. "How much land? What kind of territories?" he asks, tapping his ring against the side of his goblet.

"Our land," Merlin replies softly. "Sacred places of the earth. The Isle of the Blessed. The Crystal Cave. The standing stones. And it isn't what you think. No violence can be committed on háligweorc ground. It takes no part, not even if every single kingdom was at war with one another."

"If I granted this, then I would have no authority on this...háligweorc land, would I?" he prompts, stumbling somewhat over the ancient word.

"No." He says it bluntly, not bothering to dress it up in prettier terms. "But neither would anyone, except for the council of elders. And me." When Arthur doesn't reply, Merlin smiles and nudges at the other man's leg with one foot. "It's something to think on, that's all. I'm sure that with as much as things have changed, they'll be more than willing to negotiate different terms with you." He rises from the chair and starts to gather up the dishes, stacking them on the tray, but then he slides it aside and goes to start turning down the bed instead. He'd rather not make two trips if he doesn't have to. "How was the council today? Still causing a fuss over this?"

With an exaggerated groan most unfit for a king, Arthur drops his head against the chairback and presses both hands over his eyes. "I swear, I want to just...knock their damn heads together, rattle what little brain they have in their skulls. Maybe then they'd have an original thought. Sometimes it's like they're channeling Father's spirit right into the damn council hall, as though I haven't heard enough from him in my lifetime," he whinges, though he receives no sympathy from his consort, only a bout of hearty laughter. Raising his head, he tries to glare at Merlin but the corners of his mouth still twitch upwards, betraying him; he drains the last of his wine and leans forward to set the cup on the tray with the rest of the dishes, grinning. "Uncle has done well to ease the tension, though, so it is marginally better today. He's even come around to the idea of returning the crystal to the Druids."

The line of the other man's back stiffens, hesitating the slightest bit before he finishes turning down the bedcovers. "Agravaine. You told Agravaine."

"I know you aren't fond of him, Merlin," Arthur says, the guilty little moue his consort makes confirming what he'd already known, "but he has been more than helpful these past months."
"Yes, I know, I know," Merlin acknowledges, flapping one hand. "I'm trying, alright? I'm being… polite."

Arthur chuckles. Polite. That's about the extent of what Merlin is towards Uncle. Polite, nothing more and nothing less, but Merlin has mastered the finely tuned art of turning civility into a subtle blade, which he quite often uses in sparring matches with Agraine. "Well, I appreciate that, at least. I know how difficult it is for you to act like a well-raised human being instead of the feral barn cat you are in your natural form." One of the bed pillows thumps the side of his head. "Hey!"

"Better a barn cat than a pampered pet like you!" he retorts. "At least I'm useful."

As the sorcerer marches over to retrieve the pillow, Arthur leans forward in the chair to snag him by the loose end of his belt, using it like a lead to pull him in, grinning. They've not had a night to themselves for over a sennight now. He can't even smell that unique wild forest scent in his sheets anymore.

Chucking in amusement, Merlin slides a leg over to seat himself neatly on Arthur's lap, smiling luxuriously as sword-callused hands curl around his hips, pillow forgotten. He leans in as though for a kiss but turns his head aside at the last moment, earning a sound of protest from the other man; instead, he presses his lips to the strong line of Arthur's throat, feeling the steady pulse under his lips. "Leon is gone," Merlin murmurs in a low voice, punctuating his words with kisses. "Mordred is gone. I am going to go home to the townhouse tonight—" He presses his fingertips to Arthur's mouth, halting the protest he knows is coming. "I am going home tonight, so I can tell Clory and the others they may retire early tomorrow, take a day of leisure. You and I can have the townhouse to ourselves for a night."

Arthur's hands tighten on his thighs, an exasperated groan drawn out of his throat. A part of him would very much like to simply bar the door and tumble Merlin into bed right then and there, but the idea of them having the entire townhouse to themselves, alone and without curious eyes about, makes it easier to resist the temptation. But only just. "Fine. Tomorrow. Go on, then. Off with you." He swats Merlin's thigh in mock reproof, half-groaning as the younger man slides off his lap with an entirely unnecessary amount of wriggling and squirming. "Tease," he grumbles.

Merlin winks at him, then gathers up the tray and leaves the chambers. Arthur admires the view as he goes, then drops his head back against the chair with a sigh for a moment before he pushes himself up and shuffles to his woefully empty bed.

The castle is quiet, asleep save for the few servants finishing their nightly tasks and the guards who are on the overnight shift; Merlin finds it to be one of the most pleasant hours, equal only to the early mornings before everyone rises for the day. The soft rattling of the dishes on the tray almost covers the sound of his humming as he descends the servants' staircase into the kitchens. Cook and the rest of her army have already departed for the night, leaving it quiet and almost peculiarly still without the constant noise and bustle. "I see you drew the short lot," he remarks as he brings the tray to the scullery maid scrubbing at the last of the dishes. It's how Cook decides which of the lower servants is left to finish every night. Tonight it is Asha, the girl who risks Cook's wrath on feast days to steal sweetmeats for her and some of the other maids.

The girl startles at his voice, head jerking up to gaze at him with surprised eyes. "Oh, I—yes, I am. I mean, I did," she mumbles out hastily, ducking her head back to her task.

"Is something wrong, Asha?" Merlin wonders as he walks over, setting the tray down beside; her hands are trembling in the water. When she doesn't say anything, he reaches over to touch her
shoulder, surprised to feel that she's trembling all over, shivers running through her. "Are you well?" Still no reply. Beginning to worry now, he moves closer, resting his hand more firmly on her shoulder, trying to offer her some kind of comfort or reassurance. "What's wrong?" he repeats gently. "If it's something I can help you with, I will."

Asha drops the scouring brush into the water, staring into the empty air in front of her. "I know." Tears well in her eyes as she nods, her voice small and brittle. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry for wh—?"

Pain, thin and sharp, pierces his side. He tries to cry out, but his tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth. Frigid heat blooms in the small of his back from the source of the pain, leaching up his spine, down his legs. He cannot move. It feels as though his skull is afire. The flames from the candles leap and twist, casting tangled shadows upon the wall, like a nest of serpents.

The pain withdraws. He staggers into the counter, turning, and sees Sayer there, holding a great silver needle in hand. Shadows. Serpents. Silver.

"I'm sorry," Asha whispers softly, the words faraway.

A hand tugs sharply at his neckerchief, jerking it up over his head. Merlin hears himself whimper, a pained, animal noise, collapsing onto the floor. And then he knows nothing for the longest time.
By the Sword

There are worlds, and there are worlds.

Mordred's always known it to be true. Sometimes when he and Merlin go the standing stones to practice their magics, or when he meditates with Morgana, it almost feels as though he's taken half a step through the veil between the worlds, lying right alongside one another yet separate all the same.

This is no half-step.

He stands in the centre of a ring of standing stones placed amid a lush glade, a great green bowl in the cupped hand of the earth, fringed with towering pines. A lake glistens placidly in the distance. Overhead, the sky reels, bright and dark, filled with stars and a pearly moon. Darkness and light are wedded here, no shadows falling anywhere. Everything is visible to him, standing in stark contrast to itself, each pine needle and grass blade, existing and filled with glorious purpose.

Standing in it, Mordred wants to weep. "No! Please, no! I cannot go now!" he cries. "Send me back! Please, Goddess, send me back."

He feels Her presence before he sees Her, vast and mighty and wondrous, the very ground trembling beneath his feet; the bright spark of his magic, that shining presence that is his tether to the Old Ones and the Triple Goddess, is all ablaze with light, so bright and warm he feels he must certainly be aglow from within. He turns in place, following the tug on that cord. On the far side of the circle there is a great stone doorway, two great pillars of stone thrice a man's height, a broad slab laid across them, the grain and texture of the granite unlike any other he'd seen. And standing in it, the Triple Goddess Herself in all Her aspects. She is the merciful and wild Maiden, the fierce and gentle Mother, the wise and just Crone, laid upon one another, mirrors reflecting mirrors.

Awed, Mordred falls to his knees, head bowed. "I have always done what I can to honour the Old Religion," he whispers, addressing the grass with reverence; he cannot bring himself to look into Her face again, lest his heart burst free from within. "I have cherished the gifts bestowed on me, no matter their cost. I have walked the path set before me and tried to do so rightly. If I am yours, if I am your child, then I beg you, please, let me go back. It cannot end like this, not now, when we are so close," he implores, hands clasped before him. "For the sake of all those I love and who love me, let me go back."

A warm hand brushes the top of his hair, and he raises his head, gazing into the face of the Goddess Herself. Her eyes are gold and wise, filled with knowledge older than time, regarding him with infinite compassion, hard and fierce, like one of Merlin's embraces, and he knows without words that no matter what comes to pass in his mortal life, he is Hers, Her joy and Her pride, now and always and forever, and when the day comes to pass that he stands in this twilit glade again, She will be waiting for him then.

She leans down to him. Mordred feels Her warm breath on his hair, Her soft lips touch his brow…

…and air rushes back into his lungs in a harsh, scraping rush of life. Mordred flops over onto his side and retches, coughing and sputtering as river water comes up out of his lungs and stomach, dripping from his nose, down his chin. For a moment, he's half-afraid he's going to choke on his own bile, but then he remembers how to inhale again, dragging in ragged gulps of air. His throat is scoured raw, and it feels as though a mule's kicked him in the chest, but he breathes.
For a moment, he can only lay there, gasping, staring up at the sky. It's daylight, patches of painfully bright sky visible between the placid arch of branches. His feet and legs are still in the water. He starts to turn over and winces when something sharp jabs at him. Groping blindly at the muddy bank, he finds what'd pricked him and holds it up before him. A crossbow bolt, the quarrel cunningly barbed.

Letting his arm fall back to his side, Mordred lays for another moment, listening to the sound of his own breath and his heartbeat—alive, alive, alive. Bracing his hands on the bank, he levers himself up, gasping in shock at the pain it sends through every part of him, aching in places he didn't realise he had places. He's definitely alive. With pain also comes memory.

The ambush. Traitors. Camelot. He has to get to Camelot, warn Arthur, warn Merlin.

Slowly, slowly, he drags himself up the bank on hands and knees, clutching at the reeds and grasses to pull himself up, every movement a cacophony of dull-edged pain. Once he gains the top of the bank, he sits back on his heels, trying to gain his bearings.

Still in the forest. He must not've been washed that far downriver. The camp. He'll have to go back to the camp. Goddess only knows what he'll find there, but he'll never get back to Camelot like this. The horses might still be there. Supplies. Something. The memory of the camp burning, the screams, rises in his mind, but he presses both hands over his eyes, shoving it back down. He cannot think on it now. They are dead, he is alive, and there are lives still hanging in the balance.

There's a willow tree just by him, leaning over the river as if to admire its reflection, and Mordred crawls his way to it, grasping at the trunk to pull himself upright, leaning his brow against the ridged bark. He can feel the tree's life, deep and placid and slow, and he inhales slowly, trying to draw its strength to him, just a measure of it. Searching about, he finds a fallen branch sturdy enough to support him, and leaning against it, he starts making his way back upriver towards the camp.

He can smell the smoke before he sees the camp again, charred flesh and bone and human fear; his legs tremble, a deep ingrained instinct telling him to run. Bracing himself against the willow branch, Mordred closes his eyes and breathes deeply, remembering Her touch, the kiss She had laid on his brow. She had sent him back. He won't bow out now. He needs to get to Camelot. Emrys will know what to do, he and Arthur, and then Mordred can rest. He just needs to get to Camelot, and he cannot do it without supplies.

The thought runs through his head in steady mantra, and it's what he braces himself against as he approaches the ruins of the camp.

Never once would he think the day would come that he would mourn to see soldiers of Camelot slain, and yet he does. Half of them he knows by name. Some had taken up defensive positions in front of his own people.

Gripping the willow branch tighter, he starts towards the cavern, knowing there will be supplies there if anywhere, and hopefully there's at least one horse somewhere about—

"Mordred?"

The voice, so painfully familiar, is startling enough to make him drop the branch, staggering from a mix of surprise and disbelief. "Iseldir?"

The Druid elder appears as though he's aged ten winters since their arrival, his silver hair darkened with soot. He holds his left arm close against his side, the flank of his robes torn and
disconcertingly stained, and yet he is still on his feet, alive, limping out of the cavern to enfold him in a one-armed embrace. "Mordred," he repeats, a half-laugh coloured with relief and surprise. "Come, come in, child, sit down." In the cavern, there is a small fire kindled, a woven mat of rushes laid out beside it with a familiar figure stretched out across it. "Name of the Mother, I thought that brute had killed you."

"I'm not entirely certain he didn't," Mordred replies dumbly, falling down to his knees beside Lancelot. The knight's face is ashen, lips pale, but his chest still rises and falls in shallow rhythm. "Will he live?"

"His skull was cracked, and he was bleeding inside. I managed to stop the bleeding. The bone, I've had less success with," Iseldir replies, one hand pressed against his injured side as he gingerly lowers himself to a kneeling position. "I didn't want to risk exhausting my magic and dooming us both. How are you alive? I heard that beast had shot you down."

Mordred opens his mouth, then closes it again. He doesn't know how he can put it to words, what he had seen. The twilit glade, the stone doorway. The Triple Goddess.

His thoughts must show on his face somehow, for Iseldir reaches over to touch his arm, his voice gentle with understanding. "Never mind it. You're alive. That is what matters."

"As are you. Anyone else? Necthana? Aglain?"

The elder shakes his head slowly, shoulders dropping slightly. "No. Other than myself and Sir Lancelot, there is only Princess Morgana and Guinevere, as well as Sir Leon. The Priestess said they would make useful hostages," he explains. "We were believed dead and left as such. They were taken."

"Which means they'll be alive for a time yet. A dead hostage is a useless hostage," Mordred declares, affirming his decision. "I need to get to Camelot." It is a skill Merlin has taken great lengths to impress in him, coupling it with the hard-learned lessons of survival he already knew. Think deeply in leisure and swiftly in action, and do not return to the crossroad of a decision once made, for only madness lies that way. Ragged as he is, he cannot hope to stage any kind of rescue on his own, and Arthur is still vulnerable. Whoever has betrayed them is still in Camelot, a fox in their henhouse.

"That is not all they took, child." Iseldir's hand closes around his wrist, hard and intent, pulling sharply to bring Mordred's attention. "She took the Cup of Life."

The breath leaves him in a rush. "Ah, no!"

Iseldir's eyes are dark, jaw set in a hard line so unlike him. "You know what can be done with it, then?" he demands, and Mordred nods shakily. He has heard the tale before. Seven hells, he'd first heard it in this very cavern, sitting at the knee of Aglain and making his first birdbone whistle. "Then you know what is coming. If this Priestess has truly fallen so far, it may well be that Emrys is our only hope of standing against her and the evil she means to summon."

Mordred bobs his head rapidly, his heart taking a faster pace. "Can you summon one of the horses? I'll take Lancelot with me back to Camelot. We'll warn them." His gift for beasts lies only with the feathered breed, and he needs to get Lancelot out of his mail if they're to have any chance of getting him in the saddle. As for the man's injury, Mordred will have to simply pray he's not beyond saving by the time they reach Camelot. He's never had a gift for healing.

Iseldir gingerly draws himself upright again, making his way out of the cavern as Mordred sets to
work. It's no easy task with Lancelot unconscious, but nonetheless, he manages it, stripping off the bulky gambeson as well, leaving him only in his tunic. Lurching to his feet, he grasps the edges of the rush mat and starts dragging Lancelot to the mouth of the cave, slow and struggling; by the time he reaches open air, Iseldir has called one of the horses. Mordred gives a sound that's half a laugh and half a sob. It's Flick, Lancelot's gentle chestnut mare, loyal to the last.

"What will you do?" he asks once he manages to get Lancelot up over Flick's saddle, having to lash him in place. It'll not be the most comfortable of rides, but it can't be helped. The effort of it makes black spots swim around the edges of his vision for a moment or so.

"I will warn the other camps. This shadow will not be sated with Camelot alone," Iseldir replies, holding Flick's bridle as Mordred pulls himself astride. "Will you manage on your own?" He casts a pointed glance down at the man's bloodstained robes. To his surprise, Iseldir chuckles, a wry smile curving his lips. "Children, always so quick to discredit their elders. I have survived the reign of the Bloody Tyrant. It will take more than a poorly thrown lance to put an end to me." He pats Mordred's knee. "Go, child, and be safe."

Mordred puts his heels to the mare's sides, urging her forward, though he has the sickly feeling that no matter how fast they ride, it shan't be fast enough.

Bellegere flops down on the sun-warmed grass with an exhausted huff, aching arms falling limp at her sides, staring up at the cloud-speckled sky. Her arms hurt all the way up to her shoulders and back, and her hands are stinging numb from the repeated shock of impact. The back of her tunic clings with sweat, as does her hair, and yet, she's happier than she has been in over a month. She's only just closed her eyes when cold water is dumped over her face, sending her lurching back upright with an indignant sputter.

"You looked a bit warm, m'lady," Ione cackles, corking the waterskin; Bellegere scrapes up a clump of newly muddy soil and flings it at her in retaliation. "You're improving." Grinning, Mhera drives her spear into the ground; even though its the blunt end, she's strong enough to drive it deep enough to stick, the sharp spearhead pointing skyward. "Merlin's taught you well, eh?"

Sweeping her wet hair back out of her face, Bellegere reaches down to pick up her daggers where she'd dropped them on the trampled-down grass. It's the matched pair that Arthur had given her for her natality. The cross-guards are shaped to the likeness of phoenixes, exacting down to the feathers of their spread wings, and there's a cabochon sapphire the size of a marble set in the pommels. "He's a good teacher. Did you spar with him when he lived in Silverpine?" she asks, gesturing at Ione wordlessly; the other girl throws her a scrap of oilcloth, which she uses to wipe down the blades before sheathing them, one strapped to each thigh.

Mhera nods as she sits down in the grass, leaning back on her arms. "Aye, we did. Him and that quarterstaff of his." She lets out a barking laugh, grinning in amusement at the memory. "We used to put the green lads through their paces right quick. You fight like him. Sort of..." One hand makes a circular motion midair. "...roundabout." That's Merlin's fighting style, circles within circles; he calls it telling the hours. Bellegere likes how it almost feels like a dance when they spar, turning round and round one another without ever colliding. It's better than any other dance she's had to learn, at any measure.
"Hey, look there," Ione remarks, nudging her with one elbow and pointing.

Bellegere turns, curious. On the far side of the field, there's a rider emerging from the trees, the horse shambling along at a slow pace. "Where are they coming from?" she wonders aloud; there's no roads that way. That forest only leads into, well, more forest, no towns or villages nearby.

Mhera pushes to her feet, shading her eyes with one hand. "There's two of them," she says, a strange tone to her words. "I think one's injured...." She inhales sharply, face paling, and she utters a sharp string of curses. Reaching down, she snatch's lone to her feet. "Run back to the citadel, go and find Percival, he'll be on guard," she orders firmly.

"What do I tell him?" Ione asks, her voice pitched higher with nervousness.

"Tell him it's Sir Lancelot and Mordred," she orders, and Ione takes off towards the city as though hellfire's at her heels. Mhera snatch's her spear from the dirt, pointing at Bellegere. "You wait here."

"But—"

"No! You stay there until I know it is safe," Mhera barks back, already striding forward.

Bellegere's stomach knots over hard, her chest tightening in fear as she watches Mhera. Mordred and Lancelot are supposed to be at the peace treaty. They're not due back to the city for at least another sennight. For them to be back now, alone.... She grips the hilts of her daggers tightly, blood pounding in her ears. Mhera approaches the riders...then turns and brandishes her spear in Bellegere's direction. In an instant, she's sprinting towards them, the rough grasses whipping against her legs, heartbeat echoing her in skull.

As she gains them, she can see that it is indeed Mordred and Lancelot riding Flick, the mare trembling faintly with exhaustion. Mordred looks as though he's been thrown down the side of a mountain, bedraggled and pallid save for the bright flags of fever-colour in his cheeks, eyes glassy. Lancelot isn't even conscious, slumped over Flick's neck, tied to the saddle to prevent him from falling. "Mordred!" Bellegere exclaims, reaching up to grasp his arm; Mhera is on the other side of the exhausted horse, trying to rouse the knight.

He startles at her touch, as though he hadn't even realised she was there, looking down at her dazedly. "Well met, Belligerent," he slurs out. His voice is rasping and hoarse.

Before she can ask what in seven hells is going on, Mordred slumps over in the saddle, and Bellegere snatch's at him before he can fall clean from the saddle, staggering under his weight. She stumbles back a step and falls hard on her arse, Mordred's dead weight lying across her legs. He's stone-cold unconscious, giving only a faint moan when she tries to shake him awake.

"Gods' mercy," Mhera exclaims softly, looking between the two of them.

Bellegere heartily agrees.

When Merlin reappears from whatever hole he's slunk away to, Arthur is going to strangle him with that thrice-damned neckerchief of his. His morning had been foul enough, waking to damn George knocking on his chamber door, late for his own damn council meeting, no breakfast in sight. As if to make matters worse, there has been no word from Leon or Morgana, even though he knows full well that they should've reached the camp by now, and of course, now the ones who had spoken against his making peace with the Druids are muttering about the treachery of
sorcerers.

"Enough," he barks, raising his voice just loud enough to bring them to silence. Arthur is too hungry to be dealing with this now, still groggy from oversleeping, which is contradictory in its own right, but true nonetheless. He leans back in his chair for a moment, aware of the council's eyes on him, and resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. Instead, he settles for tapping his fingers against the arm of the chair, ring clicking faintly against the wood. "Send a rider to the camp."

"Sire," Agravaine interjects, "are you certain that is entirely wise? It would be most unbecoming if we were to give the impression that we did not trust the very people we are attempting to make peace with."

"It is wise to ensure that my sister is safe," he replies shortly. Beneath his irritation with the world in general, something about this sits wrong with him. Merlin's absence is disconcerting in its own right, and perhaps it's spilling over into this as well, but he knows Morgana, and he knows Leon. They should've sent word by now, if only to tell him they had arrived safely. Mordred had taken three of his ravens with him for that very purpose.

The forming knot of unease in Arthur's gut grows heavier when the council finally disbands and he steps out into the corridor to find Merlin's surly friend Will waiting for him out in the corridor, shifting his weight like a skittish beast, uncomfortable in the castle. "Well?" he asks in an undertone, striding over to him. He hadn't bothered sending George to look for Merlin, as the two avoided one another whenever possible, so he had sent along George to ask Will instead.

"I can't find him, or anyone who's seen him since last night," Will replies. "I even asked Dara. Nobody's seen him."

Unease blooms into outright worry, prickly and hot. Arthur blows out a hard breath, and he takes a step back, reaching up to shove a hand back through his hair. "Well, he didn't turn to smoke. There's over a hundred people in this damned castle at any given time, at least one of them must've —" He stops midsentence and turns back to Will, the other man staring at him with puzzlement. "Go down to the kitchens, find Cook and ask her which of the servants drew the short lot last night. Merlin brought the dishes down to the kitchen, and one of them had to be there to wash them." He remembers Merlin had told him about the scullions drawing lots to see who did the last of the dishes; he'd likened it to the guards drawing lots for the dungeon shift.

For a miracle, Will doesn't argue with him, taking off down the corridor at a rapid clip.

The warning bells toll a single, ominous note.

"Oh, fuck," Arthur exhales heavily. This day is clearly going to be an exercise in trying his patience.

His irritation evaporates, however, when he emerges into the courtyard with the intent of finding out what's happened now, only to be greeted with a chilling sight. There is his cousin and her maidservant, both of them looking uncharacteristically fearful. There is Mhera and Percival, head and shoulders above near everyone else. Both have another person in their arms, carrying them up the front steps into the castle. Two people who should, by all means, be on the other side of the kingdom. Lancelot, unarmed and stripped of his armour. Mordred, white as bone and scarce breathing.

"What—?" He can't get anything else out, chest tightening too much to speak. Out of reflex, he moves aside to let Percival and Mhera pass him, then falls into step behind, knowing they are
going to the physicians' chamber.

Bellegere grips his hand tight enough to hurt, nails biting into his palm. "We were out in the field sparring, and we saw them riding in," she explains, her voice strung tight. "Lancelot won't wake, and Mordred collapsed when we got to him. Arthur, what's happened?"

He shakes his head mutely, pulse quickening; she squeezes his hand tighter. "Gently with them," Arthur orders, finding his voice as their strange little party makes the physicians' chamber. Percival and Mhera must duck to get through the doorway, passing by a startled Hunith and Gaius, stooping to let the injured pair down gingerly on the patient cots.

Hunith recovers from the surprise of suddenly having half a dozen people present first. She pushes to her feet and turns to face them, and though she's not taller than a single person amongst them, her voice carries above nonetheless. "If you are not a physician and you are not wounded, I want you out of this chamber now," she orders. The natural command in her voice, the complete and utter expectancy to be obeyed makes Arthur back up as well, taking a step towards the door before he remembers that he is meant to give the orders, not follow them, and holds ground. Hunith raises her brows at him but doesn't argue. The others, however, clear out obediently, though Bellegere has to be assisted by Mhera's firm hand on her shoulder.

Once the chamber is cleared, she marches over and shuts the door firmly, then turns to look at Arthur. "What's happened?"

"I don't know," Arthur admits, watching uneasily as Gaius peers over Lancelot, searching for injuries. "That's what I intend to find out."

"Ar-Arthur," Mordred rasps out as he struggles to sit up, then goes into a fit of harsh coughing.

In an instant, Hunith is at his side, pressing both hands against his shoulders and pushing him back down onto the cot. "No," she says in a tone that brooks no argument. "You stay right there, child, not a word out of you, either of you." She casts a pointed glance towards Arthur at that last, and he nods, obediently moving to sit down on an unoccupied stool. It makes him feel strangely like a boy again, ten winters old and being given a lesson in rudimentary herblore by Gaius, though now he is not memorizing what plants to use for infection and pain. Instead, he's watching two of his dear friends being examined for injury.

"He's taken a severe blow to the head," Gaius announces first, his wizened fingers gently sorting through Lancelot's hair. "It's partially healed, however. It looks to be the work of magic."

"You have my permission to finish the task," Arthur says immediately. In a strictly technical sense, it is still illegal and an act of treason to practice magic in Camelot, but seven hells, he's the king; he'll pardon the old man later. Nodding, Gaius begins to sort through his many books, shifting them aside to reach the backs of the shelves.

Hunith has sat Mordred forward, the lad hunched over his own knees, and she's peering at his back. "What happened here?" she asks, staring at something Arthur cannot see from where he sits. In lieu of answering aloud, Mordred shoves one hand in his pocket and pulls out a crossbow bolt with a razor-edged quarrel, like a lethal star, crusted with dried blood; Arthur swears aloud. "Gods' mercy, child. Breathe in deep. I need to make sure you've not punctured a lung."

"I've not," Mordred coughs, then turns his head towards Arthur. His eyes are fever-bright and dilated. "Traitor in Camelot."

"I said hush," Hunith repeats, but he shakes his head rapidly.
Arthur's back prickles, the skin between his shoulder blades tight and hot. "Who? What traitor?"

"Don't…don't know. Betrayed us. Ambush…at the camp." Mordred coughs again. "Hostages…Morgana, Gwen, Leon."

"They're alive?" he murmurs, and the young man bobs his head, panting as though he's just been made to run laps of the training field. There's a disconcerting rattle in his chest. "Alright, enough, lay down. Listen to Hunith. You're no good to anyone dead," Arthur instructs, clasp one hand firmly over Mordred's shoulder and pushing him back with gentle insistence to lay on the pallet.

When he makes to withdraw, however, the lad's hand comes up and grasps his wrist painfully tight, fingertips digging in hard, and Arthur stares down at him in surprise. "Morgana's visions," he rasps. "Traitors…bound her….

"Someone's used magic to bind Morgana from her visions?" Arthur prompts, understanding. "The traitor, the person here in Camelot?"

A small nod. "Emrys. Tell Emrys."

Arthur tastes bile in the back of his mouth. 'I'll tell him. Sleep." The lie is bitter on his tongue, but if it shows on his face, Mordred doesn't see it, his hand falling limp from Arthur's wrist as he slumps back on the pallet, his rough breath evening out.

"Have you found him?" Hunith asks in a whisper, grinding herbs together into a poultice.

He shakes his head, already turning towards the door. "I'll need to speak to them when they wake," he orders, stepping out of the physicians' chamber and yanking the door closed behind him. For a moment, Arthur leans back against the wall, head tilted back to stare up at the ceiling above him, breathing raggedly. A part of him wants to scream with frustration and rage, find something suitably heavy to smash to pieces against a wall, set the entire forest on fire to smoke out whoever is responsible for this, but he wrestles it back down, forcing it down into that deep, bottomless pit he'd carved into himself long ago. He is the king. He cannot be weak, and he cannot be out of control. Instead, he presses the heels of both hands against his closed lids until he sees white starbursts, pieces aligning with terrible clarity in his head.

They'd already had their suspicions about a traitor to be found in Camelot and had since Talorcan's murder, but now, now he knows it for certainty, and more than that as well. It's a member of the council. It must be. He hadn't informed anyone of who he would send to the Druids until the night before as a precaution, and he had told only the council, not the entire court. He knows from a tactician's viewpoint that there is no possible way to stage an ambush large enough to overcome an entire Druid camp and an armed escort in the time it had taken Morgana's party to journey from Camelot to the camp, not to mention ensure that they didn't accidentally kill the hostages. But it might be done if they knew a day ahead of time.

They'll be alive. Morgana, Guinevere, Leon. If they were all taken hostage, then they will be alive. A princess of Camelot and the commander of the knights, they'll be valuable. And Guinevere, she'll have use as leverage against Morgana as well. Cold of him, perhaps, but he has to look at it thusly. As for Morgana's visions…. That can only be the work of Morgause. The High Priestess is the only person outside of Camelot who knows of Morgana's visions, and he imagines she's the only one who would have the knowledge and ability to put a binding spell on Morgana strong enough to stifle her dreams and hide the evidence of it. And the only person who might be able to break that binding is Merlin.

Merlin, who has disappeared without so much as a bloody trace.
Taken. Not disappeared.

Whoever is spying for Morgause, whoever has betrayed them, they have taken Merlin.

Consciousness returns slowly, painfully, like dragging oneself out of a thick black mire that clings and drags.

"...not simply give him more?"

Everything hurts. The base of his spine throbs with dull fiery pain.

"Not without damage. Serket venom must be applied with care."

Venom. A silver needle. Fire in his blood.

"Do we need him undamaged? He's a serving boy."

Frigid, burning weight around his wrists, ankles, throat. His magic, guttering low like a flame half-smothered.

"The king's serving boy. Servants hear more than anyone. He knows, I'm certain of it."

Three voices. A woman, familiar. Two men, not. He clenches his fists, testing.

"And soon you will know as well. He may be of sterner stock than most, but he is still only a man."

Manmade walls of stone. Hot, heavy air and a dark metallic scent. Blood. Curls his toes; no boots, no socks.

"We will see."

Footsteps, fading away. Tenses the muscles in his legs.

"Work swiftly. Things are at last beginning to move, and we cannot afford to delay them."

Flexes his shoulders. A hot ripple of pain follows down his back, knotting up low in his spine. Bearable.

"It will be as you wish, High Priestess."

Footsteps again, the step lighter, the stride shorter. A distant door slamming shut.

"Artless cunt."

Footsteps, a different stride again, softer. Bare feet? Coming closer, too. One, two, three paces. A hand on his cheek, pressing and then moving up, drawing away the darkness with it, rough cloth dragging against his skin. A dazzling onslaught of light, braziers and torches all aflame. A young man's face, clean-shaven and fair, a surprisingly kind smile and two pale, pale eyes, like moonlight made tangible.

"Glad to see you are awake. I was very nearly concerned. I told that mute to take care with this." A silver needle is held up in front of his face, long and thin and glittering, deadly sharp. "Serket venom is dangerous enough, even when properly diluted, but if it ended up in your spine...mm." The point of the needle traces feather-light down his cheek, cold despite the stifling heat of the
chamber. "Even my arts could not help you then. Now." The young man smiles. It would've been a kind expression, if not for the eyes. Cold as the silver and sharper still. "I have been instructed to ask you questions. If you do not answer…" The needle presses more firmly against his cheek; so much as a twitch, it'll break skin. "…I will persuade you otherwise. It is no good to lie to me. I will know. It is my gift, you see. That, I did not learn. My art, however, I have studied long and hard. You understand?"

He blinks in affirmation, afraid to move his head. When he swallows, the cold iron collar around his throat scrapes against his skin.

"Good. Let us begin." The needle withdraws. "Now, speak the truth to me." Pain, sharp and bright, slides into his arm, and a prickling heat blooms outwards from its source, hotter and hotter the further it moves up his arm. "What is your name?"

"Merlin." It leaps from him unbidden, compelled by the stinging, seeping heat.

"Who do you serve?"

"Arthur Pendragon."

"Very good. Now." Those moon-pale eyes stare into him. "Who is Emrys?"
The camp is a scorched ruin, rank with death and human fear; Arthur presses his sleeve over his
nose and tries not to breathe in too deeply, turning to survey the damage in its entirety. Mordred
had spoken true. It hadn't been an ambush, it'd been a slaughter. He counts all fifteen soldiers of
Morgana's guard as well as the other four knights; Necthana, grey hair trailing in blood, her oak
branch resting over her breast, half-covering the spear wound that'd felled her.

"Here. That's one of them," the lad says in a faint voice, pointing to one of the bodies.

"You didn't have to accompany us," Arthur reminds him, noticing how white Mordred's face has
gone.

Stubborn to the last, though, he shakes his head. A muscle in his jaw ticks. "I did."

Knowing when not to argue the point, he steps forward to look at the dead man that Mordred had
pointed out. He's garbed head to toe in black, boots and armour and all. "Were they all dressed like
this?" he prompts, and the young man nods quickly. Arthur frowns, reaching up to rake a hand
back through his hair. It might have been a tactical choice, given that the ambush had taken place
at night, but there's sufficient cover around the camp that they wouldn't have needed the extra
measure.

Lancelot approaches him, squinting a little in the sun; like Mordred, he'd insisted on accompanying
them to the camp, too persistently noble to be left behind. Hunith and Gaius had both said he'll
make a full recovery, though they had advised against any strenuous activity for a time. For now,
however, he still winces to turn his head too fast and squints in bright light. "What are you thinking,
sire?"

"Southrons," Arthur replies, straightening up. He's heard of the wandering army before, though
they've never dared to enter Camelot. They dress in black like this, down to the last man. That
means they'll be under the command of a man called Helios, purported to be both ruthless and
strategic. He wonders how in seven hells Morgause has managed to make allies of Essetir and the
Southrons. Men who are used to commanding tend not to take the commands of others well. It's a
wise move, however; if the Southrons were the ones to take Morgana and the others hostage,
without absolute proof of Cenred's involvement, then Arthur cannot declare against Essetir.
Turning his head, he calls to no one in particular, "Any tracks?"

"Some, sire. Mixed," Bors replies in a frowning voice, having wandered halfway out of the camp
into the underbrush, peering at the ground. "I have at least four different people here recently. The
rest are older."

"How recent?"

He disappears from sight as he crouches down; a moment later, his voice issues from the
underbrush, "I put it at no more than a day, sire. Day and a half, maybe."

That means someone has been in the camp after the ambush, after Mordred and Iseldir had left.
The traitor, perhaps? Coming to view their handiwork or perhaps to meet with Helios or Morgause,
to plan their next course of action.

"Sire!"

Arthur turns this time, hearing the bright strain of alarm in the other man's voice. "What have you
Bors doesn't say a word as he untangles himself from the undergrowth, bringing something out from beneath his cloak and holding it out to Arthur instead—a steel-banded quarterstaff of white ashwood. It's been snapped almost entirely in two, only a few ragged splinters keeping the two halves together.

The ground seems to open beneath his feet, his heart dropping to the bottom of that void. He wants to say it isn't Merlin's, that it is only an imitation, something similar, and yet, he knows that it is. He can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times Merlin has been without his quarterstaff; Arthur would know it anywhere. There are the sigils for resilience etched needle-fine into the ashwood. There is the deep scratch on one of the steel bands from when he had fought the Knights of Medhir. There is the blackened scorch mark where he had broken the rowan staff in the burial vaults.

"Here, too!" Gareth calls from a few paces away and raises his arm. One of the squires finds another in the burnt remnants of one of the lean-tos.

Arthur holds out one hand, and they both approach, handing him the small daggers. Careful of the edges, he rubs his thumb along the cool steel, brushing away the soot and dried blood. The flat of each blade is engraved with delicate, swirling filigree. Arthur had teased him for it once, saying that blades are weapons, not a lady's kerchief to be so prettily embellished; Merlin had retorted that a weapon didn't need to be ugly in order to stab someone.

Agravaine draws closer to him. "Sire," he says in a voice that is not as low as it ought to be, "I know you strive to see the best in others, but it must be said. This servant disappearing so abruptly within a day of this assault, and now with his weapons appearing here, we must consider the possibility that he may be responsible for—"

"Liar!" The word is spat out in a strangled, furious hiss, and Mordred lurches forward, eyes blazing, colour high in his face. Daresay he would've attacked Agravaine with his bare hands had it not been for Percival. The big man loops one arm around the lad's chest, restraining him neatly, keeping firm hold even as Mordred squirms and struggles.

"Take him out of here," Arthur orders; nodding, Percival shifts his grip and lifts Mordred off the ground, carrying him from the ruined camp.

Agravaine glares after them, sneering, "Impudent little—"

"Enough," Arthur snaps, then sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. "We will discuss this later, Uncle. For now, we need to focus our efforts on finding anything that may lead us to Morgana."

The words are bitter, and a part of him bristles in outrage to hear anyone suggest that Merlin could betray him, but he swallows it back, forcing himself to calm. He'd never told his uncle about his and Merlin's relationship, wanting to keep politics well out of it for as long as he could; Agravaine wouldn't have said such a thing if he knew.

Apart from those three weapons, they don't find any other tracks that can be followed. The trail leads out of the camp bearing north, but once they get a dozen paces out of the camp, the tracks end. They don't simply fade, they stop completely, as though the entire party had blown away in the mist; Morgause's doing. Even Bors and Gareth cannot find any further spoor. The newer tracks tell the same tale. They bear north for a stretch, and then they vanish. And there are only three sets as well; the fourth isn't there. Arthur tastes bile to think what that means.
"Alright, enough. We'll send another scouting party tomorrow," Arthur decides, staring up at the sky. They've lost the light, and even the best tracker will founder in the dark. "Bors, Gareth, you'll take a party north, see if the trail doesn't pick up again." They'll be properly supplied, then, fresh mounts and the best lymers from the kennel.

As they return to the camp and their horses, Arthur spies Mordred lurking around the peripherals like a spiteful little ghost, glowering at Agravaïne, and he quickly sidles around Llamrei to catch the Druid by the nape of the neck. "You ever do something like that again, I'll have you confined to the townhouse," he hisses, keeping his voice low as not to be overheard. Mordred opens his mouth, doubtless to argue, but Arthur gives him a little shake to silence him. "It is his job to counsel me in these things, even that which I do not wish to think on. I've not told Uncle about my…involvement with Merlin. To him, Merlin is only a servant whose loyalty might be bought. I know you're worried, I know you're upset, but you are not a child, and I expect you not to act like one. Understood?"

Mordred clenches his jaw so hard Arthur can almost hear his teeth grinding together, but then he gives a sharp nod.

Sighing lowly, he gentles his grip and moves his hand up to ruffle dark curls soothingly. "We'll find them, Mordred. All of them."

"You hope," Mordred rasps out, his voice raw and choked. He ducks out from under Arthur's hand before the other man can answer, striding over to the Hellion. With Leon and Merlin both absent, he's been riding the spotted menace, and for a miracle, the ill-tempered mare goes easily for the Druid. Perhaps she simply prefers sorcerers. The broken pieces of Merlin's quarterstaff are lashed to her saddle.

Arthur watches the young man's back for a moment, then turns and mounts up as well, turning Llamrei towards Camelot. As they ride back for the city, his free hand drifts down to trace along the hilts of Merlin's throwing knives, tucked into his belt.

Damn the headsman. When he gets hold the traitor, he's going to strangle them with his bare hands.

Well, we have a princess, we have a tower, and we have a knight. All we need now is a dragon, and we'll have a complete set, Morgana thinks sardonically as the door of her prison is slammed shut. She can hear the jangle of keys from the other side of the door, the heavy thunk of a crossbar settling in place. Hobbling forward, she lifts the lid of the tray that'd been set on the floor just inside the doorway. Halfway decent fare this time—soup that doesn't resemble dishwater, a heel of bread that's not burnt black, and a hard rind with some cheese still left on it. Barely enough for a child, though, let alone two women. Still, it's a sight better than what they had been fed on the journey here.

Careful of her dangling chains, she picks up the tray and moves it to the table, but she doesn't bother eating. Instead, she sits down in the single chair and begins to study her binds for the third time. The chains are wrought of silver, pure silver, she can tell by their weight, etched with sigils in a strange alphabet, nothing that she recognises in the slightest way. The cuffs around her wrists are linked to each other, long enough they don't restrict the movement of her hands overmuch, though she cannot extend her arms fully without straining the chain which runs to the collar around her throat. The chains running between the cuffs on her ankles are another matter—they force her to adopt a halting, mincing gait.

Morgana remembers reading once about a very foolish enclave of sorcerers that had tried to
summon a lesser demon. They had wrought a silver chain to bind it, each link etched with binding runes, like unto this one. According to the survivors, the one who had done the summoning had mispronounced two words in the incantation, and the silversmith had accidentally dripped a single drop of solder on a link, obscuring one of the sigils and allowing the demon to escape and kill two members of the enclave before being banished. She wonders if she ought to be flattered or insulted that they consider her comparable to a lesser demon.

There had been no incantation spoken over her binds, but she can still examine the bonds for herself. Thus decided, she sits back and begins to study the chain, link by link, starting with the one that runs between her wrists, searching for any such flaw that might be similarly exploited.

These chains, however, are impecably wrought. Every single damned link is a miracle of perfection, joined without the smallest gap or chink, burnished to immaculate smoothness, each perfect link etched with a perfect sigil. She can feel her magic, stifled as it is, roil through her, sickened at being constrained.

She drops the chains at the sound of a quiet moan behind her, turning in her chair.

On the single bed, Guinevere shifts uneasily in her drugged sleep, a crease forming between her brows, mumbling somewhat; Morgana hears Lancelot's name in it. Chest tightening, she moves to sit on the edge of the bed, reaching over to stroke the other woman's hair. At length, Gwen stirs, blinking dazedly. "Morgana? Where…?"

"In Cenred's keeping," she replies in a soft voice. "We're in a tower of his castle, under guard."

Whilst they had been dragged into Essetir conscious, upon approaching Cenred's castle, they'd both been fed a sleeping draught. She knows it had been done as a precaution against either of them remembering the way out should they escape. She had been woken hours ago courtesy of a bucket of cold water by the leader of the ambush party, a man she presumes to be Helios, if she is right in her assumptions that they've been taken by Southrons. He'd asked her if she would give him her royal favour before he went to war with her brother. She'd told him to favour himself with something blunt and preferably serrated.

Gwen sits up slow, wincing against the headache, and grasps Morgana's arm for balance, one hand pressed to her brow. "Sir Leon?" she asks, eyes tight shut.

"I don't know." She imagines he's being put to question about Camelot's defenses elsewhere in the castle. Her chest tightens at the thought, praying for the Mother to give him strength.

The woman nods, then presses a hand to her mouth, a sob catching in her throat. Morgana moves closer, embracing her as best she can with the damn chains, letting Gwen weep softly against her shoulder, silently vowing to see Helios dead for this.

Drawing away, Guinevere reaches into her bodice and pulls free a length of cord, a ring dangling from it. She didn't often wear it when she worked, afraid of losing it somewhere, wearing it around her neck instead so it stayed close to her heart. Unknotting the cord, she frees the band and slides it onto her finger, pressing her lips to the cool metal for a long moment. Sniffling, she swipes her eyes and straightens her shoulders, taking a deep, trembling breath and letting it out again sharply. "Let me see those, my lady," she says, holding out her hands.

Handling the chains gently so they don't rattle quite so loudly, Morgana extends her arms towards her maidservant.

Turning the links in hand, Gwen examines them, though her examination is different, studying not
the sigils but the links themselves, the hinges and the clasps, tracing her fingers along the metal with a blacksmith's practiced touch. From the quiet curses she utters, it's clear she's never seen anything quite like these chains either. "Do you believe they are enchanted in some way? Have you an idea what these mean?" she asks, tapping one of the sigils.

"No, none of them." Merlin might have. She swears he knows more languages than any one person rightly should. "As for enchantment...they repress my magic, but I don't know if they would require a counterspell to remove." She hadn't seen any keys about when the Southrons had wrestled her into the damn binds.

"No, I don't think there's magic involved. There's a lock here, just..." Gwen raises Morgana's left wrist, peering at what indeed is a small keyhole near where the chain is welded to the shackle. She halts, staring. "I can't believe it," she whispers.

Morgana's spirits gutter. "What is it?"

"It's only a simple lock." Incredulity paints her words. "This is work unlike any I've ever seen, but...it's a simple lock, Morgana. All I need is something small enough to open it." Releasing the chains, she rises to her feet and goes to the window, looking over the shutters and the frame, then leans down and begins to scrape at the wood with her fingernails for a moment, swearing softly, but then she makes a victorious sound. When she turns back to Morgana, she holds a rusted, blunted nail between two fingers. "Shall we, my lady?"

"No, no, wait." Morgana catches Guinevere's hands before she can start at the shackles, drawing the other woman back down beside her. "We do not know where Leon is. We don't know what part of the castle we're in or how to get out again," she murmurs lowly. Even if she is cut off from her visions, her magic is unharmed, roiling readily beneath her skin. If the chains were removed, she feels as though she could turn the door into little more than splinters, but what would happen then? Even if she and Gwen took weapons from the guards, they are only two alone in an enemy castle. If they do this recklessly, they'll succeed only in achieving their own deaths and likely Leon's as well. "We must take care now, or we will only hasten our deaths."

Gwen closes her fist tightly around the nail, biting her lip. "What do you think we should do?"

Staring down at the hateful chains about her wrists, Morgana glances back towards the window. It is unbarred, open to the sky, but far too high to ever consider climbing or jumping. "I may have an idea."

A knock on the door draws Arthur out of his thoughts, rubbing both hands over his face wearily. He's not been sleeping well since this nightmare began, caught up by worry and fear, in a bed that is far too empty and cold. "Enter," he says, stifling a yawn.

"You asked to see us, sire?" Lancelot calls, lingering in the doorway with Mordred beside him.

He straightens in his chair, rousing somewhat. "I did. Come in, shut the door." Once they do, he gestures towards the other chairs. Once they've sat down, he turns his gaze to Mordred. "Merlin has a trick to keep private words private. I trust you know how to do the same?" he prompts.

Mordred blinks in surprise, but then he nods. He murmurs under his breath, the Old Tongue rolling smoothly; gold flickers brightly across his gaze, bright and familiar.

Feeling the brief flicker of warmth as the magic settles over them, Arthur leans back in his chair,
taking a deep breath to settle himself. "There is a traitor in Camelot. You both know this. Merlin and I, we've suspected it for some time, and now we know it for certainty. More than this, it's someone on my own council," he announces, and they both gape at him, startled. He holds up a hand to halt their questions even as they open their mouths to ask. "As a precaution, I told no one who would be sent to the Druid camp, save Morgana herself, until the night before they departed, and I told only the council, not the whole of the court. An ambush of that size would take time to organise, which means it can only be a member of the council, who had the extra day to send a message and have things set in place."

"Do you know who?"

"No. But I have an idea to find out." Arthur leans forward, elbows on the tabletop. "As of this moment, the three of us are the only ones who know of Morgause and the Cup. You will tell no one else, understand?" he orders flatly, looking between them. "Dara has his best watchers following every member of the council. If any of them make mention of Morgause or the Cup, then we will know our traitor. Until then, we know that the Southrons were the ones to attack the camp and take our people, so we act accordingly."

Lancelot frowns, shaking his head slowly. "But, sire…what about Cenred? We know that he is a part of this. And what of the Cup of Life? An army of men who cannot die?"

Here, Mordred interjects, sitting forward in his chair. "Using the Cup will take time. Magic this powerful, involving so many people, she will have to be careful with it. We have time." He raises a hand to his mouth, biting at his thumbnail thoughtfully. "Perhaps not a great deal of time, but some."

Arthur nods slowly, grateful to hear such a thing, for thoughts of the Cup and its power had been coiled up like a thorny vine in the corner of his mind, always ready to prick at him with cunning barbs. "I don't much like this either, Lancelot, but we have no choice. We don't know who the traitor is. We don't know what they know. Right now, our only chance is to play this game out. If they suspect we're onto them, what is to stop them from sending word to Cenred and Morgause, telling them to have Morgana and Guinevere and Leon all killed?" he prompts, and the knight falters, falling silent. "Precisely. That is their leverage, the bait to keep me distracted whilst they build this army of theirs. Mordred, tell me, is there an enchantment or a curse that allows someone to control another's will?"

The lad blinks in surprise at the abrupt question, lowering his hand from his mouth. "Aye. More than one. It's a dark magic, of a certainty, but it can be done," he agrees.

"And I doubt Morgause will have any qualms about using it. I imagine they'll either kill me or force me to abdicate, and then once they have control of Morgana, place her on the throne, rule Camelot by proxy." He stops and tilts his head, gazing down at the map in front of him, running a fingertip along the parchment between Camelot and Essetir, an idea gradually taking shape. "Cenred has pride, and he's long coveted this kingdom. If he takes Camelot, he won't give it up to the Southrons," he says slowly. "But Helios…a mercenary like him, he'll want his fair share. He won't keep the respect of his men if he lets himself be shortchanged. Oh…" He leans back in his chair, staring at the map.

"What is it?" Lancelot prompts.

One hand comes up to cover his mouth, and he shakes his head slowly, a wry smile coming to his lips. "Say what you will about that woman, she plays a deep game. Tell me, Mordred, what do you think Morgause wants?"
Mordred cocks his head like a puzzled bird, a furrow between his brows. "To kill you, sire?" he ventures, clearly uncertain of how to answer. "To conquer Camelot?"

Arthur waves a hand, nodding. "Yes, that, but what else? What is there that she would want more than anything else? What would a High Priestess of the Old Religion desire above all?"


"Good lad. Once Camelot falls, she'll kill Cenred or Helios, perhaps both of them, so she is the only who commands the Cup of Life and the immortal army. That's two of the five kingdoms under her control, and the combined forces of Essetir and Camelot are more than enough to wage war against anyone, everyone else. And with an army that cannot die…. She'll be able to forge an entirely new world, one ruled by magic."

For a moment, they're all three silent for shock, imagining what such a world would be like, if it would even be possible for anything worthwhile to grow back through so much blood. "What about Merlin? Why would they take him?" Lancelot prompts at last.

Mordred coughs. "I may know why," he says, reaching up to scratch the nape of his neck. "Morgause has made allies of Druids, so she may know of Emrys and the prophecy about him… and you. She knows he’s powerful enough to stop her, and she’ll know that he’s an ally of yours."

Arthur drums his fingers against the arm of his chair, forcing himself to breathe steadily. He recalls Dara's words about lover's bias and how it'll taint his perceptions if he allows it, and he tries to separate his mind. "She knows he's Emrys, then?"

"Mm…no," the young man continues. "The Druids know of Emrys, but they don't know who he is. It's likely they wouldn't think he goes by any other name. Servants hear things that most don't, so if Morgause wanted to know who Emrys was, if he was allying himself with you…who better to know than the king's manservant?"

Disbelief washes over him, and he puts his face in his hands and tilts his head back against the chair. "You're saying that Morgause has taken Merlin to discover the identity of Emrys because she doesn't know that Merlin is Emrys?" The absurdity of it is enough to make him want to either laugh or scream. Dropping his hands, he stays staring up at the ceiling for a moment, breathing slowly. They'll put him to question, then. Bile rises in his throat, thinking just of what that entails, especially with someone like Helios, and he swallows hard, forcing it back down. "Alright. Very well. So, we understand one another, don't we?"

Mordred and Lancelot both nod, though the knight does it with a faint wince, squinting in discomfort. "We tell no one about Morgause and the Cup," the young Druid recites. "We wait for the traitor to reveal themselves and search for Merlin and the others on our own."

"And we try to do it before an immortal army hacks down the front gate," Lancelot adds dryly.

Arthur can't help a small smile at that. "Exactly. Dismissed." He watches as the knight and the Druid rise and leave the chambers, drawing the door shut and leaving him alone in silence, his chambers feeling unnaturally quiet and still. For the third time in his life, he finds himself praying.

Mother give him strength to hold out against them. Crone give me the wisdom to get us out of this safely. And Maiden have mercy on us all.
"Who is Emrys?"

Brienus has long since lost count of the number of times he has asked that question. And yet, he has received no clear answer. It is a…unique situation.

The young man on his table lets out a soft gasp, staring up at the ceiling. The muscles in his throat move as he swallows and clenches his jaw, but he does not speak.

"You make things needlessly difficult." Brienus turns to the second table which holds the tools of his art, spread out across a piece of finest leather. After a moment of contemplation, he takes up another needle in his gloved hand and dips it in the tincture, carefully coating it up to the band etched in the bronze, no less and no further. Turning back to Merlin, he lays his bare hand upon the young man's shoulder, feeling for the edge of his collarbone. Lining up the angle just so, he slides the needle in up to the marked band, no less and no further. Merlin gives a soft sound of pain in his throat, limbs twitching fruitlessly against his binds, then begins to twitch more as the tincture begins to work into him.

"What is your mother's name?" Brienus prompts. If he cannot achieve one answer, he will settle for another. He will chip away at whatever wall Merlin has placed between them, question by question, answer by answer, until he achieves what he desires.


"Very good." He grasps the haft of the needle—

"Evaine."

Brienus halts. "What did you say?"

"My…my mother…"

"What is her name?" Brienus repeats, disbelieving.

"Evaine…" He swallows hard and twitches against his binds. "Hunith."

He releases the haft of the needle, leaving it in. That is not right. He takes a step back and leans against the edge of his work table, staring at Merlin. He knows the true answer. He had been given that information by the Priestess and her ally in Camelot. He does not have it written down, but such is his memory that he can recall every word of what had been said.

Merlin of Silverpine, the bastard-born second son of Sir Lionel de Galis and Hunith the assistant physician of Camelot. He has one trueborn half-brother, Sir Leon de Galis, who is First Knight of Camelot. He has one maternal great-uncle, Gaius, who is the Royal Physician. He is manservant to King Arthur Pendragon.

Brienus turns and takes up another needle, coating it in tincture as well. He will have to be careful. If too much is introduced into the bloodstream at once, it will cause Merlin's heart to stop. He has the antidote prepared, but if he administers it, it will require time to take full effect, and that is time he does not have. The Priestess is impatient for one so powerful.

This one he places low in the left flank, carefully angling the needle between two ribs so he does not puncture a lung. "Speak the truth to me. What is your brother's name?"

"I…" Merlin whimpers once, low in his throat. "I-I have no brother of my blood."
This is not possible. Brienus has met those who have strength of will to resist the effects of the tincture, who have the perseverance to hold their tongues, but to speak falsely...that is not possible. This tincture has been perfected over the course of six generations. It does not fail. "What is your name?"

"Merlin." It is said through gritted teeth.

"Who do you serve?"

"Arthur Pendragon."

"What is your father's name?"

"Balinor."

No. Brienus reaches forward and grasps the haft of the needle in his side, twisting it slowly, taking care not to withdraw it or push it in further at any measure. "What is your father's name?"

Merlin trembles everywhere, his hands scrabbling weakly at the table beneath him, nails scraping at the stone in fitful spasms. "Balinor." He drags in a ragged gasp of air. "Lionel."

Snatching his hand back, he grips the edge of the table behind him hard; splinters dig in beneath the nails of his ungloved hand. He pays them no mind. "Merlin," he says in a low voice. "You make things needlessly difficult. Do not test me in this."

Another choked gasp, then another, and the young man turns his head to face him. The edges of the iron collar cut into his skin with the motion, blood welling up, but he pays it no mind. The flames from the brazier dance in his eyes, and for a moment, the blue almost appears to be golden. "You don't know me very well, do you? I enjoy being contrary for the sake of it," he says, baring his teeth in a grin. "And you shouldn't underestimate my ability to provoke."

Brienus gazes at him unblinking. "Very well. I shall not underestimate you again." Without taking his gaze from Merlin, he reaches back and grasps the haft of another needle. "Shall we continue?"
Treasonous Maidens and Seditious Manservants

With the exception of Uther Pendragon, cold iron is undoubtedly a sorcerer's worst enemy. It strangles magic, restrains it, cages it up inside the sorcerer, which goes against everything magic is meant to be and causes it to burn against the skin. A sorcerer of exceptional power might be able to manage a few small charms, but not enough to make the pain involved worthwhile. Unless, of course, they are creative in how they choose to spend that power.

Merlin has been experimenting with cold iron since he was a boy. Upon repeated insistence, Sir Lionel had given him a few links of it, pieces from a broken chain, and he'd spent countless hours working with it, testing his power against it. The trick of it is not to force the iron itself, but everything else. The table he lies upon is crafted of stone, and it is to the table his binds are attached, the cold iron shackles bolted fast. Half-smothered and tainted with whatever corrupt tinctures coat the interrogator's needle, his magic cannot break the cold irons. But it can crack stone.

After the endless sessions with his interrogator, the same questions over and over, the needles and the fire that scorches through him, when he feels a measure of strength creep back into him, he repeats the same two words over and over. Stán, töcinán. Again. Stán, töcinán. Again. Little by little, one fissure at time, he's crumbled the stone around the bolts holding the cuffs. He's careful to do it slowly, to avoid garnering the interrogator's notice, but finally he knows it'll take only one sharp pull to free himself, the stone reduced to nothing more than gravel still aligned.

He shudders as the last needle is drawn free of his flesh, feeling blood well up and trickle over his skin. The pale-eyed man uses a piece of clean cloth to wipe it clean, neat and precise as ever. "You make things needlessly difficult," he says. Even the manner of his speech is pointedly tidy, each word and syllable pronounced in full. "I would suggest you cease before the High Priestess returns. She will be displeased, and I have seen personally what she does to those she is displeased with. As she cannot deliver such harm upon me, have no doubt that she will instead deliver it unto you." He turns and lays his needles down on the worktable, removing his gloves with delicate care. Turning back to face Merlin, he reaches over to lay a chilled hand on his chest. His fingertips are frigid. He lingers there for a moment, gazing down at Merlin with those strange moon-coloured eyes and incongruously dark lashes. "You are a very curious creature, Merlin. I will be sorry to see you die."

He imagines that is about as near this unnatural man gets to friendship.

Withdrawing his hand, the interrogator turns away from him and walks out; with the collar around his throat, Merlin can't lift his head enough to see, but he imagines there's another chamber attached to this one where the interrogator's been taking his rest. Merlin starts counting. Once the interrogator leaves him, he doesn't return, but still he waits, counting. When he reaches five-and-seventy without hearing any returning motion, Merlin closes his eyes. Turning his hands in their binds, he clenches his fists and pulls, curling his arms upward.

The crumbling stone gives way, the bolts falling loose. He bites the inside of his mouth to keep from sobbing aloud when his magic leaps joyously, warm and bright and sweet. Reaching up, he grasps the collar and pries it free, gritting his teeth against the frigid scald of it against his fingers, setting it aside gently as to not make noise. Sitting up, he reaches down and frees his ankles. For a moment, he can only sit there and try not to weep as his magic sweeps through him unrestrained, and he feels it setting him to rights, off-colour blood seeping from his wounds as the toxins are purged from his veins, the small wounds closing up and leaving behind tender scars. Listening for any sign of movement from the next chamber, he swings his legs over the edge of the table and
rises, wobbling unsteadily. No windows, no light, he doesn't know how long he's been down here. Once he's certain he can walk without falling, he takes a step over to the worktable.

There are three-and-ten needles in all, different sizes, each fashioned of bronze and banded about three-quarters down their length, laid out in a neat, burnished row. Arranged with similar precision are one-and-ten small glass bottles, a stack of folded cloth squares, three wooden bowls of differing sizes. Merlin doesn't know what all the bottles are, what they're concocted from. Sweat from a madman's brow and slime from a horned toad, blood from a maiden's heart and ashes from a murderer's pyre, he cannot say. Whatever it is, he knows not one of them are friendly in their effects, as he's felt for himself. A bright gleam of silver catches his gaze, and he turns towards it, staring. Set apart from the rest of the tools, on its own separate piece of lambskin, a silver needle two handspans long and a small glass bottle. It looks like ink. He knows it isn't.

He takes up one of the clean, folded cloths and winds it around his hand, remembering the gloves the other man wears when handling the needles. Holding the bottle steady with his bare hand, he pulls the cork free with his wrapped one. The Serket venom has a peculiar smell to it, terribly bitter yet sweet enough to gag, akin to rotting meat.

With utmost care, he drips the Serket venom into the shallowest of bowls and rolls the needle through it; when he lifts it from the bowl, the venom dries scarce seconds, forming a clear coat over the silver that gleams with a faint rainbow sheen.

Thus armed, Merlin takes slow, measured steps into the next chamber. There is a sleeping mat of woven rushes on the floor beside a folded stack of clothes, all the same pure white. The interrogator sits at a small table on a chair, writing in a small journal. His back is to Merlin.

He has more skill in breaking the body than he does in healing it, but he isn't ignorant of the physician's art. Mother and Gaius have taught him a great deal over the years, and he has a number of tomes in his library involving healing magic. He knows how to strike a man to make him suffer, where to cut to make him bleed out. And he knows how best to strike a target as narrow as the spine without missing.

The needle goes in with ease; the interrogator takes care of his tools, sharpened silver passing neatly through flesh and bone. Merlin is stronger than him, muscle in his arms and shoulders built from years of training. He drives the needle in all the way up to where his hand grasps the haft.

The young man doesn't scream. Merlin's not certain he can. All that escapes him is a gasp, soft as a lover's sigh, and he falls back in the chair, rigid as a corpse in the cold. When his head tilts back against the chairback, he sees Merlin, and his eyes widen slightly, pupils enormous, only a thin band of moon-pale colour visible at their edges.

"Speak the truth to me," Merlin whispers, leaning over him. "What is your name?"

The man's body twitches fitfully, without conscious thought. In his lap, his hands are curled into stiff claws. "Brienus of...of the...Azdaha." Black foam froths at the corners of his mouth.

"Brienus of the Azdaha. You've asked a question of me. I'll answer it now." He leans in closer, unafraid; this man can do him no further harm. Those pale, pale eyes follow him even as his lashes flicker, rapid and unevenly. "I am Emrys."

"Checkmate. Are you looking forward to tonight?"
Bellegere scoffs as she resets the board, turning it so this time Mordred plays white. "No," she replies flatly.

With all that's been going on, she hadn't imagined the feast of Mabon would still be held, but Arthur had agreed with Father's suggestion to have the feast as normal, to reassure the people of the city. With Morgana captured and the Southrons clearly planning to move against Camelot, she doesn't see much reason to celebrate, but there's a certain reasoning in it, she supposes. People are nervous. It'd be wise for Arthur to reassure them. The feast simply isn't all that reassuring to her. She's five-and-ten now, which means she is of age to be playing games of courtship and to have proper suitors, and she knows full well that Father is doing his damndest to have her wedded off quickly. He's a fool if he believes she'll go quietly, though she doesn't imagine he'll have much luck to begin with. Lady Belligerent doesn't attract many suitors.

Turning her thoughts away from Father and courting and other shudder-worthy subjects, she raises her gaze to Mordred. "You've not been sleeping, have you?"

"No, Mother," he retorts; she kicks him under the table. He yelps in pain then curses her with inventive colour, though it lacks the usual vehemence he puts behind it. Letting out a sigh, he sits back in his chair, gazing absentely at the board. There're shadows beneath his eyes, bruise-dark against his pallor, and if she had to guess, she would say he hasn't been eating either. "The townhouse is so quiet," he admits, voice soft. "Allegra's miserable. Beryl, Sam, Elfgifa...even Clory, though she's better at hiding it. They're afraid. So am I."

"They'll be alright, Mordred," she replies, jostling his leg under the table with one foot, though this time as reassurance. Most might only see Merlin as a servant, but she knows he's made of sterner stock than anyone. She knows the same to be true of Leon and Morgana, and even of Guinevere, strong in her own ways. "So, what do you think of these Southrons, hm? I wonder what's made them brave enough to move against Camelot now when they never have before. And are you going to move sometime before Samhain?"

Mordred gives her a flat look, unamused, then reaches forward, moving a pawn. "There. And I don't know."

She moves a pawn of her own. He's lying. She would've thought he would know better than that by now, but considering that he's nearly died and Arthur's been speaking to him in private, she imagines he either doesn't want to speak of it, or he's been ordered not to. The memory of the scar on his back, small but so deadly, like a silver-white star between his shoulder blades, drifts across her mind, and she lets the lie go. "Perhaps they've made an ally of someone powerful," she poses, carefully testing. "The camp was near Essetir's borders, was it not? Cenred's invaded Camelot once before."

Mordred is adept at dissembling. He'd taught her the nine telltales of a lie. It's only because she knows him so well that she recognises it in him, the half-heartbeat of pause before he answers. He moves a knight into play. "Maybe. I wouldn't think they'd be able to be allies. It takes a certain sort to command an army, and those personalities tend not to keep company very well."

Bellegere props her chin on one fist as she surveys the chessboard, drumming her fingers against the arm of the chair. "Cenred doesn't strike me as a man who takes failure well," she says at last, reaching out to touch the black king with a fingertip. "He attempted to invade once and failed. That failure will weigh on him."

Mordred cocks his head in that birdlike way of his. "Do you think he'd be so rash, though? Arthur defeated him when he was only the prince. Would he attempt it again now that he's the king?"
"Fair point." Bellegere moves her finger to trace the crown of the black queen. Reaching forward, she moves her bishop out, taking one of his pawns. "Still, it will be interesting to see what they will do."

"That reminds me. Here." Mordred pushes back from the table and stands, going to the cupboard; Ione must've let him in earlier, if he's hidden something there.

Bellegere gasps softly when he turns back around. "My bow! Where did you find it?" she asks, rising to take it from him gently. After they had returned from Castle Fyrien, Father had taken it from her chambers, and she had been quite convinced he'd turned it to kindling.

"On the roof," he replies in amusement. "I think he threw it from a window. I'm sorry I didn't give it to you earlier. I had to take it to a bowyer."

Once he says it, she notices that the bowstring is new, as is the fletching on the arrows. The metallic green of peacock has been replaced with the white feathers of snow goose, painted with blue stripes. Setting it aside, she embraces him hard, squeezing him tightly about the ribs to hear him grunt and whinge, though she's still careful of his back; he groans and pushes her away with feigned irritation, though the curve of his mouth gives away his humour. "Will you be coming to the feast tonight?" she asks, taking up her bow again, testing the draw. "Or vigil again?"

"Vigil. I've never sat it by myself before." Mordred scrubs his hands over his arms as if to stave off a chill. "But at least it's the last year I'll have to," he adds with a smile.

"Good." Bellegere grins and punches his shoulder. "I expect a dance out of you." She prefers to dance with steel in hand, but after seeing the looks of borderline panic on his face whenever someone even mentions dancing to him, she'll gladly take her turn in the ballroom.

"Expect to have your toes stepped on," he retorts, rubbing the offended shoulder, and then groans, making a face.

Bellegere laughs at his expression. "What is it?"

He scowls unhappily, arms folded, and there's a certain amount of sulking in his voice when he replies. "I have to go make nice with your father." He huffs out a breath, giving her a flat look. "You're my friend and I love you dearly, Lady Belligerent, but I don't like that man."

She snorts and claps a hand to his shoulder. "Don't worry, neither do I. Alright, go on. Out with you. The feast is soon to start, and I have to get ready," she announces, seeing Ione enter the room with an armful of clothes—she'd asked for her best outfit to be laundered before the feast.

Bellegere loves him well too, and she's always grateful to have another person who treats her as a person rather than just a girl, but she draws the line at undressing in front of him. If anyone ever discovers that she's stripped in front of him, Father will turn him into the smoothest eunuch from here to Constantinople.

Grasping his shoulders, she turns him about and pushes him towards the door, laughing as he purposefully drags his feet, leaning back against her hands. Finally, she gives him a hearty shove into the corridor. "Joyous Mabon to you, and have a happy vigil," she drawls with exaggerated feeling, and Mordred makes a rude gesture recognised the world over. Laughing, Bellegere shuts the door between them.

He stands in the corridor for a moment, arms folded over his chest. He doesn't want to apologise to Agravaine. Lancelot had asked it of him, if not for his own sake, then at least for Arthur's; the king has enough to worry on without there being dissent in his own household. He doesn't want to sit
vigil beneath the quickbeam tree in the gathering cold, either. He's never sat by himself, and he's always been fearful of what he'll find if he goes too deeply into himself without Merlin to draw him back.

Finally, Mordred sighs and starts towards the kitchens. Surely someone there will know where Agravaine is, or at least where Arthur is, as the two haven't been far from one another in the past sennight. He supposes he owes such to Merlin, to keep the vigil he's held so long and to give Arthur whatever help he can. He touches his wrist lightly, feeling the shape of Merlin's throwing knife under his sleeve. Arthur has the other one, as well as Merlin's broken quarterstaff in his chambers; Mordred believes he has the right spell to make it whole. He'll ask Arthur in the morning.

None of the kitchen servants have seen Lord Agravaine, though they're kind enough to inform him that the King is in the Great Hall finalizing the events of the feast. Mordred waits until Cook's back is turned, then takes a linen napkin and snatches a thick slice of venison dressed with currants. Just because he's to sit vigil during the festivities doesn't mean he should deprive himself of all enjoyment.

"Oy!"

Recognising his impending doom at the hands of Cook and her skull-cracking ladle, he beats a hasty retreat with his prize, chortling all the while. He savours the treat as he walks, having to switch from hand to hand as the hot grease soaks through the linen napkin. As the servers begin to make their march to the Great Hall, bearing fragrant dishes between them, Mordred starts making his way home. Wherever Agravaine has gotten to, it's doubtful he'll find the man now, as he's probably already taken his seat at the table with Arthur.

Licking the last bit of currant from his fingers, he starts to turn down the last flight of stairs that'll take him out to the courtyard when he catches glimpse of two unfortunately familiar figures at the far end of the corridor, one garbed in grey, the other in sable. One would think that a man as wealthy as Agravaine would be more than capable of affording clothes in more than one colour. He's going in the opposite direction of the Great Hall—no doubt Bellegere's tardy and he's going to fetch her from her chambers and scold her personally. "My lord Agravaine!" he calls, hastening to catch them up and hopefully give her time enough to get down to the feast.

Sayer halts firm, and Agravaine whirls on him sharply, and for the briefest moment, Mordred would swear there was something akin to fear in his eyes. But then it disappears behind his usual air of superiority, chin lifting. "You're Merlin's ward, aren't you?" he asks. Distaste colours his tone. Faintly, perhaps, but still there. "My daughter's…companion."

"Yes, my lord." Name of the Mother, Lancelot owes him so dearly for this.

"Well? What do you want?"

He takes a deep breath and inclines his head, forcing a contrite tone. "I would ask your forgiveness for my behaviour at the Druid camp. I acted out of turn. I did not mean to give offense."

"Yes, well, one would assume you have been taught better, but I understand that tensions have been high," Agravaine says in that idly condescending tone of his. He isn't looking at Mordred at all, adjusting the cuffs of his jacket.

"A glimpse of colour there catches Mordred's gaze—a loop of thick red yarn knotted around Agravaine's wrist, bright against the luxuriantly dark-dyed fabric of his coat. It stirs a memory, Sayer's hard hand on the nape of his neck, yarn standing out sharply scarlet against a sombre grey
The lord goes on in that same damn voice, as though he is speaking to a simpleton, "I understand the King is looking to move past the prejudices of the past, but one cannot deny those of magic are inclined to be of a cunning nature, especially now with the Southrons working in tandem with a priestess."

Mordred freezes on indrawn breath, feeling for a moment as though the earth has dropped away beneath his feet.

And understands too late.

They have been played from the beginning.

Agravaine has been on the council since he arrived in Camelot, sat at Arthur's side, privy to the King's every plan, there to offer him counsel at every crossroad. Morgana, they hadn't found anything in her chambers or belongings that could bind her from her visions.... Yarn. Wrapped around a bar of cold iron and soaked in salt water, red yarn could be used to make charms that prevent one from being seen in a scrying mirror. Or by a seer. And the more he integrates himself into their future, the less anyone will be able to see of it. But still...Bellegere's father, Arthur's uncle, his own kin....

"Priestess, my lord?" he asks, proud his voice stays steady. "I have not heard of any priestess." Do not let it be true. Say nothing more of it. Let it be a mistake.

Agravaine gives a small, patronising smile that doesn't come near to his eyes. "Yes, well, the King does not hold his council with children, does he?"

Heart and mind racing, Mordred tries to swallow past the abrupt tightness in his throat. Agravaine isn't at the feast. The celebration of Mabon had gone forward on his insistence, and he isn't there. But Arthur is. His most loyal supporters are. The rest of the council is. And Merlin...Agravaine would need a scapegoat to blame, but he would also want Merlin out of the way if he needed unhindered access to Arthur's chambers...to the keys kept at his bedside. The vaults. The kingdom's most important documents. The siege tunnels.

"No, my lord. He doesn't," Mordred whispers, aware of the man's dark gaze boring into him, narrowed and suspicious. "And he does not share it with you."

The flicker of Agravaine's gaze is the only warning Mordred has before metal flashes in front of his face and a steel cable pulls tight around his throat.

Morgana can feel her magic leap back to life the instant Gwen opens the first shackle, a banked flame suddenly fed, and she bites back a sigh of relief. The sensation is akin to having a tight bandage abruptly unwound, blood rushing back into a numbed limb, except she can feel this in her very soul. The silver leaves no mark on her skin when it comes off.

"You know, my lady, I have served you for years," Gwen observes as she moves to Morgana's other ankle to open that shackle, a banked flame suddenly fed, and she bites back a sigh of relief. The sensation is akin to having a tight bandage abruptly unwound, blood rushing back into a numbed limb, except she can feel this in her very soul. The silver leaves no mark on her skin when it comes off.

"You know, my lady, I have served you for years," Gwen observes as she moves to Morgana's other ankle to open that shackle as well, fitting the bent nail to the keyhole. "I would follow you to the ends of the earth if you wished it." The shackle clicks open, and Morgana kicks the chain away; Gwen takes her left wrist next. "But this is, without a doubt, the single most insane thing you have ever conjured." Another click, another soul-bright leap of magic freed. "And I want you to know that I believe you fully mad to attempt it." Both hands free.
Morgana turns her back to her maidservant, moving aside her braided hair. "I know, but we have no choice. This is our best chance," she replies, keeping herself still as Gwen carefully slips the nail into the collar's lock.

Whoever betrayed them in Camelot has worked quickly; Morgause is moving against Arthur already. From the tower window, they'd had a clear view of Cenred's army moving out, ranks and ranks on march towards Essetir's border with Camelot, coupled with the black-clad forms of the Southrons. Morgana had hoped to make an escape before, hoping to get ahead of the army and perhaps reach the city before them. Now all she can do is pray that her message has reached Arthur and Merlin. With the army gone, however, they have the greatest chance of making a clean escape.

The collar springs open, falling from her neck to join the chains coiled in her lap, still cold to the touch, and she gives a relieved sigh, running one hand along her throat. She doesn't have long to relish her freedom. Speed is of the essence. Rolling up the silver chains in their thin blanket so they do not rattle, she hands it over to Guinevere, rises from the bed, and goes to the door. Pressing her hands against the wood, she pushes her magic through the solid wood, feeling her way through to the other side. It is locked from the outside, the crossbar set in place. "Aliese," she whispers; the bolt slides.

They're silent for a span of heartbeats, listening for any sign of movement. When there is none, Morgana eases the door open slowly, peering out. There's a small landing before the door, then a narrow staircase leading sharply downwards, which means the guards will be posted at the bottom of the stairs. Gwen stays a step behind her as she descends the stairs on stockinged feet, having taken her boots off for stealth. At the curve of the staircase, she peers 'round and grins. At the foot of the stairs, facing out towards the corridors, two guards stand. One is slouching back against the wall, the other idly drumming the beat of a popular tavern song on the haft of his halberd with two fingers—the corridor is empty.

Morgana squeezes Guinevere's hand twice, then moves further down the stairs towards them. When she can come no closer without entering their peripheral vision, she releases the other woman's hand. "Swefe nu!"

The guards collapse to the ground in ungainly heaps. Thankfully, they are wearing boiled leather and heavy robes rather than mail, so it doesn't make too terrible of a noise, though Morgana does have to lunge forward to catch the one's halberd before it can fall. Again, there's a moment of tense silence, listening for any sign that they've alerted anyone else. Exhaling slowly, she holds her hand out towards the guards. "Flēogē."

There's a surprising sensation of weight, though it isn't any kind of weight Morgana could explain in so many words, not like lifting something physically. The crumpled bodies lift from the ground; only a few inches, but enough for her to move them up the stairs into the chamber, dropping them unceremoniously to the floor. Neither man stirs. Leaving the door open to better hear any noise from below, they immediately set to the task of stripping off their armour and uniforms.

"How long do you think we'll have before they notice us gone?" Guinevere asks as she strips off her gown. Once down to her smallclothes, she wraps the rolled-up blanket around her waist, tying the corners together, then starts pulling the guard's uniform on over them.

"Nobody's bothered us thus far. I don't believe they mean to until after the invasion." Morgana gathers up her braid and ties it in a lover's-haste knot, tucking it beneath the cowl. If Cenred and Helios cannot take Camelot, no doubt they'll set the city to siege and use her as a bargaining tool to force Arthur's surrender. That, or they'll use some dire magic to sap her will, a mummer queen for them to rule.
The guard's uniform fits her well enough, and the stiff, spacious boiled leather helps mask her form. The boots are too large, but with the laces tightened, they stay on her feet, which is all she truly needs of them. She winds the scarf around her neck and head as the man had worn it, covering the lower half of her face; rising to her feet, she grabs the halberd and stands at attention. "Do I make a convincing guardsman?"

Gwen manages a smile as she fixes her own scarf. "Quite. Let's go."

Locking the door behind them, they go back down the stairs to stand at the guards' post, trying to affect the same bored casualness the men had, slouching back against the wall. Morgana begins to count in her head, measuring out her breathing just as she'd learnt to in meditation, praying for the Crone's wisdom that she has timed this properly.

When she reaches eight-and-seventy, the sound of footsteps becomes audible, coming closer. Her palms prickle with sweat, and she draws herself upright just as two guards come around the corner. They're similarly garbed in cowls and scarves against the deepening chill, and they give her and Guinevere small nods as they approach. She returns the gesture, moving away from the wall and walking away, Gwen at her side. The guards take up the posts at the foot of the stairs, leaning against the wall on either side of the staircase.

The muscles in her legs tremble, the skin between her shoulder blades tight and prickling as she walks down the corridor, drawing on every ounce of patience and control she has to keep a steady pace, to not break into a wild sprint once they round the corner. The moment they are alone in the corridor, Morgana takes Gwen by the arm and draws her into an alcove, pressing back against the wall. With her maidservant keeping watch, Morgana carefully pulls out the glossy black feather she'd taken from their message raven, a green pine needle twined around the shaft and tied with a few strands of wool from their blanket. Cupping the feather in her palms, she closes her eyes and gathers up her magic, combined with her desire to find, and breathes out Leon's name to blow it from her hands. The feather drifts downwards…then catches and flies, bobbing along delicately through the air.

Tugging the scarf back into place, she grabs hold of the halberd and follows; Guinevere stays directly at her side, matching her step for step. Her grip on the halberd is so tight the leather of her gloves creak.

True as a lymer on a blood-trail, the feather leads them through the corridors and staircases of Cenred's castle. There are only a few other guards present, and though her heart pounds so hard she is certain they will hear it, nobody stops them. They earn not a single glance. None of them pay mind to the feather drifting idly through the air above their heads.

When they come to a flight of stairs descending sharply, she knows without knowing that they've reached the dungeons. Morgana's mouth goes dry, but she forces her legs to continue moving. Confidence. They must appear to have purpose. Nobody will question them if they move with purpose and do not hesitate. There are no guards in the dungeon proper, and Morgana internally sends a prayer of thanks to the Maiden for her mercy.

The feather drifts to the floor in front of a heavy door. When she tests the handle, it turns with ease. She cannot decide if it's confidence or arrogance. The moment she draws open the door, however, a lean, dark shape lunges out of the room, tackling her about the middle and bearing her to the floor. Sparks explode across her vision when the back of her head collides with the stone floor. Through her spinning vision, she sees Guinevere step forward, halberd raised, but then she tumbles backwards as if yanked by an unseen rope.

Magic, bright and familiar.
"Merlin!" Morgana gasps out. "Merlin, stop, it's me!" she cries, reaching up to scrabble at the scarf, yanking it away from her face.

Straddling her middle, the young man blinks in surprise, the—is that a needle?—clutched in his fist halting only a few inches above her throat. "Morgana?" he whispers. He raises his head, staring at Guinevere, sitting up with a pained grunt, scarf askew. "Gwen? What in seven hells are you doing here?"

"We're hostages, and we are in the middle of an escape, so if you would please…?"

A hoarse laugh escapes him as he gets to his feet, pulling her up. He's paler than is wont, with dark shadows lingering beneath his gaze, but there's a fierce brightness in his eyes, a savage energy. "As are we. You felt it, then? That magic?" he demands of Morgana, and she nods brusquely. The night before the army had departed, she had felt a terrible surge of power within the castle, her own magic flaring in alarm even through the stifling silver chains. She can still feel it now, a coiled knot of cold, unwavering knowledge that something is very wrong in the world.

Leon appears in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe; he looks truly haggard, though she can see no visible mark on him, tremors running through his frame. "We have to get to Camelot," he rasps out as Gwen moves to his side, drawing his arm around her shoulders.

Morgana shakes her head. "The army is already marching. We won't get in front of them. I sent a message—"

"Arthur won't get it." Merlin's jaw is set in a hard line, throat moving convulsively as he swallows. "Agravaine is the traitor," he grinds out, voice strangled with emotion. "He betrayed you to the Southrons, he had me captured and brought here, and he'll keep Arthur blind to the invasion until they've knocked in the gates."

For a moment, she cannot breathe, and her body goes cold to think that Arthur is alone in Camelot, unaware of the serpent sat at his table. Morgana presses a hand over her mouth, eyes closed tightly as she takes a deep breath, then another, centering herself. "What can we do?" she asks once she knows she won't scream the moment her mouth opens.

He shakes his head rapidly. "Arthur would sooner die than give up Camelot, but Mordred, Lancelot…they'll get him out of the city. We'll find them. And we will need reinforcements if we are to retake our kingdom," he adds, then plucks at her sleeve, pointing further into the dungeons. "Down here." With that, he turns and marches in the direction he had pointed, moving at a rapid stride.

Bemused, Morgana goes to Leon's other side, supporting the tall knight between herself and Guinevere as he stumbles along, barely able to lift his feet from the floor. They find Merlin standing in a long, low-ceilinged chamber hosting easily two dozen cells, each bearing a handful of prisoners. Though it's difficult to make out much in the darkness, she can see that the closest prisoners are bound in cold irons; from the faint rattling and clinking, she guesses they are all bound in cold iron. "Who are these people?" she whispers.

"Sorcerers. The ones Cenred captures for his army, the ones who refuse to join with Morgause," he murmurs, then steps forward. He carries himself upright, shoulders firm and jaw set, and she can feel the power rolling out of him even from where she stands, bright and hot, spilling over his edges in a roiling bath. If it'd been water, it'd be lapping at her chin and rising. "It ends," he declares, voice ringing from the walls. "The Bloody Tyrant is dead, and the Great Purge is over. The Old Religion lives, the new age has begun."
When he speaks, Morgana can hear another voice with his, a woman's voice, echoing in and with Merlin's.

"In the name of the Maiden…"

[In the name of my sisters…]

"In the name of the Mother…"

[In the name of my children…]

"And in the name of the Crone…"

[And in the name of all those who have come before…]

["It ends now!"]

The last is spoken all at once, ringing double tones that she can feel echo in her very bones. There is thunder without sound, a vast impact upon the air, and the dungeons are full of the smell of heated metal and the wild places of the earth. There's a tremendous cracking sound, loud as life, a great cloud of dust billowing.

Morgana coughs, waving away the dust and smoke, and when it clears, she sees where it had come from.

The doors of the prison cells have been ripped clean from the stone, the iron twisted into pitiful, skeletal shapes on the floor. Every chain has been similarly torn from the walls and the floors, the collars and shackles shattered into so many fragments, cold iron rendered harmless as brittle wood. The imprisoned sorcerers are all unharmed, not a scratch to be found. They stare up at Merlin in awe and fear and hope, some falling to their knees, bowing low; the name Emrys is whispered in the darkness, feathery and reverent.

Merlin turns to face them, gold still dancing through his gaze, giving off magic like heat. "Now we may go."

"We have to get out of here, now."

Mordred's voice strident despite his bruised throat, and though he's still shorter than Lancelot by half a head, he looks quite savage, covered in blood that isn't his and clutching Merlin's quarterstaff, somehow whole again.

"Move the tables against the doors!" Lancelot orders. "Barricade them as best you can!" Once, just once, he wants there to be a normal feast day in Camelot that doesn't involve bloodshed or conflict in any shape or form. Suddenly, despite everything, he wishes desperately that Guinevere was here with him. Her steadfast calm would do well in this. Half of the people in the inner chamber are noblewomen who have likely never seen anything more violent than a tourney, the other half are unarmed noblemen either too young or too old to be of use. The only ones armed at all are the two knights and six guardsmen who had managed to make the inner chamber before the doors closed, along with Lancelot, Arthur, Mordred, and Bellegere. That made two-and-ten. Two-and-ten against hundreds, thousands.

On the other side of the chamber, Bellegere climbs up onto one of the benches and pulls herself up towards the window, peering out. "Cousin, there's more of them coming through the square. The
"lower town is burning," she exclaims.

Arthur lets out a string of colourful words, one hand clutched tightly against his side where one of the Southrons had managed a lucky blow before they closed the doors. "How did they get through the gates? Why did no one ring the bells?"

Again, Mordred hisses like a scalded cat. "They did not come through the gates, they came beneath them, through the tunnels." He grabs hold of Lancelot's arm, fingertips digging in hard enough to bruise. "Do you not hear me? These men cannot be killed, and soon they'll overtake every part of the castle. If they find Arthur, they will kill him. If we go quickly, we can still make the postern gate."

Lancelot presses his lips together, shifting his grip on the hilt of his sword. It sounds a terrible thing, to relinquish Camelot with so little struggle, but what can they do against men that cannot die? Mordred has a gift of survival, and Lancelot knows he's right. Better to be a living coward than a dead fool, and if they fall here, who will be able to stand against Morgause? "I know, but Arthur won't abandon his people. He'd rather die," he says, inwardly cursing the other man for all he's worth; abruptly, he has a deep and profound understanding of Merlin's occasional frustration in dealing with royal self-sacrificing idiots.

The young man casts a glance at their king, braced against a table and grimacing as Hunith binds his ribs. Taking a deep breath, he looks back up at Lancelot and claps a hand against his arm. "Do your best to keep him from lopping my head off after this, yes?" he says with forced levity; before Lancelot can ask what he means to do, Mordred pushes past the others and vaults over the table with ease, sliding up to kneel on the tabletop behind the king. "I'm sorry, Arthur," he apologises, then grasps the back of Arthur's neck with one hand.

He cannot see Mordred's eyes flash gold from here, but he hears Arthur's strangled cry, and the blond goes limp against the table. Hunith gapes up at the lad.

Mordred twists around to face him. "You are in command now, Sir Lancelot."

Lancelot blinks at him. A thought flashes across his mind, swift as a bird on the wing—are you certain you are not truly related to Merlin?—but then he snaps back to himself sharply. Turning in place, he seeks out Percival, helping to move one of the tables against the doors. "Attend the King," he orders, then faces the rest of the chamber, terrifyingly aware of all eyes turned towards him. "Everyone on their feet. We're leaving. The city is overrun. Camelot is fallen."
Arthur sneezes and waves a hand to clear the dust, batting the gauzy cobwebs away from his face. "Well, at least there aren't any bats this time," he remarks, holding his torch out high in front of him to better illuminate the chamber in front of him. It looks like a lesser hall or perhaps a small ballroom given the lack of furnishing. "We should be able to stay here for a few days at least. This place has been abandoned for centuries." Moving forward, he lights one of the torches left behind, then sets his own in the empty bracket beside it, dropping down to sit on a piece of a crumbled pillar.

The rest of their ragged little band moves into the hall, weary and travelworn from four days of trying to stay a step ahead of the search parties on their trail. None of them would have been able to keep up this pace for much longer, and he hopes that the invaders, lacking lifelong familiarity with Camelot's terrain, won't find them for a time yet.

As Lancelot attempts to start a larger fire in one of the ancient braziers, Ione sets to cleaning the rabbits that Bellegere had shot with her bow on their way in, trying to work one-handed. Percival, Gwaine, and Elyan, armed with torches and swords alike, go to explore the rest of the hall, checking the other entrances. Hunith orders Ione off her feet and checks the splint on the girl's wrist, scolding her for overexerting herself with the well-honed practice of a mother. Arthur draws his sword and lays it flat across his knees, taking a whetstone from his pocket and running it carefully along the edge. It's more habit than need, as the red-tinted steel holds an edge like nothing else, and he offers up another prayer of thanks that he'd taken to keeping the sword with him after Merlin's abduction. He can't imagine the destruction it could bring about in the hands of a man like Cenred or Helios. Or, gods forbid, Morgause herself. A tightness closes about his chest at thought of his consort, and he has to grip the whetstone a little tighter to keep his hand from shaking.

"Does it have a name?"

"No," he says without looking up.

Mordred shuffles nearer and lowers himself to sit on the grime-layered floor beside Arthur's legs, taking care to keep a healthy space between himself and the sword blade. "Are you still cross with me?" he asks, tilting his head back. Still visible around his throat is a band of unsightly bruises and raw flesh where Sayer's steel thread had cut into him.

"No," Arthur repeats in a softer voice. He had been. He'd been furious when he'd woken in a dank cavern, on the run and hiding, his own city taken right out from beneath him. If it hadn't been for Lancelot stepping between them, he might have finished what Sayer began and strangled Mordred with his own hands. And yet, he wasn't ever truly angry with the Druid. He'd been more hurt than anything, wounded down to his core knowing that he'd been betrayed not simply by some noble but by his own uncle. Thinking on it now pains him.

Mordred nods once, then turns his gaze down to the sword; it reflects a band of reddish light across his face when Arthur turns it over to start sharpening the other edge. "I didn't think such weapons truly existed," he remarks. "I've only ever heard stories. Children's tales. Have you ever heard the story of Galeren of the Dalriada?"

"No, I haven't." The corners of his mouth curve up despite himself. "And I believe I'm a bit old for children's tales, whelp."

After the Fall
"I think you'll want to hear it."

He turns to look at the boy—a-h, he's not a boy anymore, though. Mordred's become a young man. He's grown into himself, no longer unbalanced and gawky, shoulders filling out; the strain of their trials has scraped away all his soft lines down to the sharper edges underneath, the strong line of his jaw and cheekbones more noticeable. Arthur pockets the whetstone, slides the blade home in its scabbard, and eases himself down to sit on the floor so he is now shoulder-to-shoulder with Mordred. "Very well. I'm listening."

"Galeren was a champion of the Dalriada, a warrior of such renown he was known to all four kindreds. He was known more for his gallantry, as it was so true and lasting that the Maiden herself loved him. However, no mortal can endure the embrace of a goddess, not even a man like Galeren, so the Maiden gave him a token of her love instead. A sword. " Arthur turns his head sharply; Mordred raises his brows and tilts his head in a familiar expression of 'I told you so'. "It was called the Cláomh Solais, the sword of light, as Galeren only ever drew it when the darkest hour was upon him, when all other hope was gone. It was said to be made from the heart of a fallen star, forged in a dragon's breath, and quenched in the blood of the earth. No mortal blade could check it. It had the power to turn the tides of war, but it also had the capacity to unleash great evil on the world, should it ever be used wrongly. When Galeren grew old and grey, rather than let its power be abused, he hid it away."

"Where did he hide it?" Arthur asks, leaning forward slightly in curiosity, no matter that he looks an eager boy.

Mordred shrugs. "It's a story, Arthur. It changes depending on who's telling it. I've heard it half a dozen ways. Some say he entrusted it to the giants, others say he hid it in the hollow hills, or threw it into the sea," he replies, spreading his hands. "I was told that it went with him to his pyre, so his spirit could go to the Maiden with the token she'd given him."

"You said he only used it a handful of times. When?" he prompts instead.

"Well, those are all told differently, too, but it's said he drew the Cláomh Solais against a wicked dragon that had turned its back on the Old Religion. A giant who rode a great aurochs and devoured innocents. A corrupt High Priestess who tore the veil between the living and the dead, unleashing Dorocha on the world."

Leaning back, Arthur turns his gaze back down to the sword resting across his lap, the hilt glittering subtly in the firelight. He thinks of the words etched up the runnel of the blade: take me up, cast me away. Quenched in the blood of the earth. The skin between his shoulder blades prickles.

"Arthur!" Gwaine waves a hand sharply for their attention. "Someone's coming," he hisses, pressed closely up against the wall, staring out one of the narrow windows.

Everyone goes still, a perfect silence falling as they even hold their breaths. Arthur shoves to his feet and goes to the window, peering out. Sure enough, there's a small party moving towards the ruins. He frowns a little, eyeing them. They don't move like trained soldiers, straggling along in uneven groups, making no attempt to go silently; it's hard to tell with certainty in the dark, but some of the figures seem quite small to him.

Quickly, he turns to face the others, gesturing towards the doorway they had entered through. The door and the passageway are both narrow enough to make a bottleneck; if they don't have the numbers, they'll need the advantage of space and position. Lancelot smotheres the fire, leaving only the torches for light, and moves to flank the doorway with Elyan and Mordred. Arthur, Gwaine,
and Percival stand at the other side. Ione and Hunith move out of the way, behind one of the pillars, and Bellegere kneels behind a toppled column, bow ready in hand.

They all stand in silence, straining to listen in the darkness. Arthur flexes his hand around the hilt of his sword, blood echoing in his ears, hearing the sound of footsteps approaching up the passageway, hushed murmuring. Definitely not ones for stealth.

Another moment of perfect quiet, and then—

"Forbærnan!"

With a muffled roar of flame and a stink of burning dust, the braziers and torches burst into flame, illuminating the whole of the hall with sudden, dazzling light. There are a few short, abrupt curses of surprise. Arthur doesn't hear it over the rapid tattoo of his own heart. He knows that voice. "Merlin?"

"Arthur!"

Footsteps sprint towards him. He drops his sword without thinking about it, opening his arms, and when Merlin crashes into him in a ferocious embrace, he wraps both arms around his consort and clutches him close and tight. He buries his face in the crook of Merlin's neck and breathes in the wild smell of him, loam and fermented berries. Dimly, he's aware of Merlin's warm, callused hands running over his shoulders, his back, his hair, and that deep voice murmuring in his ear, "Arthur, Arthur, Arthur."

When he remembers how to relax his arms again, drawing back to look at Merlin's face, Arthur lets out a soft laugh, reaching up to touch his cheek. Alive.

"Have no fear, brother, I am perfectly well," Morgana remarks dryly, and he turns in surprise, releasing Merlin to embrace his sister, laughing giddily with relief. Over her shoulder, he sees Leon as well as Guinevere, who lets out a sobbing cry and runs to Lancelot and Elyan.

For a time, there are only embraces and reassurances, relieved and grateful; eventually, they end up moving further into the great hall. For lack of furnishing, they all sit on the floor between the braziers and exchange their respective tales. Arthur sits beside Merlin, their sides pressed together.

After escaping Cenred's castle, Merlin's party had gone in search of Arthur and the others, not daring to even approach the city of Camelot. Most of the prisoners had left, returning to their own camps along the way. The ones who were with him now were sorcerers who'd been captured alone or Druids who no longer had a camp to return to—eight-and-ten in total, not counting the four from Camelot.

Much the same had become of Arthur's party. Once they'd gotten well away from the city, he'd sent the rest of the nobles back to their own estates. He couldn't very well go into battle with a handful of courtiers, and if nothing else, they would be able to rally their own arms and perhaps keep the invaders from gaining too strong a foothold in the outlying provinces. When a band of Southrons caught their trail, it certainly would've been their end had they not been caught up by Gwaine and Elyan, who'd had the ingenuity to set off a rockslide to cut off the Southrons' pursuit. After that, they had made their way to the ruined castle.

"Agravaine betrayed us," Merlin says softly once Arthur finishes his recounting. The rest of the sorcerers and Druids are moving about the hall, helping to clear the space and making it a more suitable camp; they're well-adapted to this type of living, used to having to scrape survival out of nothing. They had given Arthur and the other knights a few uneasy looks at first, but Merlin's ease
and familiarity with everyone helps to settle the tension. They have faith in Emrys's judgment.

It isn't posed as a question, but he still nods, throat tightening. "I don't understand it," he murmurs. "I…I thought…." Arthur shakes his head again, unable to find the words. He just wants to know why. What has he done to earn such enmity? Agravaine is family, his own kin, the last connection he has to his mother. He swallows hard, fighting down the thick lump of wool in his throat, and looks across the hall to where Bellegere sits quietly, apart from the others. Agravaine's betrayal had cut him deep, but it had run Bellegere through entirely. Her own father.

Merlin follows his gaze. "How is she?" he asks, low enough she cannot hear.

"Hurt. Angry. She blames herself, though it's not her doing."

The younger man gives a small, solemn nod. "Have you spoken to her?"

"I tried. She asked to be left alone."

That earns him a sideways glance. "When has that ever done anyone good? When was the last time I left you alone to brood?" Merlin prompts, which is fair point; whenever Arthur had fallen into his bouts of bad temper, his consort had refused to let him be, unwilling to let him sulk. It had seemed an endless infuriation then, but now he recognises it having been done a-purpose. Merlin rests a hand on his arm. "Go talk to her."

Gazing across at his despondent cousin, the king nods once and pushes to his feet, making his way over to her. Merlin remains where he sits. Arthur is better suited to have a conversation with her on the matter of ignominious fathers and shedding the darkness of their sin. As the cousins fall into hushed conversation of their own, a warm body slides into the space Arthur had vacated, and Merlin drapes an arm around Mordred's shoulders. "What happened to you?" he demands, placing two fingers beneath the Druid's chin and gently tilting his head back to better see the half-healed abraded flesh of his throat. "Sayer?" he asks, eyes flickering dangerous gold.

"He's dead," Mordred replies. "I killed him." The other manservant had attempted to strangle him whilst Agravaine ran to let the invaders into the castle before the alarm could be raised. Mordred had stabbed the mute with the throwing knife he had up his sleeve, then used his magic to fling the man into the wall. He isn't certain what killed Sayer—the shattering of his spine or the cracking of his skull. Either way, he certainly isn't rising again in this life.

Merlin gives a solemn nod. He moves his hand down to touch the young man's throat, magic seeping warmly into his skin; when he takes his hand away, swallowing no longer hurts. [Did he go quietly?] Merlin's thoughts brush across his, quietly amused, and he tilts his head subtly in Arthur's direction.

[Yes, but largely because I did not give him the chance to argue in the first place,] Mordred answers, fighting a smile of his own.

[Wise choice.] Merlin ruffles his hair, then leans forward and lays a kiss on his temple. [I heard about what happened at the Druid camp. Morgause was furious when Agravaine sent word that you and Lancelot had survived. I'm surprised your hair didn't fall out, the way she was cursing you both. Were your ears burning?]

He chortles and shakes his head; perhaps later, he'll tell Merlin about what he had seen, the stone doorway and the Triple Goddess. If there's anyone who could comprehend it, it would be Merlin.

"May I have my consort back, whelp?" Arthur drawls as he walks back over to them, Bellegere at
his heels. She doesn't quite have her usual forceful affect, but there's something of her old spark back in her eyes now. Mordred grins and pushes to his feet, giving an exaggerated bow to the other man before he nudges Bellegere, coaxing her over to the dinner fire. Arthur calls Gwaine and Elyan over to him and Merlin. "They escaped the city after the invasion," he tells Merlin. "They've seen the immortal army."

The two men nod slowly, haunted expressions flickering across both their faces. "It was unlike anything I'd seen," Gwaine remarks, un wontedly solemn. "To see a man take a sword through his chest and stay on his feet..." He represses a shudder.

"They look and act as men do, but I'm not sure they are truly men anymore," Elyan adds, ashen and uneasy. "They'll flinch from a blow, I've seen, but it won't fell them."

Merlin makes a thoughtful sound in his throat. "If they are newly immortal, it would make sense that they still react as mortals. You hesitate to grasp a weapon by its blade even if it is dull. If you feel heat on your skin, you recoil before you are burned without even knowing what it is that's hot," he muses. "Like as not, we can use that to our advantage. If we cannot kill them, we must find a way to distract them."

"We can set them on fire."

A beat of silence. All four men turn to look at the source of the voice; Bellegere, having discreetly made her way closer to eavesdrop, flicks her gaze from face to face guilelessly. "What? Elyan said they still react to things even if they can't die, and I don't know about the rest of you, but immortal or not, if I'm set on fire, be assured I'm not going to give much attention to anything else."

"That's..." Arthur cocks his head. "...not actually a terrible idea, cousin, though I cannot say the idea of putting the city to torch is appealing." It certainly wouldn't be the first time he had employed fire in military tactics, but that had always been done when they had proper equipment and supplies. Not to mention plentiful access to a well.

Gwaine rubs his hands together with a little smirk. "It sounds a dangerous gamble. My favourite sort. But still, how would we do it? Even arming ourselves with torches, we will be overwhelmed, and the most we'd be able to do is set a few small fires, something they'd be able to put out."

Sitting at Bellegere's side on the toppled pillar, Mordred interjects thoughtfully, "What about pyromancy?"

"Pyromancy?" Merlin twists around to give the young man a stern glare. "Mordred, what have I told you about reading those books?"

"Yes, yes, I know, never without permission," the lad replies, flapping one hand as he shuffles forward on his perch. "But I can make it. I remember the formula for it."

"Make what, exactly?" Arthur demands. He knows they must be discussing some kind of incendiary, but he has the creeping suspicion it isn't pitch or oil.

"Sorcerer's fire," Mordred says with enthusiasm, grinning. "Spell-wrought vitriol. There's a recipe for it in Sigan's books. He'd discovered a form of it being used when he was travelling across the Strait, and he made his own formula for it in his books, one that's made more efficient with magic. Most of what's needed to make it, we might well find here, depending on whether or not there's still any stores to be found. If not, there's a camp not far from here. Two days' walk at best, less if we make good pace."
There's another beat of silence, and then Gwaine chuckles. "I knew there was a reason I liked you, whelp," he remarks. He turns his gaze back to Arthur, that familiar hint of challenge in his eyes. "Well, then, Queen Arthur?"

Arthur casts a glance at Merlin, brows raised in silent inquiry. He doesn't know enough of this pyromancy or sorcerer's fire to truthfully say whether or not it would be feasible to attempt. It does indeed sound a dangerous gamble, though in the past sennight, he's not come up with any better ideas to retake the city. Returning his gaze levelly, Merlin contemplates it a moment, then dips his chin. Arthur exhales slowly and turns back to Mordred. "Very well. See what you can do."

Three days, there's little else to do but wait.

Normally, Arthur would chafe at the inactivity. He is not patient by nature, but the lesson of patience is one that's been well-hammered into him by circumstance. Instead of sulking and feeding his own frustration, he tries to make use of the time instead. Eight of the sorcerers in Merlin's party are proficient in combat magic, and as sorcerer's fire naturally works best in the hands of true sorcerers, he tells them how best to get past the city walls without detection, the most efficient places to strike. The distrust in their faces morphs rapidly into surprise and disbelief when he speaks of their magic so calmly, and daresay they even offer him a measure of respect.

Morgana uses one of Mordred's birdbone whistles to call messenger ravens to the keep, sending messages to other Druid camps. She's sent word for Iseldir to meet them with all swiftness. His camp had been given charge of the Cup of Life before its theft—he would know best its power and perhaps even how to break the backbone of the immortal army.

Recovered from his treatment at the hands of Cenred's interrogators—Arthur has never seen nor heard of a Nathair serpent before, nor does he ever wish to see one after seeing its effect—Leon takes command of their ragged band of swordsmen, a total of six, as Bellegere refuses to be set aside on account of her age and sex. Arthur doesn't argue it. Her stake in this is personal, and he cannot begrudge her the chance to set it aright.

Mordred finds a small chamber that he makes into an impromptu chemist's workshop, working to make sorcerer's fire, this so-called liquid flame, allowing only Merlin to assist him with it. Whatever it is composed of, apparently, it can be dangerously fickle, especially in the mixing of various components. Still, Arthur risks the young man's scolding and darkens the doorway of the small room, rapping his knuckles against the doorframe; the door itself is long gone. "How goes your alchemy?" he poses.

"Pyromancy," Mordred and Merlin correct him in unison, voices slightly muffled as they both have their mouths and noses covered, Merlin with his neckerchief, Mordred with a long scarf. There's a sharp, bitter scent lingering in the air that burns in the back of his throat, making him cough a little, backing up into the corridor proper. "Ready?" Mordred asks; Merlin nods. Arthur watches with fascination as they pour the contents of three different containers into a single large bottle, and immediately after they do, the young man stoppers the bottle, holding it still with both hands as Merlin pours hot wax over the top of it, forming a seal. For a moment, they are both perfectly still, staring at the bottle as if half-expecting it to burst into flame that very moment. When it doesn't, and the wax seal holds, both sorcerers let out faint sighs of relief.

"If I've measured this out right, that's the end of it." Mordred says, tugging his scarf away from his mouth. "That needs to sit undisturbed until at least moonrise, and then we can open it and see if it doesn't burn."
Merlin pulls his neckerchief down and resettles it about his neck, then tilts his head back to look at Arthur. "What are you doing here?" he poses curiously.

Stepping back into the room—the acrid smell isn't quite so strong now that the bottle is sealed—he rests both hands on the back of Merlin's chair, gazing down at the other man. "I came to ask if you are intending to sleep at all before Iseldir arrives. Morgana's received a raven from him. He should be here by evening."

"You should rest," Mordred insists. "This won't need tending for hours now, and you'll need your strength."

"You see, even the whelp agrees," Arthur hums, leaning down slightly to brush his lips against Merlin's hair, breathing in the scent of him, still clean and wild underneath the stink of whatever concoction they've brewed.

The young man gives a heavy sigh, affecting defeat even as he smiles. "I suppose I should before you send Mother in here after me as well," he remarks, and Arthur scoffs, tweaking his ear before he turns and leaves the room, wordlessly expecting Merlin to follow. [What have you done?]

Merlin asks as he rises, eyeing Mordred. The lad's suggestion might have sounded reasonable, but he'd caught the spark of mischievous glee in his gaze.

Mordred offers him a perfectly innocent smile. [Nothing, of course. Just collected some plants I found that I think will help you recover. I left them in your chamber.]

Curious now, he hastens his step, heading back through the lesser hall and over into the small chamber off the hall where Arthur had moved their bedroll with his usual utter lack of tact, only to find his king standing still just inside the doorway. Closing the door behind him, he peers over Arthur's shoulder. Laughter bubbles up in him, unexpectedly bright and gleeful. Their bedroll and the floor are strewn with small, late-blooming wood roses, fragrant and colourful.

"I'll kill him," Arthur deadpans, understanding.

Still smiling, Merlin steps around to stand in front of him, close enough to feel the heat of his body through their clothes. "Why?" he asks softly, feeling the blood beat faster through his veins with the sudden flush of desire, the need to feel himself and Arthur alive. He places both hands on Arthur's arms, bringing the other man's hands up to rest on his waist, warm and solid. "I like roses." He leans in and kisses him.

Arthur groans into the kiss, and without preamble, he draws Merlin firmly to him, arms clutched about his waist. The younger man sighs against his mouth, hands sliding up Arthur's arms, over his shoulders, and into his hair. The gentle guiding tug against his scalp makes Arthur groan again. Without pulling away, he starts taking small steps forward, forcing Merlin to walk backwards, matching him step for step; when the backs of Merlin's knees meet the edge of the bed, he sits down with a surprised huff, breaking the kiss. Arthur ends up leaning over him, made to bend by the firm grip Merlin still has on his hair. "Do you want…?"

"Come here," Merlin rasps, tugging him closer. Arthur sweeps the roses aside with one arm, clearing the bedroll.

It's the first time they've been together since being reunited, and somehow, it's almost like their first time all over again, fumbling at each other's fastenings, laughing as they get tangled in their own clothes, swearing quietly when sharp elbows meet soft flesh. Finally, however, Arthur is settled over Merlin, propped up on his elbows, their legs entwined beneath the blankets. "Your wounds, are they…?" he murmurs in belated alarm.
"Fine, I'm fine." Merlin winds his arms around Arthur, tugging him down into another kiss, clutching him close and tight. "I've missed you," he whispers.

"I missed you," Arthur echoes back. They've not even been apart a month, and yet it seems a terrifying length of time, knowing that it could've very well been far longer, that he might have lost Merlin, that he might've died in the dungeons of Cenred's castle. The thought alone makes the skin of his back prickle with chill. So, he tucks an arm under Merlin's back and lifts him closer, determined to be warm again. Every bit of it, he imprints on his memory—the warm salt taste of skin in his mouth, the soft sounds gasped in his ear, the eager rake of nails down his back, the hot sting of teeth in his shoulder.

"You and the damned biting," Arthur murmurs once he falls over onto his back, husky from exertion, and gingerly touches his shoulder. He can't tilt his head at an angle to see it clearly, but he can certainly feel it, a dull throbbing ache, an imprint of Merlin's teeth impressed in his skin. "I hope you've not scarred me this time."

That earns him a low chuckle, nuzzling against his neck as he sprawls over Arthur's chest. "I didn't bite you that hard, prat."

"So you say. Maybe I should have you fitted for a muzzle."

"Try and see what I bite next." Teeth snap playfully beside his ear. After a moment, Merlin pushes himself up on his elbows, sweeping his sweat-damp hair out of his face with one hand. "Arthur," he says in a solemn voice, blinking the glaze of pleasure out of his eyes. "When we retake Camelot, I would to be the one to kill Morgause."

He can't help it; he laughs.

"I'm not jesting." A touch of indignance colours Merlin's tone.

"I know." Arthur chuckles. He reaches up and tucks a stray curl behind one of those absurd ears. "I was worried about you, you know. Morgause, Cenred, Helios…none of them are the sort to treat their prisoners gently, especially if they wanted information from you. I was afraid of what they would do to you, of the measures they would go to. I didn't know if they would be able to…to break you. Ah, lionheart," he murmurs, earning raised eyebrows at the unexpected endearment, "I was not expecting you to emerge from this with a band of sorcerers in tow, ready to bed me, retake the kingdom, and kill Morgause."

Merlin gives him a rueful smile. "I may well fall to pieces later. If I do, I pray you'll help me gather them again. For now…"

"Marry me when this is over with," Arthur says, then closes his eyes and sighs inwardly as Merlin goes wholly still against him, eyes widening. Damn. So much for being eloquent and proper. Deciding there's no point in trying to unring this bell, he takes advantage of Merlin's stunned silence and goes on with the speech he had practiced. "You helped me build this kingdom, Merlin. I wouldn't be who I am without you. Twice now, I've done without you, and if it is in my power, I'd never have there be a third time. I love you. Sorcerer, scholar, advisor, the absolute worst servant in all five kingdoms, champion of the Old Religion. You, Merlin, you in all you are. I love you, and if you would allow it, I would have you help me rule this kingdom we've built."

It's a rare thing, to put Merlin on the back foot so firmly that he's rendered speechless; daresay Arthur's managed it now, the younger man's mouth agape as he sits upright, dragging the blankets up with him. "Oh…oh, Arthur…Arthur, I—we can't—that's—" He stops and shakes his head as if to physically dispel the shock. "I will be at your side as long as I live, Arthur, but you'll have to
take a queen one day, you have to have an heir."

"I already have one," Arthur replies with a candidness he doesn't quite feel, propping himself upon his elbows. "Morgana. My heir need not be my own child, you know that." Truthfully speaking, he could name anyone he wished as his heir, but it is best if they are blood-kin to him. Merlin is right in that to force growth is to kill it. Accepting magic and taking a sorcerer as his consort will be change enough. He shan't force it further by naming anyone other than a Pendragon heir to Camelot.

Merlin blinks a few times, lips parting soundlessly. He must not have expected Arthur to have a countermove prepared; granted, he isn't aware that Arthur's been planning this for half the year, which might be why. "But…still, I'm not a noble, I'm—"

"The greatest sorcerer ever to walk the earth, hailed by the Druids as champion of the Old Religion," Arthur interjects before he can even finish that sentence, not wanting to hear Merlin degrade himself. It's one of those rare instances of situations aligning themselves just so. According to Iseldir, Emrys is meant to be a bridge between the Old Religion and the new world. What better way to represent that union and heal the rift between their people than to wed a Pendragon? Marriage has always been a satisfactory method of forming alliances between previously hostile kingdoms.

"I…I'm a man," Merlin says lamely.

"Now you are stating the obvious as well as grasping at straws," he retorts. "You know nobody cares about that. Father never cared, and I've heard stories about my grandfather as well." In other kingdoms, it isn't quite so accepted, and he's fairly certain that there are places in the north and across the Strait where it is still a punishable offence. In Camelot, however, there's an old jest that it doesn't matter what goes on in anyone's bed, just so long as there's not a sorcerer hiding underneath. "Well? What do you think?" he asks.

"What do I think?" Merlin grasps at his hair, twisting around to better stare down at him with utter incredulity. "I think you're mad for even thinking of this. I think you're an idiot for doing this now, of all damn times. I think you're asking for nothing but trouble."

Arthur chews his lip, then tentatively prompts, "So…is that a yes?"

"Oh, you clotpole…of course, it is." He leans down, pushing Arthur back against the bedroll and seizing his mouth in a kiss, hands gripping his shoulders, and there's a salty taste to him, wet and warm. Merlin breaks away only to press a shower of kisses over Arthur's face, mumbling something incoherent but affectionate, though he does catch a 'dollophead' somewhere in there. When he draws back, he's grinning that sweet, bright, crooked smile. "Yes and yes, from this day to the end of my days," he murmurs. Sniffling a little, Merlin gives a soft chuckle in his throat and traces his fingers over Arthur's cheek, shaking his head. "Now, though? Of all times?" he asks, amusement threading his voice.

"I had planned to ask you after the ban was lifted. Properly, too. Out in the gardens, maybe, or after supper in our chambers." Certainly not after taking a tumble on the floor of a castle ruin on the run from an invading army, refugees in their own kingdom. "I was going to have a ring made and everything," he admits, and the young man raises his brows in surprise. "Yes, I actually did plan this, Merlin. But as we've seen, the rest of the thrice-damned world seems to have taken up a very specific and zealous crusade against things in my life going according to plan, and it seemed wise to ask you now before we pit ourselves against an immortal army with swords that are as good as sticks and a boy's alchemy experiment."
"Pyromancy."

He rolls his eyes skyward. "Whatever you call it." Tracing idle patterns on one lean flank, he says, "It may be some time before we can do it properly. An official handfasting, I mean. We have reparations to think about, and I have to have the ban officially removed first, give the people time to adjust to the change it'll bring. If you'd allow it, though, I'd declare you my consort and have it be private knowledge for now, leave all the pageantry for another day." A thought strikes, and he closes his eyes. "Oh, seven hells on it."

Merlin blinks in surprise as the abrupt note of despair in his tone. "What?"

Arthur opens his eyes. "I'll have to tell Leon now." He'd planned for that, too. He hadn't intended to ask permission—Merlin belonged to himself alone—but he would at least give Leon the courtesy of hearing it beforehand. He meant to get his First Knight at least halfway drunk and ensure there were no sharp or heavy objects in the room before telling him, too.

Merlin laughs, the traitor, and kisses him again. "I'll protect you, don't worry."

That actually makes him feel somewhat better. Not that he'd ever say so, but it does.

"Forbærnan."

There's a great rush of air as the vitriol ignites, and suddenly, the inner courtyard of the ruined castle is awash in light. Only the slightest bit of it had been carefully poured onto the ancient pavers, and yet it burns as high as a bonfire. The flames, however, are a blue that sapphires would envy, a painfully bright white where it burns hottest, casting up silver sparks.

"Name of the Mother," Iseldir remarks, then turns to look at Mordred, the lad almost vibrating with glee. "I have underestimated you, young one. I shan't ever do so again," he says; the lad bows respectfully.

Arthur manages to take his gaze away from the sorcerer's fire to look at the Druid elder; the blue-white glow casts strange patterns of shadow-light on their faces, ever-shifting. "Will it harm them?" he asks in a low voice. The brief glow of joy he had felt when he named Merlin his consort to the others has been replaced by the cold, solemn knowledge that they have a kingdom to retake, an entire army of men who cannot die between them and peace, and he knows that their breath of grace has ended. Still, a small, deep part of him curls up warm to know that if nothing else, Merlin is his well and truly consort, always and always, and he has the bright, shining memory of Merlin reciting vows to hold onto.

The elder's brow creases in a small frown, shaking his head. "No, my lord. As impressive as this magic is, it cannot do harm to one made immortal by the Cup of Life, but I have no doubt it will serve as ample distraction." He turns his gaze to Merlin, quietly solemn. "Have you given thought to how you will empty the Cup? This will not end otherwise."

"How do you mean?" Morgana asks, looking between the two.

Sighing softly, Iseldir folds his hands in the sleeves of his robes. "The Cup of Life is not meant to be used in this manner, thus the magics wrought of its corruption are likewise tainted. These men have sacrificed their own lives, though they may not know it. They exist suspended between life and death. They are not dead, but they do not truly live, and if the Cup is spilled, that suspension will end."
"You mean to say, if we spill the Cup, their entire army will simply…" Gwaine brandishes a hand, sounding utterly disbelieving. "…die?"

"Just so, but it is not quite so simple as that. The forces of life and death are the greatest magics of all. You won't unweave them simply by emptying the Cup. You must also break its hold." Lancelot opens his mouth, no doubt to ask what exactly that entails, but Arthur clears his throat softly. Exchanging a darting glance with Merlin, he curls his hand around the hilt of his sword and draws the blade with a hiss of steel over oiled leather, presenting it. In the strange blue glow of the sorcerer's fire, the red-tinted hue of the steel is deepened to near violet, its eternal ripples seeming to dance with the flames. "Would this suit?"

For the first time in their knowing one another, Iseldir is truly caught off-guard. His eyes stretch wide as his mouth falls open noiselessly. "Indeed it would," the Druid elder rasps out, throat working. "It would. If I may ask, sire, how did you ever come across such a weapon? The magics needed to forge such a thing…"

"Are still known to the Old Ones," Merlin interjects lowly. One hand touches his left sleeve. Iseldir stares at him, then nods, still shaken. "Of course, Emrys."

"That's a fine blade, but the question remains. How do we get to the Cup? We don't even know where it's being kept."

"Yes, we do," Arthur and Morgana say in unison. The siblings exchange an amused glance, and then Arthur crouches on his heels, using one hand to brush a section of sandy ground smooth. Picking up a twig, he starts to draw out a rough map of the castle, the others peering down curiously. "Morgause will see that the Cup is never left unguarded, but it'll also need to be in a place that can be well-defended. Even if Cenred underestimates us, I doubt she will, and Agravaine knows we shan't give up so quickly," Arthur explains, his voice turning bitter at mention of his traitorous uncle. "It'll be here, in the throne room."

"Well and good," Gwaine remarks dryly. "Now how do we get there without dying?"

Merlin gives a fierce little smile, a flash of teeth in the shadowed courtyard. "Leave that to me."

"The watchtower will have to be taken first." Lancelot sits forward and plants another small twig in the sand so it stands upright at a corner of the map. "If they ring the warning bell, it'll bring the entire damn army down on us. Of course, we don't even have to hold the tower itself, just make it so that they cannot ring the bells. There's a pulley system of ropes that can be cut, or we can just set it to flame with this." He nods towards the sorcerer's fire. "And with them distracted, we should be able to reach the throne room."

Gazing down at the sketched lines in the sand, Arthur feels his convictions settle in place within him, anchoring solid in his heart.

This can be done. It will be dangerous, and there is more than fair chance that they shan't all survive, if any of them live at all, but there is hope. Only a spark of it, small and frail, but it burns bright as sorcerer's fire and is just as impossible to smother.
"That's the last of it." Mordred corks the bottle of sorcerer's fire and carefully moves it to set on the floor with the rest. With Iseldir and the other sorcerers all working with him to make it, they've accumulated quite the impressive supply. They'll be able to set half the city of Camelot aflame. "Are they still arguing?" he asks as he makes a half-hearted attempt to wipe his hands clean; his fingers are stained a strange purplish black hue, almost as though he's been frostbitten. It doesn't hurt, but it's certainly odd to look upon.

Merlin makes a wry face and nods, turning to look down the corridor where the siblings had left to shout at one another in a measure of privacy. It has been suspiciously quiet for some minutes. "I'll be back. Make certain they've not come to blows," he says, rising to his feet.

Mordred chuckles, no doubt thinking it a jest; he's never seen Arthur and Morgana truly fight before.

He walks through the lesser hall past the rest of their ragged little battalion and down the other corridor, following the trail of footsteps in the grime. It leads him to a set of large, heavy double doors, one of which is slightly open, and he can hear their voices beyond, surprisingly soft. Merlin stops and leans his shoulder against the doorframe, listening.

"...to be left behind like some—"

"A princess of the blood and my heir," Arthur cuts her off, his voice gentle. "As long as you and I are alive, Camelot is ours by rights. If this doesn't work...if we fail...then it falls to you." A faint jingle of mail as he moves, rustling cloth. When he speaks next, there's a note of dry humour threading his words. "I know your predilection for personal revenge. There's no one else I'd trust to avenge me."

Morgana gives a soft laugh, then sighs deeply. "Just...do try to keep all your pieces attached, brother. I have no doubt I would look far lovelier in the crown than you, but I would hate having to manage the headache all the time," she murmurs.

A low chuckle. "I will do my best."

Merlin gently pushes on the door, opening it further.

Arthur stands with Morgana, embracing her, her head bowed against his armoured shoulder, and he has his cheek resting on her hair, honey gold and raven black bowed together. When Arthur catches sight of the sorcerer over his sister's shoulder, he gives a faint half-smile. "What is it, Merlin?"

"I was coming to ensure you two hadn't drawn steel against one another," he replies with a small smile of his own. "I've seen you argue before."

Morgana chuckles as she lowers her arms, stepping back from him. "I imagine you'll soon be facing more than enough steel," she remarks, though there's the faintest tremor beneath her forced levity. One hand is curled into a fist against her side; Merlin imagines that she holds Arthur's signet ring, the Pendragon seal.

Arthur nods, then glances at something over his shoulder. "Merlin, bring the others to me. Not everyone, just our party," he instructs, and Merlin nods, retreating from the doorway and going to find the others, all making their own final preparations before they depart for Camelot.
When he leads them back into the greater hall, Arthur and Morgana are both seated at a table he hadn't noticed before—a great round table carved of stone, with nine heavy chairs carved of the same. Arthur sits in one, Morgana in the chair directly to his left. He gestures to the other seats as they file in; when Merlin catches the king's gaze, Arthur tilts his head subtly, indicating the seat to his right. Stepping around the table, he takes the seat, placing his hands on the tabletop in front of him, tracing his fingertips over the ancient words etched deep into the stone. The granite feels familiar to him, solid and pure—like unto the standing stones, taken from one of the sacred places of the earth.

Once they've all taken seats at the table, Arthur leans back in his chair, resting his hands over the arms and gazing around at them. "This table belonged to the ancient kings of Camelot," he says in a low voice, reaching forward to tap fingertips against the tabletop. "A round table afforded no one man more importance than any other. They believed in equality in all things. Commoner, noble, those with magic and those without, it made no difference. It seems fitting we revive this tradition now, as without each of you, we would not be here. Camelot has been overcome by an evil that goes against the very nature of the world. Tomorrow, I make my bid to free my home and my people from it." He gets to his feet. His voice is quiet and solemn but his words still carry with their strength, fierce passion and conviction laying over him in a bright mantle, every inch a king. "Are there any around this table who would join me?"

Leon's gaze moves from Arthur to Merlin and back again, a faint smile touching his expression. "I've fought at your side more times than I can count. You're my brother, and there's no one I would sooner die with."

Lancelot rises to his feet. "You taught me the values of being a knight, the code by which a man should live his life. To fight with honour for justice, freedom, and all that is good. I believe in this world you will build."

"Even though I was a commoner, a nobody, you were willing to risk the safety of your kingdom." Elyan pushes back from the table to stand. "Now it's time for me to return that favour."

"I think we have no chance…but I wouldn't miss this for the world," Gwaine says, flashing white teeth in a daring grin.

Percival rises to his feet, and for a moment, it seems as though the big man is going to remain silent as is his norm, but then he looks across at Arthur. "I've lost one home. I don't intend to lose another."

"You're my family. By stone and sea and sky. Whatever I can do," Mordred says.

There's a heartbeat of silence, and then Arthur turns his gaze down to Merlin, the only one of them still seated, eyebrows raised. "Merlin?"

He tilts his head back to look up at his king, affecting a thoughtful expression. "Hm? Mm, no, I'm afraid it doesn't suit. Perhaps another time."

"Merlin…"

"Oh, very well, if you insist." He takes to his feet, casting a smile at Arthur, who returns the expression and reaches over to brush his knuckles against the back of Merlin's hand.

Casting another look around the table, the familiar faces gazing back at him, ready and willing, Arthur moves his hand to the hilt of his sword. The thought that'd been lurking about the corners of his mind for days now springs to the forefront, bright and eager. He backs away from the table and
takes a few steps away, moving to stand in the open space of the hall. "Gwaine, Elyan, Percival, Lancelot, Mordred," he says, implicitly summoning, and with a few confused glances, they all step away from the table to stand in a row before him. A vagrant noble, a blacksmith, a woodcutter, a goatherd, and a Druid. "Kneel," he declares and draws his sword.

For a moment, they all stare at him, none of them quite comprehending or perhaps just not quite believing. Merlin grins.

"Kneel," he repeats, pointing the tip of the blade towards the ground for emphasis; this time they obey.

One by one, he goes to each man and recites the vows of a knight, an oath he's been able to say forwards and backwards since he was eight winters. One by one, he names each man a Knight of Camelot.

"I saw you knighted as a Marbrand," he remarks when he comes to stand before Lancelot, a grin playing at his lips. "I would knight you now for yourself. Have you a family name?"

The kneeling man begins to shake his head, then pauses. "I…it wasn't truly ours, but…we were called du Lac, for the lake we lived on," he replies at last.

"Lancelot du Lac," Arthur repeats, rolling the name over. "It suits. Rise, Sir Lancelot du Lac, knight of Camelot."

When he moves next to Mordred, the lad is staring down at the floor as though it holds all the secrets of life, and though he holds himself fast, Arthur can hear his breath trembling. "No," he murmurs softly; Mordred's head jerks up so fast it's a miracle he doesn't injure his neck, lips parted in silent dismay. Arthur half-turns to look at Merlin, staring at him in similar shock, and shifts his grip on the sword, holding the blade flat on his palms and proffering the hilt.

Comprehension dawns. Officially named or not, he is Prince Consort of Camelot now; it is in his power, and it is his right. Merlin steps forward and takes the hilt of the sword, the blade he had forged in his own blood. A faint noise, almost a sob, rises from Mordred as Arthur moves aside, letting Merlin come forward.

Turning the vows over his mind, Merlin finds they do not quite fit, not for a Druid, not for Emrys, oaths of laws and honour and duty. The choice between duty and doing what's right. No choice at all. Firming his grip on the sword hilt, he raises the blade and lays it flat against Mordred's left shoulder. "In the name of the Maiden, I charge you to protect the innocent. In the name of the Mother, I charge you to be strong. In the name of the Crone, I charge you to be wise. Rise, Sir Mordred mab Brangaine, knight of Camelot."

Mordred stands, lashes damp, but smiling all the same. Merlin turns and hands the sword back to Arthur, holding the other man's gaze, a thousand emotions beyond words crossing between them in that moment.

Arthur nods once, understanding, and he turns to face the others. "Our kingdom awaits us. Let it wait no longer."

"So that is the city of white walls, hm?"

Arthur glances towards the owner of the voice, a stocky man with shoulders like a bull, iron-grey hair cropped short—Edern. He's to be the one to lead the rest of the magic-users into the city to set
the sorcerer's fire. "Have you never seen it before?" he asks in a murmur, shifting his weight to keep his legs from cramping, crouched in the undergrowth at the treeline.

"Not with mine own eyes, no." The man shifts his weight as well, picking up a twig and peeling the bark off it. "Had a brother who died here."

"I'm sorry."

Edern grunts, peeling away another strip of bark. "I warned the fool boy not to go. So, is this where we'll be getting through those walls?" he asks.

"It is." Arthur points to the deep ravine that winds right up to the city; it leads directly into the siege tunnels as well, but that isn't where Edern's party needs to be. "Once you get up to the city, you'll climb out and make directly along the wall towards the east gate. Halfway there, you'll find the drains, and once you get through the grate, you'll be in the lower town, at the street of silk. Clothiers, weavers, and the like. I imagine sorcerer's fire needs no kindling, but it'll go up like a tinderbox." He'd chosen the street of silk to begin setting their fires because he knows that there will be few people there at this time of night, stalls and shops left empty. Burning part of his own city is one thing, but he'll avoid harming his own people wherever he can. He glances back at the other man, adding in a pointed tone, "After the belltower."

Edern nods gravely. "Emrys told me. We surround the whole tower with flame, ensure no one can ring the bells," he recites obediently, then cocks his head to the side in order to squint at Arthur with his right eye; the left is more blind than anything. "Won't we be seen by watchers on the ramparts?"

"Not if you stay flush with the wall. They won't be able to see you unless they intend to tip themselves over the battlements."

"Mm. What's there a drain doing in the middle of a dry wall, anyway?"

Amused, Arthur gestures towards the ravine once more. "That was a river once upon a time, when Camelot was first constructed. If the river overflowed its banks, the drains allowed some of the water into the lower town so it wouldn't flood the east gate, and in the rainy season, it lets the water run out. Not many people even remember it's there anymore, and like as not, the grate will have rusted away. If not, it won't be hard to remove." Settling back on his heels, he turns his head towards the big man, looking him over. "Thank you."

Edern blinks, surprise crossing his face, but then he quickly rights his expression back to gruff detachment, giving another low grunt. He starts on another twig, digging at the bark with his fingernails.

"Is it because Merlin asked you to stay?" Arthur coaxes. This likely isn't the best time to have such a conversation, but until they see the patrol, their signal to move in, there's little else to do but stand and wait, and curiosity's been nipping his heels. Merlin hadn't forced any of them to stay. He'd made the offer, just as Arthur had to his own men, and of the eight-and-ten who had followed him from Essetir, two-and-ten had accepted. The other six have stayed behind with Morgana, Iseldir, Hunith, Bellegere, and Ione in the castle ruins. Should their gambit fail, then Camelot's rule will fall to his sister.

Edern is quiet for a time, so long that Arthur's half-certain he shan't answer at all. Finally, he replies, "My mother was a Druid. We were raised on the prophecy that told of the coming of Emrys and the Once and Future King, the rise of the Old Religion, the new dawn of magic. When the Great Purge came…I thought the Old Ones had forsaken us, plied us with false hopes. But I
have heard Emrys speak with the voice of the Triple Goddess Herself. I saw him free us from cold iron as no other could. And now…” He chuckles, a deep rumble from the depths of his chest, and he turns his head to squint at Arthur once more, amusement etched in the lines of his face. "I've seen the son of the Bloody Tyrant declare the greatest of our kind his consort. I've seen a Druid named a knight of Camelot. And now I'm seeing a Pendragon fight beside sorcerers rather than against them. So, no, your majesty. If Emrys spoke, I would obey, but I stay now because for the first time in twenty years, I remember what it is to feel hope. And…” He moves his gaze back towards the city, a sharp edge coming to his grin. "It will be bring me a great deal of enjoyment to let them know what it is to be burned alive for once."

Arthur raises his brows, staring at Edern, but to his surprise, amusement kindles in his chest, a grin finding his face. "That's fair," he relents. Movement catches his gaze, and the levity evaporates. He taps Edern's arm and nods forward as a mounted patrol rides past, near enough to the treeline that he could've thrown a stone and struck them. Southerns, all of them, not a single of Cenred's men. A division in the ranks, perhaps. It takes every inch of his self-control to hold fast and remain still; Merlin had warned him that the notice-me-not charm would only hold so long as they remained still beneath it. His heart quickens its pace with every approaching hoofbeat, rising in his throat as they ride closer, closer…and keep riding, moving directly past them. Arthur exhales a slow breath once they've passed entirely, clenching his fists against his legs. "That's some kind of charm," he whispers, watching the backs of the patrol retreat.

"The old tricks are old because they work," Edern replies just as quietly, though there's a tremor of nerves in his voice.

"It's time. Come on." Arthur straightens up, careful not to make too much noise and draw the patrol's attention, and they quickly return to the rest of their allies, waiting tensely eager in a small clearing, aware of all eyes on him. "The patrol's just gone by."

Moving with grim efficiency, they gather up their supplies—containers full of sorcerer's fire, bottles and jars and repurposed waterskins, as much as they could feasibly carry, not to mention bundled rags soaked in the stuff—and make their way out of the woods towards the dry riverbed, sliding down the sandy wash into the bottom of the ravine. As much sorcerer's fire as they carry with them, none of them dare to so much as think of lighting a torch, so Merlin and Mordred head the party with lightstones, extinguishing their glow when they approach the city walls.

"Here will do," Arthur murmurs. He has to tilt his head almost all the way back to see the ramparts, standing just at the mouth of the tunnel. Any closer, they'll be underground. "Mordred."

The young man goes to the side of the ravine, studying the water-carved rock with a practiced climbers' eye. "Here," he murmurs, and with two neat motions, he's climbed up, kneeling at the lip of the ravine. "Just grab and pull."

Arthur keeps his gaze on the ramparts looming above them as Edern and his party climb up out of the ravine, mindful of their burdens. The ravine is wide, with no cover to be found, with nothing but open field on all sides. If even one of them is seen, if a volley is sent down, there'll be no place to hide.

Finally, the last of the sorcerers are out of the ravine, and Mordred springs back down to rejoin the knights. Edern pauses, gazing down at Arthur. "May the Maiden have mercy on you, Pendragon."

"And you as well. Try not to burn down all of my city, would you?" Arthur replies.

A savage grin, a baring of teeth in the darkness. "I make no promises." With that, he's gone.
He waits a span of heartbeats, straining his ears. When he hears no cry of alarm from the ramparts, no hissing descent of arrows, he turns back to the others and nods, leading them into the dark tunnel. They have no torches still, but he doesn’t want to try lighting one now, not knowing if there’s a guard set at the far end. Remembering the blindfold game he had played in Silverpine, he sets aside thoughts of darkness, going instead by his other senses. The tunnel is narrow; keeping both hands out at his sides, he can touch the walls, using them to guide himself forward around the turns and curves.

The rough natural stone smooths out into manmade walls, and he opens his eyes. They’ve come to the end of the tunnel, just a few paces before the iron gate that closes it off. "Merlin," he whispers, pressing back against the wall to give the sorcerer room.

Sidling past the others, Merlin carefully eases his arm through the bars to touch the lock. "Aliese," he whispers; metal clicks. Withdrawing his arm, he eases the gate open, mindful of the rusted hinges, and steps forward, carefully moving into the corridor and peering ’round the corner. He waves them forward.

"How will we know if they succeed with the sorcerer's fire?" Leon asks in a breath of a whisper.

It's a fair question, one he honestly hadn't thought of. If they hear the warning bells, it will mean Edern and the other sorcerers have failed, but without the bells…. "Listen for screaming," Arthur replies at last, leading them up the stairs and further into the castle. There's a tense, sombre stillness to the air. Not a single servant can be seen roaming the halls, nor any of the courtiers and nobles that have residence in Camelot. He's reminded of a forest holding its breath when there are predators on the hunt, everything staying still and silent in hopes that they will be passed over.

Approaching the next corner, he presses himself flush to the wall, peering around, and withdraws just as quickly, gesturing for the others to halt. At the other end of the corridor, four guards are on duty. Arthur puts his head back against the wall, biting the inside of his mouth until he tastes blood to keep from swearing aloud. Glancing over at the others, he tries to think of some way to cause a distraction without revealing themselves, any kind of way to get around them, but the sound of rapid footfalls brings his thoughts to a sharp halt. Tilting his head, he strains his ears to listen, able to hear only snatches of the guards’ words, the echo of the corridor playing strange tricks with their voices.

"…east gate…fire in the belltower…Pendragons…Priestess's orders…"

One man curses loud enough to be clearly heard all the way down the corridor, and then there's the sound of hastily retreating footsteps, armour and weaponry rattling. Arthur peers around again and grins—the guards are gone. "They've done it. Morgause believes we're staging an attack, she's sent her men to the east gate," he murmurs, turning back to the others. "This is our chance, let's not squander it."

They take off up the corridor, no longer creeping along. They haven't the time to be cautious now. Morgause will surely soon realise that he isn't truly attacking the east gate, and they have to reach the Cup before she has it surrounded by an entire unit of immortal soldiers. When they pass an outer corridor, he can see the blue glow of sorcerer's fire from the lower town; the entire belltower is consumed by it, a spire of sapphire flame that can probably be seen from the Darkling Wood. In the space of a heartbeat, he casts a prayer of thanks towards Edern and the sorcerers, wishing the Maiden's mercy on them all.

"Hold!"

Arthur skids to a halt, turning sharply on heel as his heart gives a terrible lurch in his chest. A
dozen guards are coming towards them. He seizes his sword hilt, but before he can draw, Merlin grabs his arm, tugging sharply. "Arthur, we must get to the Cup," he insists.

"Merlin—"

"Get to the Cup, sire," Leon echoes, turning to face the guards with sword drawn. The others form up around him, fanning out to form a line across the corridor, barring the way. "Go, go! We'll hold here. Go!"

Loath he is to leave his men, Arthur knows if they don't spill the Cup of Life, then it'll be all for naught anyways. Clapping a hand to Leon's back, he turns and sprints up the corridor towards the throne room, Merlin keeping pace at his side. They hit the double doors together, shoving them open and running into the hall. At the far end of the throne room, on the dais where the thrones are usually placed, there is now only a single pedestal, chest-high, with a large goblet placed on it. Suddenly, the doors swing back towards them, and Arthur has to leap forward to avoid being either knocked over or crushed, the double doors slamming shut with a resounding crash, the crossbar snapping down into place.

"Pendragon," Morgause spits as she stalks forward in a crimson gown; Helios shadows her, armed and in the black armour of the Southrons. "You do not die easily, do you?"

"Not to High Priestesses, no." Arthur draws his sword, splitting his focus between priestess and warlord, and her eyes fix on the blade, jaw tightening. She knows what it can do, then.

She makes a subtle gesture with one hand, and Helios moves closer to stand square between Arthur and the Cup of Life, steel naked in hand. With one threat seemingly under control, her gaze turns to Merlin, a faint smile curving her lips. "Do you think to defeat me with a stick, serving boy?" Her hands comes up, red flames blooming in her palms, and with a sharp flick of her wrist, she hurls the fire at him.

Merlin turns his quarterstaff in hand so sharply it whistles, lingering streams of brightness trailing from the ends, the flames vanishing when they touch the steel, and Morgause hisses like a scalded cat. "You've been searching for me, High Priestess," he says, voice dark and intent.

There's a flicker of confusion, but then realisation settles over her face. "Emrys." Instantly, her eyes flare into gold, and all the fine hair on Arthur's arms and nape stand at attention at the prickling rise of magic in the air. Merlin shifts into a fighting stance. In an instant, they are at one another. As warlock and priestess give each other no quarter, Arthur turns to fully face Helios, angling his blade out in front of him as he takes a few measured steps sideways, gaining space. He notices that the other man doesn't immediately launch into an attack, that he's watching Arthur just as closely, moving equal to him. They're not the actions of a man made immortal, and in that instant, he knows. Helios hasn't added his blood to the Cup, having chosen not to hang his own life on something so fallible. He's mortal.

With that, he firms up his grip and goes on the attack. Helios is skilled; how not? He wouldn't be commanding the Southrons if he could not acquit himself in a battle. Arthur gains no true ground, the warlord matching him step for step, metal hissing as their blades cross and parry in a deadly, whirling dance. He isn't forced to retreat, but he doesn't get any nearer to the Cup either. Anytime he moves to advance, Helios blocks his way, pressing hard enough to force Arthur to take a step back. Steel rings clear and pure beneath the sound of magic crackling and snapping in the air.

As they make another turn in their dance, magic lashes out towards him, a tongue of crackling white lighting snapping out like a whip. Arthur jerks away from it on reflex, able to smell the
bright, crisp scent of it, and in that one heartbeat, Helios is inside his guard. His blade crashes
down against Arthur's, driving it from his hands, and a swift kick to the leg brings Arthur down to
his knees, blade rising to strike one final time.

Something hisses over his head, so close he can feel the breeze of its passing stir his hair.

Helios's eyes go wide, a wet gurgle escaping him as he staggers back a step, arms lowering. Blue-
and-white fletching trembles beneath his chin, the arrow gone clean through his throat.
Disbelieving, Arthur twists around and tilts his head back. To his shock and horror, Bellegere is
crouched on the balcony above the throne room, already drawing again. Helios gives a choked
grunt when the second arrow finds his chest, punched clean through his leathers into his heart. The
third arrow takes him to the floor.

Shrieking in wordless fury, Morgause hurls fire towards the balcony, forcing Bellegere to retreat
with a shrill cry; he prays she's not taken serious harm, but he cannot stop to look now. Arthur
lunges to his feet and snatches up his sword, leaping over the Southron's body. Three strides, and
he's on the dais. The Cup sits before him, full to the brim with wine-dark blood, and he can feel its
power, seeping through his mail and clothes like melting snow, burrowing into his skin, stealing
the warmth from him. Taking the sword hilt in both hands, he draws back and swings with
everything he has in him.

When the edge of the blade strikes the Cup of Life, there's a terrible, reverberating impact upon the
air, thunder without sound, as though all the world's been rung like a great bell. The force of it
shudders painfully up both arms, numbing his hands and wrists and rattling his teeth in their
sockets.

The Cup falls to the floor. Blood spills in a slick crimson wash.

"No!"

Every window in the hall explodes inwards at Morgause's scream, glass bursting over their heads in
a sharp-edged hail, a thousand needle-sharp punctures at once. Arthur ducks his head into his arms,
eyes closed tight.

"Oferwings!" Morgause screams, and an unseen wall of power slams into him, flinging him clean
off his feet.

Glass crunches when he lands in a heap, hot pain igniting all down his back and side, and for a
moment, he cannot move, he cannot breathe, only try to keep himself conscious as his lungs
struggle to work again. Through a sickly red haze, he sees the Priestess advancing on him, eyes
blazing with gold and wild hatred. And behind her, Merlin. His sword is lying on the floor beside
his legs—cast me away—and marshalling what's left of his strength, he kicks out as hard as he can.
His boot heel meets the hilt, sending the blade skittering across the floor towards the other man.

"Beadoméce!" Merlin commands; the sword leaps up into his outstretched hand.

Morgause whirls to face him and goes still when the blade plunges into her chest, the steel sliding
through flesh and bone, protruding from her back in a grotesque spire. Gold fades from her eyes,
leaving them brown and mortal; her legs fold beneath her. Merlin withdraws the blade as she
collapses, taking a half-step back from her. Morgause takes a final shuddering breath, lips parting
soundlessly, then goes still.

Arthur gingerly levers himself upright, wincing as he feels glass bite into his flesh, the crunching
sound of it beneath him almost deafeningly loud in the abrupt silence. His gaze moves from the
fallen High Priestess up to the balcony—Bellegere is leaning over the scorched railing, soot-streaked and dazed, but alive—then wanders back down to his consort, standing over Morgause's body with the sword hanging at his side. As if sensing Arthur's eyes on him, Merlin turns and meets his eye, silent understanding passing between them. Outside the hall, there's an auspicious lack of battle-clamour, replaced by faint sounds of disbelieving laughter. Arthur closes his eyes with a deep sigh.

The immortal army is no more.

Camelot is theirs.
The glass makes an almost musical tinkling sound as it's dropped to the floor, a piece at a time; Arthur bites the knuckle of his forefinger to hold in a swear.

"Stop tensing," Mordred scolds. "You'll make it worse."

"We'll see how relaxed you are when you've been rolled in broken glass," he grouses. Even so, he tries not to tense the muscles of his back so much, letting the young man coax out the splintered pieces of glass with his magic, dropping them to the floor amidst the rest of the broken glass that layers the floor of throne room. With the force of Morgause's magic behind it, the jagged shards had gone through the spaces in his mail, through his gambeson and tunic. It stings like seven hells to have them removed, almost more painful than the initial injury. "Ow!"

Mordred leans around with an entirely too-amused grin, holding up a sliver of glass almost the length of his little finger. "That's quite a good one, no?"

Arthur glares at him, and the young man only laughs, returning to his task. The sound of crunching glass underfoot makes him turn his head. "Why is it that whatever I tell you to do, you manage to do quite the opposite? Shall I have a lead put on you, tether you to a post?" he asks dryly, arching an eyebrow at his cousin. "How did you get here?"

Bellegere offers a small, sheepish smile, a flash of white teeth in a soot-blackened face. The ends of her braided hair are singed, her sleeve and jerkin similarly scorched, but it doesn't seem as though she's been properly burnt anywhere, the balcony railing having taken the brunt of the flames. "I told Ione to say that I wasn't well and wished to be alone. I took one of the sorcerer's cloaks, followed you. I went in with Edern and the other sorcerers through the grate and came up to the castle on my own," she replies, but when her gaze slides around the throne room, the flicker of levity evaporates from her, throat working as she swallows hard. Morgause and Helios still lay where they've fallen; the High Priestess lies in the congealing slick of blood that'd spilled from the Cup, sticking in her fair hair. Wrapping her arms close about her, she asks in a smaller voice, "Has…has anyone found my fa…Lord Agravaine?"

Arthur founders a moment, mouth opening soundlessly, but then Merlin interjects as he approaches, "Not yet, dear heart." He reaches up and tucks one small braid behind her ear, brow furrowing as he touches the singed end. "Why don't you go down to the dungeons, and see if you cannot find Roland or Mhera? We will need a few more steady hands about."

She hesitates for a moment, glancing between them, but Arthur gives her a nod. Reaching over to give Mordred's shoulder a light cuff, she shoulders her bow and leaves the throne room.

Biting back another hiss, Arthur shakes his head, the enormity of what lies ahead of them almost as daunting as what they've just overcome. "Gods' mercy, there's so much to be done. I should go down to the dungeons, see who they've imprisoned. No doubt the guard is in utter shambles. Is the lower town still burning? I know the court's probably on its ear, and we'll need to send word to Morgana—"

"Hush." Merlin reaches out and puts his hand over Arthur's mouth, a look of exasperated fondness writ clear across his face. "Leon and Lancelot are taking command of the guard, Gwaine has gone to speak to Dara, Elyan and Percival have gone down to the dungeons, and I've already sent a raven to Morgana. Now hush and sit still, let Mordred work." He tilts his head to look at Arthur's shoulders and upper back, chainmail studded with splinters of thick glass. The corner of his mouth
quirks. "You look like a glazier's pincushion."

Arthur snorts, then winces. "Oh, don't make me laugh, it hurts."

That earns him a proper smile, the corners of his eyes creasing, and he moves his hand up to gently ruffle through Arthur's hair, smoothing it back from his brow. "It needn't all be done at once," he points out in a soft voice. "The court can wait until Morgana returns. She's the better courtier of the two of you, you know that. You'll not get anything done in such a state."

"Yes, yes, alright. Just...is the town burning?" he repeats. That question, he feels, deserves to be answered first. He cannot see from the throne room windows, but the scent of smoke drifts in whenever the breeze changes, blowing through the gaping holes where the windows had been, jagged splinters still clinging to the edges, yawning stone mouths full of glass teeth.

"No. Edern and the others would have felt it when the Cup of Life was spilled, and they're already working to stop the fire from spreading any further."

Moving his gaze downward, he sees the silvery goblet tucked in the crook of Merlin's other arm. There isn't a mark on it where he'd struck it, nor where it had fallen on the floor, and there's not a drop of blood to be seen on it. He can still feel the magic of it, though now it isn't like being dunked in a winter river. The old bite scar on his shoulder tingles. "What are you going to do with that?" he asks in an undertone.

Merlin stares down at the Cup of Life, rubbing his thumb over the side of it. "Once it's safe, I'll return it to where it belongs," he replies at last. "For now, it stays with me." He looks at Arthur's back again. "I'll go find Gaius for you."

"Thank you. And tell someone to get those damn banners down!" Arthur calls after him, glaring upward at the pennants adorning the walls of the throne room. It isn't the coiled serpent of Essetir, but rather a blood-red tree on a field of black. Morgause's standard. He wants every damned one down. They'll have a splendid fire in the courtyard later.

Merlin's laughter echoes through the throne room as he leaves, swinging the door closed behind him.

There's a gentle span of quiet, broken only by the plinking of glass and Arthur's stifled winces as Mordred works up to the king's shoulders, removing the last of the glass pieces. As the young man continues his work, Arthur gingerly turns his head to look at him. "Caledfwlch."

Mordred raises his gaze, brow furrowing in silent question.

Smiling faintly, Arthur taps his ring against the pommel of the sword, once more resting in its scabbard at his hip. "You asked if it had a name. Caledfwlch," he repeats; he'd been thinking about it ever since he'd been told the story of Galeren and the Claíomh Solais.

"A good name, sire," Mordred replies, smiling.

"Thank you—ow!"

Dawn comes to Camelot.

When it does, there's a sense of dazed trepidation in the city, a confused air of nervous fear as whispers spread of dire magic being worked, the invaders bursting into fire and rags, demon fire
burning the street of silk. But when sunlight falls onto the citadel, it shines on the crimson banners of the Pendragons, the golden dragon flying proud from every spire and gatehouse, emblazoned on the shoulder of every knight working to restore order, calling for peace and patience, announcing there would be an audience soon. King Arthur has reclaimed his throne.

Nearly all of the city guard had been disbanded upon the arrival of the invaders, replaced by immortal soldiers. Now they are called back to duty, headed by Leon and Lancelot, rallying what remained of the knights. The last of the fires are extinguished on the street of silk and in the belltower. Edern and the sorcerers had done well in their task; no one had died in their fires. Three men and one woman had been killed, but at the hands of the immortal soldiers who had tried to control the spread of flame and find the culpable party, only to find a great number of the lower town risen against them.

In the castle, Merlin works to restore order in his own way. As the king's manservant, he's the highest-ranking member of the royal household, and daresay there's not a single servant who doesn't know him in one way or another. None had seen him since his capture. It seems longer than two months ago. So much has happened in so short a time.

"You need to speak to them, Arthur. I know you mean to make a proclamation to the city, but these people are scared," Merlin says as he returns to his king, closing the door of the throne room behind him. "I've gathered the household in the courtyard. The prisoners that were freed from the dungeons are there too. Has Mordred finished?"

Arthur makes an affirmative noise, sitting on the edge of the dais with a bucket of cold water between his knees, washing the blood and soot out of his hair and off his face. "Yes, he has. I sent him to help the others, Gaius as well. I'll live, and they'll be of greater use elsewhere, I imagine." He makes a face as he sets aside the bucket and rises to his feet, rolling his shoulders. "Still stings like hell, though. The courtyard, you said? Let's go, then."

"Hold, hold." Merlin catches Arthur by the arm as the king makes to pass him. Weary though he is, a smile tugs at his lips. "Whilst I agree that the blood-soaked marauder look doesn't suit you, appearing a half-drowned kitten isn't much better." He reaches up and slides his hands gently through Arthur's wet hair, fingers tingling with magic, then shakes the excess water from his hands. He does it twice more, then smooths the other man's now-dry hair down, patting it into a semblance of order. "There, now we may go."

When they reach the inner courtyard of the castle, the entire household is gathered, some hundred strong, from the elderly royal chamberlain to the youngest scullery maid. They have that same dazed look about them, lost and confused; one might think that some great disaster had struck, an earthquake had leveled the city of Camelot, leaving them to question the workings of the world. Merlin can hear the gasps and cries as he and Arthur emerge, mingled relief and joy.

"Hear me!" Arthur holds up one hand, calling them to quiet again. "My people, you will be given answers, that I promise. A dire shadow had fallen over us, averted only by the grace of the gods and the bravery of some. There is a tale to be told, and it will be in due time. For now, I ask this of you—mourn for what happened, give thanks that it has not. Those who wish to go home to your loved ones may do so. The rest of you, take heart and spread the word. King Arthur Pendragon has returned. The throne of Camelot is his. The kingdom is secure."

Merlin can see them do just that, a stirring of hope in them, like the first glimmer of sunlight breaking through the cloud bank after a terrible storm. A few are even smiling as they begin to disperse. His heart feels as though it may lift through his ribs, full of pride as it is, and he's quite certain that if he flung himself from a high cliff, he'd surely take flight.
As the rest of the servants dispel from the courtyard, a few make their way forth towards Arthur—the prisoners that Elyan and Percival had freed from the dungeons. The knights who had been imprisoned have already returned to their duties under Leon's command. This is the rest of them—people too valuable to execute out of hand, yet too influential to be left unchecked. Members of the court, Arthur's council. Merlin recognises them all by sight if not by name.

"Sire…" Joscelin of Powys begins, approaching slowly, his coppery hair lank and disheveled. It doesn't seem as though he's been terribly mistreated, but by the way he squints in the sunlight, Merlin knows he's been kept in darkness during imprisonment. "May I…?" He hesitates, giving a weak laugh and running both hands over his face. "Forgive me, your majesty, but may I please touch you? I've feared I've lost my wits with all that I have seen, so please, may I know that I am not seeing some awful fever dream born of some dire magic and confinement?"

Arthur offers a small smile and nods, holding his arms slightly out to his sides in silent invitation.

With slow, tentative steps, Joscelin comes forward, the others slowly approaching after him. Merlin can hear him exhale heavily when he reaches out to grasp Arthur's wrist, sees his shoulders slump in relief. Joscelin lowers his head for a moment, and when he raises it again, there's hope and awe in his eyes, a smile coming to his face. After all the stricken faces Merlin's seen, it's heartening. The young lord laughs, moving his hands up to grasp Arthur's shoulders, and gives him a little shake. "Ah, sire… gods' mercy, it is good to see you," he says softly.

"You as well, my friend," Arthur replies, and there's genuine warmth to his voice.

Joscelin smiles and straightens up, clasping his hands before him. "We'll begin setting things right, sire. What would you have us do?"

Arthur pauses for a moment, looking them over. "I would not overburden any of you….

"No burden, sire," he insists, and several heads nod in agreement behind him.

"My sister will be returning soon. I would have our city in some form of order when she arrives. Sir Leon and the knights are bringing peace to the city and the lower town. I ask you to do the same here amidst the peerage." His gaze moves between their faces, direct and earnest. "There were some who escaped the city with me. I told them to secure their holdings and raise their own defenses in preparation for the invaders. Have riders sent to their estates and your own under white pennants of peace with the same message I've given here. Camelot is at peace, and there will be no war in my kingdom."

The gathered men nod and bow, leaving the courtyard with a sense of purpose to them.

Once they've gone, Arthur exhaled a breath so deep his shoulders move with it, his lashes fluttering.

Merlin edges closer to him. "You're doing well," he reassures in a low voice. He gently nudges Arthur's arm with his own, but to his surprise, Arthur takes hold of his hand, interlacing their fingers and squeezing tightly. He nearly withdraws on reflex, but then he relaxes, brushing his thumb over his scraped knuckles. "Are you all right?"


"You've done well," he repeats, squeezing his hand again. "There's time. People are in shock. It'll pass. Morgana will be here soon, midday at latest. You know she'll be riding hell-for-leather for the city. It'll do everyone good to see a public reunion, and whatever proclamation you make, you
can make together."

Arthur nods slowly. "Yes, I know," he says in a low sigh, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose with his free hand.

Leaning closer, he gently nudges his shoulder against the other man's, mindful of the armour he still wears. "You should sleep. Or at least eat something," Merlin murmurs gently. None of them have slept much at all the past three days as they worked to make the sorcerer's fire and form their plans, and Arthur usually went into battle fasting. Surely there's at least one of Cook's many helpers down in the kitchens; if not, he can make an admirable meal on his own, having done so on journeys.

Arthur only grunts, eyes still closed.

Gently sliding his hand free, Merlin wraps an arm around Arthur's back and tugs at him, guiding him out of the courtyard and back into the castle. There is a surprising number of servants still at work despite leave to go home, and he can see they've taken heart from Arthur's address. And a number of them are working to take down every single one of Morgause's banners, a grim satisfaction in their faces. He catches one of the maids and asks her to have a light meal brought to the king's chamber.

"Has there been any news of my uncle?" Arthur asks in a drowsy voice. He'd been leaning more and more into Merlin's side, exhaustion at last catching up to him.

Merlin scowls when he elbows open the door of the king's chamber, finding the entire room in utter disarray. It doesn't seem as though everyone's been sleeping in here, which lightens him in part, but someone has certainly turned the room upside down and inside out, all of Arthur's papers and belongings hurled everywhere about the chamber. "No," he replies, drawing Arthur over to lean against the table, staring on the buckles of his armour. "Perhaps he added his blood to the Cup, died when it spilled."


"Dead. Gaius told me." Merlin leans down to grasp the bottom of his chainmail, easing it up over his head.

"The Cup?"

He studies the half-shredded fabric of Arthur's gambeson, scowling. "No, Morgause. You were right. She killed him to control Essetir's forces two days after the invasion," he replies, draping the gambeson over a chair and lifting Arthur's tunic with another frown. Cleaning rags. He gives the other man's back a cursory glance to ensure none of the wounds have started bleeding again. Most are superficial, and Mordred had at least made an attempt at a healing charm. Still, he slides his hand down the length of Arthur's spine. "Þurhæle dolgbenn."

"Mm." Arthur swats his hip. "Stop that. Tickles."

Merlin kisses the crown of his head, then grasps his arm and draws him over to the bed, yanking back the bedcovers one-handed.

Making a face, the other man resists, pulling against his grip. "I need to—"

"Sleep. You need to sleep," he cuts Arthur off, pushing against his shoulders to get him down on the bed. "If anything happens, I'll wake you. I promise."
Arthur grumbles something else argumentative even as his eyes drift closed, slumping down against the pillow. He's asleep before Merlin even draws the covers up over him, snuffling into the bedding.

There's a light knock on the door, and he hastily moves to answer it, praying that something's not happened already. But no, it's only the girl he'd spoken to in the hall, bearing a plate of bread, cheese, and chicken. He thanks the girl as he takes the plate, then asks if she has seen his brother.

"No, my lord. I think he's looking for Lord Agravaine," she replies, her lip curling at the man's name.

"Thank you." He casts a glance back at Arthur's sleeping form beneath the blankets. He takes a step back into the chamber and sets the plate on the table before stepping out into the corridor. "The king is resting before Princess Morgana's return, he isn't to be disturbed," he instructs, and she bobs her head quickly. Once she hastens away, he lays a hand on the door and winds a protective charm around it, ensuring no one could enter without him knowing it.

Thus warded, he departs for the main square, knowing he'll be sure to find some of the knights there, and sure enough, as he's descending the stairs, he sees Leon and Lancelot making their way up to the castle. And dragging a familiar figure between them. He unslings his quarterstaff, anger welling up hot and sharp in his chest. "Where was he?" Merlin asks through clenched teeth, working his grip on the quarterstaff. Every muscle in his arm aches with the desire to crack open Agravaine's skull and see what spilled out.

"One of Dara's watchers caught him trying to escape the city through an old service gate," Lancelot replies, giving Agravaine a shove forward. The man staggers, falling to his knees on the cobblestones.

Merlin rakes his gaze up and down the kneeling man. "What did you do to him?" It brings him no sorrow to see that Agravaine appears as though he's been dragged through a thicket backwards by a galloping horse. His clothes are torn, his hair disheveled, and there's a set of bleeding scratches down the side of his face, blood dripping from his nose and mouth.

"We didn't, though I cannot say I wasn't tempted," Leon answers, gripping the scruff of Agravaine's neck and hauling him upright. "Dara's watcher raised the alarm when he saw him. The citizens reached him before we did." From the tone of his voice, it's clear he would have been more than satisfied to simply allow the people tear him apart like hungry curs fighting over a chicken carcass. No doubt he would have if it weren't for the fact that Arthur and Bellegere had first right to vengeance. "What does Arthur want done with him?"

Merlin shifts grip on the quarterstaff once more, temptation nipping sharply at him. A part of him wishes to bid Leon draw his sword now, save the headsman the effort, or to find a sturdy rafter and a length of rope. Swallowing hard a few times, he pushes away the thunderous clamour of bronze wings in his ears, and when he speaks, his voice comes out deep and powerful. "Lord Agravaine du Bois of Snowgate, you are charged with conspiracy, murder, and high treason. In the name of King Arthur Pendragon, I order you placed under arrest and imprisoned until such time as your fate can be decided."

Battered though he is, Agravaine still hisses and glares at Merlin with disgust, lip curling. "You have no right!"

He bares his teeth in a smile, knowing it too sharp-edged to be anything like amicable. "I have more right than you can imagine, my lord," he replies and takes a certain pleasure in seeing the briefest flicker of confusion pass through Agravaine's dark eyes. Merlin looks to Leon and
Lancelot. "Take him to the dungeons. No one speaks to him, and no one touches him."

The knights both accord him small bows and seize hold of the man, hauling him away. A number of people had followed them into the square, jeering and hissing at the disgraced traitor. Merlin watches them go; only once they have vanished back inside the castle does he shoulder his quarterstaff once more, feeling the bracing presence of it across his back.

"Well done," a familiar voice says, and Merlin finds a smile as he turns. Dara folds him in an embrace, the earthy scent of orchids surrounding him. "Sir Gwaine has told me of your quest to return here." Amusement sparkles in his deep blue eyes. "Prince Consort. Daresay you're handling your new role well," he says in a murmur, lowering his voice to ensure no one heard them.

"I've not been crowned yet, so don't repeat that," Merlin replies, flushing slightly.

Dara chuckles warmly. "Never would have imagined it. Will I be invited?"

"Of course. Are you well?" Some people hadn't fared well when Morgause's forces had overtaken the city, especially those who were known to be loyal to Arthur. Only a few people know of Dara's patronage, but after having experienced their brand of questioning for himself, Merlin knows it could've been found out.

The courtesan chuckles with genuine amusement. "When a city is invaded, there are two people who are always spared—healers and whores. Don't fret on me. Where is our good king?"

"Taking a nap before Morgana returns. He's not slept for near two days. Stubborn to the last. Arse," Merlin mutters; Dara chortles again, taking delight at Merlin's impropriety as he always did. He glances upwards, gauging the measure of the sun. It's only been mere hours since they retook their kingdom; it feels as though it's been at least an entire day.

"What will be done with the High Priestess and the Southron?" Dara queries.

Merlin exhales a deep breath. "I imagine Arthur will have the bodies displayed before they're burned, let people know they're well and truly dead." It's the wisest thing to do; if he'd seen an army of immortals, he would certainly want to know that the ones leading it were dead.

"And Lord Agravaine?"

"That I cannot say." He wishes he could. Knowing how much suffering the man has wrought, he wishes he could go down to the dungeons now, perhaps with a silver needle and a bottle of Serket venom, have him speak the truth of his crimes. However, that decision lies with Arthur and the court. His chest tightens at thought of Bellegere, sending a prayer for the Maiden's mercy on the girl.

Dara nods solemnly, no doubt thinking the same.

An eager call of Merlin's name makes him turn just as Mordred comes sprinting up to him at a rapid clip, eyes bright. "One of the watchmen has just seen a party riding towards the city. It's Morgana!" he exclaims joyously, then pulls up short. "Ah, hello, Dara."

"Hello, whelp," the other man replies. He arches one brow, amusement layering his tone. "Or should I address you as Sir Whelp now?"

Mordred flushes up to his hairline, stammering nonsense. He knows precisely who Dara is and what he does, both in his capacity as a spy for Arthur and as the proprietor of the most lucrative bordello in the city of Camelot. Easy enough to imagine which flusters him more.
Chortling, Merlin claps the lad on the shoulder, giving him a little shake to draw his attention. "Fetch Leon and the rest of the knights," he instructs. "Tell them to clear a path from the gates to the citadel for Morgana. I'll go and wake Arthur."

The young man nods and runs off.

Dara watches him go and casts a glance towards Merlin. "You've done well."

Now it's Merlin's turn to flush slightly, reaching up to scratch the nape of his neck as he ascends the steps of the citadel. "I like to believe so."

Arthur is still deeply asleep when Merlin returns to the king's chamber, burrowed beneath the covers and making those quiet snuffling sounds he makes in lieu of actually snoring, something Merlin is grateful for. A part of him is loathe to wake the man already, but he knows the siblings should be seen reuniting in public, reassure the people that Camelot is truly united and whole. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he reaches over to shake Arthur's hip, murmuring his name. Good thing he doesn't sit too close, for Arthur jerks awake with a grunt, fists already clenched, still wound tight. Once he recognises Merlin, however, he opens his fist and scrubs his palm over his face. "What is it?" he asks in a gravelly voice.

"Morgana's been sighted. She's riding for the city now. The knights are clearing a path for her. Come on, you need to be up and dressed to meet her in the citadel." Merlin draws back the blankets, then gets up and goes to the wardrobe, pulling it open.

Arthur goes to the washbasin and splashes water on his face. "Any news about my uncle?" he asks.

"He was captured trying to escape the city. Dara had his watchers on the old service gates, one of them spotted him." Merlin finds a deep red tunic and one of Arthur's dress jackets, bringing them both over to the other man. "I had him sent to the dungeons under no contact."

Arthur gives a small, stiff nod as Merlin pulls the tunic over his head, straightening it out. "Good. Thank you." He turns and holds out his arms for the jacket; when he turns back, he catches hold of Merlin's hand, lacing their fingers together. "Come on. I want you standing with me."

Merlin squeezes his hand. "I will. Here."

Pulling a length of red cloth from the back of a chair, he drapes the cloak around Arthur's shoulders, reaching around to fasten the clasp of it. Once he gives the fabric a few light pulls to straighten out the fall of it, he takes a step back to cast a critical eye over him, then shortplies.

"What?" Arthur glances down at himself, wondering if there was some obvious hole in an embarrassing place or some unfortunate stain.

"Nothing, just...that's near exactly what you were wearing the night I saved you from Mary Collins," Merlin answers.

Arthur raises his brows. "You remember that?" he asks softly, and the younger man nods, smiling. He reaches up to ruffle his dark curls, earning himself an exasperated swat in retaliation. "How mawkishly sentimental of you, lionheart."

"Oh, shut up, let's go."

By the time they make their way out to the citadel's front steps, Leon has done his job well. There's a clear path from the square down to the city and all the way to the gates, guards staggered down the length of the path to help keep the crowds back. What remains of the knights are posted in the
Merlin knows when Morgana has entered the city; with the hush lying over the square, he can hear the faint sound of cheering, gradually growing louder and clearer. Murmurs of anticipation ripple through the square, excitement humming in the air. Merlin hears Arthur inhale a sharp breath when his sister rides into the square to a rising cry of joyous welcome. Like Arthur, she's made an effort to gather herself into something presentable, bathed and brushed; perhaps she isn't in a silken gown, but her carriage is upright and proud in the saddle, offering smiles to the townsfolk. The rest of her party follows after—Guinevere, Ione, Hunith, but also Iseldir and the handful of sorcerers that had chosen not to take part of the attack, much to Merlin's shock.

Morgana draws rein in the middle of the square, one of the knights taking the reins from her as she dismounts. She's smiling as she ascends the steps towards Arthur stopping two stairs below him. "Brother."

"Sister," he replies, a smile in his voice.

She lifts something from around her neck, holding it out. Gold winks brightly in the sun—the royal Pendragon crest. She has it strung on a length of cord, the signet ring too large for her smaller fingers. "You entrusted this to my care until our kingdom was ours once again. I return it to you now."

Arthur holds out one hand, and she drops it into his palm. "And I accept it," he says, closing his hand around the ring, then steps down and wraps his arms around her, embracing her fiercely.

The cheer that goes up is loud enough to rattle the windows.
A brisk knocking brings Merlin awake with a start, jerking halfway upright and looking around in confusion until his gaze lands on a familiar face watching him with amusement. "What's…?"

"It's just breakfast," Arthur says gently, then raises his voice a touch. "Enter."

The door of the chamber eases open, a maid entering to set a covered tray on the table and curtseying before leaving again.

Merlin sits himself more upright, rubbing the heel of his hand over his eyes, brow furrowing. "Wasn't Morgana here?" he asks, baffled.

"Yes, she was. Last night." Grinning, Arthur rises from his desk and moves to sit on the edge of the bed. One hand reaches over to smooth down Merlin's hair, fingers lingering warmly against the side of his face. "You fell asleep at the table. Nearly tipped right out of your chair. Gaius said it was best to let you sleep. I doubt you've been getting enough of that."

He snorts wryly. None of them have gotten a great deal of sleep. Conquering a kingdom is easy. Setting one to rights after a conquest is an entirely different matter. So is rescinding a ban that has stood for nearly a quarter century.

Arthur and Morgana hadn't simply made a proclamation to the gathered citizens of Camelot, noble and common-born alike. They had laid out the entire tale for everyone, stretching all the way back to when Morgause had first appeared in Camelot to challenge Arthur—the Knights of Medhir, the sleeping enchantment, the attempt on Morgana's life, Cenred's march on Camelot, the near-war between Caerleon and Camelot provoked by a botched assassination, the foiled attempt at peace with the Druids, the alliance between Helios and Cenred orchestrated by Morgause, the theft of the Cup of Life and the immortal army it'd wrought, Morgana's capture and escape as well as Merlin's, their reunion with Arthur and his men, the planning of a desperate gamble to free Camelot, their infiltration of the city, the burning of the street of silk, the deaths of Helios and Morgause, the spilling of the Cup of Life. They told every bit of it and left none of it out.

Not even the magic.

It had been a tremendous thing to see. An entire city had listened in silence to their king and princess speak, too awestruck to raise any kind of protest or outcry, if they had any at all. When the balance of the story had been told out, Arthur had called for an end of the ban of magic in Camelot. They had lived beneath the shadow of Uther Pendragon's war for too long and brought nothing but suffering back upon themselves. The cycle of vengeance would go on forever, blood for blood, unless they chose to put a stop to it. Choose they did. No more. Uther had begun a war no one could win, trying to shape the very nature of the world to his will, and now his children will end it. No more.

Merlin had nearly fainted on the steps of the citadel that day, and only Leon's iron-firm grip on his elbow had kept him upright.

This past sennight has been a confusing whirlwind of activity. People are still uncertain, wary and suspicious, but so far there has been no outright rebellion, no rioting or calls for revolt, which he takes to be an encouraging sign. Arthur had already begun steering them away from the prejudices of the past without much resistance, and now that they have finally flung themselves over the last great wall, they've all been dazed by their landing on the other side. It will pass.
Merlin pushes back the bedcovers and goes to the table despite Arthur's insistence that he sleep just a little while longer. The smell of fresh bread calls to him even with the tray covered, and his stomach won't let him sleep any longer until he addresses its demands. "What are we doing today?" he asks between bites.

Arthur laces his fingers together beneath his chin, elbows propped on the tabletop. "Uncle Agravaine's trial," he says softly. "I cannot delay it any longer."

The honey in his mouth takes on the flavour of gall. Sliding back the plate, Merlin leans back slightly in the chair. "Does Bellegere still insist on being there?" he asks after a moment of quiet.

A short nod. "I cannot rightfully order her not to. I stripped Agravaine of his title, which means she is now Lady of Snowgate. As scion of one of the Great Houses, she has a seat in the Hall of Audience, and it is her right to preside over trials." He sighs and presses both hands over his face, scrubbing back through his hair and lacing his fingers together over the nape of his neck, head bowed forward. "She's adamant about it." His voice is weary and heartsick.

"He murdered her mother," Merlin points out, not that Arthur much needed the reminder. They had found the proof of it in Agravaine's belongings when they searched his chambers. A journey book—a kind of magic journal that was crafted in pairs. Whatever was written in one would likewise appear in the other. It was how he had communicated with Morgause without ever leaving Camelot or needing a messenger raven. In it, they had discovered all the proof needed, including an old message from years before in the early pages. Lady Thea, Bellegere's mother, had suspected something was amiss with her lord husband and discovered the journey book whilst searching his study. Agravaine had drugged her with a powerful sleeping draught, then ordered Sayer to drown her in the river and make it appear a suicide. No one would question it, knowing her history of melancholy.

"I know. I know." Arthur raises his head after a moment, blowing out a deep breath as he settles back in his chair. The ring on his finger taps against the carved arm of the chair. "She'll attend the trial if she wants. Not the execution. I'll lock her in her chambers first," he decides at last; Merlin nods, though there had been no question in it. He takes a deep breath and gets to his feet, running his hands through his hair again, then turns back around to face the sorcerer, face set in grim lines. "I'll see you in the Hall of Audience."

The order of no contact has stood for the duration of Agravaine's imprisonment, only two people having seen him—Gaius, to examine his injuries, and the servant who brought him meals, one of Dara's watchers. Arthur walks down into the cool darkness of the dungeons, holding himself collected, every inch the king; the guards straighten at attention as he passes, going to the only cell that is left occupied in the dungeons.

Agravaine had been accorded a bath and fresh attire, and he stands in his cell with carriage upright, chin lifted. When Arthur comes to stand in front of his cell, he holds gaze with him, eyes dark and cold as river stones. The resemblance between father and daughter is writ plain in their features, and yet it is nigh inconceivable that they can share blood.

Arthur turns to look at the guards. "A moment." They nod, departing; once they've gone, he faces Agravaine, clasping his hands behind his back. For a moment, both men are silent, stretched taut in the air between them, but finally, Arthur takes in a deep breath and lets it out slow. "Your trial is but a formality, Uncle. We have proof written in your own hand, an entire city of witnesses. There is no question of your guilt. But I ask you now, only ourselves. Why?" he asks softly.

"Why?" Agravaine echoes, narrowing his eyes, fists clenching at his side. "You would ask me
why? I have lost everything to accursed Pendragons. Uther was so desperate to have his precious heir that he willingly made a sacrificial lamb of my sister, his wife, even as he bedded a woman already wed, breeding that bastard whore you call a princess. You murdered Ygraine, and then Uther murdered Tristan when he sought to avenge her. And even that could not assuage his guilt. He slaughtered thousands in the name of his grief, and for what? For you?" He shakes his head. "No. I was glad to hear it when Uther died, and I would have been glad to see every trace of his bloodline scoured from this kingdom, to spare Camelot from all of you."

Arthur listens to it all in silence, hands clasped behind his back; after taking a deep breath to steady himself, he raises his head to stare at the man he had called his uncle for so many years. "My father is dead. Tristan's death has been avenged. You say you lost your sister, but tell me, am I not your sister's son?" he asks. "Your actions against me, do they not dishonour her memory?"

Agravaine's jaw tightens, throat working. "I may not have been your family, but you were mine. I loved you, Uncle," he continues, forcing the words up past the unexpected tightness closing in his throat and finds he has no more to say. Turning away, he walks back up the corridor and out of the dungeons, making his way to the Hall of Audience.

Everyone is standing, waiting for him before taking their seats. The front half of the hall is given over to seats for the scions of the Great Houses, including a high table where the royal family sits, the middle of the floor left open, the fringes and back corners standing room for lesser nobles and knights. Morgana stands in front of her chair, placed directly to right of his; Bellegere is accorded the seat to Arthur's left as his second-closest blood kin. It should've been held by Agravaine. Soon, he hopes, there will be another chair set at the table for his consort. Until then, it is only the three of them. Heads bow to him as he walks in, making his way up onto the dais. "Be seated, my lords and ladies," he says as he takes his seat.

There's a soft rustling of fabric as they do so, like the gentle ruffling of birds' wings in a mews. Arthur doesn't go so far as to search the Hall of Audience, but in the edges of his vision, he can see Merlin standing with his brother, mother, and great-uncle to the rear of the hall, along with the other round table knights. Merlin's gaze rests on him, solely on him.

It is grounding, helping him keep himself steady. "Bring forward the accused," Arthur says; the chamber is so hushed that his voice echoes faintly in the rafters.

The side door of the hall opens, and Agravaine is led out, escorted by two knights. A ripple of faint hisses rolls through the audience as he walks past them, coming forward to stand in the open space in the middle of the hall before court and crown.

"Agravaine du Bois, Lord of Snowgate, you stand accused of conspiracy, murder, and high treason. Do you deny these crimes?"

The man raises his chin defiantly, staring up at Arthur. "I do not, but I say that I have committed no crime, only acted in the best interest of this kingdom."

He tightens his hands over the arms of the chair, digging his nails into the wood hard enough to make his fingers ache, then leans forward and picks up the small, plainly-bound journey book sitting on the table before him. "We have proof of these crimes here, recorded in your own hand. You confess to the murders of Thea du Bois, Lady of Snowgate, and Talorcan of Camelot. You confess to conspiring with enemies of Camelot, bringing about the events which led to the invasion by King Cenred, Helios of the Southrons, and the High Priestess Morgause. Do you deny this?"
Agravaine's mouth thins, eyes flickering, but then he clenches his fists at his sides and speaks in a steady tone, "I do not."

"The punishment for these crimes is death. However, you have acted not only against me, but against every man, woman, and child of the realm. Therefore, I put it to the realm as well." Arthur turns his head to face the assembled members of his court and council, scions of the Great Houses. One by one, they each shake their head; some make the old Tiberian gesture, thumbs extended and turned downwards—death. So it goes, all the way around the Hall of Audience, until they come at last full circle to Bellegere.

In the great ornate chair, she appears smaller and younger than five-and-ten, yet she holds herself firm and upright, chin raised as she gazes down at her father with the deep, dark eyes she had inherited from him. When she speaks, her voice is a spill of cool water. "Tell me, Father, would you have sold me to some distant lordling, or would you have killed me outright?"

Agravaine has no answer for that, unable to meet his daughter's gaze. It is answer enough. Still, Merlin notices that when Bellegere gives her vote, "Death," a shudder plays through him, his shoulders dropping slightly, and knows something has broken in him, likely something he did not even realise was there to be broken.

Arthur sighs once. "So be it," he says. "The sentence is passed. For your treachery, you will die. For the blood we share, I will grant you the choosing of it. You have until dawn." He gestures with one hand, and two knights move to escort Agravaine from the hall, his feet stumbling.

Thus is the fate of Agravaine du Bois, the last orchestrator of the Great Battle for Camelot.

In the end, the execution is held privately.

It's a matter of some speculation amidst the city, for some had imagined Agravaine would grieve his nephew unto his last moment, but his pride wins out, choosing to die with his dignity rather than on display for the masses. Or perhaps it is that there is something in him that harbours some kindling of love for his family, discovered too late, wishing to spare them the sight of it. When the bell gives its single toll to ring in the dawn, he calls for poison. Swift-acting and painless, he drinks it straight off and lays down to wake no more.

"How is Bellegere?" Merlin asks that night, curving himself around Arthur's back as they lay abed; one hand traces slow circles on his side, the warm skin soft as a child's. After the execution and declaration of death, she had returned to her chambers and spoken only to her cousin.

"She wants to go back to Snowgate." He presses back against his consort with a sigh; he'd never admit to it in so many words, but he likes being held this way, to know that he has someone at his back who will truly have his back. "I cannot say I fault her for it. It is her home, and she is the Lady of Snowgate now; the estate is hers."

"Did anyone speak against that?"

Arthur huffs softly. "Oh, yes. A girl has no place running an estate, a child cannot manage such responsibility," he echoes the words of the councilman who had spoken, scorn colouring his tone. No doubt those same voices had spoken in protest when Morgana had been his named heir, but Arthur had been firm in his resolution then, and he's firm in it now. He scoffs. "I was younger than she was when I was given charge of my estates. Two of them. It wasn't too great a responsibility then. Either way, it doesn't matter. Uncle had no other children, and Snowgate has always been
held by a du Bois."

He ducks his head down to rest his cheek against the back of Arthur's shoulder, murmuring against his skin, "What will you?"

"I'll send her off proper, make sure that people know she isn't being cast away for having the misfortune of having the wrong man for a father. She'll come back." Arthur stretches against him, then rolls over so they're face-to-face with one another. The shadow of pain lays over him just as it had when Uther had died, and yet, there's still a brightness to him. "Merlin," he says in a soft voice. "The entire kingdom has been turnt on its ear. I lost my throne and regained it in the course of a month. I overturned a ban that's stood as long as I've lived. I executed my own uncle." A small, humourless smile comes and goes. "I am weary unto death of being caught up in the bloody coils of things that began before I ever opened my eyes. Will we ever be done with it?"

"We will," he reassures. Merlin reaches up to stroke soft golden hair, smoothing it back from his brow, and Arthur tilts his head into the touch, eyes drifting shut. "We will, Arthur. It will take time, and it shan't be easy. The ache is part of the healing. But we will heal, all of us, and we'll be better for it."

The other man smiles faintly, eyes still closed as he leans into Merlin's hand like some great cat; he even sounds like one when he hums softly in his throat. "And then I'll name you my consort and wed you in front of all the peers of the realm and I'll bring you back to this chamber every night without ever having to lie about it again?" he poses, a faint thread of genuine amusement winding its way into his voice.

"Yes, that as well," he chortles.

Dark gold lashes part, pain-bruised eyes searching his. "Do you promise it?"

Merlin leans in to kiss him, soft and lingering. "I promise."

True to his word, when Bellegere takes Ione, Roland, Mhera, and the remainder of her honour guard to return to Snowgate, Arthur accords her a send-off fitting of a highborn lady, silencing any rumours that she was being sent away in disgrace for her father's sin. Mordred offers to accompany her as well, but she insists he's more needed in the city, Camelot's first Druid knight. She promises to return in a few months for their handfasting, swearing bodily harm upon all of them if they dare go through with it without her being there.

It's a strange time.

Whilst Arthur was the one to repeal the law against magic, it is Morgana and Merlin who truly lift the ban of it. Morgana has been a well-loved presence in Camelot since she was one-and-ten, Uther's beloved ward, Camelot's darling. She plays the games of court well. Daresay there are none who play it better. Except perhaps Merlin. None can match him in the art of playing the long game, and he'd mastered dissembling before he ever reached his Colts' Years. Whilst he is still new to the finer skillset of statecraft, he has an acute memory, able to recall at a moment's prompting the most obscure detail of anything he'd ever read—and he reads extensively. Upon Arthur's order, Geoffrey had turned out easily twoscore books from the era before the Purge, hidden away in the library; a true librarian could never stand to see a book burned, no matter how treasonous its contents. Several of them contain details of magical law and restrictions which, when coupled with Morgana's knowledge of governance and Merlin's fearful intellect, pave the kingdom's path to normalcy at a rapid clip.
The first true test of their new world is the Cup of Life. There are factions who demand it be locked in the vaults of Camelot, away from their enemies. There are factions who call for it to be returned to the keeping of the Druids. There are factions who demand that it be destroyed entirely. Arthur learns soon that the third option isn't viable. The Cup of Life is a manifestation of the power of life and death. It exists beyond time and cannot be destroyed.

Unsurprisingly, Merlin is the main voice calling for the Cup's return to the Druids. "It was safe in their keeping before, and it will be safe there again. What Morgause did was blasphemy. It went against the very nature of the world and twisted the balance. It is not something any tenpenny magician with a mind for vengeance can weave," he insists at one such debate in the council hall, sitting opposite from those who would have the Cup sent to the vaults. "It does not belong to Camelot, and it does not belong in Camelot's vault."

"Before it was with Iseldir's camp, where was the Cup hidden?" Arthur asks.

"It was not hidden at all. It was kept on the Isle of the Blessed, under the protection of the High Priests and Priestesses who lived there. It was moved after the last one… suddenly died," Merlin replies, casting him brief, purposeful glance and straightening his neckerchief.

It seems an idle motion, but Arthur knows the old, shiny burn that lies beneath the red cloth, a mirroring wound to the deep scar upon his own shoulder. Now we match. "The Isle of the Blessed is within Camelot's borders. Can it not be returned there?" he asks, looking towards Iseldir, sitting at Merlin's side along with several other Druid elders and sorcerers, including a strangely accented and tattooed man hailing from something called the Catha.

"The Isle would be the safest place for it, sire," Iseldir replies. "It is a holy place."

"It will be protected," says the tattooed man, Alator.

He sits back in his chair a moment, ring clicking against the carved wood as he drums his fingers against the arm of the chair. "The Cup will remain in Camelot," he begins, then holds up a hand when he sees Merlin straighten in his seat, already getting his back up. "As I understand it, the Isle is being rebuilt, and there are acolytes already being trained there, yes?" he asks; the sorcerers nod. "Then the Cup remains in Camelot's vaults until such time as there are sufficient numbers to ensure its safekeeping on the Isle. Does that suit?"

There's an exchange of glances, not a single word spoken aloud, and then Merlin nods decisively. "It will suit," he agrees.

Such is the cycle of their days.

Forging new laws, overturning the old, finding compromise where the two conflict. Merlin's prediction proves true, as they all knew it would—it isn't always easy, and there is indeed an ache to it.

Some cling to the past, purporting rumours that Arthur is under control of magic, a mummer's king. The person controlling him, Merlin or Morgana, varies depending on which version is more popular that day. Still, not much stock is placed in such murmurings. Morgana is Arthur's heir; if she truly desires the throne, an assassination is not so difficult a thing to orchestrate, especially for someone of her capacity. As for Merlin…they have known each other in passing since Arthur was two-and-ten, and Merlin has been his manservant for years. He's had more than ample opportunity to bring ill upon Arthur.

There are a few who whisper that perhaps Uther was assisted into the next life by his sorceress
daughter in order to make way for his ambitious son; those rumours are stamped out quickly and harshly.

The occasional knot of protest springs up in varying provinces, nervous tensions spilling over into violence, though only twice does it grow so severe that Arthur sends a regiment of the Royal Army to bring order.

Even a stunted tree will reach for sunlight.

The street of silk is rebuilt, trade picks up to its usual lively pace, bolstered by the presence of more magically-inclined merchants. A new crop of recruits enlists, hoping for replenish the ranks of the knights—there's a handful of young sorcerers amongst them, watching Mordred with adoration. Arthur conscripts the finest carpenters to build a second Round Table, large enough to seat far more than just nine people. The original table is brought from the castle ruins and set up in one of the smaller, private halls. His personal small council, sat by those who love him most, where he is only Arthur and not the King. No official proclamation is made, no banns are posted, and yet, the household begins to treat Merlin less like a fellow servant and more like his consort. It is one of the constants of the universe: servants miss nothing.

Summer tilts towards autumn, and harvesttime comes to the countryside. For the first time in nearly three-and-ten years, Merlin doesn't sit vigil beneath the quickbeam in the townhouse garden. A path is cleared to the standing stones in the Darkling Wood, and he leads the ritual procession from the city, giving tribute to the Old Ones and celebrating the Feast of the Dead. He doesn't ask if anyone has seen the shades of the dead during the celebration, not even Arthur. He had hoped to see Father, but none of his dead appear to him, though surely he has many. A part of him is grateful not to see Nimueh again.

The celebration winds on. In the small hours of the morning before the dawn comes proper, Merlin manages to make his way back up to the royal chambers, towing Arthur along with him, both of them giddily drunk on perry brandy and joy.

"Maiden have mercy, get off!" Arthur groans as they tumble onto the bed in a tangled heap, Merlin landing square atop him. "No more honey cakes for you."

"Oh, that's passing rich coming from you, you overfed bullock," Merlin retorts, giggling as he manages to wriggle his way further up onto the bed and off his consort, instead tucking himself in the space beneath Arthur's arm. Warm from the brandy and drowsy with it, he's half-asleep without ever getting beneath the blankets or taking off his boots. Still, he rouses when he feels a sword-callused hand grasp his, something cool fumbling over his fingers. "What's that?" he mumbles, squinting to keep his vision from doubling any further. Still, he has to blink several times before he can make sense of what it is he's seeing—a band of finely engraved silver on his finger. His breath catches in his throat.

"I told you I would have one made, did I not?" Arthur murmurs against his cheek, breath sweet with perry. "I say summer, this coming summer. I know it's your favourite time of year. We'll post the banns when the last of the harvest comes in, and then the court will have the winter to fret and moan and get over themselves. We'll let Morgana plan the whole thing. She'll love that."

Merlin blinks back the sudden heat of tears even as he laughs, sitting up to rain kisses over Arthur's face, babbling incoherently. He's not even certain what all he's saying, only that he's agreeing, or at least, he hopes that is what comes across. As Arthur pulls him in for another kiss, he reaches up and gently captures the king's face between his hands. "Twice," he says, earning a small, puzzled frown in return. "We have a handfasting done here in Camelot, the way you nobles do it, but then I want it done again by way of the Old Religion. It's a different ceremony, different vows."
Arthur turns his head to kiss Merlin's callused fingertips, then each of his knuckles, lips lingering against the engraved band. "If that's what you want. And anything else," he adds, murmuring the words against Merlin's palm. The corner of his mouth curves up in that sweet, crooked smile so rarely seen, and he echoes the words they've said so many times in their compromises. "Does it suit?"

Laughing, Merlin leans forward and kisses him once more. "Oh, yes. It will suit."
An insistent knocking breaks through the warm, pleasant haze of sleep with staccato taps, and Arthur exhales harshly against the nape of Merlin's neck. "If someone is not dead or dying, they soon will be," he rumbles.

Merlin chortles and stretches luxuriantly against his king like some great, pleased cat, arched back and all. "Be nice."

"I am always nice," comes the dry reply as he gets to his feet, and a bright laugh follows him up. Rather than bother with trivialities like clothing, he snatches one of the blankets off their bedroll, earning a protesting whine from Merlin, and wraps it around himself like a Hellene deity, padding barefoot over to the door. Bright sunlight sets him blinking as he opens the door a fraction, squinting out and shivering unhappily at the invasion of cold air. "What is it?"

"Good afternoon," Mordred says cheerfully, then holds up a large plate heaped high with food. "I've brought provisions." He rakes his gaze up and down Arthur, smirk growing. "Nice hair."

Arthur snatches the plate away from him with his free hand, eyes narrowed in mock irritation. "Thank you. Now go away." Not wanting to risk losing the blanket, he kicks the door closed.

The Druid braces a hand on the door, keeping it open. "The elders would like to know when they may have the spirit house back."

"When we're done with it."

He doesn't move his hand from the door. "Also, Morgana's sent a raven for you. She says that if you are not home by the Yule, she will, and I quote, ride out to the camp, tie you to her horse, and drag you back to Camelot mother-naked," Mordred relays in that same damnably chipper voice, clearly delighting in being the bearer of this particular message.

Arthur presses his lips together to keep from grinning, though from the look of glee on the younger man's face, he fails. "Thank you, Mordred." This time, when he pushes the door shut, the Druid allows him to, shutting the cold winter air out once more. He shuffles back over to their bed, blinking to adjust his gaze to the dimness; the spirit house has no windows and is lit only by numerous golden-hued lightstones, not a hearth. "Did you hear all that?" he asks, carefully easing himself back down into the warm nest of blankets and furs, taking care not to spill the plate of food.

"Mm-hm. Mother-naked," Merlin chortles, sitting himself up and helping Arthur settle back into their bed. He takes the plate and begins picking it apart with eager fingers.

Arthur takes a slice of venison from the plate, leftover from last night's feast, and gropes about the furs for a moment, coming up with two lengths of thick red yarn, tangled about one another. "So, do we still need to keep these?" he queries, taking the end of one strand and tickling Merlin's ear with it, making him squeak and duck away. Usually, they would keep the yarn from their handfasting until they had their first child, at which point it would be used to tie off the birthing cord before it was cut, but given that they'll not actually have children, he's not certain what they'll be needed for.

"Yes, of course we do. It's bad luck to be rid of them." Merlin breaks off a piece of honeycomb and holds it up to Arthur's mouth, lashes fluttering slightly as Arthur's tongue curls around his
fingertips. "So, my king, how did you enjoy a Druid handfasting?" he asks, slightly huskier than before.

"I quite enjoyed it," Arthur replies, nipping Merlin's fingertips between words.

He'd never been to a handfasting before, not as the Druids did. The ritual itself wasn't complicated, simply different from what he's used to; it been done outside, as was appropriate, on the shore of a frozen lake. Stone and sea and sky. The feast afterwards had followed no rules of ceremony he knew of, and if there'd been any kind of hierarchy to how things were served, he didn't see it. There'd been a great bonfire, wine and song abounding, enchantments cast around the camp to keep them warm despite the snow. He quite likes their dancing, quick and whirling without the numbered steps and polite exchange of partners he'd grown up with. There hadn't been any obligation for them to stay the length of the celebration, which meant Arthur had been able to hoist Merlin over his shoulder and carry him off to the spirit house in the middle of it, to the sound of much laughter and teasing jests.

"When should we go back?" Merlin queries softly, eyes drifting shut as Arthur begins to trail soft, nibbling kisses up the inside of his wrist and inner arm.

Arthur gives a deep rumble in his chest, tracing patterns across the delicate skin of Merlin's wrist with his tongue, feeling the quickening leap of blood. "We have until Yule. That's another five days. I say we make the most of them."

All Merlin can manage in reply is a breathless moan.

Fortunately for the king's dignity, Morgana doesn't have to have Arthur dragged back to Camelot by horse. They leave the Druid camp and return to the city before Yule, just in time to avoid the snowfall. Despite the winter chill, Merlin feels warm the entire ride home, the red yarn from their handfasting tucked safely into his saddlebag. He urges the Hellion forward, catching up with the rest of the party, and he's surprised to see Arthur engrossed in quiet, serious conversation with Iseldir of all people, the elder accompanying them back to Camelot, gaining earshot just in time to catch the tail end of the king's low words. "...wouldn't want to risk harm."

"Harm to what?" he asks.

Both heads turn towards him, silvered grey and shining gold beneath their hoods, and Arthur offers a perfectly cordial smile. "Nothing," he answers innocently.

Iseldir hides a laugh behind a cough.

Though winter is generally a quiet time of fallow inactivity, back in the city, Morgana goes at full tilt. She takes a deep and abiding interest in the planning of their wedding; both men are perfectly happy to let her have control of it. Arthur might do well in hosting feasts, but he's never done well in planning feasts, and Merlin harbours a dislike of the pageantry involved, not to mention being the centre of everyone's attention. Morgana, however, is in her element.

"You're my brother, of course I'm enjoying this," she laughs when Arthur makes mention of it, visiting her in her private study. "Not to mention I have leave to do whatever I wish."

"Just do try not to bankrupt the kingdom, alright?" he chortles.

She flutters her lashes in a parody of innocence, her tone perfectly sweet. "Me? Never. Hey!" She tweaks his ear when he leans forward, tilting his head to try and read the writing on the wax tablet
"No spying! Don't you have something better to do with your time?"

"Yes, yes, I'm going. Tell me, did you send those silver chains to the Druids as I asked you?"

Arthur asks, rubbing his ear.

"Yes, I did." She arches one brow at him. "Now get out, I'm busy."

He gets to his feet and gives a low, sweeping bow from the waist. "As you command, my lady," he drawls, then jumps aside as she hurls a stylus at him with deadly accuracy. Laughing, he beats a hasty retreat from the study, closing the door behind him. The corridors are cold, and he tucks his hands under his arms as he makes his way down towards the physicians' chamber.

He isn't surprised to find the chamber empty. The invasion hadn't been kind to Gaius, especially since Agravaine had told Morgause of his relation to Merlin and the royal family, and he is no longer a young man. Arthur had granted his request for resignation, and of course, the only logical choice to replace him as Royal Physician is Hunith, who has been his apprentice and left hand since Arthur was a child. Gaius now lives in his own chamber here in the castle, and Hunith operates from the physician's chamber on her own, at least until she finds her own apprentice.

It isn't long until she returns, bundled up in warmest winter attire with her medicine bag over one shoulder. "Arthur," she says warmly, hanging up the bag on a hook beside the door. She's never addressed him by title except in Father's presence. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"No, I simply wanted to visit." Arthur helps her out of her cloak and goes to hang it beside the hearth so it can dry. "We've not had much time to speak to one another lately."

Hunith sits down and pulls off her boots, exchanging them for jacquard slippers. "No, we haven't. How goes the plans for the wedding?" she asks, smiling.

"Morgana won't tell me, but she's happy, so I take it to be going well. She wants to surprise us. And that is actually what I wanted to speak to you about." He sits down on one of the old stools, mindful of the way it wobbles. He feels unaccountably hesitant all of a sudden, as though he is a boy of ten again, twisting his ring on nervous habit; it is his mother's ring, the only one he wears for the moment. The other is currently being kept safe in a locked coffer in his chamber along with its pair, right alongside the carefully coiled pieces of red yarn from their handfasting.

A warm, rough hand smooths over his hair, drawing him out of his thoughts. Hunith smiles down at him, a knowing glimmer of humour in her eyes. "If you mean to ask whether or not I approve, you should very well know the answer already," she replies, amused. "I've always known you and Merlin would be something to one another, since you first met. Perhaps not quite like this, but I knew."

Arthur raises his brows. "We met when we were children," he points out.

"Indeed." The amusement deepens. "And you returned from that meeting with the stamp of my son's teeth in your arm."

Heat spills up his neck into his ears and cheeks. "I didn't know he was your son," he mutters, still feeling a twinge of old embarrassment. "Why didn't you ever tell me? When I was younger?"

Hunith is quiet a moment, thoughtful, and she draws out a chair proper and sits down as well. "At first, it was a matter of propriety. I didn't want to risk my place with Gaius. I imagined once he arrived in Camelot with Lionel, people would eventually find out on their own, I needn't make a declaration of it. I suppose I imagined you'd learn it for yourself eventually, as often as you were
around Leon and Merlin. I would've answered your questions, if you had come to me." She gives him a curious glance. "When did you learn?"

Arthur shrugs one shoulder, not wanting to admit that he hadn't realised until months after Merlin had been made his manservant, and he had only realised it because he had heard Merlin address her as Mother. Gathering the folds of his fur-lined cloak under him, he moves from the stool, sits down on the floor beside her chair, and leans his head against her knee as though he is a boy again. Whenever he'd been visited with nightmares or simply couldn't sleep, he used to sneak past his guard to come sit in the physicians' chamber with Hunith. "You know, when I was a child, I used to wish I was your son," he says softly.

She strokes his hair with callused fingertips, smoothing it back from his brow. She's always done as such for him, handling him as though he is precious, not as a prince but just as himself, someone beloved to her. So few people have ever treated him thusly. "I suppose you will be now, in a way," she remarks, amusement colouring her tone. "And I have always loved you as such."

He nods, the fabric of her skirts scratching against his cheek. "Do you suppose Balinor ever would have come to like me?" he prompts.

Hunith chuckles softly, though now there is a tinge of old sorrow to it, scratching her nails gently against his scalp. "I believe so. He wasn't a man inclined to holding a grudge, not truly. If he had lived to see the man you have become...yes, I believe so." She bends down and presses her lips to the crown of his head, breath warm on his hair as she murmurs, "I am so very proud of you, sweet boy."

Arthur closes his eyes and smiles, the last of an unknown tension vanishing as smoke in a strong wind.

As long as the winter nights are, they pass swiftly. The longest night comes and goes. Merlin makes the wry observation that it is indeed warmer to spend Yule in the castle than in the garden. The nights begin to shorten, the days begin to warm. Spring comes to Camelot, and a fresh crop of young nobles arrives with it, eager to make their opening gambits in the game of courtship; no small number of them gaze after Merlin whenever he crosses their path, much to his chagrin. Planning for their wedding gets underway in earnest, pledges to attend streaming in from afar.

"Caerleon and Annis have both promised to attend," Arthur observes with amusement, sighing in relief as he settles himself into the bath, the water just this side of too-hot. "Rodor is still recuperating, so Princess Mithian will be coming in his stead."

A dry snort echoes out from behind the changing screen. "I imagine she'll enjoy this display of overt masculinity as much as I will."

He grins. "Ah, come now, lionheart, aren't you excited about the tourney?"

Merlin snorts as he emerges from behind the screen stripped down to his skin, crosses the chamber, and climbs into the bath, easing himself down into the hot water. The tub isn't quite large enough for two grown men, unless, of course, they are willing to be quite close to one another, which they are. "Oh, yes, of course. All I've ever wanted for my wedding is two days of sweaty men knocking the seven hells out of each other," he remarks, leaning back into Arthur's chest.

"It's tradition," Arthur laughs, sliding his arms around his sorcerer's waist. "My father did the same when he married my mother, and so did my grandfather. You said we could have a traditional
Camelot wedding, and the tourney is part of it.”

He chortles, tipping his head back to rest on the other man's shoulder. "I know, and I also know how much joy you get out of giving someone a thorough routing with a training sword." He flicks a bit of water at Arthur's face. "So you have your tourney, love."

The blond chuckles and kisses Merlin's wet hair, then reaches over and grabs a ball of soap from the stool placed beside the tub. Nudging Merlin forward a bit, he starts working a lather into his consort's dark curls, using his fingertips to keep it from tangling too badly; Merlin leans back into the ministrations happily, a purring hum starting up in his throat. "You know, Morgana used to have a cat that got this same look about it when she pet it," he teases, sputtering as water splashes in his face, then tugs on a clump of damp hair in retaliation.

Merlin squawks, turning his head with a teasing glare on his face. "Keep that up, and I shan't wash your back for you."

Chortling, he kisses one of the little creases in the corner of Merlin's grin, then rakes his gaze over his soon-to-be consort. "I always thought you hated feasts. There's still time. We can tell Morgana to keep it tame," he offers hesitantly, uncertain.

Water laps at the edges of the tub, sloshing over onto the floor as the sorcerer twists around. His legs settle to either side of Arthur's hips, braced against the side of the tub. "I didn't hate the feasts," he corrects. "Before now, though, all I ever did at the feast was stand against the wall and make sure no one's cup ran dry, and all I ever got to eat of all that delicious food was whatever scraps were left before the dogs got their share. Not exactly an enjoyable way to spend a night," he points out, raising his brows. "And I don't like everyone always...looking at me. Old habits, I'm afraid. I can get past it. I imagine I'll have to. And why shouldn't we make a fuss?"

"I suppose." Cupping both hands in the water, he starts rinsing the lather from Merlin's hair, smiling at the way he squeezes his eyes shut against the soapy water like a child.

"Good." A certain, familiar slyness creeps into Merlin's grin, and he reaches out to take the ball of soap in hand, working up a lather. "Now turn around. I'll wash your back."

The tourney is indeed a grand event, with knights from several kingdoms partaking of it. Split between two days, there are three main events: archery, jousting, and melee. Bellegere, freshly returned from Snowgate, competes the first day. There are different categories—longbow, shortbow, moving target, on foot, and from horseback. A year ago, a great many would have been incensed and embittered at being bested by a young girl, but that had been before. Now she isn't merely a girl, she is the Lady of Snowgate, last scion of the House du Bois, slayer of Southrons. Merlin finds it an almost surreal experience, to sit up in the high box instead of with the rest of the crowds, wearing the fine new clothes Guinevere and Morgana had conspired to make for him—a tunic of deep blue, dark-dyed trousers, a belt tooled with silver, and his favourite, a black coat that's fashioned after the Eastern style, with silver fastenings up the front and a high collar. They'd found the pattern for it in one of the old books about the Dragonlords brought to Merlin.

"Are you enjoying your tourney so far?" Annis asks from her seat beside him, amused.

He offers her a wry smile. "Yes, insofar as Arthur is enjoying himself, and I enjoy seeing him happy," he answers.
She chuckles at that, watching as one of her sons tilts against Leon, applauding as the horses thunder past their box. "Men," she laughs. "One of nature's most delicate creations. One must always have a care in their handling."

Merlin cheers loudly as Leon unseats the other man, rising to his feet and going to the railing to accept the beribboned token offered to him, one of the many he'd been given today. Leon grins and salutes him with the lance, heeling his horse back to the end of the pitch. He retakes his seat, twisting the ribbons between his fingers. "I'm surprised you came," he points out.

"Oh? Why? I like the young Pendragon, far more than I ever liked his father. And I like you," Annis replies.

"Your husband doesn't like either of us."

She outright laughs at that. "Oh, Caerleon. I have been his wife for a great many years now, and I can tell you that he does. In his way, he does. He simply has a...different way of expressing it," she replies with raised brows, nodding towards the side of the tourney pitch where the knights are arming themselves for the upcoming melee.

Merlin laughs so hard he nearly drops the tokens.

The next day, he doesn't see Arthur at all and shan't until the ceremony, both of them similarly sequestered to be fussed over in preparation. He is attended by Guinevere, which means that Morgana will be looking after Arthur, ensuring everything goes to plan. Having never been fussed over in his life, he wonders how it is anyone gets anything done on the day of their wedding.

"You aren't supposed to do anything, that's the point," Gwen laughs as she helps him into his new coat, stepping around to do up the fastenings with the deftness of a longtime servant, swatting aside his hands when he attempts to do it himself. The rich fabric still feels strange against his skin, an unfamiliar luxury; he imagines it's one of many things he'll have to get used to. Understanding submission to be the better part of valour here, he stands still and allows her to fuss over the lay of the fabric, the state of his hair. She pauses in her adjustments when a knock sounds at the door. "Do not move," she orders firmly.

"As my lady commands."

An unimpressed glare is levelled his way. She opens the door with utmost care, as though expecting marauding Southrons to be waiting on the other side, but then she grins and opens the door wider with a warm greeting. "Leon."

"Gwen." He folds her in a gentle one-armed embrace, chin resting atop her curly head for a moment. As First Knight, usually he would be in his chainmail and red cloak, ceremonial sword at his hip. Today, however, he isn't First Knight; he is Merlin's brother first today, attired in the deep green and russet colours of Silverpine. Affection is writ across his every expression, eyes warm and even somewhat damp. "Look at you," he murmurs.

Risking Gwen's wrath with movement, Merlin steps forward and takes hold of his brother's hands. "No one has ever had a better brother," he replies. "I owe so much to you. To everyone."

"All I have ever wanted for you is your freedom and happiness, little villain," Leon says softly. Drawing his hands free, he folds his arms around Merlin, embracing him briefly yet tightly, squeezing him hard. "I am so very proud of you." His voice is low and thick with emotion.
Lowering his arms, he takes a step back and rakes his gaze over Merlin once more, smiling. With a soft laugh, he shakes his head with faint disbelief, then straightens up and proffers his arm. "It's time."

Gwen leans up to kiss his cheek. "I'll see you in a moment," she murmurs, leaving the room.

Once her footsteps fade down the corridor, Merlin inhales a deep breath and lets it out slowly. There's a great fluttering in his chest, as though some warm, silken bird is caged within his ribs. It calls to mind the feeling he had when he first began to realise that what he felt for Arthur went beyond a friend's affection, what seems to be a lifetime ago. Maiden's mercy, they'd been so young. Never once would he have ever imagined they would come to this point.

"Merlin?" Leon says softly.

Raising his gaze to the face of his brother, he smiles and curls his hand around Leon's arm, a warm, solid anchor. "I'm ready."

What happens next seems to occur in a golden haze, like unto some wonderous and impossible dream. When they enter the throne room, Merlin cannot say what colour Morgana's gown is, nor can he name any of the faces amid the crowds, though he knows they are all beloved, friends and allies and family in blood and in heart. He can see Arthur at the far end, standing on the dais, bright and golden and beautiful, the touchstone of his heart.

When they reach the dais, he releases Leon's arm and reaches out to take hold of Arthur's extended hand, rough and warm, fingers squeezing gently around his own. Geoffrey of Monmouth stands before them, filling the air with the familiar, dry creak of his words; distantly, he hears his own voice making the appropriate replies, making his vows, Arthur's saying them in turn. When the callused fingers squeeze gently around his, he kneels obediently, head bowed, knowing what comes next.

A bright susurrus of murmuring brings his gaze up, peering through his lashes, and his breath catches faintly in his throat.

Held between Arthur's raised hands is a coronet of purest silver, Druid-crafted in the old style, the likeness of dragons wrought in its elegant lines. When he lowers it to Merlin's head, the metal is cool. The weight of it is unfamiliar and solid in its presence, a reminder that with it comes the responsibility of a kingdom, a people, a way of life; he rises to his feet carefully, adjusting himself to it.

Arthur clasps Merlin's hand tightly with his own, raising his, and when he speaks, his voice rings clear and strong, echoing from the rafters: "Merlin, Prince Consort of Camelot!"

Three months of sharing a bed every night, Arthur is very nearly used to the constant warm presence of another body beside him stretching and turning in sleep, the occasional dreaming kick. Which is why he is rightly alarmed when he wakes up to Merlin leaning over him and shaking his shoulder, whispering his name with urgency. "What? What is it?" he asks groggily, mind hastily clearing as he turns over, scrubbing a hand over his eyes. For a split second, he's certain something must be wrong, given the way Merlin is trembling beside him, but then he notices the way his consort is grinning, kicking away the blankets and rolling out of the bed. The candles flicker to life, illuminating him as he pulls on his trousers. "Merlin? What is it?" he repeats.

"Get up, Arthur. It's time," he whispers, his voice quivering with excitement.
"Time? For what?" He glances towards the window. The moon's at its highest, full and bright; dawn is easily hours away.

Merlin doesn't answer him, drawing his nightshirt on and crossing the chamber to the far wall. "Onhlídan," he whispers. With a low rumble of stone, the hidden door slides open, and Merlin vanishes into the darkness beyond.

Understanding dawns. Arthur tosses back the sheets and quickly draws on his trousers as well, finding his nightshirt just as his consort reemerges from the secret chamber, cradling the soft blue dragon egg in both arms. "Now? Are you certain?" he asks softly, hastening over. To his surprise, when he comes near, he can feel heat coming off the egg; he reaches out to touch it with tentative fingers. The shell is smooth and unmarked, just this side of being too hot to touch. It's then he notices that Merlin is wearing Balinor's signet ring on his right hand, the engraved dragon-head triskele just visible in the candleglow.

"I dreamt of him. Father," Merlin murmurs softly, his eyes bright. "Come on. It needs to be done outside." Cradling the egg in the crook of one arm, he reaches out to take Arthur's hand in his own. Magic spills across his skin, warm and tingling, and the world takes on a faint shimmering brightness. When they walk out of the chamber into the corridor, none of the guards turn to look at them, and he realises that Merlin's cast a glamour over them, rendering them unseen and unheard. He cannot imagine how they would look, the King of Camelot and his consort wandering barefoot about the castle in their nightclothes.

Arthur isn't at all surprised when Merlin leads him not to the Darkling Wood or to the standing stones, but out to the small clearing where they first began sparring with one another, the world painted in hues of silver and grey in the moonlight. Merlin leads him out to the middle of the clearing, dropping Arthur's hand and kneeling down in the soft grass. He sets the egg down gently in the grass in front of him, balancing it upright.

"What happens now?" Arthur asks in a hushed voice, aware of how important this must be.

"The Great Dragons are called into life by dragonlords. I will have to give it a name," Merlin replies. He sits back on his heels, hands resting on his thighs as he gazes at the egg, a pearlescent blue-white in the moonlight, the smooth shell almost glowing, and they both sit in silence, the time stretching on soft and unhurried. In the distance an owl hoots softly; insects hum their nightly song. Despite the late hour, Arthur doesn't feel at all weary, actually quite languid, resting his chin on one knee and curling his toes against the dew-damp grass as he waits.

At last, Merlin takes in a deep breath, straightening up slightly; Arthur raises his head from his knee. Leaning forward, he exhales a single word. "Aithusa."

His voice emerges deep and resonant with a power that Arthur can feel run down his spine like a flick through a rope, his stomach clenching and pulse jumping in response to it. The name almost seems to hang in the air for a moment, the last trembling hum of a bell-toll…and then a soft tapping noise begins, the egg trembling with it.

A white hairline crack appears in the shell, spiderwebbing outwards. Merlin's hand reaches out blindly, and Arthur takes it with his own, squeezing tight.

A chip the size of his thumbnail falls free of the egg, the tip of a small snout appearing. His heart hammers against his ribs so hard he's certain his bones will crack for strain.

The dragonet pushes its head free; the egg shudders, wobbling as it stretches towards the open air, small claws grasping at the edges of the shell. Unexpected tears prickle at his eyes, blurring his
vision, and he swipes them away with a weak laugh. Beside him, Merlin makes a similar sound of awe and wonder, laughing aloud.

"Look at that," Arthur whispers as the dragonet finally comes free of the egg entirely, wobbling on unsteady baby legs before righting itself. Blue eyes move from Merlin to Arthur and back again, blinking widely. Under the pale spill of moonlight, the dragonet almost seems to glow, luminous as a pearl. "Are they always all white like that?" he asks.

"No," Merlin replies with a watery giggle. "A white dragon is rare as anything." He squeezes Arthur's hand again, smiling. "No dragon birth is without meaning, you know."

Arthur reaches up to curl his hand around the nape of Merlin's neck, smiling. "I think I know what this one means," he murmurs.

As he pulls Merlin into a kiss, the dragonet sits up on its haunches, diaphanous wings unfolding, and for the first time a quarter century, the air comes alive with the music of dragons.

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