The Book of Merthur
by horsecrazy

Summary

'It was awkward business to ignore a man sitting the length of one knee from you, especially when he had such voluminous ears, and though Arthur made a valiant attempt at it, he had soon to abandon this in favour of grousing at Merlin for a myriad of grievous transgressions, the most pressing of which was his manner of sitting far too close, as if they were mates. This shortcoming was to become a theme when they laid down after passing round a hard cheese and some bread, Merlin in Arthur’s cloak, and Arthur in nothing at all, because his was the greater constitution; and whilst Arthur was working himself into the choicest bit of ground, with the least stones, Merlin suddenly rolled over, mummified within the cloak Arthur’s thoughtfulness had provided, and put his nose into Arthur’s neck.'

The 'yes homo' we all deserved. A collection of one-shots righting the heterosexual wrongs of canon.

Notes

Hello, and welcome to my latest obsession, which is waxing poetic about Arthur and Merlin in an excessively long-winded way, because I'm bitter about what canon took from us. This is going to be a series of one-shots; as of right now, I've no idea how many there will be. They'll take place chronologically, because I'm just not the sort of writer who can write out of order. You can read each as a standalone, though the relationship between Arthur and Merlin (and other characters) will of course deepen in later one-shots. I haven't
decided how much actual canon I'm going to incorporate, but I'd say it's very likely that everything after season one will be AU. I wanted to take from Arthurian myth as well as Celtic folklore/fairytales in general for this collection, so you'll see lots of various myths cobbled together and incorporated into this.

The title I based on T.H. White's 'The Book of Merlyn', because I'm not done stealing from him. This particular story is partially based on the tale 'St. George of Merrie England'. It's set early in season one. I hope you enjoy! Comments are always appreciated.
There were on that day (a Tuesday) two things of especial note: the first was the occurrence of a murder, and the second was the absence of a murder.

You would not ordinarily be particularly roused by the first, since Pestilence and War were ever plying their trades, and doing a rousing good business; but this murder was notable because its victim was already dead, and therefore a rather strange audience for the second perpetrators to target.

The second murder was thwarted only by an incredible restraint which the victim did not deserve, and for which the prospective murderer, in his own exceedingly humble opinion, ought to have been rewarded.

There was that day a keen sun, which burned on faithfully till, suddenly, it was not to be; and, as the poets say, fucked off handily. Now, there is an awful lot of fuss in a dark wood, where those stagnant trees of daytime now sit up, murmurous, and the rabbits in crepuscular glee flit off to eat. The heather lay in sweet latent bunches underneath, working up a good shout: but, not, naturally, till its travellers had already gone unheeding over it, and put their backs to it with the comfort of a child who has checked under his bed and found only a lot of dust, and maybe an old tart. So the complaints which had run on all day, whilst the light was unfailing, changed their tune quite abruptly, not, naturally, to a less strident one, but they did lose a certain amount of whinge in favour of a fat lot of cowardice: “Arthur, what was that?”

“Well, what was that?”

“Another owl, Merlin. For God’s sake--”

“That was not an owl.”

“How would you know?” Arthur snapped, but in a princely way, since he did not allow peasants to rile him up to anything which could be credibly called peevishness, or even mild pique.

“Because I had one for a pet as a child.”

“You didn’t have an owl for a pet.”

“I did too! I called him Archimedes. My mum let him sleep in my room, and--”

There was a sturdy bow in his hand with which Arthur first contemplated shooting himself, and then Merlin. He said instead, “Shh!” with a sharpness that was intended to convey a sudden danger, and which found its mark, for Merlin abruptly discovered that the human mouth had been designed with a sort of hinge, so that it could go both ways, and close as well as flap about interminably. They went on for some blissful distance in this way, with the soft grasses breathing all about them, and the trees in wakeful vigilance.

And then: “Are we lost?”
"You might be, but these are my woods, and I’ve known them all my life."

"You know the whole woods. You’ve walked every single--"

"Yes, Mer lin, every inch of them." And again the bow was hefted, and contemplatively weighed, and Arthur’s chivalry, which at that moment was having a Crisis, whispered seductively to him that after all the Code certainly could not intend for him to protect every innocent, if they were very, very annoying, and hummed too much.

"Doesn’t seem like it, since we’ve passed that same tree three times now. I recognise it because it’s got some Hypericum olympicum growing under it. Gaius taught me that; it’s the scientific name for Chase-devil. You can use it to treat a rubbish mood. Can’t think why he hasn’t prescribed it for you yet."

"I’m only in a rubbish mood when I’m stuck alone in a forest with you."

"You mean when you’re lost alone in a forest with me."

"I am not lost, Merlin!"

"Sure; of course," his servant said with a distinct lack of veneration, which reminded Arthur that he was due another lecture on proper titles and how indescribably rude it was to accuse one’s prince of being lost in his own forest, when in fact he had an impeccable sense of direction, and certainly would have noticed himself if they had passed the same bloody tree twice, let alone three times. He would need a word with his father upon their return; sacking Merlin had not particularly worked out for either of them, as his dirty hose began to proliferate in the alarming way that dirty hose had when one hadn’t any servant to pick them up, and Merlin had only migrated back to him anyway, complaining all the while about what a knob Arthur was, and how put upon he was by Arthur’s perfectly reasonable requests, and how in fact he no longer believed in the monarchy whatsoever, and thought he might rather become an anarchist, than to serve such a tit. Uther would sort him. Perhaps Merlin might be banished, and then Arthur could get himself a proper servant, who called him ‘my Lord’ and understood that it was an honour (in fact the highest honour) to pick up Arthur’s dirty hose, and to polish his armour, and muck out his stables, and draw his baths, and rub his weary feet. This was so delicious a thought that Arthur for a moment forgot his impeccable sense of direction, and whacked his head on a branch; and Merlin, justifying the last paragraph, let out a great laugh, the big whooping sort which required the aid of his hands on his knees to keep him upright.

There was perhaps another half hour of this, which is not necessary to tell, as it was only the same old plodding round, with here and there an interjection from the forest, and afterwards an interjection from Merlin, who had been frightened by the forest’s insistence on its participation in the general conversation, which ran continuously along the same lines, till Arthur, finally, threw down his bow and said, “Well, Merlin, thanks to your incompetence, we’ll have to make camp for the night. It’s too late and too long a walk to return to the castle now.”

"My incompetence? It wasn’t me insisted, ‘I’m the prince, every tree here is mine, this rock is mine, look at me, I’m rich, I know what I’m about.’" His mimicry was terrible. Arthur’s mouth made a sour twist as he set about arduously ordering Merlin to collect their firewood.

"I’m not going out there. I’m not the one with the sword. I’ll be eaten."

"By what?"

"There are boars! Probably monsters. Deer."
“Deer? A deer wouldn’t eat you, you big girl, and I shouldn’t think a boar or monster would find you to their taste either. Anyway, they’d have indigestion from it, so you could console yourself with that.”

“A fat lot of consolation that would be. It’s bad enough you got us lost, and now I’m to be eaten on top of it.”

“You’re not going to be eaten, you coward, and I didn’t get us lost—”

“If there’s no danger of my being eaten, then why aren’t you collecting the firewood?”

“Because that’s a servant’s job.”

This spawned a rather intense argument, during which there was a scuffle, and an all-around loss of dignity, and finally a hole in Arthur’s trousers which Merlin would need to mend, so that he rather regretted putting it there in the first place. But the end result was that they went off together in search of the firewood, and returning with an adequate amount to perish neither of the cold nor the dark, which Merlin seemed to consider a foe in and of itself, they set to lighting it, which required the assistance of Arthur’s flint, the bit of steel which he had thrown at Merlin’s backside soon as he bent over for a branch, and another argument which never truly was settled, but merely died down whilst they sat round the flames and tried to pretend the other did not exist.

It was awkward business to ignore a man sitting the length of one knee from you, especially when he had such voluminous ears, and though Arthur made a valiant attempt at it, he had soon to abandon this in favour of grousing at Merlin for a myriad of grievous transgressions, the most pressing of which was his manner of sitting far too close, as if they were mates. This shortcoming was to become a theme when they laid down after passing round a hard cheese and some bread, Merlin in Arthur’s cloak, and Arthur in nothing at all, because his was the greater constitution; and whilst Arthur was working himself into the choicest bit of ground, with the least stones, Merlin suddenly rolled over, mummified within the cloak Arthur’s thoughtfulness had provided, and put his nose into Arthur’s neck.

“What are you doing?” Arthur demanded.

“It’s cold. Do you want me to die of exposure?”

“I wouldn’t hate it.”

“Well, then you can dig my grave, go home alone, and pick up your own damn clothes.”

“I don’t see where the tragedy is supposed to be.” Arthur paused. “Aside from having to pick up my own clothes.” He wiggled a bit. “Get off.”

“No.”

“Merlin.”

It progressed in this way for some time, without any noteworthy additions or changes, till finally Arthur rolled over, found himself an uncomfortable nose’s breadth from his manservant, and pushed him, bodily, back toward the oak under which they were sheltering. Then, whilst Merlin was sorting out his arms, which had got tangled in the cloak, Arthur unsheathed his sword, laid it down between them, and turned peacefully back to the business of getting to sleep.

There was a clang, sonorous in the dark. “Ow! Why’d you put your sword here? It’s a good job I didn’t skewer myself!”
“No it isn’t,” Arthur said, darkly.

“Are you worried I’m going to try and steal your maidenhood?” Merlin asked.

“Dear God, what an image; thank you for that, Merlin,” Arthur replied, and turned over to see how his remark had landed; but he found in doing so that Merlin had rolled away, and then it was lonely, terribly lonely, to look upon the hunched back, and the dark tuft of hair above his cloak, and to feel suddenly withdrawn from him all the ceaseless chattering day, which he now recognised as an extension of friendship, whilst the forest in choral rhythm went on round him.

He was the worst sort of soft-hearted eejit, of the breed that considers himself unassailable, unfeeling, hard; so that when he is breached easily, often, he feels himself doubly hurt, and doubly shamed--and then it is a thing to be hidden, as if it had never been acceptable for him to experience it in the first place.

So it was then that he rolled over himself, facing out into the wood, away from Merlin, with something like a lump in his throat (though of course it was not), and did not sleep.

Merlin woke to a hand over his mouth.

As this was unprecedented, he started up out of Arthur’s cloak; and in reply, the hand, which had a tremendous lot of strength behind it, pressed down even harder, and this seemed to Merlin to confirm that a murderer had got hold of him, and he would be chopped into bits, and left for any foragers who liked that sort of thing; but as he had warned Arthur not to head into this bit of wood, on account of its gloom, which even in full day had a certain harrowing quality to it, he had the satisfaction of being right, so it wasn’t all bad.

But after all it was only Arthur’s big stupid hand, and Arthur’s big stupid thigh in the dirt beside him where Arthur was kneeling with his sword drawn. He took his hand slowly from Merlin’s mouth, and put his finger to his lips, as if Merlin had not quite got the point whilst Arthur had been smothering him. “Quiet. There’s someone out there.”

“A bandit?” Merlin whispered, with a sudden awareness of all his extremities, and the ground underneath him, and all the gossiping leaves, who with a terrible innuendo trembled their every living stalk in the way that a foot or bludgeoning item might stir them.

“I don’t know. That’s what we’re going to find out,” Arthur whispered back, and pulling Merlin and his cloak upright in one smooth motion, he went on ahead like a cat, with Merlin left to blunder about behind him.

The moon came down like a soft snow, and could be credited entirely for the handsome and noble quality which Arthur’s features took on in its forgiving light. And the wind on swift tiptoe went onward, over the sweet heather, and the tremulous hedges, and in the living bramble thrashed some hidden inhabitant, mewling.

Merlin lost his sense of poetry quite early, when they had gone on some distance, and found nothing, not even a fiendish rabbit. He was tired, and his feet hurt, and he hadn’t had enough to eat for supper--and all of this conspired to put him into a churlish mood, so that it must have seemed to Arthur he was towing a child through the wood, and not a well-behaved one, with elocution lessons; but as Arthur was regularly childish, and couldn’t even pick up his own trousers, it seemed fair enough to Merlin.
They were walking more normally now, with a regular dispersion of heel to toe ratio, and considering giving up the thing altogether, when the hair on Merlin’s arms stood up. This was a right good shock, of the kind that starts in the belly, where some other sense, which we have carried about for a very long time, never knowing its presence, suddenly asserts itself: and putting its flame into our spines, and all down our fingertips, makes of an ordinary man, properly shod, one open nerve. And worrying at it now were the trees, and the beasts, which in a sudden conspiracy shut up: not one after another, but simultaneously, as if a conductor had moved his baton just so. Merlin felt the wind go through the grass underneath him, moaning; but here the leaves obeyed their phantom director, and sat dumbly unruffled.

Arthur in front of him had gone stiff. He reached back to see that Merlin was behind him, and nudging him for good measure, got him all tidily arranged so there was no part of him which could be seen from the position of a threat which happened to materialize between Arthur and his sword. It was very chivalrous of him, and put Merlin into some difficulties trying to do the same. Not out of any personal concern for Arthur’s fat stupid head, of course, but merely because a dragon had told him to do it: and it seemed to Merlin that any oracle which dispensed flames as well as advice ought to be fastidiously heeded.

There was a little clearing ahead of them. It was a very ordinary clearing, where the flowers in drowsy awareness leant their heads one upon the other, and dreamt of cleansing rains; and the grass in easy concession kept its chatter to a minimum, whistling only occasionally, when the wind let off a particularly disagreeable rush, and roused it all to anarchy. There was only one discrepancy, and that was the woman standing in the middle of it, with her feet bare in the silent heather, and her shoulders hunched in a copious weeping. Even this might not have been so unusual, since it was a nice enough place to weep, easily the most agreeable spot in the woods, and the least prone to Saxons, who were proper bogeyman, and liked the deeper bits, with more ominous moss. However, after drawing up short at the sight of her in the midst of these woods, in the midst of this night, Merlin saw that aside from her propensity to wander about shoeless as a wood nymph, the woman had one other eccentricity, which surely wasn’t her fault: she was absolutely transparent. There was a filminess to her, as to a fine lady’s silks, only a bit naughty, as one could see the grass behind her, rippling in the same queer manner in which her own body seemed to undulate. She was like the feeling of a sea before its placidity has totally dissolved, when the storm has got up its bluster, and foams up uneasily, not quite breaking its planes, but certainly agitating them: that was how Merlin felt looking at her. He was not afraid, exactly. But there was a stirring in him which upset his stomach, and lifted a wary premonition, hot, into his throat; and the hair was still alert on his arms, and the hand which Arthur had put back, to stop him from a stupid action, lay white on his forearm.

For a moment they all breathed, and looked at one another. But ultimately they were both gentlemen, and could not ignore the etiquette.

“Are you in distress, my lady?” Arthur asked, slowly taking his hand off Merlin’s arm, as if that were the more threatening gesture, and not the sword which was still naked in his grip.

“Well, I think that’s a bit of a dim question, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m only saying; she’s crying. Of course she’s in distress.”

“Well, it’s a rhetorical question, Merlin. Naturally I’m aware she’s in distress, otherwise I wouldn’t be asking.”

“How’s it a rhetorical question, if you’re expecting an answer? You wouldn’t just ask a question
like that, just to throw it out there. So it’s not a rhetorical question.”

“Rhetoric, Merlin, can be used to elicit a discussion.”

“A discussion about whether or not she’s in distress, which she clearly is. Why didn’t you just say, ‘Can we help you?’ and just leave off the whole bit about whether or not she’s in distress in the first place?”

“Are you mad? This isn’t the place to be having a debate over semantics.”

And the woman, pitiful, or perhaps pitying, looked on with her bright sad eyes.

“Sorry, I’m nervous. I babble when I get nervous.”

“When do you not babble, Merlin? I have yet to enjoy a moment free of it.” But Arthur had felt the eyes on him, and straightened now in a sudden self-consciousness, which Merlin could see in his shoulder blades, now very stiff, and clearing his throat, said to the woman, “I am prince Arthur of Camelot, and you have my protection, my lady; whatever is troubling you, I give you my word, my sword and assistance are yours.”

It was nicely said, even though he was clearly uncomfortable, and did not know how to address a woman who seemed, according to those hearthside tales of old, to be quite dead, and perhaps unaware of it. Merlin was almost touched. He had only been in the prince’s service for some weeks, and was beginning to notice that Arthur was mostly a prat, but even he sometimes needed a holiday from himself, and then he was almost lovely. Very briefly, and afterwards he was unbearable; but it was only fair to mention that this was not entirely anomalous (though it was certainly rare). He was still quite certain the dragon had the wrong Arthur, but this one did seem capable, occasionally, of doing a very minor good turn.

“My child,” the woman said, and when she spoke, there was something like thunder in it, and Merlin’s magic, quiescent, but fast in his bones, ever unslumbering, lifted its curious head, to test this odd disturbance.

But the woman spoke again, and now it was only a plaintive voice, absolutely broken, so that you could hardly listen to it; it moved your own heart to tragedy, and Arthur, for all his bluster, was clearly softened, and took a step forward, so that there was now less distance between himself and the woman than there was between him and Merlin.

“Arthur,” Merlin said, quietly cautioning.

“My child. She’s taken my child!” the woman cried, and putting her face in her hands, broke into another round of weeping which was no less terrible for lack of tears, and might have been even more so.

“Who’s taken your child?” Arthur asked gently, and now the sword was put away, and he went, empty-handed, with his hair shining in the moonlight, tenderly to this apparition, to bend his knee in service.

But to Merlin there was something which was not quite right, beyond the obvious, for if she had simply been a ghost, he supposed he ought not to have felt this way about the matter, since a spirit likely had as much right to their grief as anyone, and probably even more, as their attachment to it had flouted the usual procedure of death, and that was something to respect at least. Certainly Merlin had never had such a passion. But there was the first frightful voice which had quivered the magic within him, and even now it did not settle, but fizzed impatient in his limbs, as if it knew to
be close at hand.

“She’s stolen my child; but now you have come, and I know you can help me.” But she was looking at Merlin as she said it, and the look was as single-minded as if she had forgotten Arthur altogether.

“Of course,” Arthur said, and he too looked back at Merlin, and there was a slight furrow between his brows, as if he had felt there was something incomprehensible which had passed between the woman and his servant, and was not for him to know.

“Be careful,” Merlin whispered when the woman turned and went silently on ahead, the grass untroubled underfoot.

“What’s she going to do, Merlin? She’s only a woman. And dead.”

“That’s the most dangerous kind.”

“The kind who’s wandering round looking for whatever poor child she died heartsick over?”

“The kind you underestimate,” Merlin said, and Arthur, looking at him in a contemplative way, put a hand on his sword.

So they went on afterwards, unspeaking, whilst the woman told them of a sorceress who stole new babes in the night for the pleasure of snuffing their pink young lives; and such had happened to her own infant, and so she had wandered, and finally discovered the creature’s cave, and there been put to death herself: and there they had the whole vile history, and Arthur certainly was indignant, and having no room for both his indignation and his foresight, forgot Merlin’s warning entirely. He had his sword back in hand, and was readily prepared to spit any number of sorcerers, simultaneously; and Merlin, swallowing, remembered this was to be his life, friendless indeed once Gaius had completed the usual requisites of age, and gone away from him. He had not particularly planned to befriend Arthur, on account of the deficits which he had already listed, at some length; but sometimes he thought they would get used to one another, and have a thing that was like companionship, though surely neither would call it by that affectionate name. He had thought he could have Gwen, who was lovely indeed; and perhaps even Morgana: but he would have to lie, he would have to build another Merlin, who was more palatable, who was only silly Merlin; and they would love him only as that, and never as he knew himself.

The trees breathed softly down upon them, and the moon in silent accord lit their plodding way; and the wild things went with wicked hearts to other glades, to commit their nameless deeds.

They were led what seemed to Merlin a long distance, and then the woman stopped before a mighty rock, the largest Merlin had ever seen, and which stuck out on the landscape as his own poor ears stuck out on his otherwise proportionate head, and turning back to him said, “This is her cave. You must enter, and find my child.”

“Um,” Arthur said, looking round the whole smooth thing, which had no break in it. “I’m afraid...it appears there’s no opening.”

“That is why I have brought you,” she said, and turned the burning eyes back on Merlin alone.

“What is Merlin going to do?” Arthur asked with an offensive amount of incredulousness, but as the only argument which should take it out of his voice was, “Come and see, you insufferable sod”, Merlin only stood there smiling in the stupid way he had when he needed to appear innocuous, and shrugging his shoulders, said, “I have a knife from supper!”
“Well, then, have at it, Merlin. You just go on and chip your way inside, whilst I sort out how to do something useful.” And saying this, like an ass, Arthur went round the boulder, as if he thought from another angle he might notice something that was like an entrance, or could be fashioned into one, with enough manpower which was not applied by Merlin. So while he did this Merlin, after he had gone out of sight, laid his hands on the stone, and closing his eyes, sent out all his senses, to every thin flaw and breach, and poured himself, shuddering, into them; and under his hands the stone began to quicken, and burn off as under a blacksmith’s touch. He felt his heart troubling itself, and the breath hot in his throat, and then, suddenly, from behind the face of the stone, there rose up such a feeling as he had never experienced: and it went shrieking through all the bones of him, and he fell backward with a cry, landing thump on the grass, where for a moment he had to nurse the sickness in his raging belly.

Arthur ducked out from behind the rock, frazzled; he looked down at Merlin on the ground, and at the opening before him. “What the hell have you done?”

“There was...I found a lever. On the stone. I pressed it.” He was trying to breathe. He felt as if he were a very small child, and the cave his limitless bed, with the monsters teeming beneath it. There was an insubstantial dread, indefinable, and it gnawed out his heaving gut, and his burning throat, and Arthur, seeing something in his eyes, or perhaps even feeling in a rare bout of sensitivity Merlin’s flinching discomfort, looked once more to the cave, and down at his servant, and then kneeling beside him, put out a tentative hand.

“Are you all right?”

“I don’t think we should go in there,” Merlin gasped.

But the woman had passed on before them, into the cold depths of it. And Arthur, after a moment, his hand limp on Merlin’s shoulder, as if after putting it there he had quite forgotten what ought to be done with it, pursed his lips and, almost gently, patted the trembling arm underneath him, and stood.

“Wait here,” Arthur said, and went ahead into the cave.

But of course he couldn’t, and had not even thought about it.

Arthur did not know what he had expected. It was a cave, and had all the usual fixtures of a cave; certainly he must have expected that.

But he had not foreseen the poor tiny bodies, preserved as if in stone. They had not decayed, not withered, not gone to bits from the elements, the animals, all the myriad cruelties of slow-decaying Time. They were flawless; they were hundreds.

He stood there in the opening to the cave with Merlin warm behind him, and the depths cold before him, and saw all the perfect limbs of them, like marble, and all the unclenching fists, in hot pink flower, as if the blood had newly risen. He felt Merlin’s hand touch his shoulder, and fist there, and he leant, very subtly, into it, so that he was not alone, and helpless: so there was some other human heart, beating the fresh blood into its living organisms.

Merlin was silent, for once. They watched the small creatures, as if they expected there to be a collective breath, and a collective rising, and for the cave to suddenly, at once, go from tomb to
nursery. Arthur was briefly sick, and swallowed it. He heard the woman move, weeping, into the far regions of this mausoleum, touching the little hands, and passing, inconsequential, through them.

He allowed them both to gape for a little longer, and then gathered his princely resolve, and keeping Merlin behind him, stepped softly onward, his sword before him.

The woman had stopped crying. It was rather abrupt, as if she had let off the weeping by turning a spout within her, and now had stopped it up again. When they found her she was standing, not beside any dead infant, and looking tenderly upon it; but beside a woman who had gone into death as if it were merely a sound slumber, and was now sitting in a chair with the hair down over her knees, and her pale face transfixed in the midst of it.

“You have a soft heart, Arthur Pendragon,” the woman said, touching the long foaming hair, which Arthur saw now was the same shade as her own, and covered the same cheekbones as her own. “It will make you a weak king. Do you know,” she said, and suddenly her hand which had passed so easily through the small bodies, sank into this one as if into something gelatinous, down into the still chest, and the unbeating heart, “that your mother brought you here, to me, soon as she had birthed you?” And the voice came now from the lips of the woman in the chair, and the stare looked out from the serene green eyes as they came, brilliantly, alive beneath a fine black brow.

“Get back, Arthur!” Merlin yelled, like an idiot, and was picked up unceremoniously by the woman’s magic, and slammed into the nearest wall.

And then it was only the two of them, both breathing hard, the woman with unaccustomed labour, and the fresh excitement of life, hot in her veins; and Arthur with the mention of his mother, whom he had never met, and yet loved.

He put himself in front of Merlin’s crumpled body.

“Thank you for bringing me back here. Igraine, I think, was wrong to try and give you to me.”

“What are you talking about?” he said in what was supposed to be a roar, and was only a whisper, because it had failed in his throat, and then he had got to force it past his tongue, unwillingly.

She smiled at him, and it was not an unfriendly smile, but a commiserating one, as if there was something about him, tall, handsome, blonde, which was miserable and pathetic.

“I had a boy like you once, and he betrayed me, and sealed me in this cave to die. And then your mother brought you here, and I saw how beautiful you were, just as my son was; I wouldn’t have killed you, just as I didn’t kill him. But I could only watch as she laid you here in the grass, at the foot of this cave, after seeking entrance, which I could not give her; she left you in the woods to die. It would have been a very small, ignoble death; I was sorry for it, but I was helpless. My soul was already cleaved from my body.” She looked at him steadily, and he did not lift the sword, but only went on holding it mechanically, as he had been taught to hold it; as if he had been taught nothing beyond it.

“She’s lying, Arthur,” Merlin said groggily from behind him. And here he paused, and sounded very small, “You know sorcerers do that. It’s all they do. She’s lying. Your mother loved you; she must have, since you wouldn’t have had time to be a prat yet.”

And the woman went on unblinking, as if Merlin had never spoken: “You may leave; I think your reign will be an interesting one. But Emrys I cannot allow to live.”
“Emrys? He’s called Merlin,” Arthur corrected her, and then a sudden wind swept the blade from his hand, and his feet from beneath him; and behind him Merlin let out a little cry, and was jerked roughly toward the seat in which she suddenly towered like a queen, leaving behind him the nails which he tried to dig into the stone.

The sword had spun out of Arthur’s reach. And there was some invisible hand, holding him mightily; it did not let up as Merlin was being dragged writhing over the floor, but in fact tightened, as if it could feel in him the sudden panicked surge, and all the stretching of his battle instincts, crying his feats to hand.

Merlin was looking at him in a queer sort of way. It was almost watery, as if he should have liked to cry; but there was a strange significance to it, which Arthur could not fathom: he was not afraid. His face had a look of resignation. Arthur had seen it on men who had either to fall on the blade before them, or backward into the pike at their spine, and no other choice; and seeing it now, realised Merlin was going to die, and, secondly, that he would be sorry for it.

He stretched out his arm for the sword. He did not know how he managed it. There was still the same invisible hand, holding him fast; he felt as if he were to be split, right down the seams of him: his arm took up the cry, and wailed dismally in its socket, and in his fingers there was all the maddening numbness of a serious wound. But he stretched out the arm, and stretched it out, and looked the sword straight in the blade, into the reflection of himself, as if willing a sudden autonomy into the weapon; and, miraculously, it quivered, or appeared to do so. He had the fuzzy incoherence of battle, when sweat has come like an old frost to blind the young eye; but he had seen it move, and redoubled his efforts. He made all his fingers long as he could reach them, and tried to roll whilst in the grip of this unseeable hold; but there was a white flash along his side, and the flesh bubbled in terrible concert, and he was fixed, fast; but then he looked from the sword to Merlin, who was now in the flesh and blood hands of the woman, looking back at him.

There seemed to be something in Merlin’s face which said it was all right for Arthur to give up. There was a strange tenderness which Arthur had never associated with his manservant, and certainly not with his manservant’s feelings toward himself.

“And Arthur, it’s ok,” Merlin said, and seemed to believe it himself.

And Arthur, taking hold of the sword, his hand boiling where it touched, and the heart loud within him, every wound he had ever taken concentrated now, in every square inch of him, and his head booming like a beleaguered shore, taking the brunt of earth’s unearthly squall, came up off the floor, and onto his knees.

The blade went up past Merlin, and pierced her newly blooded heart. Arthur, still on his knees, trembling, turned it sharply, and held on stubbornly whilst each new wave struck him a terrible blow; he was sick, violently: but he did not let go the sword, and in fact pressed forward, with all his weight behind it, till he heard the tip score her very spine.

She burst out in a terrible screaming; he saw Merlin twist, once, in her grip, unnaturally; and he felt through all the upheaval of his body a single point of terror, more pressing than all the rest.

And then the world collapsed in on itself, and in a miffed protest, suddenly blew out once more: and he was blasted at least the height of a man, and triple the length; and coming down in a shower of stone and the bright pinpoints of light which continued to rack his eyes long after the world had settled back into itself, he saw Merlin land beside him with the terrible rag dolling of limbs typical of a man thrown fatally from his horse.

He tried to lift himself on an elbow, to seek out a pulse; but there was another tremendous blow to
the shivering cavern, and all he could think to do was to pull Merlin by the sleeve toward him, and wrap himself round the whole limp mess of him, whilst the roof came down.

It ought to have killed him; there was an entire slab of it which plunged straight away for his head--and was suddenly arrested, perhaps a foot from his neck, and there hung, raining the soft bits of it down the neck of his tunic. There was a calm blue light round it, and a sensation within him that he certainly had never known, and could hardly recognise as comforting: Arthur knew only that he was safe, by some inexplicable miracle, and there was aside from that a pleasant melting sort of awareness, which people who are very loved know in the embrace of someone dear. He did not know it; princes are not held. But he felt that the light meant him no harm, but had only an immense goodwill for him.

He looked down to see Merlin awake underneath him, and smiling blearily.

The slab smoothly turning rolled to one side, and smashed benignly, where it would not harm him.

And then Merlin, his eyes darting back in his head, went absolutely still once more.

So it was that Arthur had to carry him, swaying, over one shoulder from the cave and into the new day.

The woods had come on fantastically in the evening, and now in full glory burst out madly, trilling. The heather was now fully awake, and the grass in youthful blaze burst like a warm fruit underfoot, sending up its aromatic death.

He could see, just over the hill ahead, the battlements of Camelot, orange in the fresh sun. And with a sigh he said to the slack body over his shoulder, “You are entirely useless, aren’t you?” and started off home through the amiable trees, which were now only a lot of foliage under the remorseless sun, who would allow none of that midnight capering.
Like Simple Noble Natures

Chapter Notes

This is set between 'The Mark of Nimueh' and 'The Poisoned Chalice.' I took the riddles from a site called medievalists.net. The title is a line from Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King', one of my favourite pieces of Arthurian literature. I hope you enjoy!

Deep in the gloaming of May, where the sunlight ran wild, and temperatures were consistently agreeable, Arthur was darting starkers about his chambers with his sword in hand; and on hearing the door open, he called out, “Merlin, there’s a rat” and dashed on after his prey, both swords swinging copiously.

“And you’re going to stab it?” Merlin asked, helping himself to some of the dinner he had earlier laid, and to a look at the parchments Arthur had left beside its remains, which were probably confidential matters of Grave Political Importance; but as they had been left out openly, beside the dishes he was expected to clear, it seemed to Merlin as good as an invitation. And if it were not an invitation, then Arthur ought to be more circumspect about it, and hide them where Merlin would have to snoop for them, as he had done with the poetry Arthur had written last week in a storm of poorly-constructed passion for some visiting princess.

“I’m going to do anything I can to it once I catch it; do you know how much destruction rats cause?”

Merlin had finished with the leftover dinner, and now was helping himself to Arthur’s chair. He watched the proceedings with grave interest, but kept himself studiously from a peek at Arthur’s more prominent features, since that seemed to him, even through the general accident of nakedness, which does not discriminate in how it charms the eye, something which Arthur might interpret as provocation: or worse still, a compliment. It was only that he had never seen a naked man going full tilt round his room, brandishing a sharp object within the vicinity of his unprotected bits; and moreover, in response to such a very small affront, since the rat could hardly have meant anything personal by his occupation.

“Merlin, get off your useless, lazy backside and help me!”

“Right away, Sire!” Merlin replied with enough eagerness to convey that he certainly meant to do it straight away, and not after procrastinating long enough for Arthur to find it himself. He did not see why he should have to kill other people’s rats, when there had been no one to slay his own rats, and he had got to simply roll up his sleeves, like a proper homeowner, and do it himself. Moreover, he was somewhat sorry for the rat, who certainly couldn’t have expected such an end to his day, much less his life; it was not very heroic.

There was a voice at the door, which Merlin had forgotten to close. He looked round to see Gwen poke her head into the room, and freeze. They were all of them very still; certainly Arthur, who had heard her say into the chamber, “Merlin!” in her high sweet voice, and solidified where he stood. There was a sort of tottering blush, which struck first Gwen, and then collapsed into Merlin, and finally on to Arthur, who turned an impossible red, and not only where it was maidenly to do so. Merlin was suddenly suicidal, and thought he might laugh. It was his personal suspicion that Arthur’s liaisons with Camelot’s ladies were not nearly so detailed as Arthur insisted them to be,
and he thought looking at Arthur now, that probably he was right, as usual where Arthur was concerned; it was bitter to admit, but Arthur had nothing particularly to be ashamed of at the moment, aside from his personality.

“I’m so sorry!” Gwen stammered, launching herself backward, as if she had come from a catapult. “The door was open--I did knock. I was only--I needed to ask Merlin something. Sire. Your Highness.”

“Merlin!” Arthur bellowed, dropping his sword, and yanking all the skins from his bed, as if Gwen instead of retreating in her poor undignified way had stayed on impertinently, to finish her measuring look. “You idiot! Shut the door, you bumbling, stupid, inept bumpkin!” This was not very motivating, and so Merlin took a moment to consider it, whilst blinking in the usual glassy way he had developed, when Arthur wanted him to do an unpleasant thing, and he did not. “Now, Merlin!”

“Sorry,” Gwen fretted once more, and there was a nearly audible wringing of hands, and then the frightened patter of her feet. It could not have been very flattering, to send a lady at that speed in the opposite direction of one’s bits.

Arthur was staring at him in a thunderous sort of way, but would not relinquish his grip on the skins to retrieve his sword. It was therefore reasonable for Merlin to take his time with the door, since he could not be stabbed without the sword, and Arthur could not recover it without alarming the help.

“Well, Sire, I think there’s a lesson here for all of us,” he said from the comfort of the doorway. “Probably you should actually put on the outfit I laid out for you before running about scaring the ladies.” And so saying, he ducked, as Arthur’s arm winged round, having collected a boot with alarming speed, and dashed it with enough strength against the wall to split a scalp, and certainly to hinder an escape.

Merlin had legs like a new foal, and had to gather them up hastily whilst Arthur in a rage forgot his chastity, and came pelting pink as his birthing day across the room, intent on a grievous act; and then the modesty was all for nothing, as he came blustering out into the hall after Merlin, where a passing knight in a series of blinks tried to reconcile the image of his master on the tourney field with the image of his master in the buff.

In the end Merlin was captured, and then he had to awkwardly stumble about before Arthur, who had twisted his arm behind his back, and held it at an angle which preserved enough distance between them to ensure that neither of them became overly acquainted with the other. “Ow ow ow ow ow,” he said, with exaggerated feeling, because Arthur, despite the sketches which Merlin nightly committed to his journal, was not entirely a monster; but he was not entirely dim either, and twitched Merlin’s arm, to show how much farther he could force it before such a howl was really justified.

And then Arthur, who must have seen the sketches, and modelled himself after them, with vicious glee gave the remains of his supper such a bash as to powder them, finely; and then he set about with great artistry, dusting the freshly-washed floor with them.

“And you’ll find every last crumb,” he said, with the same quality of tone which he used to offer a duel he meant to finish in triumph, or in death.
There were evening meetings with the Council, and a sequestered deliberation with his father; there was a squire to scold, for having muffed the edging of his favourite sword; and there was dessert to nick from the kitchens, since Merlin had forgotten to bring it to him, or eaten it himself, as Arthur strongly suspected.

When he had returned to rooms which were dubiously polished, for the amount of time Merlin had been at them, Arthur decided that he was not yet done being upset; neither was he done taking it out on Merlin. But when he arrived at a brisk march to Gaius’ rooms, he heard the sound of a great suffering beyond the door, and pulling his knife (he had left his sword in the magnificently lustrous bedchamber), burst through into the workshop.

Gaius was pottering about his tables in a perfect calm; he did not look up at Arthur’s dramatic arrival. He went on with his baffling machinations, dropping this bit of weed into that vial, and that sort of liquid into this jar. He leapt at the touch on his shoulder, and looked round with his hand to his chest.

“What the hell is that?” Arthur shouted into his uncomprehending face, and whilst they shared an alarmed stare, Gaius reached up to pop out the bits of wax which he had wedged into his ears. “What, Sire?”

“I said, what is that?”

“Oh, it’s Merlin!”

“Is he dying?”

“No, no; he is practising.”

Arthur was only now putting away the knife, and paused in the act of disarming. “Practising what? Dying?”

“It’s a rote, Sire.”

“A rote should never sound like that,” Arthur said, and taking the stairs to Merlin’s room two at a time, he burst onto the scene of the crime to find Merlin and victim in a fatal grappling, with the rote losing badly. “Merlin, Merlin!” he shouted, till his voice had achieved the rather miraculous accomplishment of conquering the rote, and now in deference to his superior frequency, it died, a feeble wheezing expiration. “What on earth are you doing?”

“I’m playing,” Merlin said, wielding the bow as if he meant to joust with it. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought you were being tortured. I was coming to see if they needed my help.”

“Well, no one does. Thanks anyway.” And he brought the bow, howling, to the strings once more.

Arthur in a helpless rush of empathy snatched it from Merlin’s calamitous hands, and pushing him back by the forehead, till he was no longer close enough to perpetuate any violence, sat down on a stool facing Merlin, with the rote on his knees. He placed his calloused fingers on the board. He cleared his throat. He was stricken, abruptly, by a terrible self-consciousness, where the sudden keen interest of Merlin’s eyes struck him a stinging blow, and there stayed, hotly, in all his tingling extremities. He felt, sickly, as if he were letting something naked into all the callous world: but there was nothing for it. Merlin was staring at him, expectantly; and Uther had taught him, through many a blow, that one did not disappoint expectations.
Into the room there crept a mournful whisper, shyly peaking; and the wind through the soft country hills rose in disconsolate recognition. And the two sang, sweetly, sadly, together, whilst the violets in a curious association leant straining against the tower base, and the boar in snuffling rhythm lifted up his shining tusks. Arthur did not know where he drew it from, but only played till something had lifted from his chest, forgetting that he was confessing, and shutting his eyes. He felt the instrument in blind obedience yield its private griefs, and there was something warm in his throat, which he would later have to ignore, but could now, momentarily, feel out as if he were any other human, and subject to their little myriad heartaches.

The strings went on, sobbing. He felt them vibrate, minutely, under the pads of his fingers, where the sword handles had dulled them, and the bow strings cut them. He felt where he was not supposed to feel anything the breeze in concerted response, speaking among its arboreal public.

And then, very gently, he let it die away.

He opened his eyes.

Merlin was staring at him. He was smiling. Not in polite acknowledgement—but as if Arthur had done something worthy. He realised that Merlin had an almost handsome smile, if you liked that sort of thing, and could overlook his ears, which were not entirely bad, and sometimes, at the right angle, almost charming, if one were tasteless. He did not mean to, but smiled back, with the same admiration in it, and he could not say why, as there was hardly anything impressive in sitting on one’s backside, beaming foolishly. He cleared his throat again, and looked down at the fingerboard, rather as if it would tell him where he had got the pleasant feeling in his stomach, and what ought to be done with it.

“That was brilliant, Arthur! Where did you learn that?”

“From a minstrel, when I was eight.”

“Uther let you take music lessons? I can’t believe it! Oh—it improves dexterity, yeah? In your fingers?”

“My father didn’t let me; I did it in secret. He would have never approved; music is for troubadours and ladies, not princes. I used to…” And here he trailed off, suddenly aware that he was speaking as if he and Merlin were friends, as if Merlin wanted to know any of this, as if he cared to spill it, to a manservant, and a rubbish one, at that.

But there was an awareness between them, almost tangible, and now he felt the terrible cognisance of his loneliness, by its sudden absence. And he knew he would have to feel it again, when he left the room, and the smile, and went alone into his barren chambers, where there was an inadequate fire, and the stilted bed linens, uninhabited

He had been lonely, he realised, a very long while, because he had not had anything like this smile since perhaps the time of his mother, who must have looked at him this way, because he could not bear the idea of anything else. He had taken an artist’s liberties with her, and built her into an idol, with flawless marble neck, and flawless loving heart. And now looking at his manservant, who was not his friend, but smiled as if he had forgot it, Arthur remembered why he had constructed her in the first place, because he was not certain how else to be loved, if he could not fabricate it.

“I used to sneak it, wherever I could, after my training was done. I hid it under my bed, and put bits of rag all round the door, to try and dampen the sound.” He went on with a sort of compulsion, feeling as if he had been tricked, somehow; but settling into it, feeling the pleasantness of it, and the warm transference of Merlin’s smile to his belly.
“It’s really, really great. Could you teach me how to do it?”

Arthur hesitated. He was concerned for the rote, which had never done anything to anyone. But the rote was an excuse to stay, and so after a brief consultation with his conscience, and an even briefer rejection of his conscience, Arthur handed it over.

Merlin was pants at it.

But Arthur found that in arranging Merlin’s fingers on the board, and draping his hand round the bow, and coaxing him, almost patiently, through the first note, and then the ringing second, that the rote protested less, and the pleasure went redly into Merlin’s cheeks, and up his ears. They were sawing out an almost competent scale when the Great Bell startled the complacent midnight, which had crept on quite without their notice.

They blinked at one another a bit. Arthur cleared his throat again, and looked down at his hands, which were suddenly like great blocks of wood. For a moment he did not speak; there was a dreadful sentimentality in him which he thought might have designs on Merlin, and tell him something awful. He said, at last, “Right. Well, don’t do anything like that ever again.”

“I won’t; I’m a quick learner. I think I’ve got it now.”

“I’m sure you haven’t,” Arthur said, crisply, but paused before he left, and gave Merlin an almost friendly punch to the shoulder.

Next morning Arthur was beastly, and made him polish all his armour twice, and brush his horse till she was reflective, and lug every last bit of gear back and forth from the armoury to the training fields, even for the men who had squires; and then at supper he had a fit over the cream custard tart which Merlin had eyed all its wobbly journey up the stairs, and had to take away, since Arthur was too precious for it. But as it was the most splendid thing he had put in his mouth for a very long while, Merlin did not mind that bit, and in future would have minded it still less if Arthur were similarly choosy about his poached pears.

After that he hauled in the bathwater, and it was too cold, though Merlin had heated it soon as Arthur went rooting round in one of his cupboards. Then he had Arthur’s dirty clothes thrown on him, one stinking piece at a time, the muddiest pieces landing with a rude slap to the mouth. “Are you just going to stand there, Merlin?” Arthur snapped.

“Sure, right, I’ll just move round then, let you practise on a moving target, shall I?”

“I meant put down those clothes and scrub my back.”

“I am not doing that.”

“Tell me, Merlin, what exactly is it you think a manservant is for, hmm? I’ll give you a hint: it’s not to plague their master, and ponce round accepting flowers from all the maids without a care in the world.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” Arthur said with a sharpness Merlin felt was a bit unfair, since he was the one being the arse, and Merlin was only minding his own poor business, and trying to get on as best he could, under the (singularly dirty) thumb of a despot. He submerged with a wounded air, and came up to
shake his hair so that it flew dog-like in the tepid evening, soaking Merlin. The whole affair was rather like scrubbing up a dog, as Merlin was generally just as wet upon finishing as Arthur himself, and his hair smelt of the same herbs; Arthur had even ducked him and let Merlin come spluttering to the surface himself, frantically waving about his arms as if the tub were a depthless lake, whilst Arthur roared like a perfect tit, and splashed him.

Then His Royal Highness had to be dressed like a child, and fed his dessert (he was not burped; even royalty has some limitations on their helplessness in the face of a man poor enough to do it for them); the latter was a generally belligerent undertaking, and on a creative evening generated at least three new words which could not be repeated in polite company, and even amongst crude ought to have been fully considered. Arthur dismissed him by yelling something like, “Piss off!” or when he was feeling generous, “Get out, Merlin,” which was so comparatively genteel Merlin felt they were practically in love, and took out the snake which he had put in Arthur’s boot.

Tonight it was “Get out,” and after an amount of time which could be comfortably accepted as incidental by all parties, Arthur came to Gaius’ rooms as if he had only been strolling past after an audience with the king, and heckled Merlin whilst he was finishing his own cold supper, and then followed him up to his room, where the rote was fished out once more. He taught Merlin a proper little tune this time, and it went smoothly down the steps to the chamber below, and spelled Gaius’ foot to lively accompaniment as he consulted a parchment.

They were discussing bowing techniques when the Bell with clear and faithful tune sang its closing appeal.

“Right,” Arthur said, and slapped him on the back. “That was occasionally not entirely traumatic. Marginally preferable to putting a dagger in my ear. I certainly wouldn’t do it again, however.”

But back he came the next evening, with a tart which he had judged wretched if the recipient were his own exalted Self; but tolerable enough for someone like Merlin.

Spring was getting on, and in its infirmity pondering whether it ought to let in the summer, and take its graceful retirement; in the mornings it was still sounding out the flowers for their opinion on the matter, and nudging round the hills who in a soft turning ruffled their melodic grasses, and submitted. The beasts were not entirely reconciled to it, but they snuffed about in a good enough humour: and the humans in rare exultation loosed their fetid woolens, and took naked to the more mild pools, with the least concentration of livestock piss.

There were then two roads into Camelot, from the north, and the south; and now a third was being constructed on the eastern border, and it was this Arthur rode out to oversee next morning, with Merlin in tow for no reason Merlin could fathom other than he had only that morning complained about what an awful dull excursion it must be, to chaperon the deforestation of Camelot’s denser bits. He was now hanging valiantly onto the saddle horn, and trying quietly to soothe the horse with a suggestion of magic here and there: but the horse wasn’t having it, and went on hating him passionately. It swung round whilst Arthur was not looking, and attempted a piece from his boot, the rather vital one, which contained his toes.

Arthur naturally was sitting his own steed in easy familiarity, with a soft hand, and limited application of his spurs. The wind in picturesque harmony stirred up his shining hair, and sent it magnificently across his brow, so that the sun caught it, and it was as a crown, God-appointed.

Merlin, whose arse was sweating, thought, and not for the second time, how obnoxious it was that
Arthur’s personality had gotten Arthur’s face. Gaius had said not to give him spots, but Gaius didn’t have to wash his dirty underclothes.

There was a cool breeze, which in hemming consideration inclined first toward summer, and then back to its blustery roots, whipping up Arthur’s cloak, and lifting it like a standard across the sky, and in such flaming procession they went along the straggling lines of workers whilst they felled the murmuring trees. Merlin clucked to his horse, and tried to tempt him up beside Arthur, in case he might decide Arthur’s own lovely mare was a perfect model for all equine mannerisms. She was going about smoothly underneath him, bobbing her head whenever Arthur reached down to pat her beautifully arched neck, as if they were great mates, and generally seemed quite amorous about him; Merlin wondered if she were quite all right, so far as horses went.

Arthur was chattering about an upcoming tourney; he was easy in himself away from the citadel, with none of his men in worshipful expectation, and for the last mile only himself and Merlin and their two blowing steeds, volatile in the wind. It was getting on toward noon, and Merlin felt almost content, when his horse was too busy about his footing to devote himself to his plotting. The wind was cold down his neck, and went under his skin with the reptilian slipperiness of something from those cold loams over which the oldest trees brood, in deepest shadow. It stayed on under his neckerchief, till he was shuddering with it; and then it struck him that there had come the usual awakening to his bones, when his magic felt a devout kinship, and longed to come out. He clucked the horse up beside Arthur after all, and it was too startled by his sudden command of the situation to even shy. Arthur was in the middle of explaining his last tourney against Sir So-and-so, and how he had won a great triumph, etc. There was a colour like a boy’s in his cheeks. Merlin said, “Mm hmm,” and looked round to see who it was wanted to kill them now.

There was a tree, standing as an ordinary tree might have done; but this one exposed its extraordinariness by the sole distinguishing factor which brought Merlin’s eyes squarely round to it: that was to say, it was the only standing tree, with the rootless tracts all round it. The workers had gone right round it, and sheared off its neighbouring brethren with uniform nonchalance. There was nothing else particularly standout. It had all the requisite number of burls, of leaves, of various woody doohickeys. It sounded in the carping wind, now with youthful zip, now with elderly moan, the same as any other tree.

Arthur stopped his mare beside it, and with a confused squint, swung round to look at him. “Why have they gone round it? It’s going to be standing right in the middle of the road.”

Merlin’s magic stretched itself. It went singing toward the tree, and felt something rush singing out to meet it. He reined in the horse as he began to fidget, and the horse felt in a primal way his sudden mastery, and went quiet. Arthur’s mare was looking at him similarly; and the two animals brought their heads together with a consulting air, switching nervously their steaming hides.

“Arthur,” he said, in a cautioning tone, and touched the armoured forearm.

“What is it Merlin?”

“It’s a fairy tree. That’s why they’ve gone round it. It’d bring bad luck on any who cut it down.”

And now Arthur, with a ridiculing face, said, “That’s superstitious rubbish. Don’t be a child, Merlin.”

And catching up an axe from one of the nearby carts, he dismounted; and letting the reins of his mare drop into the grass with the confidence of a man secure in his horsemanship, he did the
honour himself, innumerable fell strokes. It gave one shuddering death throe, and whistling down it came, in a sudden hiss of alarmed foliole, and sweetly dying limb.

Arthur was having supper alone when the voice came to him. He was in the act of deciding to give Merlin his tart, since he had slavered over it anyway whilst laying out the dishes, and probably ruined it.

The window was open, and that was how the voice came to him, as he was practising how to most rudely present his gift; it was not the silvery tune of wrecked sailors, torn upon the rocks to which the Sirens sang them with terrible efficiency. In fact, it sounded a bit like Merlin, if Merlin had got a cold, or a bad night in the tavern.

He stuck his head out the window, frowning.

He did not feel the desire to go out to meet it forcibly animate him; there was only his own natural craving, and then his legs took him smoothly to the door, and down the stairs, and across the courtyard he went, toward the distant field, where he knew to go, instinctively.

Merlin was crossing the courtyard at the same moment. He had had a lovely chat with Gwen, and was feeling the glow of it; it was almost within him to forget that his friends were only temporary, not in the way of everything mortal, which must sooner or later give itself back to the permanent clays of earth undying; but in the way of the deeply forgettable, who are there because we need them; and afterward of no consequence. He was hit by a cold burst of the evening breeze, and it sobered him. He was standing now within the courtyard where his brethren had died, and would go on dying; and where Arthur, and Gwen, and all the kindly kitchen staff would watch him burn, and be mad with the triumph of it.

The moon had laid down a proper white tapestry, perfectly pure, and it broke the monotony of the dark cobblestones where the blood of the myriad dying had painted it. He looked at it for a long moment. There was something hot, and quite hard, in his throat. He did not want to swallow it, but only went on feeling it for a moment, to remind himself. There was a terrible loneliness in him. He was often able to suppress it, when it was easy enough to be Merlin the serving boy; but here he could only be Merlin the sorcerer, where his fellow diviners had met their screaming deaths.

He was feeling quite sorry for himself, and thinking over whether he ought to have a bit of a cry, since he was not Arthur, and did not have any reputation to protect, when a shadow passed him on the left side, just at the corner of his eye. It went on silently, with a head full of blonde hair.

“Arthur?” he called out, just confused enough to forget his depression.

But Arthur went on walking with dreamlike persistence.

Merlin followed.

He did not call out again, but went on just as quietly behind Arthur, who was moving in a queer puppet-like way, and made not a sound. The latter was alarming enough; but in addition to it Merlin’s magic was sending up such a howl that he felt in his teeth.

They parted the soft grasses for a very long while, till they were at the edge of the wood; and then
from its fringes stepped a strange man, dark-haired, blue-eyed, magnificent with an otherworldly beauty. He was dressed all in fine purple, and hemmed in gold; and he was holding out his hand for Arthur to take it.

“Arthur. Arthur!” Merlin shouted, and watched a long ripple go through Arthur’s back, as if some part of him had heard it, and shrugged it off. “You can’t have him,” he said to the man, and the magic came in its usual warm rush to simmer his humming limbs.

The man was unmoved. He went on holding out his hand, waiting.

“No!” Merlin hissed, and let his power go bursting free of him, unreined.

But Arthur had already taken the elegant white fingers in his own, and without a sound they vanished absolutely into the dark woods.

“Arthur’s cut down a fairy tree. And now he’s gone,” Merlin panted as he burst through the doors of Gaius’ room.

“What do you mean? Slow down, boy.”

“Arthur’s cut down a fairy tree. He did it today, while we were overseeing the road. I told him not to, but he never listens to me. He cut it down, and just now, there was some man in the woods, he was--purple! And I’ve never seen anyone so good-looking.”

“Purple?” Gaius asked with a contemplative lift of his eyebrows.

“Dressed in purple,” Merlin elaborated, still trying to get an adequate amount of oxygen back into him. He had run all the way from the meadow, and now wanted to die. “Arthur was clearly enchanted. He just walked right up to him, and took his hand, and they vanished. I tried to stop him, Gaius.”

“Oh, dear. That sounds like the Sidhe indeed to me.”

It was at this moment there was a light knock at the door, and a pause which could only marginally be considered respectable. Into the room came Morgana, wearily ruffled. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Gaius. I’m here for my sleeping draught.” She looked at their faces. She gathered her brows with an unladylike wrinkle, and said, frowning, “What’s wrong?”

“Arthur’s an idiot,” Merlin blurted out.

“That’s not the problem, that’s simply a fact which contributes to whatever the problem is. What’s he done now?”

Gaius suffered a moment of clear reluctance, which his face did not bother to conceal; but as there was hardly any turning back now, he said, sighing very heavily, “I’m afraid Arthur seems to have fallen prey to the Sidhe. Merlin saw him lured into the woods, and taken.”

“What?”

“Arthur and I went out to oversee the road being built on the eastern border today, and there was a tree in the middle of it the workers had left. I told him to let it alone, because it was a fairy tree, but no, no one listens to me, so he just chopped it right down. And now here we are.”
Morgana took this entirely in stride, as if she really had expected nothing else from Arthur. “So what do we do about it?”

“We?” Merlin asked.

“My lady, it would be very dangerous for you to—” Gaius tried to say, and was not meant to finish; Morgana elevated her chin with an inhuman loftiness, and looked down at them both, from her vantage point of several inches below.

“I was asking for a solution, not permission. Now, Merlin, where did you see him disappear?”

“Er...it was just at the edge of the woods, straight on from the citadel, across the meadow? There was a man waiting for him. Arthur just went straight away to him, and took his hand, and poof, they were gone. I didn’t see where. They just sort of went up...into thin air.”

“Yes, the Sidhe are known to do that from time to time. It is said that they take a chosen human from time to time into their own realm, from whence they never return.”

“How do we find them?” Morgana asked, and Merlin now relaxed onto the nearest stool; she had the same command in her voice as Arthur shouting a contingent of knights to order, and was hardly less dominating.

“I’m afraid there isn’t a particular science to it. At twilight, wherever a barrow mound can be found, you might encounter one, if they are inclined to show themselves. Generally they are not, unless you have displeased them.”

“So we just wander round the woods hoping to bump into one eventually, and ask it to give Arthur back to us?” Merlin asked.

“We’d need to wait till tomorrow, and by then I suppose they’d be more than happy to do so,” Morgana interjected.

“They won’t simply give up a prince of Camelot,” Gaius warned. “The Sidhe are tricky, and the two of you would be wise not to treat this as a lark. Arthur is in danger, and so are the two of you if you intend to muddle about in the business of fairies.”

“What else are we supposed to do? Leave him there?” Merlin was not entirely opposed to the idea, but probably he would miss Arthur occasionally, in the habitual sort of way one does when they have gone out of a comfortable routine; and Uther would simply be miserable, and certainly take a looser hand with his kingly justice, since an execution is always at least mildly cheering to its audience, by the simple demonstration that your day may be rubbish: but hardly so much as that.

“It’s certainly no less than he deserves. Look at you; ready to brave anything for Arthur. He doesn’t deserve you, Merlin.”

Merlin straightened a little, and felt the warm pleasure of her compliment, and several other maidenly assets, come into his cheeks. “Thanks!”

“You must have something to barter with the Sidhe,” Gaius said, and looked at Merlin in a significant way. “It’s entirely too dangerous, Merlin.”

Merlin, who only an hour ago had expected by this time to be warm in his bed, dreaming of a holiday, and hearing the rote with sweet locution following him down into his untroubled slumbers, now rubbed the bridge of his nose with a jaded resignation. He wondered if it would not have been easier to stay on in Ealdor, to be caught out at his tricks, and tidily burnt. Certainly it
was tempting at the moment, and he would not have had to air out any sweaty feast coats, or scrub the royal back. Now he would have to go and live among a lot of wicked fairies who had stolen a prince, and certainly would not refrain from eating a serving boy. He would never see Gwen again, or watch the morning come shyly to the battlements of soaring Camelot, which had all started to become rather dear to him. And simply because Arthur was stupid, and could not do as he was told, and a dragon had told Merlin he was in charge of it all, and had got to bear it for the sake of his Destiny, which he did not want, and had not even asked for.

He was properly pitiful whilst Morgana went on asking questions about the Sidhe; and then he said, breaking into the middle of it all, “It doesn’t matter. We’ll get him back. I’ll get him back. You don’t have to worry, Gaius.”

“Then I’ll see you at twilight tomorrow, Merlin. In the meadow, by the hawthorne tree,” Morgana said in a way which was more like an order than a simple contribution to the conversation, and swept out of the room.

They were three in the peaceful dusk, if one did not count all the weapons which Morgana had smuggled out under her cloak, including a full set of Armour, which she put on now beneath the tree, without much regard for Merlin’s delicate sensibilities, which were not used to watching a lady disrobe. Not that they were.

Gwen was standing with the bag into which she had put their provisions. She smiled sunnily when she saw him, and put the loose hair back behind her ears. “Hi! I wanted to come. To help. Arthur, that is. Oh! It’s not because I saw his--I mean that isn’t why I’m here. I wasn’t--” She turned a shade of red which had not yet been invented.

“Of course not, Gwen,” Morgana soothed her, buckling on one of her greaves with unladylike efficiency. “In fact, you have every reason to have run the other way, and if he isn’t profusely grateful for your help when we find him, I’ll box the ears right off him for you. Now.” She was done with her mail, and winked merrily in the expiring day. “Let’s see what we can find. Take us to the tree he cut down, Merlin. We might as well start there.”

So they set out abreast, Gwen in the middle, and Morgana with her hand on the sword which Merlin suspected she had taken from Arthur’s own rooms. The day was entirely cooperative, and held the soft glow of its vestiges at precisely the shade which was conducive to those poetic flights of fantasy which are so inspired by such a particular hour, in such a particular wood. It was a true twilight, gently apricot, neither blazing day, nor sombre night; and the creatures which flourish in it came peeping out to test it, watching them pass with alert ears.

Merlin could not see anything particular about the spot where the tree had been cut down. There was only the disturbed earth, and the lonely heap beside it, still green. He did not feel anything in it to rouse him. It was now only a tree, and the earth round it simply a bit of soil which had recently undergone an upheaval, mundane as any summer tilling. He even crouched next to it, to see if there was anything faint wafting up from it, and felt simply the breeze at his neck, and the evening squeezing round him, eager to be ushered in.

They went on a fair long distance, trying to spot anything in the darkening woods which seemed to them something a fairy might populate. There was not anyone walking about helpfully, looking supernatural. When the girls were absorbed in eating some of the cheese Gwen had brought, Merlin sent a faint wisp of his magic out into the faceless gloom, in search of some response; and finding nothing, he pulled it back again, frowning. Morgana cracked her neck. Gwen went on
smiling up at him, forgetting the bag in her hands.

“Well, where do we go now?” Merlin asked.

“What an awful lot of bother, and over Arthur, of all people,” Morgana replied, and set out into the trees, shaking her head.

Meanwhile Arthur had been put into the tower of a magnificent gold palace, in a room overlooking a garden which had all the usual bits and bobs of a royally inclined green thumb with the funds and the staff for a proper good showing, and then some. There was a fountain sat in the middle of it, shining marble, and ludicrously naked, in an unabashed way, without any modesty of fig leaf or strategic hand; but he did look at it, for lack of anything better to do, and wondered whether they had modelled it after anyone particularly, and what exactly they needed with mortal men, if there were among them those sorts of anatomies.

He had tried an escape first thing after the door had shut behind his jailer, and climbed all the way down the tower, and into the ivy at its base; it seemed a perfectly auspicious start. He ran to the far gate, a white wicker construction, rather precious, if you asked him, and was in the act of boosting himself over it when he found himself, inexplicably, back in the tower.

After that he had done it again, this time going round the fountain to the right, and heaving himself over the low stone wall which he found behind it, thick with roses that cut up his hands; then he was once more in the tower, and angry.

He did not have any weapons, but called out several challenges through the heavy door to his guard, asking was he a man, etc. The guard was not a man, or at least not insecure about it, and said only, “Make yourself presentable for the Queen.”

His rooms were well-appointed, with a large canopy bed like quicksand, sweetly perfumed, and a vanity fit for Morgana, with a variety of mirrors and combs, and even a bit of pomade which he dabbed out of its jar and sniffed, experimentally. It was all very lovely, for a girl, or Merlin, and insulted him. There was not any need for the lemony pomade, or the dish of rosewater, and his hair came out naturally, fresh from bed, polished as any maiden’s; so he was perfectly presentable, and the honour was certainly theirs. But at any rate he did not want to meet this Queen, but only to go home, to the comforting pottering about of Merlin’s ineptness.

There was a man sent round to collect him after some hours, not the one from the woods, but a fair-haired variety, equally beautiful, in a fine lime tunic from a material that Arthur could not name, and shimmered as if it were born of the moon.

Arthur attempted to fist fight him. It was not a successful fist fight, but he had made a good showing of it, and had to be subdued by three of them; so then he felt all right about the situation, and plotted to have the sword away from the one who ultimately ended the entire dust-up, soon as he could.

He was taken to a hall thrice the size of Camelot’s, with the daylight coming evenly down into it, a uniform gold which did not seem to change with any waning hours. The tapestries were brighter, and the meat more aromatic, and the people unearthly in movement, and skin clarity. He was a bit dirty from his scuffle, and felt momentarily regretful for the pomade sitting unused on the vanity.

There was a woman at the head of the table, green of eye, golden of hair; and the silks foamed
shining from her bare white shoulders, and over her fragile white hands. There was nearly a
translucence to her, and surrounded her with something like an aureole which faintly watered his
dumb unblinking eyes. When she spoke, he came up out of his skin; there was no other description
of it. Only that he left, momentarily, in a transcendence, and came back to his own lackluster
sinews, same as they always were, and now inadequate.

“Arthur Pendragon. Welcome.”

He cleared his throat. There was a hand on either shoulder, keeping him where he was, but there
was no reason to cringe about; he was still a prince as well as a prisoner. “My Lady.”

“Your Highness,” one of his captors corrected, jabbing him.

He pursed up his lips, prepared to be stubborn about it; but then she looked at him through a cold
gaze, and could not be addressed in any other way.

“Your Highness, I come to seek clemency from you, for whatever it is I have done, and to ask that
you return me to my home.”

“You have brought yourself here, Arthur Pendragon; I will not return you.”

“Er, not to be contrary, but I believe one of your men did kidnap me, and lock me in a tower.”

“Did you not take his hand willingly? Did you not go with him into our realms, without a protest?”

That didn’t seem entirely fair of her. “I was enchanted! Your minion tricked me, lured me away
from my home, and then swept me off before I had any idea what was happening! And now you
want to blame me for it?”

“My minion only read what was already in your heart, and used it against you. You should not have
been so weak.”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“It is not for you to know yet. But you will, Arthur Pendragon. And then you will have to choose
what sort of man you’re going to be.”

He was no longer dazzled by her, but only sick of her rubbish, and desperate for the whole lot of
them to piss off, posthaste. “Then let me go home, and choose it in my own time.”

“I’m afraid that is not to be. Once a year I take to my bed a mortal lover, until I have done with
him; that is the tithe mortal men must pay. This year it is to be you.”

It mightn’t have been so bad; she was very beautiful, after all, and there were unmentionable parts
of him that thrilled to the idea; and then the deeper bits which said to him that she was not quite to
their taste, and did not stir him in any romantic way, but only reminded him that in looking at her
he did not feel even what he experienced in looking upon, for instance, Merlin; and if that was not a
scathing indictment of her charms, certainly nothing was.

“I, er, thank you for the honour, but I’m afraid I must refuse.”

“And I’m afraid you have no choice in the matter. The one you desire is now lost to you, forever.
But it will not be a very long forever, Arthur Pendragon; you may content yourself with that.”

“What? What ‘one I desire’? What are you talking about?”
“Take him back to his rooms. I will call upon him when I choose,” she said, and seating herself primly, went back to her supper.

He was taken roughly by either arm, and turned protesting from the hall, and the lively motes of sun, and the Queen in regal repose, minding her elbows just as Arthur had been taught by his host of childhood tutors.

It was at this moment Merlin, Gwen and Morgana had found something of interest. It was only a little heap of moss and the wriggly bits which inhabited them, and to an undiscerning eye which was not on the lookout for any small thing which might save their idiot master, it would have passed unremarked. But upon spotting it, Merlin stopped; there was a little tingling recognition inside him that brought him closer to it. It was only a soft little hillock of unremarkable dirt, with the moss the only standout thing about it. Or anyway it seemed to be so, till he had knelt down beside it, and now felt the surging wildness in it, prickling at him, pushing out this way and that, from all the angles of it to meet him with thundery greeting where his magic in straining joy went out to join it.

“Morgana!” he called, and the girls came pelting across the forest floor at his tone.

“What have you found?” she asked a little breathlessly, kneeling beside him.

“It’s one of their barrows,” he said, and then realised he did not know how to explain it; but Morgana looked for a considering moment down at the little hill, and then said, “You’re right” whilst Gwen wanted to know how either of them could tell.

“You just can.”

“I can’t,” she said, not in any confrontational pique, but only in a sweet confusion, switching the bag with a frown to her other shoulder. She picked up her skirts so she could get down into the scrub with them.

“Now the question is, what do we do from here?” Morgana asked, looking at him in the deepening night.

“Er,” Merlin said, wondering if he shouldn’t have consulted the dragon before he left. He had only a lot of ridiculous ideas, such as saying a polite hello to it, to see if it would respond to some manners; but of course probably it didn’t, if it took people like Arthur. “I’m not sure.” And then he did call out, tentatively, glad that Arthur was not there to see him. “Em...is there anyone there?”

There was not, surprisingly, anyone at home in a little pile of dirt, in the middle of the woods.

Morgana said, “We’re here to take Arthur Pendragon off your hands,” and there was a little pop, as if his ears had suddenly equalised.

Arthur was not entirely sure how long it was customary for fairies to wait between their supper and their copulation. Certainly in mortal lands there was a proper delay, so you didn’t cramp; but since it was reasonable to assume that the fey folk were not beholden to the same indignities of digestion, it might be any moment now. He was not especially keen on it; even the hotter parts of him had cooled now, after the way she had spoken to him. There was a terrible smugness to her
that he did not like. Certainly he would have never addressed visiting royalty in the same manner. And now there was this business about him desiring some unknown party, as if she knew something about him that he did not, and he did not care for all that unsettling sort of thing. There was also the rather ominous implication that she was like the more sexually adventurous of the insect species, and possibly planned to consume him afterwards. He had spent enough time in the company of Gaius and his entomological experiments as a boy to know there was only a very brief pleasant period; and then the unceremonious ripping off of his head.

He was pondering another go at the garden, this time over the north wall, when he saw beyond the wicker fence a shape that was like a man, and then when it had resolved out of the mists, exactly like a man; like one particular man, in fact.

“Merlin!” he called, and his heart gave something that was like a skip, but certainly was not, since it was only Merlin.

“Arthur? Arthur!” And the long skinny arm went up over his manservant’s head, cheerful as if they had met one another in the lower town in the midst of their own respective days.

Then there was another shape beside him, and a third behind that.

“Morgana,” he said, with a cold horror that came over him in a thundering rush. She had caught him out languishing in a tower like a maiden, and now he was never going to forget it; and worse, all the knights would know as well, and say nothing to his face, but natter behind him like a bunch of sodding old women with their knitting, and nothing else to do.

They came unmolested through the gate, and now Arthur saw that Gwen was with them as well, and wondered why the Fates had seen fit to mock and punish him, when he was so handsome.

“Arthur,” Morgana said with a horribly satisfied face, her hand on the pommel of his sword. “Glad to see me?”

“What are you doing with my sword?”

“Well, someone had to be the brave knight, and clearly it isn’t you. Now be a good boy and let down a rope or something. Or a lock of your hair? You know my hands blister easily, and this stone will gouge them up terribly.”

“I think I’d rather die here.”

“I believe you would rather than admit you’ve been rescued by two girls and a servant. Never mind. We’re here for you anyway, and you’re going to be grateful about it.”

“I will not,” he sulked.

“I think we should probably just nip in and get him, and go out again. They’re going to be here--” Merlin broke off, looking round him. “They’re here.”

And indeed they were, suddenly, as varied as the jewels which Morgana wore with blinding flair to state suppers; and now they committed the grave error of taking up the elbow of Gwen, who let out a frightened cry.

“Don’t touch Gwen,” Morgana said in her usual blazing way, and drew his sword.

“Morgana, you idiot, there are five of them, and they’re men.”
“That’s just more gloating for me,” she said, but of course it wasn’t; though she did have remarkable form, and gave two at once such a showing that by some invisible means three more were called into the garden in order to subdue her. She went down under the whole lot of them, and gelded at least one with a blow from her armoured shin. Arthur drew back from the window in a terrible sympathy, holding a fist to his mouth.

Then they were brought, struggling mightily, to the tower; and deposited there together, in the same room as Arthur, with the garden piping in its lighthearted ambiance.

“That certainly went well,” he said dryly.

“I’m sorry you weren’t impressed with our efforts,” Morgana snapped. “It must be so difficult to sit round like a princess combing your hair, waiting to be rescued.”

“I haven’t sat round combing my hair, that’s your specialty, and I was on the verge of leaving when you so ineptly burst in here, waving round my sword—”

“Were you, now? And you were only waiting for, what? Your truly beloved to appear, and carry you off over his shoulder?”

He felt the peculiar spluttering in him that always seemed to materialise in the presence of Morgana, who was infuriating, and wielded it deftly as any weapon. He rounded on Merlin. “How could you have brought her?”

“Oh, I see; it’s Merlin you wanted to come riding in on a noble steed, to sweep you away.”

“I didn’t want any of you to come blundering in here like a lot of fools, to make everything worse.”

“Don’t speak to Gwen that way,” Morgana demanded, and struck him such a ringing blow to either ear that he reeled backward, into Merlin, who was predictably useless, and only flailed about trying to regain his balance, and failing with a cry onto the bed.

“I wasn’t speaking to Gwen, I was speaking to you—”

“You’re such a spoilt little child, Arthur Pendragon. Have you any idea what we’ve been through, to make it here? Or do you not care?”

“That’s your business. No one asked you to rescue me, Morgana; in fact, I believe I distinctly insisted upon the exact opposite—”

“Arthur,” Merlin tried, struggling up from the bedcovers.

“And moreover, Mor gana --”

“Arthur!” Merlin snapped, and yanking him by the tunic, turned him round to face the door, where a courtly procession had stolen with utter silence into the archway of it, the Queen at their head.

They were all abruptly done with their argument.

The Queen lifted her head with the stately sort of consideration which formerly he had only seen Morgana successfully achieve; there was an art to it, which involved the skillful manipulation of one’s angles, so the chin was at a superior elevation, and the nostrils not too indecently exposed.

“Hello. Erm,” Merlin said like the raging idiot he was. He was actually insinuating himself
between Arthur and the little crowd in the doorway, as if Arthur were the romantic part of a ballad, and had to look pretty, and to be protected, and not much else. “Listen, I’m sorry Arthur cut down your tree; he didn’t mean anything by it. If you let him go, I’ll stay.”

“What?” Arthur, Gwen and Morgana said in chorus. Arthur pushed Merlin behind him, before he could do anything even more stupid, which was not at all out of the realm of possibility.

“You would exchange yourself for the prince, Emrys?”

“Emrys’? Why do people keep calling you that? His name is Merlin,” Arthur said, holding Merlin easily with one hand whilst he squirmed about, trying to put himself back in danger, as if he were really brave, and not a great big girl’s blouse. “And he’s not staying.”

“That’s hardly an equal trade,” Morgana pointed out.

“Of course it isn’t. The Sidhe aren’t going to exchange someone like me for Merlin,” Arthur said with as much insult in his voice as he knew how to produce.

“I meant an unfair trade for us,” Morgana replied.

“I’m sure you’ll think so next time you want someone to cheer in a tourney, and escort you to your supper.”

“I never cheer for you in a tourney.”

“Anyway,” Merlin broke in again, “I said I’d stay, and I meant it. You can take me as retribution for your tree, and I’ll do whatever it is you want me to, to make up for it.”

Arthur, who knew precisely what she wanted him to do, pulled Merlin back by the collar of his coat when he tried to slack-jawed into enemy arms; and Merlin, pulling in the opposite direction, tried to shoo him off with a few flicks of his hand, which Arthur also caught, and yanked up behind him. “Don’t be stupid, Merlin, no matter how naturally talented you are at it.”

“I will make an exception for you. You may all leave, if you can meet the Challenge. It must be answered by one who is pure in soul, and noble of heart.”

“Not you, then, Morgana.”

“Certainly not you,” she snapped back. “Unless by ‘purity’ we mean in the marital sense--”

“Morgana!”

“I will choose,” the Queen cut in. “For it is only I who can see into each of you, and know who is worthiest.” She said, with an insulting lack of consideration, “It is the girl,” and swung round to Gwen, who looked with wondering eyes back, flushing to the roots of her hair.

“Well, of course it is,” Morgana said.


“There are three Trials: of intelligence, of courage, and of strength.”

“Listen, I’m the knight, don’t you think I ought to be undertaking any trials? She isn’t a warrior. Or are you not interested in any sort of fairness?”

“It is not solely the warrior who is imbued with such attributes.”
“What is she going to do for a test of strength? Move a heavy piece of furniture to clean under it?”

“Don’t be an arse, Arthur, if you can help it. Of course Gwen can pass any silly test.”

“Can we help her?” Merlin asked.

“You must,” said the Queen. “For that is the only way she will succeed. And if she perishes: so shall you all.”

The first Trial was not off to a very flamboyant start. In fact it was off to hardly any sort of start at all: they were simply taken into the woods, without any poetical flourishes whatsoever, or even a single trumpeter, and left there.

Arthur, who had got his sword back, looked properly unnerved at not having to use it immediately, and looking all round them, said, “What exactly are we supposed to do? Wander round aimlessly till something jumps out at us?”

“Well, it’s certainly preferable to standing round listening to you talk,” Morgana replied, and set out in the lead, at a ripping good pace.

Arthur fell back, firstly, Gwen assumed, to avoid Morgana; and secondly to harry Merlin. But after all he had neither intention in mind, and matched his pace to her own, looking supremely uncomfortable, so that she felt it herself, and all her insides made as if they wished to be outside. She was twisting her hands, and not looking at him, whilst he was wiggling his sword handle, and not looking at her, when he cleared his throat with the sort of pomp that always presages actual words: but then there were none from him, and only more of the awkward sword fussing, and a sudden chumminess with his boots. They walked on in this state for an uncomfortable length of time, whilst Morgana and Merlin chattered away, and the birds got in merrily on the repartee.

“I wanted to apologise,” Arthur said at last. “For what I said earlier. It was unfair, and arrogant of me. And after all, anyone who’s put up with Morgana for so long can certainly pass whatever test it is the Sidhe intend for them.”

“Oh!” she blurted out, feeling the anxiety pass warmly into her cheeks. “You don’t have to! I mean, you were right, they should have picked you. It’s all right. And I’m sorry too. About earlier, I mean. I didn’t see anything! Not that there isn’t anything to see, of course that’s not what I mean-” And here she broke off, and looked helplessly at him, nearly weeping; and for a moment he was stricken with his own mortification, and then, quite unexpectedly, he let out a laugh: really a nice one, rich and kind, with none of the mocking peal to which she was accustomed. He was absolutely lovely when he smiled like this--not so lovely as Merlin, of course, who hadn’t any other smile but the kind one, and probably never had used it, or even thought to use it, in any thoughtless cruelty. But he didn’t look anything like Uther’s son for a moment, and seemed almost a different sort altogether, not even a noble, but only a simple man with no consciousness of his station, or hers. Her cheeks quite went up, and she patted them a little, when he had taken her by the forearm the way he might one of his knights, and squeezed it, and then moved off to Merlin’s side, where the tension suddenly went out of him.

“Gwen, are you all right?” Morgana called back, swinging round so they could smile at one another.

“What do you think the first Trial is going to be? It’s intelligence, so some sort of puzzle, maybe?”
“I shouldn’t worry about it, Merlin. It’s not as if we can use your brains to unravel it.”

“Nor will we need yours, so why don’t you be a good boy and go play with your sharp things till we need to beat someone up?” Morgana asked sweetly.

“Oh, well,” Arthur snapped, as if that were a blistering comeback in itself, and taking Merlin by the collar, he steered him with an almost unconscious awareness of the landscape out of the path of a thorny bush, which Merlin had nearly blundered into. He was still arguing with Morgana as he did it, and held onto Merlin longer than he needed to; in fact, far longer. She wasn’t criticising! Naturally. It was only the collar must be chafing his poor neck, and then it would be tender, and possibly in need of ministrations; not that she intended to administer them, of course.

The woods were not altogether different from the woods back home; probably most woods were not so very different from one another. But they did have a certain saturated quality to the colours, and burst out like a jeweler’s tray as they went on through the rows of sizzling wildflowers, whispering as they passed. The trees here were larger, with denser garlands; and in the air there was no sickly woodland carcass, slowly wasting, but simply the gentle breathing of the flowers, never overpowering. They had not seen any animals, but heard them moving about in the bracken, and surely they too were richer, more elegantly furred, and healthily fattened, than the creatures back home. Soon it was only like any pleasant jaunt, and they nearly forgot what they were about. Gwen even picked some lily of the valley, which grew wildly in colours she had expected, and some she had not, and gave them, stammering, to Merlin, who lit up as if she had done something miraculous. Arthur frowned at them both, and seemed rather dampened, so then she had a sprig of primrose which she desperately wanted to give him, and could not, for now he had gone back to his severe face, and frightened her. She threw it, ashamed, into a bush, and fretted over how she had hurt him, though she did not understand why.

The quality of sunlight had not changed, but there was a feeling in some internal clock of hers of several hours having passed, and night coming on; and then she saw Merlin go stiff, and the sensation pass into Arthur, who was walking nearly shoulder to shoulder with him.

A small hedgehog came bristling out of the undergrowth, and stopped in front of them. There was no reason to be alarmed by it, but Merlin was still wary, and Arthur, looking at him, put a hand on the pommel of his sword. Gwen was a bit sorry for it, to be confronted by such a lot as them, and with such poor manners.

But then it said, in a clear, fluting voice, “What speaks in all languages in his riding, and his mouth spits the poison of life or death? It is silent when it rests, and is deaf like a boy or one of the poor,” and she screamed.

The hedgehog screamed back, a high, terrible thing; and darted round behind the bush from which it had emerged.

Arthur, who had drawn his sword at her scream, now was left blinking confusedly, wondering what he ought to stab; and evidently feeling somewhat silly, sheathed it after an awkward interval in which they all looked silently at one another, whilst the bush muttered an inspiring rally to itself.

After a moment, the hedgehog waddled back into their path. He said, “You did give me a fright, young lady. Why on earth did you scream like that?”

“I’m sorry! I just wasn’t expecting you to speak. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Well, that’s all right. I suppose it’s fine to be nervous, since I’ll have to kill you if you can’t answer the question.”
“What?”

“Well, not me, of course; but someone will be along shortly to do it. So, have you an answer?”

“Um, well--could I hear it again, please?”

“We were told we could help her,” Merlin broke in before the hedgehog could answer. “Can we give her the answer?”

“You may help her, but you may not speak it aloud. She has one chance to give the correct answer.”

“What a load of rubbish. How exactly are we supposed to help her solve a riddle, if we can’t even tell her we’ve got the answer?” Arthur demanded, but Merlin looked round at her, and turning Arthur so his back was to them both, he mimed dipping a quill, and then pretended to scrawl out a message on Arthur’s back. He dipped the imaginary quill once more, flicked it, and presenting it to her with a flourish, began to write once more on Arthur as if he were a parchment.

“Pen!” she cried, and the hedgehog clapped its little hands.

“Good show! Oh, I’m so relieved. It’s just terrible, what’s going to happen to you if you fail. All right, my dear; the second one, then. An eater lacking mouth and even maw; yet trees and beasts to it are daily bread. Well fed it thrives and shows a lively life, but give it water and you do it dead.”

She looked at Merlin, whose eyes in swift thought went up, and back to the ground; but it had come to her already, in a sudden burst, and she said, a little hesitating, “I think I know it.” For a moment she could not say it, looking round at all their faces, which would live or not live according to her answer.

“You’re fine, Gwen,” Morgana said to her, smiling from behind Merlin. “I know you’ve got it. Go on.”

She was looking at Merlin when she said it. He had on his sweet dear face the smile which engaged his whole being, and seemed to show the bits of him most men didn’t have, or certainly were not inclined to wear. There was no faltering in him. He did not hesitate in his belief of her; he was sure as if he had never doubted her, and was not capable of it. And squaring her shoulders, she said, clearly, “It’s fire.”

“Correct! And now for the last. Truly no one is outstanding without me, nor fortunate; I embrace all those whose hearts ask for me. He who goes without me goes about in the company of death; and he who bears me will remain lucky forever. But I stand lower than earth and higher than heaven.”

Arthur drew his sword. He sank the point of it into the soft dirt beneath them, and in this way, laboriously, formed his answer in careful print.

“Humility,” she read out when he had finished, and looked at him. He was a little embarrassed, and cleared his throat; he folded the blade in the hem of his tunic, and drawing it carefully through to the end, sent it back to its usual pristine quality.

And the hedgehog, sitting up on his back legs, pronounced his judgement gravely: “You have answered the Trial, Guinevere of Camelot, and will go on.”

Merlin, laughing, even clapped Arthur on the back, and Morgana ran up to hug her whilst the hedgehog in his usual voice said, “Oh, I’m so pleased! Good luck to you all; you’ve been
marvelous.”

And he waddled back into the brush, and was gone.

They could not get on much farther, for here the wood suddenly funnelled into an impassable bramble, which Arthur meant to hack with his sword; but Merlin, stopping him with a hand on his forearm, pointed to a single low archway at about knee height, which suggested, by the indistinctness of its depths, that there was something other than more brambles beyond it, and seemed to open up farther, into a sort of tunnel.

But when Arthur knelt in front of it and had a quick look, he said, “We can’t go on that way.”

“Why not?” Morgana demanded. “Budge up, and let me see.”

She came away with a very pale face.

“What? What is it?” Gwen asked, holding a hand to her chest, and feeling as if her heart had suddenly magnified, and now had got a second home in her throat.

“Adders,” Arthur told her grimly. “They’re everywhere. You’d have to crawl straight over them to reach the other side.”

Gwen, who just that morning had made Merlin kill a very little bit of spider, large as her pinkie nail, and hid her face whilst he did it, reached out for the nearest thing which might hold her upright, and found Merlin’s shoulder, which was slender, but very firm, and did not bow under her weight. He was terribly kind about it, and said, “It’s all right,” and patted her, a little clumsily.

Morgana said, “There’s nowhere else to go. How can they mean for this to prove Gwen’s bravery? It isn’t brave to crawl over a nest of venomous serpents; it’s foolish. She can’t survive; none of us could.”

“If I could--” Gwen said, and failed. She was looking at the opening, and feeling already under her dress, down her neck, the slippery jumble of it, and hearing the sibilant voices in many-tongued bay. “If I could survive long enough to reach the other side, and pass the other test, then you could all go home.”

“No, Gwen. You couldn’t. And we won’t let you do this alone.”

“But you couldn’t go in there with me, my lady. I’m not sure Arthur could even fit. Not that I’m trying to say anything about your, you know, your weight! I wasn’t meaning you’re fat, of course you obviously aren’t--it’s just you’ve got--your shoulders. They’re very broad.”

“Guinevere,” Arthur said, kindly overlooking her stumbling, “you might survive one bite, if we could get you back to Camelot to Gaius in time. You could never survive all of them, not long enough to face whatever’s on the other side. You’d probably be dead before you even reached the end of the tunnel.”

“Then what do we do?” she asked, looking round at them all, and thinking, in the sudden shock of the decision she came to whilst she was not even aware of it, that she properly adored them all then, even Arthur, who in not striving to be princely in that moment somehow was more regal than ever. She took a shuddering breath, and wiped her eyes a little, when they were not looking.
“We’ll think of something, Gwen, don’t worry.” Morgana assured her. “I promise.”

“I’m sorry, my lady. I don’t think there’s any other way.”

And then she made a dash toward the tunnel, past Arthur, whose reflexes were a little dulled by his surprise, so that when he tried to grab her he caught only a tendril of hair that came loose in his hand, and was all that was left of her.

She went on trembling hands into the tunnel, flattening out onto her stomach when the archway caught in its living teeth her woolen cloak; and now the ground rose up, tremulous, to meet her. The tunnel was like a throat round her, wet, flexing, and continuously there were the little liquid plaps of things which in legless flight fell helpless from the overarching branches. She wept hotly, and the bile came up into her throat; and now underneath her she felt the ground in a satin animation, rolling with such coordinated sleekness that for a moment she was hardly aware of its motion, till it came undulating round her ankles, and down her tunic, and burst Hydra-headed from the folds of her cloak, and the pleats of her skirts.

“Gwen! No!” Morgana screamed, and Arthur with only the hesitation necessary to draw his knife, and throw himself down flat into the dirt, went wriggling after her.

“Arthur, don’t!” Merlin yelled, but could not get it out fast enough, and there were only the two dusty boots, kicking about as the rest of Arthur went in its own swift slithering unfaltering into the tunnel.

They poured over her back and round her wrists and under her belly the ground like a conscious being shifted her this way and that, into the thorns on either side, as if it were first doing her the courtesy of trying to persuade her to fuck off, before there were any hard feelings; but as she kept crawling, crying out every time there was a new movement, it had unfortunately to take a harsher view of the entire thing.

They did not bite simultaneously, as they moved, but in one cluster on her ankle, where they were most troubled by her thrashing feet, and then her elbow, which whacked them round most rudely; and then as they were already in her tunic, it just seemed the proper thing.

She felt a queer coldness in her, first; and then a hot pain, which seemed only to get hotter as she went on, and then the nausea on a high crest broke against her throat, and down sweeping into her mouth, but she was not sick, and only swallowed it, for the bitterness of it kept her focussed, and absorbed her so that she could not think of whatever she had not yet forded. She had crawled on, she thought, a very long way, but probably any distance is trebled when there are snakes all along it, so there was no way of telling, but only ahead of her a light that suggested at some point she must come to an end of it.

Merlin of course had followed Arthur into the tunnel. He was at once encompassed by the smooth mass of it, and the hissing which came at him from everywhere, as if the forest itself was no longer an ordinary construction of bough and bush, but had come violently into life, and startled by it, was
acting out.

He did not know what else to do. He reached out, and felt all the tiny little lives round him, and snuffed them.

They were only a lot of snakes, but they were frightened, and uncomprehending; and they did not understand where they were going, or why they must do it, and felt in his grip like a lot of screaming children, trying to communicate their pain before they had been given the words to do it. There were tears hot on his cheeks, and they went, drip by drip, into his mouth; but he held on to the bright little spots which his magic felt out with ruthless proficiency, till the blood came scorching from his nose, and the goose flesh marbled his trembling arms.

It was very quiet. He let out a gasp, and let go.

Arthur’s feet brushed the top of his head, and then he remembered why he had done it, and his grief burnt into terror, and lit up his throat. “Arthur. Arthur, are you bit?” His heart was in his ears, and deafened him; he felt the feet stir, and tried again. “Arthur?”

“I’m all right. You?”

“Fine.”

“What the hell just happened?”

“I don’t know,” Merlin said, and wiped his cheeks with a sleeve.

“They’ve all died. Gwen must have reached the other side. Come on, then.”

She was in a clearing which the tunnel brought them to with no further trouble. She had sweated into her tunic till it was nearly black, and laid looking up at them through her soft dark eyes. She was like marble when Merlin touched her, and smiled up faintly.

“I got through,” she whispered, and struggled for a breath.

He nearly could not speak. There was a shudder through him, when he touched her still cheek. “I knew you would.”

“I’m sorry, Merlin. There wasn’t any strength test. I don’t think I can manage anything else. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m sure she picked me because she knew I’d fail all of you.”

“No, no,” Merlin said, somehow, round the thing which had grown into his throat, and squeezed his voice into a very small thing indeed. “You didn’t, Gwen. You did brilliantly.” He did not cry; it did not seem fair to her, to have someone’s grief foisted on her now.

Arthur knelt beside him, very white, and when Morgana came crashing out of the bramble, and into the clearing, there was something very like agony on his face.

“Gwen. No, no, no, no,” Morgana said, in a voice that was like the cry of someone fatally wounded. She said, “Gwen” again with the last of her air, and sank down in a breathless keening.

There came into the clearing a gradual light, which was only a light; and then it was the great fairy Queen of that magnificent palace, without any segue. She seemed to have been born of it, and stood
gently limned in it.

“If she can survive till morning, then I release all of you. Her wounds will be healed, and you will all leave of your own free will. This is the Trial of strength.”

And then she went, and the day abruptly with her.

So in the coolness of night they curled round her, and gave her their woolens, and built of the nearby trees a sheltering wall; and then the wind which had gone moaning through the dale went in sobbing disappointment to other victims.

Morgana kept her bedside vigil with faithful hand and heart, and did not let go the cold fingers she was minding, and mopped with the neckerchief Merlin had given her the fever from Gwen’s flaming brow. She stroked her hair, and talked her steadily through the night.

And though she felt she could not, Gwen went on. She looked up at them whilst they knelt hale and whole round her, and shivered off the cold blows which she felt meant to take her finally, and did not shut her eyes for long, but only to put back the tears, so they were none of them terribly bothered. She did not beg the struggling pulse another reedy thump; but firmly ordered it.

So when the dawn stole quietly in, it touched her living face, and brought the bloom back to it.
Dead Was My Lady Truth, And Well-Beloved

Chapter Notes

I know the plot of this is similar to when Mordred has to be snuck out of the castle, but I wanted Arthur to take a more active role from the beginning, and I'm going to do something different with Mordred, so I decided to steal the bare bones of the plot for that episode. I hope you enjoy, and thank you for the comments and kudos so far! This takes place shortly after 'The Poisoned Chalice.'

A miserable, sodden day. The sky displeased with itself and all its wretched lot, and trying to get out of its own skin. The beasts hardly better, lowing in the mists, and stamping their various pawed extremities to demonstrate their pique. It was a very funereal showing, and well it might be: for today there was to be an execution.

The day was not always so sensitive, and often put on a nice coat, and beamed quite merrily, whilst the convict was led to his pyre, and died to the fluting of the oblivious wilds, knowing precisely why he should not yet like to go; better to die in the rain, when the world had already turned its back on him. Possibly it had an awareness that this was a different sort of execution, and was not the usual tragedy of the ordinary old bigotry, which is fine enough, when it is the usual dodgy villain who has done nothing wrong, but certainly looks hale enough to do it eventually, perhaps.

Today the convicted was a child, and Arthur on seeing him brought in crying in his men’s arms, went straight away to the dungeons and knelt on the floor outside his cell. He was only a wiry little thing, with dirty blonde hair, and had wept his eyes almost closed. He laid in the straw and hiccupped occasionally, looking up through his fringe, whilst Arthur prompted him gently for his story, which did come out eventually, a little disjointed, on account of the hiccoughs; and then he went away very sorry, to call on his father.

“I just don’t understand the point of killing a child. What is that going to prove, other than the fact that we have no mercy even for the most vulnerable of our citizens?”

“He was caught stealing food in the lower town, and using magic to do it. Tell me, Arthur, which law is it do you consider him to be above?”

“He was starving! His mother cast him out--what else was he supposed to do? Anyone will steal if they are hungry enough, and no other way to get it. I don’t see why we can’t take the circumstances under consideration. He hasn’t tried to harm anyone--”

“And what do you suppose our enemies will do, when they see us bow to the first sob story we hear--and from the lips of a sorcerer, at that?”

“Father, he can’t be more than ten at most.”

“You were twelve when you rode in your first battle. He is practically a man, and will be judged as such. If he is old enough to violate the laws of these lands, he is old enough to answer for them.”

“And what will the people of Camelot think?” Arthur tried, a little hotly, with a tone he did not often take with his father, and Uther, hearing it, rounded on him.
“The people of Camelot are intelligent, and know what he represents. They will think we are protecting our citizens from every quarter, even those that would try and fool us with an innocent facade. You would do well to remember that, Arthur. You are dismissed.”

Arthur stood for a moment, raw with his failure; he saw the boy lying with the fringe over his eyes trying to be dignified about confessing to a prince whilst lying in a lot of dirty straw, and hiccupping. He took the pommel of his sword into his hand, to feel something solid under him. He remembered it was his privilege to feel anything at all, and no longer the boy’s; and then the warning bell sang a single bleak note, and brought the citadel into anarchy.

There was a knock at the door, and the following announcement: “My Lord, the boy has escaped.”

Merlin was stirring something pungent, and trying to coordinate the necessary movements--which were often a two-handed endeavour--with holding his nose shut, and had nothing to do with it. He yelled out exactly this to Gaius as he came into the room with a satchel of herbs: “I had nothing to do with it.” This seemed obvious enough, but Gaius eyed him suspiciously all the same, which Merlin acknowledged was somewhat fair, if a little hurtful.

“Well, just see that you stay out of it,” Gaius said, and upended his satchel onto the table beside Merlin’s concoction. “I need you to sort these and label them, soon as you’re done with that. And mind yourself today, Merlin. That poor child has enough to worry about without you trying to get yourself killed assisting him on some fool’s errand. Arthur and the guards will bring him back, and if anyone is caught harbouring him--”

“I’m not!” he protested.

“I trust that. What I do not trust is for you to remain faithful to your current innocence.”

“I swear, Gaius,” he said, and Gaius, rolling his eyes, tottered off into the inner chambers for one of his anatomy books.

Merlin supposed it was not appropriate to seek out the boy, and get them both caught; but if in his wanderings he happened to stumble across him, and forget to mention anything to the guard, or their certain blonde-haired leader, he could hardly be considered to blame for anything other than tragically poor eyesight, which he really ought to have checked. He was often missing things like that.

“I’m just going to ask Gwen something!” he called back toward the stacks which Gaius was perusing, and slipped out the door before he could be accused of anything untoward.

Arthur went back to his chambers for his coat. He hardly fancied marching round with a lot of grim-faced tossers, trying to flush out the boy as if he were a pheasant, and putting on the coat with unnecessary force, he stood for a moment pressing the heel of his hand into the bridge of his nose. He gave a dramatic sigh, loudly; but not loudly enough to miss that there was a rustling deeper in his chambers which was not made by any movement of his own, nor the natural settling of any of the usual fixtures, giving out their weather-related aches and moans.
He drew his sword.

He went with a hunter’s stealth over the floor, hardly breathing. There was now a rattling good rain, disturbing the windows, and concealing what quiet clicking of his boots on the floor that even he could not smother. His heart had come hot into his mouth, and sat as if holding its own breath, whilst the blood went zinging through him.

There was a foot under his bed, quite battered. It was not a particularly advantageous position from which to ambush, especially if one forgot that their foot was hanging out, but he kept the sword in hand anyway, and stopped beside it, nearly touching it. He said, loudly, “Merlin, if this is your idea of a joke, it’s as unappreciated as the rest of your attempts at humour.”

The foot twitched, and tried to draw itself under the bed, as if it had not already been called out; and Arthur, crouching, snatched it by the ankle, and yanked out its owner.

It was the boy, white-faced. He had done what every animal does in sighting the hounds, and run; and hearing their awful baying, flung himself into any immediate thicket without bothering to know its topography.

There was an awful lot of racket beyond his door, the clanking armour going past in frightened pandemonium, and the softer pat patting of the servants rushing about their chores. The rain, quite agreeing, gave a concerted roar, and sent its thunders to wake the unflappable walls, which did not often have anything to be fussed about. There was a good overcast getting up now, and the day came in masked as night, and overall the deception was quite successful.

Arthur looked at the boy; the boy looked at Arthur. It was like when a deer casts its soft eye over the predatory one of its hunter, and accidentally catching it, tells of his humble woodland soul; and then of course you can’t eat it, and must find something less fuzzy.

“Please, don’t hurt me,” the boy whispered, and of course then it was impossible to even imagine it.

Arthur, kneeling beside him, said, “Keep under the bed. Don’t make a sound. My manservant Merlin will be in shortly to clean my chambers. Don’t make any noise. Don’t give yourself away, do you understand? You stay right here, till I return and tell you it’s safe. Don’t even breathe loudly.”

And with that he went off to seek the boy at the head of his guard, in stern and convincing lockstep.

Merlin had not seen the boy. He had not purposefully looked for him, of course, and had not bumped into him behind any of the statues in the western corridor, or the eastern one, and neither had he accidentally happened across him in the servant’s quarters, or any of Morgana’s clothing chests, or the niche in the southern wing where he had waited out more than a few violated curfews. He was also not in the stables where Merlin was perfectly right to be, since Arthur’s horse still needed to be brushed, and her hooves checked.

He took a very circuitous route to Arthur’s chambers, in order to stretch his legs, and saw Arthur himself leading out a contingent of red-caped men, all of them very severe. Arthur had his tourney face on, which he used when he was nervous, and did not want anyone to know it. He ignored Merlin completely, crying out various orders, and marching about with his hand on his sword, very
importantly.

The chambers were a disaster as usual. Arthur did not seem to understand that there were things which could be done with his personal belongings other than throwing, dashing, or otherwise depositing them like a projectile in random and unreasonable places.

Merlin set about tidying, humming under his breath. Arthur of course was not there to hear it, but he liked the idea that he would be annoyed by it, and did it more loudly, in a more musically-disinclined key. The rain had got its teeth in now, and from round the trembling hills the thunders poured to quiver every wobbling nook. At first this seemed to Merlin a perfectly apt explanation for the static which lifted his arm hairs in wary alertness, and he went about under that assumption for a few minutes, collecting hose. But soon it struck him that in his belly there was a corresponding unease, which persisted as he worked his way deeper into Arthur’s rooms, and now flared almost painfully, as he neared the bed. He was not looking at it when he felt the hot jolt of his magic come singing into his limbs, but was drawn, inevitably, toward it, and in a sort of trance-like obedience, dropped the tunic he was holding. He stood for a moment in an attempt to quantify the unease, and its relation to the bed, other than the usual offence at the state Arthur had left it in, which certainly insulted him on a personal level, as a human with working appendages who could make their own damn bed; but never had he reacted with such immediate vigilance. It felt as if Arthur’s bed were a knight he needed to fight, and not one who obeyed the Codes, and fought according to the usual chivalrous notions about women and unarmed serving boys.

There was someone beneath the bed. It struck him at once, whilst he was standing and squinting at it. His heart came, pop, up into his throat, as if it were a little cork; in the moment of terrible realisation he had seen Arthur, settling peacefully down to sleep, whilst the assassin bided his time, and then the cold flickering of the knife, as the moon unwittingly came in to garnish it.

He rubbed his damp palms on his trousers.

“Listen,” he said. “I know you’re there. Come out now, or you’ll regret it.”

There was nothing. Probably he ought to have expected that; his voice had cracked a little in saying it, and likely not inspired any alarm.

“I’m armed,” he said, which was true in a sense, and ought to have inspired any blundering hero to come charging out with answering blade, if Arthur was anything to judge by.

There was a particularly concentrated chattering of the storm, as if it were tired of itself, and trying to get in where it was dry: and under that only his own breathing, and the squelching of his toes in his boots where they were working up a good panicked sweat.

He grabbed one of Arthur’s knives from the supper table, and holding it before him he knelt down slowly, one careful knee at a time.

There were two eyes, very large, staring back at him.

“You’re--” he said, and broke out in a relieved laugh. He did not long maintain it; he remembered they were in the bedroom of the man hunting this very boy, and yanked him out from beneath the bed. “We have to get you somewhere safe. You’re in Prince Arthur’s chambers; if he finds you, he’ll turn you over to his father.”

The boy sustained such an interval of fixated gawking that Merlin was forced to decide whether he was concerned, or rather terrified; they looked at one another for an uncomfortable period whilst the rain went on with its business, providing just the sort of backdrop one expected an unblinking
murder child to take advantage of. But then he did blink after all, and was only a scared child, small for his age, and Merlin’s internals allowed him to get on with not messing himself.

“Are you Merlin?” the boy asked, which he had not expected at all.

“Erm, yeah. How did you know that? Never mind; we need to go. You can stay in my room till we figure out how to get you out of the castle.”

“Prince Arthur said I was to stay under the bed till he returned.”

Merlin blinked. “What?”

“He told me not to talk to you.”

Merlin did not have another reply, and could supply only a second, “What?” And then, when he had recovered as much as he was going to: “Arthur knows you’re here? Arthur told you to hide?”

“He said I shouldn’t talk to you,” the boy whispered, and his face began to shiver with what Merlin recognised as the prerequisite to a good earned bawl.

“No, no, no, it’s all right; I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not going to tell anyone. I’m going to help you, ok? Shh, shh, shh, please don’t do that. We have to keep quiet, all right? You’re going to be fine. I promise,” he was saying in the gentlest tone he could conceive, when the door opened, and Arthur walked in, thoroughly soaked.

He stopped. He shut the door behind him with a mechanical motion of his arm, peeling off his gloves. There was nothing said, and the storm surged in to occupy the mute chambers, till they were full to shuddering.

“Merlin, what are you doing?” Arthur asked at last, tossing the gloves somewhere over his shoulder.

“What are you doing, Arthur?”

“It’s none of your concern; go back to your room and do whatever it is you do when I don’t need you.”

“Oh, I just sit round morosely, waiting for your summons.”

“Good. Then do that.”

“Arthur. What are you going to do with him?”

Arthur with a far heavier sigh than was warranted shook out his hair, and taking off his wet jacket, hung it almost neatly over the back of his favourite chair, ruffling up his fringe. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m not taking him back to my father. But it’s not for you to be involved; go back to Gaius, and let me handle it.”

“You’ll need help sneaking him out.”

“And if you’re caught doing so, you’ll be executed. My father isn’t going to behead his only heir, even if he is committing treason. His servant, on the other hand, will not be afforded the same courtesy.”

“Arthur--”
“Merlin,” he interrupted, with a look that Merlin thought was almost like fondness, or something near to it; and then he felt something like a little skipping in his chest, and there was a glow which went up from the skipping into all his extremities, concentrating itself in his ears, which he could feel beaming out as if he had left them too long in the sun.

“I know. I’m already involved. Just by not telling anyone, I’m committing treason, right? Might as well do it right.”

Arthur looked at him for a very long while. There was the furrow between his brows which he got when he was upset, and had not caught it in time to hide it.

“Go down to the kitchens and fetch us some supper. Pottage, and some extra bread for the boy. And any pastries they’ve got.”

Arthur did not often converse with children. He was not doing it well now; he tried to speak to the boy as if he were a courtier, and felt like rubbish. There was a general sense of amusement at his expense, and it ran right between Merlin and the boy with a sort of liquidy speed, too quick for him to catch it, but certainly he felt it just as it rushed past, and then sat a bit stiffer, and went after his pottage with new zest.

Merlin was entertaining the boy with a little wooden carving he had produced upon returning with their meals, and had already got his name out of him, and coaxed the weeping away from him, so that he was almost chatty, and seemed to quite forget that he had come to a grand kingdom, and the grand kingdom wanted to cut off his head. They were now debating whether or not Merlin could juggle; the boy thought such a miracle was the concoction of myths, and certainly not a thing any ordinary man could do; and Arthur, stirring up his pottage, was inclined to agree, if the ordinary man were Merlin. But then he took up three of Arthur’s knives from the table, and as if he did it every day, began to toss them one after the other, till they were no longer distinguishable by the naked eye: or certainly, at least, not Arthur’s naked eye, but only some bit of silvery light which seemed almost to be a production of his very being.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked, after he had forgotten himself and clapped, because the boy was doing it.

“I have lots of talents you don’t know about,” Merlin said, and winked, and there was now something funny about Arthur’s insides. They seemed to forget it was only Merlin, and had gone to bits over the whole thing. It was a bit like admiring a girl, only of course it couldn’t be, because it was Merlin, and his ears were far too large. It was the pottage, certainly; and he would need to speak to cook about it.

When the juggling was finished, and Arthur had presided over a game of hide and seek, trying to be stern about the whole thing—and faltering because Merlin made a spectacle of himself by crawling about the most absurd crevices which wouldn’t have lodged a mouse, and calling out plaintively, “Aland? Aland?” whilst the boy quite obviously snickered from the curtains, and even sneezed out the dust which they were harbouring—the boy was taken by an untroubled slumber. He went as quietly away as if he had been read into his dreams by his devoutly loving mother. Arthur lifted him from the rug in front of the fire, and put him into the bed, taking off his boots, and tucking up the little body securely, so a draft would not get it; and then he turned to find Merlin watching him, and cleared his throat. He felt he had unconsciously done a thing Merlin approved, and now had his reward, which certainly wasn’t any reward whatsoever, but only a smile that made
over Merlin’s whole face, till it was nearly pleasant. He thought perhaps Merlin would not die entirely alone after all, but get himself a nice peasant girl who didn’t terribly mind him.

He sat down beside the fire, rubbing his forehead.

“How are we going to get him out of here?” Merlin asked quietly.

“I don’t know. We ought to wait a bit, let the patrols run their course, and come up empty-handed. My father will eventually assume he’s escaped, and grow lax enough that we ought to be able to sneak him out.”

“But the longer he stays here, the more likely he is to be caught.”

“I know.” He steepled his fingers under his chin.

“It’s kind of you to help him.”

“Merlin.”

“I’m only saying. You might not be entirely a prat, all the time.”

“That sounded like—was that a compliment, Merlin?”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t dare,” he said, and the smile came again, and lit up Arthur to his very toes. He felt the comradeship of the rote, as if he were not so very alone, and the world were not so very large, with no one in it for him; it was a terrible longing he had in him, suddenly. The boy and the fire had made him cosy, as if they were part of an ordinary evening, or might have been, if his lot were different, and he was more admirable; as if the boy were a younger brother, who had a younger brother’s adulation, and the cleanness of an uncomplicated love, which was not heavily won, and easily lost. He felt a warmth in the room that was more than the warmth of the fire, and wanted, for a while, to simply sit in it.

The boy was breathing easily, and had the fringe over his eyes again. Arthur in looking at him felt how the frail bones had been in his arms, and how they might be ruined; and the sweet young cheeks like apples took the fire into them, and shone out freshly-scrubbed.

“I know what evil magic has done,” Arthur said, looking at the boy. “But it can’t...I don’t know that it can be so universally wrong as my father claims. Don’t individuals have meaning? Can’t they be judged by their actions, and not their birth?”

“I think few things are as black and white as Uther makes magic out to be,” Merlin said quietly.

“When I was...when I was in the Caves of Balor, looking for the Mortaeus flower, I nearly died. I was clinging to a ledge, just trying not to fall. No idea how I was to get out of that mess; I thought I was done for. And then there was a light, just floating up from out of the depths. I thought it was there to kill me, because it was magic, and that’s what magic does. But it didn’t. It lit the way out of the cave for me. I felt...I don’t know. It was...I felt a warmth. That it had for me. I don’t know how else to describe it; just that I knew it wouldn’t harm me, that it was even benevolent. I wouldn’t have survived without it.”

Merlin leant forward in his chair, bunching up the material of his trousers round his knees. “Arthur--” he said, and seemed to choke up; and then he sat, pale, with trembling jaw, staring at him in a profound misery which Arthur could see in every strained line of him.

“I’m not saying magic is good, Merlin; I know that. I’ve seen what it can do. I don’t know how I
feel about it. But I do know I can’t stand by and watch a child murdered for a crime he hasn’t yet
committed.”

“He has committed a crime. Just by being born. Just by existing. If he hadn’t used it--if he never
used it, he’d still be wrong. In this kingdom. Under Uther’s laws. He can’t ever be himself. He’ll
have to lie to the people he cares about, get turned out by the ones with enough compassion to not
hand him over to the king, always be alone. You can’t--” Merlin was looking at the boy now, the
tendrils of his throat vibrating under a great tension. “We can’t imagine what that’s like. I
think...it’s a whole different sort of loneliness. To love people, and to know they think they love
you, because they don’t know what it is they’re loving. And when they do, they’ll take it away.”

There was something like a lump come to his throat again. He watched the boy on the bed, and
thought of his mother. He was deifying her again; he loved her with an exhaustive faith, because
she had died young, and beautiful, bringing him into this world; and it seemed to him that a
sacrifice like that could never be forsaken, by either party. Uther did not demonstrably love him,
since it was unseemly, and Arthur had killed his wife; so the mother he had never met supplied
everything he wanted, by virtue of her inability to do anything else: and it seemed impossible to
Arthur that all mothers were not of similar ilk. The mother who had thrown out the boy had
committed a betrayal, firstly, of her son; and secondly of all mothers everywhere, who loved their
children thoroughly.

Merlin was silent. He was almost like a carving in the firelight, and only breathed out from time to
time, worrying the knees of his trousers.

“Go tell Gaius I need you to attend me tonight, and that you’ll be staying in the antechambers. We
need a plan.”

The storm had done with them next morning, and passed into neighbouring hills; but there was a
mighty wind left over, and it sent up a whistling that was like something expected of a dark wood
at full midnight, getting up its demons. Arthur led out another search party, and came back in with
pink cheeks and a frightful nest in place of his hair, which he fussed over while Merlin fed and
cheered the boy; he was short with both of them, and left after he had got his fringe to obey,
banging the door.

“He’s just worried,” Merlin told the boy. “He’s kind of an ass when he gets like that.”

Today he taught the boy to juggle with some pears he had brought up, and told him tales of
tourneys; he did not even need to embellish them, but put into his best words the standards in
blazing flight: and the horses in thundering rush assaulted the stuttering fire, their chaffrons playing
the usual heroic anthems. There is not much more heroic than the tune of links on horse flesh, and
the boy in whooping delight watched it all unfold, as if he were truly in its midst. He wanted to
know, was Arthur very good, did he win loads, was his horse very beautiful? And Merlin, pausing
to be sure Arthur was not about to burst in on them, and hear himself complimented, bent close and
whispered, “He’s the best there ever was.”

Gaius eyed him as he ran in and out that day, but did not say anything, and when he ducked in
briefly to say he would be eating with Arthur, who still needed to be attended, on account of a
minor head wound he had got in training, the eyebrows were forbiddingly launched at him. But
there was no comment, only a thoughtful, “Hmph.”
“I don’t think he suspects anything,” Merlin told Arthur cheerfully.

“He better not. Did you manage to smuggle up anything from the kitchens?”

“Yeah, a few things,” Merlin said, and laid out a number of satchels containing the equivalent of an entire banquet.

“Merlin, we can’t carry all of this.”

“I didn’t want him to go hungry!”

“Do you want my horse to die under this load?” Arthur snapped, and looking over his shoulder to where the boy was sleeping on the bed, he bent over the map he had spread out along the supper table, his fingers drumming alongside it. “Do we really want to take the boy to Nemeth?”

“It’s neutral territory. Magic isn’t outlawed.”

“It isn’t well looked upon, either.”

“Well it isn’t hardly anywhere, unless we take him to the druids. And good luck finding them. I can say my mum’s ill, and I’ve gone to Ealdor to look after her; no one will think that’s odd, and Nemeth lies in the same direction.”

“I don’t like the idea of you taking him. There are bandits on the road. What are you going to do if you run into trouble?”

“I’ll manage. It’s not like you can just run off for a week in the middle of hunting a sorcerer. Uther might suspect something.”

“Merlin, if you’re caught—”

“I won’t be. Trust me, Arthur.”

They looked at one another for a while by candlelight, and Arthur was almost handsome. The soft light had done him a good deed, and polished up his hair, and the health in his cheeks. Merlin had a sudden rush of goodwill for him: he thought of confessing like the child had confessed, and letting Arthur pass his even-handed justice. But Arthur had forgiven a child, because children are blameless; and the man who had ridden and served beside him was not, but had made himself guilty of not only an evil, but a deceit as well. When Merlin was more understanding, and had lain down for the evening to be carried off to sleep by the day’s labours, he thought Arthur was not a bad sort, but only trying to overcome a bad parent; and then he could imagine a companionship that was entire, with nothing between it, but only Arthur as he was, and Merlin as he was.

But the longer we have nursed a lie, the bolder it has grown; and the more beholden to it we are. And here by candle they were nearly friends, and it was enough; the simulacrum of it, the feeling of false and fleeting camaraderie made him feel, shortly, as if he could possibly be loved, for the Merlin that existed, and not the one he had improvised. He did not want to chance it. It was cowardly; but he had been brave about many things, and thought he could forgive himself this.

Arthur nodded, very slowly, as if each bob of his head was bringing him round more solidly to the idea. “Right. Well. Get him up. It’s now or never. My father is talking about tripling the patrols in the lower town, and then we’ll never get out.”

“We’ll be all right,” Merlin said, and the warning bell lowed a sudden deep cry.
Merlin and the boy went up and down Arthur’s chambers whilst he was gone, looking palely at one another, and attempting none of the usual festivities.

Time seemed to Merlin to no longer comprehend its own flow, and aged him with similar disregard for the usual conventions of maturation. He felt he might be a hundred, or at least as old as Gaius. He bit his nails, and forgot to tell the boy it was all right. The wind was unhelpful, and went round stirring up unease with an ominous whooping.

“What happened?” he asked soon as Arthur had stepped back into the room, looking grim.

“Someone thought they spotted Aland in the lower town. There’s to be a guard posted at every corner, and patrols every fifteen minutes. We’ll never get him out.”

“We’ll have to wait,” Merlin said, deflating. He had been feeling the adventure, and was already prepared to creep out into a darkness rich with unparalleled peril; and now that it had been snatched from him, he had only the fear which adrenaline for a while muffles. It was a sharp terror, and pierced him to the marrow: and looking at the boy, he felt all his sleepless nights where the moon went over the ceiling, and his eyes went restlessly after, wondering how it would be to die, and to be lauded for it. He saw the boy breathing in quick gasps, as if he were a hare the hounds had come hot onto, and went to him.

Arthur fisted a hand under his jaw, and rubbed the knuckles against the point of his chin. “We’ll wait. Don’t worry,” he said, straight to Aland; but to Merlin it seemed Arthur was talking to him, and he felt suddenly as if he could no longer live in his skin; it was inadequate for what the promise made of him. He stood, desperately fixed where he was, looking at Arthur whilst the plummy voice came over him, and through him: “I’m going to save you.”

They waited whilst Time was still broken, and counted itself off incorrectly; and then they waited some more.

It was three days, by the usual reckoning; and at least a decade, by Arthur’s. He went out for his patrols, and came back tired with the tiredness of a liar who must live out his every impromptu tale. He was terrified with the terror that is exclusive to battlefields; he felt the lives he bore, and might drop. He felt the boy’s trusting eyes, and Merlin’s; and when he was near the surface of slumber, where the realms are not so very separate, and mortal as well as Morpheus have forgotten their place, he was stricken by their deaths, and jolted rudely into a cold sweat to find Merlin asleep beside him on the floor, and the boy snoring beneath the covers.

He was snappish, and sorry for it; but he did not know how to correct himself. He knew to be stern when there was a danger; and afterward not to show he was scared, but simply to go on as if nothing had occurred. He knew to be stern when he loved something, and to berate it, till it went away: and then he would have nothing to lose, when he was inadequate.

So he tried not to love the boy, and only to view him as a sort of abstract justice which he needed to accomplish. But Aland was helpless in the large bed, and Merlin had already imprinted on him, as if he were a puppy; and then it was nearly unbearable to do anything other than love him, a little.
There was another day, and another; and the patrols were not called off, and Uther did not relent. Merlin was tired of pacing round and snapping at one another, and brought out a chess board. He was rubbish at it, but somehow won, occasionally, and this to Arthur was a far more grievous act of sorcery than any the boy could have perpetrated.

But they settled a little into themselves, now, and were not so stiff, till the heavy boots went clomping past the doors, and then Arthur with a start turned to check the bar was still in its place, and Merlin froze over the board, fiddling the pawn in his long white fingers.

There were bedtime stories to be told, which Merlin handled with surprising grace; he had a good voice for it, and pitched it to meet the various requirements of the populace which inhabited the stories he spun out, bit by bit, till the candle had gone low, and Arthur had fallen, without even noticing, into a pleasant drowsiness.

“Where did you hear all those?” he asked one evening, and Merlin, shrugging, pulled up the covers over the boy.

“I made them up. I use to do it a lot, back in Ealdor. Sometimes I just felt, you know...that I wasn’t really welcome. And the stories helped. Like I wasn’t alone, so long as I was telling them. I could sort of...go into them. For a while.” He seemed to suddenly notice that he was talking to Arthur in a chummy way, and his ears went red to the tips. He looked up with the look of a dog that has been beaten, and crept back on its belly, to know what it has done.

Arthur, swallowing, felt the weight of what Merlin had placed in his hands, and the frailty of it, and knew he ought to dash it.

Merlin rescued him. He gave the big stupid smile which exasperated Arthur, because he knew it was a trick to get out of his polishing; he said, hardly wavering, ‘What, no ‘Well, Merlin, it’s hardly a surprise you had so few friends?’”

“I was getting to that.”

“You know, you’r starting to get a bit slow. When I first met you, you’d have been right there with it.”

“I am not slow at anything.”

“Of course not.”

“Say it a little bit less convincingly, Merlin, I didn’t quite catch the utter scorn.”

“Of. Course. Not,” Merlin said with an exaggerated movement of his lips, and in the process of his mockery revealing that he had got a bit of stubble coming in on his upper lip, which distracted the candlelight, and Arthur as well.

They went on squabbling for a few minutes, whilst the boy slept untroubled. Then Arthur brought out the wine, and they got roaring drunk, and whilst they were trying to giggle, and to hold one another up, simultaneously, they spawned a number of brilliant ideas; but the most brilliant of all was the wooden horse which they thought they could build probably in a matter of hours, since Merlin was a fair hand with a saw, and Arthur was a fair hand with supervising: and then the boy could simply be smuggled out past the guards, who would not notice him, because he was inside a horse. They were sadly unconscious before they could implement it.
Arthur woke up with his head in Merlin’s lap.

There had been a death in his mouth, and not of a long illness, which whiles away its victim in intervals of lyrical pallor. This had been a messy one, and the deceased had thoroughly disgraced himself. It was only the natural biology of death, which does not have to worry about your trousers; but he ought not to have done it in Arthur’s mouth.

This was when he noticed the lap under his head. He had shifted in order to redistribute himself in his skin, since he was desirous of leaving it, and knew he hardly had any choice, and it was nice skin besides; and he thought a change in positioning might do him some good. He heard the whispering of linen beneath his head, and blinked, because the floor was not made of linen, and therefore it was quite a surprising development. Moreover, the linen was warm, underneath it, where there was some surface of strangely contradicting materials, which seemed at once to be firm, and yielding.

He blinked once more, and turned his head the other way, and he found, in front of his nose, something which was unmistakably a man’s lap, with all the trappings. The lap was undergoing all the normal functions of a young male, and nearly put out Arthur’s eye.

Arthur’s mind came fuzzily into awareness, and now, with a speed that rattled his brain, which during the night had got much too big for his skull, he leapt away, and screamed, “Merlin!”

Merlin sat up with a foggy look, holding his head. “What?”

Arthur spluttered. The wine had flustered him, and disconnected many vital neurons; but it had forgot to unhook the transmitters which conveyed to him the sight of his manservant’s penis, and now he was stuck on it, in a scientific way. It was still alert. Merlin did not seem to notice it, but only wanted to grip his temples, and moan. Arthur had launched himself as far as the table, and was now holding one of its legs in an attempt to introduce the revolving ceiling to a fixed object, and to force it into imitation.

“Merlin!” he shouted again, as if a proper scolding would shame it into hiding.

“What?” Merlin said again, as if he were the prince, and could just go round snapping at people.

“You...get me something for this headache.”

The boy was awake now, and called out, hazily, for Merlin; he wanted him in the mornings, when he had woken to the unfamiliar chambers which were not his home, and found the unfamiliar sunlight coming in transformed through the windows which were not his own; and Merlin, rubbing his head, went to check on him, and then to bring him his breakfast, and fuss over him, and generally conduct himself in a pleasant way, which Arthur had never experienced, and was almost convinced here was the true magic, that Merlin was actually capable of serving, in a competent and timely manner.

He did have an elixir for his headache, and it did not taste any better than the casualty in his mouth. He held his nose whilst he drank it, and then ordered Merlin to fetch him some water. He was carefully considering the pros and cons of falling on his sword, or at least of putting it through his head; he did not understand why Merlin had allowed him to drink so much. It was irresponsible.

“You’re the one who brought it out.”

“Yes, well, you didn’t have to leave it out. You know, if you actually put things away in a timely
manner, this wouldn’t have happened.” He massaged his temples.

“Prince Arthur, you aren’t wearing any trousers,” Aland offered, whilst Merlin looked at him with a smile he had concealed with exceptional poorness.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Merlin!” he snapped, putting them on backwards, and then to a delighted audience yanking them off again, and setting them to rights.

“I figured you’d notice eventually. I guess not. I suppose it’s a good job you’ve a manservant to do those things for you.”

“Not that he’s any use whatsoever!” Arthur snapped again, and slammed the door.

He had forgotten his sword, and went back in to belt it on, and then to slam the door once more.

He spent a thoroughly miserable patrol in the rain yelling at people, and getting the side eye from his men. When he stalked into Gaius’ chambers to collect Merlin, Arthur was determinedly wretched, and did not plan to come out of it anytime soon; Merlin, who had recovered from the wine with questionable speed, launched into a cheerful lecture on some herbs he had used in the treatment of gout, and walked very close to him, as if Arthur were at all desirous of that, which he was not. In fact he had conceived a passionate hatred of Merlin, and his good nature. He also hated the herbs Merlin was blathering about, though they had not done anything, and probably were innocent of anything other than a premature wilting. Merlin was not guilty of a premature wilting. Arthur had still not recovered from it. It seemed to him that possibly Merlin was in love with him, and that was why his body had responded in the disturbing manner it had demonstrated that morning. It was not appropriate, but it was understandable.

“I had an idea,” Merlin was saying when they let themselves into Arthur’s chambers, and called Aland out from underneath the bed.

“God save us,” Arthur said, as rudely as he could.

“The guards aren’t going to leave. And every day he stays here, the more likely it is we’ll all be caught. And I don’t want my head lopped off, or his, or yours.”

“I won’t have my head lopped off. Although I’m not saying I wouldn’t welcome it, at the moment. Did you get some more of that elixir from Gaius? And how did you recover so quickly? You drank at least as much as I did, and I’m twice your size.”

“You aren’t twice my size. I’m actually a little taller than you.”

As slander, Arthur could not let this stand, and pulling off his sodden tunic, he hurled it into Merlin’s face, which was the least he deserved, for being such a liar. “You are not taller than me, Merlin.”

Merlin shrugged, and hurled the tunic back at him; it struck his naked back with a dull thwap, and stuck. Arthur tried to remember what he had said last time he’d discoursed on the subject of masters, and not throwing things at them, which could be, under the strictest interpretation of the law, considered an act of treason; and certainly Arthur deemed it an executable offence, under the circumstances, which were the following:

- He was wet, and it angered him

“Anyway, we dress him as one of the spit boys, and go round right under their noses. No one would think it odd for me to be in the company of a kitchen servant.”
“And how do you propose to get the proper clothing? Rob one of the spit boys? And what happens when someone sees him up close, and recognises him?”

“Gwen could make him something. And I could change up his face a bit.”

“Change up his face a bit? How exactly, Merlin, do you propose to do that? And don’t pull Guinevere into this. Do you have no regard for her? Don’t you like her?” He was irritated about it. Gwen was a nice girl, and didn’t deserve whatever fumbling rubbish Merlin would consider a proper courtship.

“Who’s Gwen?” Aland wanted to know.

“Gwen’s lovely,” Merlin said.

“She’s all right,” Arthur said, sitting down in his favourite chair so he could put his chin in his hand, and sulk properly. She was perfectly lovely, but he was not in the mood to compliment anyone, especially if they had the poor taste to be courted by Merlin.

“You can mix up some herbs, to use them as face paint. If you know what you’re doing, you can even change the shape of someone’s face. A sort of optical illusion.”

“And you would know what you’re doing with make-up.”

“Yeah. Gwen thinks it’s cute,” Merlin said, and it seemed to Arthur he said it with a certain smugness, as if he knew it would bother Arthur before Arthur himself even knew it would bother him. “We can do it, Arthur. Who’s going to expect us to take him out right in front of the guards? I won’t tell Gwen what the clothes are for. But we have to do something.” He was solemn again, and looked at Arthur so earnestly that Arthur was uncomfortable; it felt as if Merlin had put the feeling into him, and now he was strangely protective of it.

“Arthur,” Merlin said again, and was even kneeling on the floor, so he could meet Arthur’s eyes properly where he was slumped at the table. He did not touch Arthur, but it was as if he had, and Arthur, feeling it, went still. They looked at one another so long the boy probably wondered about them.

“All right,” Arthur said, softly, and Merlin, incandescent, smiled at him.

Gwen had attended to her father’s supper, and seen him off to bed, and now she was sat down with her mending, thinking about how she had kissed Merlin, and Merlin had not seemed to mind, very much. Possibly he did mind, just a little, and was only too polite to say anything. But after all he had said it was perfectly all right, and he was really a terrifically lovely man, and not a liar.

The candles were burning quite low at this point, and the tallow putting out its habitual reek; the sweet flag underfoot gave a little shirrh shirrru where her toes went over it, and tried with vain assistance to give the tallow even a middling run for its money. She had left open the shutters to let in the summer, and now that it was yielding to the late hour, began to think about closing them. But it was sending in such a friendly breeze, and minding itself round the candles, that she couldn’t yet be persuaded that it was necessary to leave her chair. So she went on in this cosy manner, stitching, and wondering what it would be like to kiss Merlin again, when he was capable of reciprocation. If he wanted to. Which surely he wouldn’t. But it was the sort of atmosphere conducive to such
fantasies, and it made her cheerful: for by candlelight, whilst the hills are breathing out their last sweet fragrances, our hopes are most conceivable. They have not been stripped down by daylight, and paraded about raw; but are only the soft, silly bits of humans, and allowed to be so. So there were times throughout the mending that it was not only vaguely possible that she might kiss Merlin again, but almost certain, and she sang to herself, and was embarrassed by herself; but it was a pleasant sort of embarrassment, and only made her shake her head a little, and hold the mending to her face.

There were footsteps outside the window whilst she was bent over a hem, but there were many such noises in a night like this; she was not especially mindful of them. But then there was a voice at the window, and a head thrust through it; and the head belonged to Merlin, and smiled so happily at her that she forgot, entirely, how to stitch, and stuck herself with the needle.

“Ouch!” he said. “You all right?”

“Oh! Yes. Thank you. It’s just a little prick. It’s nothing. You don’t have to look at it,” she said, and realised he had not offered.

“I can if you want me to.”

“No! I’m sure you have loads of better things to do. I mean, of course you do, you’re Arthur’s servant, he’s probably got you running all over, you know, polishing his armour. And that sort of thing. I think he should be nicer to you!” she blurted out in a different volume altogether, as if her mouth had detached from the whole, and was now just saying whatever it fancied, in whatever manner it liked. “I mean. I’ve wanted to say that for...ages now. I think you’re a very good manservant. And...he’s lucky to have you.”

“Thank you,” Merlin said, and his face was positively brilliant. There was no one had ever smiled like him. It came into his eyes, and shone down on her; and she felt that before it, she had never been warm. “Actually, speaking of Arthur, I have a favour to ask you. Could you sew me something? Something like one of the spit boys in the kitchen might wear?”

“Sure. But why?” she asked, setting down the mending and going to the window so their faces were very near one another, and the summer night ran respectfully between them, tossing up Merlin’s hair. It was getting longish about his ears, and beginning to curl round them.

“It’s for Arthur.”

“What would Arthur want with something like that?”

“He just...em...he just likes that sort of thing. You know, seeing...if he can fit himself into it. He’s really, you know...just mad about it. I think, maybe it’s a sexual thing?”

“A sexual thing?” She blinked.

“Yeah. You know, em...like the sensation...of the clothes being really tight? He likes that.” He was red, and looked apologetic. “You can’t tell anyone you made them. He’s really embarrassed about it.”

“I wouldn’t.” She wouldn’t know how to.

“Great. So, do you think you could do it? How long would it take to make something like that?”

“I could...probably have it by morning?”
“Gwen,” he said, and had lost all the flustered hue, and was now only his usual radiant self. He grabbed up her hands in his big rough ones, and held them in such a warm press that she thought how their children might look, and how she would dote on them. “You’re the best!”

And then he had turned back from the window, and left her stupid at its sill, touching where his fingers had touched, and the sensation gone under her skin. She had almost forgotten about Arthur’s sexual proclivities; but of course you can never entirely forget when a handsome prince with hair of bright corn silk is weird about his appetites: so when she had got over, partially, the lingering manner in which Merlin’s presence stayed on, she went back to it. And then she could not come out of it, and wondered what it would be like to pass him in the hall, whilst he was dressed in his own tailored costume, which was disappointing to him; and imagining it, she was already hot under her tunic, in the unpleasant way.

Gwen was brilliant, and brought round the clothes next morning. He rushed off to Arthur’s with them in his arms, and went banging into the room at full speed, trying to get up his breath. He had run up all the steps, and nearly fallen, and died; and Arthur was not even impressed, but only looked at him from the breakfast table where he was sitting across from Aland, and trying to cut up his trout.

“Where have you been?”

“‘Good morning, Merlin. Oh, Merlin, you’ve brought up the disguise we needed. It’s a good job we have you. Don’t know what I’d do with myself if we didn’t.’”

“Probably have a nap, without someone in my ear the whole time.” Arthur was only partially cognizant of Merlin; he was absorbed in putting his own bread onto Aland’s plate, which was sweet, and bothered Merlin. It was disconcerting when Arthur was not a prat; it was easier to be dismissive of him, and to slag him off to the Great Dragon, and to not enjoy his duties as the royal idiotminder, but grumble about them. It was easier to be at odds with Arthur, than to look at him in a soft way, and notice his strong thighs. “You didn’t tell Gwen what it was for?”

“I didn’t, I swear.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Just that it was for you.”

Arthur looked up at this, and squinted at him. He put a fist under his chin.

“What else did you tell her?”

“Nothing!”

“Come on, Merlin; I know that look. What did you say to Gwen?”

“Nothing much. And I don’t have any look. Nothing special. Just my face.” He did have a look; he could feel it on his face. But Arthur certainly didn’t need to know he was right; it wasn’t healthy for him.

The look he could feel on his face had a child, nearly its twin, but more concentrated in its novelty, as newborns often are beside their faded genealogy. “Cover his ears.”

Arthur gave him a confused look, and did as he was told; and then the look was abruptly angry, as if he had anticipated what Merlin was about to say, or at least the gist of it. He had at least foreseen that Merlin had made a boob of him, and now his eyes were not unlike the sword on the table, and in a skewering manner felt their way round Merlin’s belly.

“I just told her that...you like...trying to fit yourself into...small clothes. That sort of thing. That it was for that. That you liked it...sexually.”

“What?”

“Well, I had to give her a reason why she couldn’t mention it to anyone! What else was I supposed to say?”

“Anything but that!” Arthur had leapt up, and forgotten to keep hold of Aland’s ears, which he took up once more in his palms, hastily, when he had remembered himself. “Merlin!” he hissed. “She’s going to think I’m some sort of pervert!”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Merlin!”

“Look, I’m sorry, Arthur, I didn’t know what to do.”

“Yes, you seem terribly remorseful, what with the ‘Well, what else was I to do when I had a hundred other excuses I could have given?’ If my father doesn’t catch us, I’ll have your head off myself,” he said with appropriate menace. Merlin was not fazed. Arthur liked to say those sorts of things, and to puff up his chest, and then to do nothing, like a numpty.

Aland was weary of being left out of the grown-ups’ fun, and took Arthur’s hands from his ears. “Can you tell a story, Merlin?”

“Later,” Arthur said, because he was not the fun dad. He took up the clothes. “Put these on.”

“Please,” Merlin added, since Arthur was also not the dad with manners, and it’s unseemly for a child to learn by example, when the example is so poor, and he thinks to get away with it, simply because someone who is larger than him has done it.

They stood with their shoulders almost touching whilst Aland went behind the dressing screen, and then when he had come out again, Arthur looked him up and down critically, his arms crossed. He was very stern, and stood as he did when appraising a horse. “Well, Merlin, run along and get your make-up. Let’s do something about his face.”

“Right; I’ll just nip down to my rooms.”

“Where you keep your make-up.”

“Arthur, you don’t get a complexion like this without some help,” he said, because Arthur did not like it when Merlin could not be baited, and thus having thwarted him, he went at full speed off to Gaius’ for his magic book.
He had assumed, presumptively, that somewhere in the annals of sorcery, there would be something which could be used to modify an undesirable face; certainly there was the opposite, and certainly it had made him feel a bit better, whilst he was carrying Arthur’s armour up to his rooms, to know he could give him spots, and a paunch: and so it could be reasonably presumed that warlocks had not given their rivals an exhaustive thrashing with the ugly stick, and let it lie, when they had the means to doubly humiliate him, by being thoroughly handsome, in the laudatory way of epics. So between the two, Merlin ought to have no few selections in how he could alter the boy, and get him past his own mother, if need be; but after some time in his bed, with the book over his lap, he still had not come upon anything satisfactory. The sun was getting on, and that meant some considerable time had passed, and Arthur would be angry, and possibly come looking for him. He had to ruffle up the pages quickly, and hardly glance at them, and then to simply latch onto the first thing which seemed to be even vaguely related to his troubles, and commit it to memory, before Arthur with his usual thundery shouting came bulling into the room.

“Where have you been?” Arthur demanded when he had let himself back into the chambers, and Aland with a little shout came running to meet him, as if they had been parted at least an eternity.

“Sorry; Gaius was hovering. He wanted me to help him with some elixirs.”

“Well get to it; I have patrol in a few minutes.”

Merlin had not considered that Arthur might want to watch him. This was awkward, for all the obvious reasons. He popped his knuckles to pass the time, while Arthur made all the antsy movements of someone who does not have to be patient, because he is rich, and has paid for the world to be accommodating; Arthur made a gesture with his hand toward the boy. He was highly aggravated, and gave Merlin the usual look of bitter confusion, to show that he did not understand how it was Merlin continued to operate with all the common objectives of the human systems which keep him lively, and breathing, let alone put on his trousers in the morning.

There was a knock at the door, which saved him; but only momentarily, since it was insistent, and seemed, by the tenor of it, to be upset about something. And then he and Arthur looked at one another, with a mutual panic, and Arthur picked up the boy as if he were a pair of dirty braies which could be hastily put away when there was company, and they were in danger of discovering your sloth, and slovenliness; and all the other sins besides.

“Arthur?” The voice belonged to Morgana, and that meant the knock as well.

“Get rid of her!” Arthur hissed. “That woman is like a bloodhound.” Then he hustled himself and the boy behind the dressing screen, leaving Merlin to fend for himself. Merlin was struck dumb. Morgana was like a very good bitch who has been bred for a proper killing, instead of simply flushing a stag from his bramble, for the murderous delight of her humans; only she could do it with her words, and also a sword, and possibly she had either, or both, in company. And Arthur, the coward, was now flinching behind the dressing screen, and gesturing for him to get on with it, alone.

The voice came again. “Arthur!” It was not delighted. Merlin looked at Arthur, who hissed at him, and made another shooing motion.

It was certainly the most daunting thing he had done, including drinking down a goblet which he knew to be poisoned; he opened the door with his heart in his throat, and slipped through it before Morgana could impose herself on the gap, putting her back with a startled look on her face into the hall. “Merlin? Where’s Arthur?”
“Morgana! Hey; yeah, sorry. Arthur is...em, he’s naked.”

“Arthur’s naked.”

“Yeah, very naked. Probably the most naked I’ve ever seen anyone.”

Morgana tilted her head a little. He felt as if she were tasting what he had said, and finding it inadequate, and false, as if he had put the wrong spice into it; he tapped his fingers together. He tried to look innocuous. He thought possibly he could succeed, because Morgana was susceptible to his ears, which she thought were adorable, and liked to tweak. He tried to look like something that was like a dog which is not very bright, but is a friend to everyone.

She squinted at him. She did not look enamoured of his ears now, but only crossed her arms over her bosom, which he hadn’t noticed. “Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to be subjected to that. Tell Arthur to come and see me when he’s done being naked. I want to know why the two of you are creeping round like thieves lately. I saw Gwen give you something this morning. Don’t worry, Merlin,” she interrupted, when he opened his mouth with an excuse. “I’m not going to interrogate you.” Her face softened, and in fond appraisal looked him over. “I know it’s Arthur’s fault, whatever is going on. I’m hardly going to take it out on you.”

“Great! Yeah, thanks, Morgana. Really. Arthur is--”

“A spoilt, reprehensible gobdaw.”

“Right,” he said, smiling. “A naked, spoilt gobdaw, so I better help him be...not naked anymore. Which he is. Very. It’s just, you know, swinging round. Free. Em--”

She put a hand on his arm before he could get on any farther, and giving it a squeeze, moved off into the hall with her skirts whispering. He slumped back against the door. His knees were like water underneath him, and went loosely this way and that.

“Are you financially compensated to be this ridiculous?” Arthur asked, coming out from behind the screen as soon as Merlin had shut the door behind him.

“No, just to be your toady.”

“We really ought to change your job description, since the former is the only thing you’re any good at. But at least you kept her out, so there’s that. I suppose occasionally you can make a show of doing something useful. See if you can actually maintain that, and get to work on him. We need to get him out tonight. We can’t have Morgana sniffing round here.” And with this said in his usual rude and imperious tone of voice, Arthur, tousling the boy’s hair, took himself off to patrol.

Then there was the spellwork to be done, which took him some time to work round to; he had to get up his courage, and to kneel in front of the boy, and put his finger to his lips, and say, “You can’t tell Arthur.” And then he whispered the words of ancient mystique, and turned the boy green.

This presented a difficulty; and he spent the rest of the afternoon wrestling it. By the time Arthur was in from the rain, and sullen with it, he had settled for giving the boy loads of spots, and the paunch; only he had found some way to transfer this to his cheeks, and to the nose, so the end of it was baggy, and rather sad, and the effect, altogether, was perfectly monstrous: so at least if anyone had reason to look at him, they would not want to do it for long.
They had a tense supper.

Arthur sheathed and re-sheathed his knives, though he was only going as far as the boundary, where the road turned off through the trees and Camelot made its brief farewells, before the leaves shut it out. He had eaten a piece of bread, and nothing else. His stomach was even resentful of this, and wanted the chamber pot. But he had to keep up a heroic front, and went on stoically arming and disarming himself, for something to do. Merlin was working on the boy’s mood, and had a repertoire of tricks which was nearly stunning in its variety. In addition to the juggling, he could pull coins out of the boy’s ear, and even guess which card the boy was going to draw from a pack of Arthur’s; he knew poetry by rote, and could whistle exactly like a shrike. If the boy made a show of fright by any gesture of his eyes or limbs, Merlin drew him away from it, and made it seem a silly thing, but so gently the boy was not ashamed, but only delighted by whatever distraction had been employed.

When they stepped into the hall together, Arthur’s confidence was only a sheer thing, and underneath it was the certainty he had gone wrong, and was to get them all killed; and Merlin somehow knowing it, touched his shoulder with a steady hand. There was a feeling which went from Merlin into Arthur, and he knew it to be a steadfast faith, that Merlin was confident in their course, and in Arthur; and then he took a breath, and found that it was easier, and he could see the castle only as it really was, in the falling twilight, the old nooks familiar and friendly to him, and the shadows now only the ordinary comportment of nature. The hand was taken from him, but not the sensation of it; and his shoulder where it had lain was as if alight.

They were not stopped by anyone. It was not the business of the staff where he was taking some servants. There were the proper bows, and curtseys, but these were only the general courtesies, and no other attention was paid to them. Merlin greeted everyone he knew, and smiled round with his usual cheer. There were some maids Arthur could see were keen to flirt; but seeing him they lowered their heads and rushed on to their duties, whispering behind their hands.

So they reached the stables in good order, where Merlin swiftly tacked up the horses, and the guard, smiling to their lord, streamed past in benign ignorance.

Aland on seeing them had stiffened, and fixated on a tall dark man called Bors, who was looking at them with a lingering confusion; Arthur remembered it was Bors had brought him in crying, and now he could see him puzzling through the tickling at the back of his brain, which could neither recognise the boy, nor hail him as a stranger.

They were all of them waiting for something to give; Arthur could scarcely bear to exist; he felt it was heavy, and prickled at him, and longed to come bursting out of himself, and the world. He could not stand casually in the rain as he was generally known to stand, giving orders, but had to, and did. He was painfully mindful of the eyes which followed and weighed them. He was painfully mindful of how Merlin would look at him from the headsman’s block, and the axe sing its merry old tune, unknowing of its duty. Merlin was looking back at him, buckling the girth blind, as if he were afraid to look away from Arthur; they were both staring helplessly at the other, as if there were some salvation in it, and passed the moment that way, without noticing that Bors had gone away, till the boy began to chatter once more.

When they mounted up, the rain had brought on an early night, and they headed at a brisk canter for the wild wet wood, which tossed unbecomingly. The road sucked up the hooves of their mounts, and then they bogged down into a weary trot, unspeaking. There was a general sense of doom, from the weather, and Arthur took out his sword, and laid it ready across his saddle. He was looking into this barbarian wood, teeming with unknowable ills, and inexplicably it felt impossible to him, to hand Merlin over to it. It was a place you went into, and not out of.
Merlin was staring at it, with Aland in front of him, quietly holding the saddle horn. He turned to Arthur. The wind was having a lark with his hair, and his ears, red in the aftermath, stuck out most ludicrously. “Well, this is it.”

Arthur, abruptly, did not want it to be. He saw the boy looking up at him from Merlin’s arms. He saw the big eyes which were unchanged by Merlin’s revisions, a little teary. He was a little teary himself, from the rain.

“Thank you, Prince Arthur,” Aland said, as solemnly as a man, and reached out his hand.

Arthur reached back with an autonomy of limb that startled him. He swallowed when the small wet fingers touched his own. “Aland, when I am king, you are welcome here.” He was embarrassed by the strength of feeling in his voice, and softened it with the generic following: “Be well.”

The boy’s look was only a pale thing beside Merlin’s. Something had blazed up out of his eyes, and touched Arthur with its warmth. He was aware of the rain, distantly, as if it were shut up outside a window. It was intimate, the blazing, and it made him feel that he did not quite understand the general order of things, that he never had, but was feeling round toward it, through the look.

“Arthur,” Merlin said, and then his throat seemed to close up. He was struggling against it, and the combat could be seen in his neck, where the tendons flickered. “Thank you. For being kind to him.”

And he leaned out, and caught up Arthur’s hand, which felt to Arthur as if it were too large, too crude, for the interaction: but it stayed well enough in Merlin’s own hand, for the moment, whilst the rain was ignorant, and came pattering between their fingers.

“Be careful, Merlin,” he said, thickly.

“Right. I’ll be back,” Merlin said, and then he took up the reins, and clucked to his horse, and away he went into the world, as if he never would be.

“The boy who escaped,” Uther said over a quiet supper that night, looking contemplatively into his wine. “You’ve seen nothing of him?”

“I rode out myself this evening, as far as the boundary. There was nothing,” Arthur said, lying as he had never lied before. He was not yet recovered from the image of the tail out like a standard, and the dark head bouncing over it.

“I sent some of the men round to his mother’s house, to see if she had taken him in.” Uther rolled the goblet in his hand, and seemed oblivious of it. “She was dead, Arthur. By the hand of magic.”

Arthur felt the cold come creeping into his belly. “What?”

“The story the boy told, about being thrown out.” Uther sighed, and rubbed the weary line between his brows. “It was all a lie. He murdered his mother, and fled. She had been dead some time when the knights arrived, but there was no mistaking it. I sent Gaius round to confirm it.” He looked up at Arthur, as if he were sorry for him. “This is why I said we must act swiftly, no matter how seemingly innocuous the accused.” He said it with almost a sympathy. “You are young, and your compassion will serve you well. But you must learn who has earned it. You must learn, Arthur,
that a king cannot afford to give it freely. You must select its recipients as wisely as you pick your
 counselors.”

Arthur was not aware of any speech. He thought Uther might have gone on to give one. But there
was only a dull roaring in him, whilst his hands went on with the banal chore of shovelling up his
food, and putting it into him.

Morgana was not ignorant of the fact that Merlin had been gone a week, and Arthur was dismal.
He had gone off to his mother, in Ealdor, and would shortly be home, Arthur explained, but went
about with such a long face that she was as sincerely convinced of it as she had been of Merlin’s
attempts to justify why she could not be admitted to Arthur’s chambers. They were only silly boys,
and terrible at subterfuge; and if they had wanted to arrange about the boy more efficiently, they
ought to have consulted her.

She did not tell Arthur she knew about the boy. She had seen them all at the stables, and known,
though she could not say how; she had only got a feeling about the little spit boy with the spotty
face, and said nothing. But she did feel a bit sorry for Arthur, and tempered their exchanges, which
he hardly engaged in anyway, and then only half-heartedly. He took his supper in his chambers,
and was sometimes blankly faraway in the halls, when people tried to acknowledge him; she
thought it likely he would recover when Merlin returned, or not at all. She was sorry he had fallen
into love in this clumsy way, and was too stupid for it, and she decided she would be motherly to
him, if he were grateful about it, which he was not.

They played cards in the evenings, because she made him, and he was a tosser when he lost,
naturally, and unbearable when he won. He seemed briefly to come back into life, though, whilst
he was engaged in the competition of it, and in the firelight where his hair gleamed, it was almost
pleasant, till he spoke.

She said to him one evening, “Merlin is a lot more capable than you give him credit for, Arthur.
He’ll be back. I know it.” And casually she dealt out the cards, while Arthur sat with his chin on
his fists, watching her with a dawning comprehension.

“I know that. He’s only visiting his mother,” he said, to test it, and she gave him a look. He sighed.
“How did you know?”

“Because you’re a pair of silly arseholes, who ought to have come to me for help. Where is he?”

Arthur rubbed at his face, looking down at the cards, so she did not see that the answer was
difficult for him, that he was sick with it; and he was momentarily so wretched, and in need of a
mother, that she felt the hurtful movements of a great compassion. It was distressing to look at him,
to be moved; and to go on only sitting there, powerless.

“Nemeth. Provided he even made it, and wasn’t waylaid by bandits, or killed by the murderer I
sent him off with.”

“It’s sweet that you’re worried about him.”

“I am not worried.” Arthur paused, because that had not been convincing. “I am worried...about
the horse.” He turned over the card in his hand, and rubbed his face again. “I should have left well
enough alone. I thought I knew better than my father, and look what I’ve done.”
“Arthur,” she said, and he flinched from the gentleness of her tone, as if he were used to flinching, and did not understand tenderness, or how to be affected by it. “You had no proof of his wrongdoing. You knew he was a poor child who had stolen some food because he was hungry, and you acted upon that information. The law is not omniscient, and it doesn’t see nuance. It does not judge individuals, but only itself, and anything which seems to run afoul of it. Don’t you think it was better, to be kind to a child you thought was innocent, and to risk being wrong, than to assume his guilt, and be wrong?”

He looked down at the card under his hands. She saw that he was struggling inside himself, and could not look back up. “The innocents are the people who will fall prey to him, because I was naive.”

“The innocents are the people who have no one to speak for them. The innocents are the people who are guilty by the misfortune of their birth. Some of them will be criminals, because that’s how the world is: the oppressed are not innocent by virtue of their oppression, just as they are not guilty. But you can only look at them as individuals, and decide based on the circumstances. And it’s better to free a guilty man, and let justice find him again, than to kill an innocent one, and let nothing find him again.”

He turned the card under his hand; he was absorbed in the table. The firelight came brilliantly to him, and bronzed the shining fringe, and the scarred fingers. He was like a carving which by some sorcery unfroze, bit by bit, and the blood of man went into the petrified limbs, and animated them. The card turned more quickly, and the movement came up into his forearms, and finally into his head, which went up. “It’s been over a week, Morgana. Nemeth is only a two day ride from here. He should have been back by now, if he were going to be.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said off-handedly, so he would feel it was something to be casual about. “It might be two days’ ride for you; Merlin has a terrible seat. You’ve got to allot time for falling off the horse, and putting himself and the boy back on it. And surely you don’t think he rode into Nemeth, tossed the poor thing off his mount to fend for himself, and rode back here at full gallop just to be reunited all the quicker with you? He’d have to get the boy situated somewhere safe, with someone who would take care of him.”

Arthur made a face. “He’s not coming back to be reunited with me. Don’t make it sound so romantic, Morgana.”

“Oh, but isn’t it?” she asked, and pinched his cheek. He slapped her hand away. “He’s very handsome, don’t you think?”

“No.” Arthur looked at her in an alarmed way, as if he were concerned for her. “I think you ought to have a chat with Gaius about what’s in those sleeping draughts. Merlin. Handsome. I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in my life.”

“Good. Because he’s the only man in all the world who deserves Gwen, and they’re going to be married, and have my nieces and nephews.”

“I don’t know what that has to do with me,” Arthur snapped.

“I’m sure you don’t,” she said, truthfully, because he was absolutely dim.
It was nearly three weeks Merlin was gone. There were too many adventures to tell; he had taken seven days to Nemeth, to flee some Saxon outlaws; and then he had got lost, and afterward the horse had got lost; and then it had come back to him reluctantly, with a guilty air; and after that the boy had taken sick, and they could only go on slowly, and soon not at all: he was poorly enough that Merlin had to stop their journey altogether, and hunt up some herbs, and attend to him.

But in the end it was done, and the boy was handed off to a jolly big blacksmith, who took him on as an apprentice, and seemed to look very favourably upon him, as a son; and so Merlin left in high spirits, feeling himself accomplished.

He was four days in returning, because there were no outlaws this time, though he was lost again, and wandered about in a vile patch of Sherwood, very dingy, with some rather suspicious boughs that looked like faces, and seemed to watch him as he trotted along talking to the horse, for something to keep back the quiet. He had decided, in the silence, where he was able to hear the arguments which he made for and against himself, to tell Arthur. It was terrifying, and exhilarating. He took it back at least twice a day, and in the morning when he woke up having blissfully dreamt of the look which Arthur had given Aland on their parting, he reinstated it once more. He thought how the shock would come to Arthur’s handsome face, and then the understanding. He knew they would be conspiratorial about it, and talk behind their hands like a pair of good mates; and then there was a sort of glow in place of his stomach, whilst he pictured it, and thought of being loved, in a deep platonic way. He would not have to be false anymore, and to prevaricate, and pretend he was dull.

So he rode back almost buoyant, and did not touch the saddle, and not only because he was an atrocious rider, and left too much air between the seat and his ass, every time the horse went into a trot.

When he crossed the border into Camelot, it was a Tuesday, and joyful of it; the sun pierced him through, and surrounded the citadel, and framed it: and he was happy with an almost terrible intensity, and touched up the horse to a gallop.

It was mid-morning, and Arthur would be training, so he ran straight away to the field, to see him in full armour beneath the sun, drilling with single-minded devotion. He was now not ashamed to admit Arthur was magnificent, because they were shortly to be friends.

Arthur was putting himself through his paces alone, against a practice dummy. Merlin could hear the distinctive whanging of his sword, crying out each successful hit (and they were all successful). It seemed unlikely he would look up, without any prompting, and he would not like to be prompted, and lose his rhythm. But then his head came up, with a frown on the sweaty face, and his eyes went straight away to Merlin across the field, as if he had known to look there. The sword came out of his hand, inexplicably; Merlin had never seen him drop it before.

Merlin waved. Arthur stared. He was still so long Merlin felt uncomfortable, as if his presence had ruined something.

And then Arthur turned back to his dummy, and went on being trying to it.

Arthur finished his drill in a fever. He had never gone harder, but poured all of himself into each exercise, and fought three of his men at once, and won, swiftly. He pulled off his helm at the end, and shook his head, and conducted himself very casually, under the burning gaze of Merlin, who
had stayed on to watch him. In fact he hardly noticed Merlin. He was somewhat anxious, of course, because they were in possession of a secret, and a dire one; and now there was a second mouth to keep stopped up. But that was all. He had not thought often of Merlin in the seventeen and a half days of his absence, and did not think of him now. He went up to him as a courtesy after practice, and taking off his gloves, tossed them to Merlin, who surprisingly caught them.

“Well, it certainly took you long enough. Was your mother well?” he asked; the knights were still in ear shot.

“Yeah. She’s great. Really great, actually. I think she’s going to be happy.”

He wanted to leave it at that; he supposed it was now inconceivable, to set off on another mission, to retrieve the boy, to take him to some lonely dell, and cut off in secret his lying head. He knew he could not do it, and he could not order Merlin to do it; so it was tempting to let Merlin believe in a boy wrongfully accused, to believe in his own actions, and the conviction of them. And he might have done, if a grief had not been done to Merlin’s faith, to his comprehension of justice, and the Law; if he had not touched Arthur’s arm, and looked at him very strangely, and said, in a raspy voice, “Arthur, I have something to tell you. Not here. In your chambers.”

If Merlin had not said upon entering them, and barring the door behind, “Arthur, what you did for Aland, and magic--” before he was overcome by something, and Arthur would not have imposed himself on the confession. He would have let Merlin carry on believing in the boy, and loving him. He had done something of which Merlin approved: and he did not want to let go of it, and to be less noble. He wanted to be honourable in the eyes of his servant, and to have acted justly: and he was almost cowardly enough to have let it go on, and basked in it. But Merlin said to him, “Arthur, magic isn’t always evil. You can see that. You helped Aland because you knew it was the right thing to do.”

Then it was with a stiffness in his throat that Arthur had to crush him. “Merlin.” He sighed. “I’m sorry. But we were deceived.”

“What?” Merlin asked, softly and he seemed to sense there was something unpleasant, and Arthur put a hand on his shoulder, to steady him for it.

“Aland...was not abandoned by his mother. He murdered her, and fled. That’s how he ended up in Camelot. My father sent some men round to search the home of his mother, to see if she had taken him back in, and found her, dead by magic.”

“I don’t believe that. It could have been--it could have been someone else. There’s no way to know--”

“She was dead some time. It would have happened shortly before Aland arrived. Gaius confirmed it. There was evidence of his...crime. It’s certain it was him.” He squeezed Merlin’s shoulder a little, and it seemed to be frailer than it was a moment ago, to have withdrawn into itself. “I didn’t want to tell you. But you have to know...my father was right. And we shouldn’t have interfered. We let ourselves be deceived by him, because he was only a child. But you must remember, magic corrupts, even the seemingly incorruptible. You have to be careful. I wouldn’t want you to trust the wrong person again. You were lucky he didn’t harm you.”

Merlin was shaking. It was as if Arthur had stabbed him with it, rather than put it as gently as he could, in a kind tone. He had tried to be mindful of how Merlin cared for the boy, and not to be harsh about it; but of course it was harsh, and could hardly land softly, with little impact. Merlin was struggling to swallow, and the stubble on his lip jumped, spastically.
“I just thought--” Merlin said, and had to pause, because his voice had snapped off jaggedly, and the rest of it lodged in his throat. “I mean--thank you, Arthur. For warning me.”

He gave the trembling shoulder a little pat, and said, quietly, “You’re welcome, Merlin.”

Merlin did not sleep. He was uneasy in himself, and the linens on his bed, and the moonlight that lay coldly unassuming on his blanket. He felt as if he did not belong in the world, or his skin; his grief had carried him out of it, and separated them: so he was left to himself, and that was inadequate. He listened to the breathing of Gaius below, and hated him, and everything; and then he was ashamed of himself, and turned the hate inward, where it belonged.

When he had snuck down for a sleeping draught, and laid studying the ceiling as the draught went about its business in his limbs, and failed, and simply vanished, as if it never were, he put on his trousers. He went to the Great Dragon, to pour out his wounded heart.

“The boy’s tale was true,” the Great Dragon said, lifting his head from the stone, to the tinkling accompaniment of the chains.

“What do you mean?”

“It was Uther who misled you, not the boy. It was Uther, who had the boy’s mother killed.”

“But why would he do that? Why would he--” and he broke off, holding his torch in a grip that hurt, whilst comprehension went hot through his veins. “Because he was just a boy. Because he was sympathetic.”

“Because Arthur was beginning to stray. Because Arthur did not believe in the guilt of an innocent child. Because Arthur considered him an individual, and not a demographic. And that, young warlock, is why he had to doubt. That is how Uther murdered us, and how he will continue to murder us.”

“Then how do I stop it?”

“By helping Arthur to become the king he is destined to be.”

“But he--” Merlin swallowed with great difficulty, and nearly could not go on: but that was his own fate, to be hurt, and to endure. “He thinks I’m a monster. If I ever show him what I truly am--”

“Then do not show him. For some of us, young warlock, are bound for tragedy. That is the way our destiny lies. And all we can do is be useful enough, until there is meaning in it.”
Chapter Notes

Hello, and thank you to everyone who has read and commented on this. I appreciate the fuck out of you guys.

The challenge Arthur issues to Morold is from A.T. Hatto's translation of Gottfried von Strassburg's 'Tristan'. I did tweak it a little, but it's mostly a direct quote. Think of this as an alternative episode 5, since I'm going to bring in Lancelot a bit later. Everything will be mostly AU from now on; but I did manage to go four whole episodes without veering entirely off the course of canon, which for me is pretty impressive.

I have gone back and added a 'Book One' to the title of the first story; I decided I wanted to delineate the story arcs in that way since this is basically a complete retelling of the show. It just seems a bit neater to me to split them up into separate books rather than have them just all mashed together (each fic will, however, all still be posted as a part of this work; I'm not going to start a separate entry for each 'book'). Anyway, I hope you enjoy the latest addition, and thanks for reading!

The lady Morgana was resplendent. Dramatically she came led by the hand, by the beaming King Uther, for he knew what he brought; clad in purple samite she was, with a girdle of woven silk, and the white ermine of her mantle paired against the sable, for the melodrama of it. It all fitted finer than any robe and mantle had fitted, and from the clasps shone out some tiny pearls, and the sun through the windows took up the cry of them, and shouted it into every watching face. Her hair was as if living, and went over the white shoulders as the stream goes over its marbled stones. The fair white hand held the mantle delicately between two fingers, and hung against the purple samite with the motion of a bird before its first balletic lift into flight, when in its stillness it seems a very fine statue, into which the artist has put everything he knows of life, so that motionless, still it seems ready to burst into action, and to be just on the threshold of it. While she passed Arthur, and the robe hid the fair white hand from the court, the bird was no longer a very fine statue, but flitted into life. She had continued the avian metaphor in the crude sense, and held up her middle finger as long as she could get away with it.

But after the boggling was over, and she was too far away for a reciprocatory gesture to be launched, Arthur remembered that he was bored, in the most fatal sense of the word. King Nantres made a fine speech, and Uther after him; or at least they must be presumed to be fine speeches, since a king could hardly put out anything less, and Arthur had not entirely heard them, through the buzzing in his head. This was a self-defence mechanism which activated in the event of a feast, and had developed to such a degree that it knew when there were politics to eavesdrop on, and to bring him back into the fray--and when there was small talk, and then it could supply a long list of trite commentary which was charming enough to dazzle a female seatmate, but sufficiently distant to discourage any connubial hopes. (As well as they could be discouraged, which was not hardly, since he was so desirable.) He had one joy, and it was that he had forced Merlin to attend him, and he was now standing behind Arthur’s chair sighing as loudly as the voice in Arthur’s head; so he was not alone in his suffering, and at least could be gleeful about that.
Merlin was in attendance to see to his cup, and to replenish the rosewater into which Arthur dipped his fingers between courses. He was not friendly about it. He even said, once as he leant in to fill Arthur’s goblet, right into his ear, so closely that Arthur could feel not only Merlin’s breath on his ear, but possibly his lips, “You know how you’re always threatening to end me? Now’s your chance.” And Arthur, snorting, said to him, but at a proper distance, because he had manners, and knew not to breathe into people’s ears, and make them shiver, though the great hall was hot, and in fact he was sweltering under his jacket, “If I can’t escape into sweet death, what makes you think I’ll give you the pleasure?”

Merlin made a disapproving noise, and splashed Arthur’s wine. He had not done it out of clumsiness this time, but pique, and made sure Arthur knew it.

“Merlin, do try to be useful at something,” he said, but not very harshly, because he thought he might try and talk Merlin into creating a distraction whilst he slipped out, and if he were rude, Merlin would muff the distraction, purposefully.

“I don’t see why I have to stand behind you all this time. You could pour your own wine.”

“I could. Or you could just do your job, without the whingeing.” He spotted Gwen making eyes at the space behind his chair, and was miserable. It was always wretched, to see someone making a fool of themselves over something stupid. He imagined Merlin was returning the look, and felt like the expression on a wet cat’s face, and then his pheasant did not sit right, and leapt about in his belly as if it wanted revenge, and was immediately in the process of seeing about it. He bent down to scratch the head of the bitch waiting under the table for her scraps, and had his hand thoroughly licked, and then he felt a bit better; it is not as easy to be disgruntled when a dog loves you.

Gwen was still smiling in her besotted way at the back of Arthur’s chair, and then she mouthed something across the hall, and it seemed to Arthur that Merlin mouthed something back, for she suddenly covered her mouth, and turned away to laugh. He spun round. “Am I interrupting anything, Merlin?”

“Yeah; a little. But don’t you worry yourself, Arthur; you just sit there on your backside whilst I run myself ragged.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “I know we’ve discussed this before, but obviously it bears repeating; you shouldn’t try to be funny.”

“But I am.”

“You aren’t,” he said, a little less sternly than he meant to.

Merlin sighed. “Why is it we all have to sit round and watch while you lot pat yourselves on the back every time another one of you comes into town?”

Arthur was not supposed to agree, but certainly did, and as a compromise said nothing, but only went on drinking his wine aggressively. Merlin filled it again, brushing Arthur’s hand with his own so that the hair on the back of Arthur’s hand stood up, because Merlin had done it in such a way as to be ticklish, probably on purpose, and moreover, the hand which he had done it with was cold, and made Arthur shiver again, and then he felt himself becoming snappish over the inconvenience of it all. “Merlin!”

“What?”

“Why are your hands so bloody cold? It’s like a damned forge in here.”
“I dunno. They’re always like that.”

Arthur had a vague thought of rubbing them between his own, to see if he could bring the blood back into them, and then he blinked at the oddness of the thought, and stared suspiciously into the wine. Merlin leant in towards him again, and then he was aware that Merlin’s hands were the only cold part of him, and the rest of him warm, almost unbearably; and then Arthur felt that he could sense not only Merlin’s face beside his ear, but the whole skinny lot of him behind the chair, with the instinct by which he knew all the movements of his own myriad parts. Then it seemed obvious to him the wine was poisoned, and he was currently engaged in the hallucinatory stage preceding his painful death.

“If I can get us out of here, without alerting Uther or the guards, tomorrow you polish your own armour,” Merlin whispered into his ear.

“I could just order you to get me out of here.”

“So you’re afraid of betting against me.”

“I’m not afraid of anything, Merlin.”

Merlin was smiling right next to his face. “Then do we have a deal?”

Arthur looked at him. He ought not to have turned his face; Merlin was awkwardly close. But it would have been cowardly of him to not do it, and then Merlin would have been right to mock him. “Right. Lead on, then,” he said, with as much sarcasm as he could muster, and the words were scarcely cold in his mouth when there was a sudden loud bang, and a cry from one of the squires. The high table, and the rest of them besides, turned round toward the racket; Uther was already out of his chair and flirting politely with one of the ladies at the lower table, and the racket went blustering out from behind him, so that he was almost in the centre of it, and absorbed by it. It was only a tray of ale being dropped, but might well as have been a great tragedy, by the way the court exclaimed over it, and Arthur, having started at the loud noise, now jumped when Merlin’s hands came down over his shoulders, and yanked him out of the chair. Then his wrist was taken up in one of the cold hands, and Merlin, laughing, and darting with surprising speed toward a door which was nearly invisible, because the servants used it, dodged a page with Arthur still in his grip; and then he hit the door with his shoulder, and they both stumbled as it gave way. Arthur was still being toted about like a child, but Merlin led him with such assurance he allowed it, especially as he didn’t know the servant’s corridors, and was already turned about; but then it was the contagion of it, the way Merlin’s laughter passed back into him, as if it had gone through his fingers into Arthur’s wrist, and then even when they had hurtled past a startled line of servants bringing in the next course, and the way was once more familiar to him, Arthur went on after him, laughing. They were both pulling at the other, and sprinting at top speed, up the stairs and round, toward the battlements. There was no specific reason for it, other than it seemed mischievous to keep running, though Uther had probably already noted his absence, and was not in a position to do anything about it, without abandoning the guests. They pounded away up the stairs, beginning to pant now, and when Merlin, laughing harder, could barely take the next flight, Arthur got him by the collar, and hauled him up after.

They were roaring like mad when they got to the battlements, and held up one another. Arthur did not even know why he was laughing; and that, of course, is the best kind. He felt a kind of fizziness in him, and realised it was happiness, the directionless sort, which is not born of a tourney victory, and fleeting: but just the absurd joy of living, the freedom in being outrageous. He clapped Merlin on the back.

There was an early sunset, since fall was now encroaching, and when they had calmed they
watched it menace the hills, which had only been greenly minding their own business, and now blazed up, almost wickedly. It was splendid. The lands turned a lovely peach, and then as the sun was bloodied by its final movements, there was a lurid blush which took the green meadows, and the wavering trees. They flushed all the way to their roots, and were shameful as any pure maiden. Merlin had pressed his shoulder into Arthur’s, and did not take it away; and Arthur did not either, as it seemed a moment to be shared. He had sometimes come, and sat on the battlements as a boy, and left his legs dangling over the edge, for the sheer bravado of it; but he was soon scolded down by a tutor, or Morgana. Now he did it in order to be closer to his kingdom, to feel its breezes on him, and to be awed by the slow evening movements of the creatures who lived on daylight’s fringes peeping up in the meadows, to see was it safe. Merlin clambered over with him, taking off his jacket, and loosening the neckerchief. It seemed this was what he had been missing when he had sat on it before, thinking how far it was; he did not now notice the ground, but only his great pride for Camelot, and how he could scarcely bear his love for it.

“I start the armour polishing at four a.m. sharp,” Merlin said, leaning back on his hands.

“That, Merlin, is a filthy lie.”

“It’s true! It has to be ready for morning practice. I’ll bring it round to your chambers tomorrow, first thing.”

“I believe the squire who dropped his drink tray is to thank for our timely escape, not you.”

“How do you know I didn’t orchestrate that?”

“Because you can’t orchestrate anything. That implies forethought, planning. Craftiness.”

“You don’t think I’m crafty?” Merlin asked with a playful squint.

“I think you’re about as devious as the rabbit I shot this morning.”

“You did have to chase it for some time.”

“Because you scared it away!”

“It’s not my fault I sneezed. Anyway, you’re not getting out of this. Unless you want to just go ahead and concede defeat, and say you can’t do it.”

“Merlin,” Arthur said, knowing he was being baited, and struggling not to be such easy prey.

“No, it’s fine. Everyone has their own skills. You can’t be good at everything.”

“I’ll have you know that if I wanted to, I could polish that armour better, and faster, than you ever did. Not that that would be particularly difficult.”

Merlin shrugged, with an innocent look on his face. “All right. I’m sure you could.” He said it with such insincerity Arthur considered throwing him off the wall. He at least nudged Merlin with his elbow, hard enough to get a flinch out of him.

“I could, you pillock.”

Merlin was beatific. “Yeah. No, I believe in you.”

“All right, fine,” he said, and hauling Merlin up with him, went down the stairs to his rooms in order to prove it.
“And you said I’m not crafty,” Merlin pointed out when Arthur had finished (entirely commendably), and then he was chased round the room, and caught by the ankle, and then hurled back through the curtains round the bed, which came crashing down, and whilst he was thus ensnared, Arthur sat on him and rubbed his head with his knuckles till Merlin had to either concede, or to be bald.

But the feast was a two-day affair, and they were required to attend the second evening on threat of Merlin’s flogging. Uther was hovering somewhere between ‘vexed’ and ‘murderous’ depending upon his whim, and how important the guest within earshot.

“It was very romantic and all, Arthur, but you shouldn’t have done it; you’re going to get Merlin into trouble,” Morgana said out of the corner of her mouth, whilst out of the front of it she flirted with some lord or another, but in the disinterested sort of way she had when she considered the recipient too stupid to waste a clever repartee on. The lord was nevertheless flattered, since he did not know she was capable of a rousing good debate, which would have equally frightened and enticed him, and thought that she was like any good lady raised to be pretty, and harmonious, and considered himself to be getting the best of her.

“He should get in trouble. It was his idea. And it was not romantic, Morgana, what on earth are you drinking, and how much of it have you had?” Arthur said out of the corner of his own mouth, but told Uther he had felt sick, and thought he would dishonour himself; and that Merlin had hurried him away in the interests of Camelot, which was too noble to have a prince with digestion issues all over the table.

Morgana was tiring of the lord, and would soon wound him. Arthur was almost sorry for him, except he was a knob.

He was drinking his wine, and picking at his boar, though he had killed it himself, and ought to feel triumphant about its richness, and the size of it. He was watching Merlin stand with his head close to Gwen’s, and really did feel sick; it was a sort of grief over the sheer ineptness of it, which was physically excruciating. It seemed to Arthur that Merlin was trying to court her, and was terrible at it, and that she didn’t notice; and then he was embarrassed for both of them, and had to look into his wine as if it were a fascinating conversationalist.

“They’re adorable,” Morgana said, whilst she prepared to finish off the lord.

Arthur made a disagreeable noise. He did not bother to clearly articulate his thoughts on the matter, since it was perfectly obvious that Merlin was a complete failure, and Gwen a complete nutter, if she were in approval of it; he wished them many stupid children, to polish his boots with insolent incompetence.

“Oh, don’t scowl, Arthur,” Morgana chided him.

“If he has time to flirt, he has time for chores. He ought to be attending to my goblet.”

“You’re a grown man with two working arms; attend it yourself. And jealousy isn’t a good look on anyone.”

“Jealous of Merlin? You think I’m jealous? You need to stop with that wine right now. Women just can’t handle it the way men can.”
“Oh, I didn’t mean of Merlin; I meant you’re jealous of Gwen.”

“Gwen? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh,” she said with a sympathetic face, as if he had skinned one of his knees, and got teary over it, “don’t worry about it. You’ll hurt yourself, trying to fathom it out.” She pinched his cheek.

He scowled and slapped her hand away.

The lord by this point was determined to make a marriage match of it, since Morgana liked him so well, and Arthur looked away whilst she dispatched him; it was grisly, and turned his tender stomach. The lord afterward sat in bitter silence, afraid to draw her back down on him. Morgana had already forgot him, and was engaged in trying to outdrink Arthur, just to be difficult.

“Well, Tristan has fallen, I hear, and Morold will continue to take his tribute.”

“A pity,” Uther said to King Nantres, taking a sip from his goblet. “I had heard rather good things about the boy.”

“Duke Morold is a savage warrior; I’m not surprised someone of Tristan’s inexperience fell to him. Moreover: there are rumours he may have used sorcery in the duel.”

Arthur’s defence mechanism knew at this moment to be alert, and to impose himself on the conversation. “What’s this about a tribute?”

Uther ignored him; he was still displeased. King Nantres seemed to be far more jovial about the larks of boys, as if he had rather enjoyed Camelot’s much-lauded warrior prince running from a banquet as if it were a beast he found too daunting for his blade. “In Cornwall my boy, there’s trouble from a Duke of Ireland; he’s demanded payment of their own sons in return for not conquering their lands. At Tintagel he fought a duel with King Mark’s nephew Tristan, and slew him, or nearly; I’ve heard he still lives, but barely. The boy was brave, but foolhardy. He thought to challenge him to single combat, and to stop the tributes by defeating him. But he’s only a boy, and paid for his arrogance.”

“Father, if the people at Tintagel are in trouble--”

“No,” Uther said, coldly, before Arthur could even finish his proposal.

“But I could challenge him myself, and free the people of--”

“No. Tintagel and Camelot were at war before you were born, Arthur, and there is still bad blood between us. They would not welcome the aid of a Pendragon, even in the most difficult of times. Cornwall is not our concern.”

“I could go in disguise. They wouldn’t have to know--”

“Arthur, this discussion is finished,” Uther said, and sat back confidently, as if it truly were.

“Merlin, we’re going to Tintagel,” Arthur said as soon as they were alone in his chambers, and Merlin crouching in front of the fire, to stir up the embers. “Pack our bags for the morning.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong--”
“Consider this me correcting you.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“I know it was wrong.”

“All right, then, correct me if I tell a lie: Didn’t Uther already tell you not to do it? And didn’t King Nantres say one arrogant young prat already paid the price for being an arrogant young prat?”

“I knew you were skulking about listening to us.”

“I don’t think we should do it.” Merlin had rolled up his sleeves, and the fire was being complimentary to the arms which he had bared, and made it seem as if they were almost muscular, which they were not. But Arthur didn’t notice either way, and went on pacing as the brilliant ideas came flowing through him, as if he were only a sort of conduit for cleverness, and his human skin too small, too mundane, for his wisdom.

“Of course you think we shouldn’t do it; then you’d have to leave the citadel and go into the world, where it might be dark, and you can’t have your little torch next to you through all the scary night.”

“I don’t sleep with a torch next to me.”

“Don’t pack anything with the Pendragon crest,” Arthur continued, as if Merlin had not spoken. “We leave at first light.”

“So you’ll ride in dressed as any shabby old knight who most definitely isn’t a Pendragon, slay the villain, and then the people will welcome you, and there will be great rejoicing, and we’ll all be friends?”

“Don’t be naive, Merlin; that isn’t how politics work.”

“I wasn’t being naive, I was being sarcastic.”

Arthur ignored that. “A single heroic act won’t magically form an alliance—”

“Well, maybe a stupid one will do it, yeah?”

“Would you be quiet?” Arthur snapped. “I can’t hear my own thoughts.”

“That’s probably because there aren’t any.”

Arthur ignored that too. “Anyway, what was I saying?”

“You were saying you’re a git.”

“Merlin.”

“Uther will be angry,” Merlin warned.

Arthur paused at that. ‘Angry’ was not the word, but rather ‘livid.’ Uther, like most monarchs, did not like to be appointed by God, and then to be questioned about it by man. “He will be,” he acknowledged. “When he finds I’m gone. But when I return triumphant, and I have freed the people of Cornwall, and won a great victory for Camelot, he’ll come round.”

“Oh, yeah, sure, he’ll come round to you; he’ll have me flogged.”
“He won’t have you flogged,” Arthur said, studying his sword critically in the firelight. “I wouldn’t let him.” He was immediately uncomfortable with having admitted it; Merlin gave a smile that seemed to Arthur was a little shy, and immensely pleased, and said, “Really?” in a voice with no resemblance to their previous banter. And then hastily, because Merlin seemed to have misinterpreted the exchange as proof of Arthur’s regard, Arthur added, “Well, you’d hardly be in a state to polish my boots after a flogging.”

But Merlin did not seem to understand the whole affair had been straightened out, and persisted with the smile, as if Arthur had said something Arthur himself didn’t even know about. He was about to give Merlin a bit of clarification, so there was no confusion over it; but at that moment his door opened, and Morgana barged inside the same as she did to her own chambers, without announcing herself.

“Merlin, can’t you bar a door?” he demanded, and to Morgana: “Can’t you knock?”

“Of course I can, Arthur; but I only observe common courtesies for the people who commonly deserve them.” She was carrying a heap of cloth in her arms, and almost could not see over it. She set it on the table, nearly upsetting Arthur’s supper.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for Merlin. I know that look in your eye; you’re going off to Tintagel, and you’re dragging poor Merlin with you. I don’t want him to be cold. God knows you won’t take proper care of him, so I’ve brought him a nice cloak, and some blankets.” She smiled with her usual dazzling charm, and Merlin upon receiving it looked at her the same as the lord had looked at her, and was a little erratic on his feet, as if he had forgot where to place them underneath him. Arthur was instantly miffed, for no discernible reason.

“The cloak’s from Gwen,” Morgana said, and then rounded on Arthur. “You are so selfish, Arthur Pendragon. Did you even ask him if he wanted to go?”

“He’s my servant, he goes where I go.”

“Gwen’s my servant; she’s also a person who has her own desires and is allowed to exercise them. Merlin, if you don’t want to go, you don’t have to.”

“You can’t just release him from his duties!”

“Well, then run along to Uther over it.” Morgana tossed her hand contemptuously. “Let’s see whose maidenly tears sway him. I think we both know the outcome of that; I’ve had years to perfect how to cry in a way that men can approve of. They don’t like to see your face actually change, Arthur; the only acceptable grief is a pretty one. And let’s be honest: you’re quite a blotchy crier.”

“You’ve never seen me--”

She said to Merlin, in a confidential sort of tone, though Arthur was standing three feet from her, “He used to lose to me at the quintain, before Uther put a stop to my participation in Arthur’s training. And then he would cry. You should have seen him. He was just as bad at losing as he is now. He’d get all red--”

“Morgana,” he snapped, and was as red as this fictional Arthur she had spun to the delight of his unruly servant, and could feel it, and was flustered; and more so when Merlin looked at him beaming from every pore of him, and then he forgot what he was going to say to shut her up, and
settled for saying her name once more, firmly, the way he commanded a horse which had balked at an enemy.

“--and then snot, everywhere.”

“No thank you for your help, Morgana,” he snapped again, and taking her by the shoulders, steered her toward the door. And Merlin, holding up the cloak, called out, “Thanks, Morgana. And be sure to thank Gwen for me!” He said it in a tone that was nearly enamoured, and Arthur felt a surge of bitterness in his throat, whilst he thought of how Merlin could right now be accomplishing something useful, instead of mooning after a couple of girls, one of whom was an absolute menace. He shouldn’t wonder at the prevalence of magic, when there were things such as Morgana to be guarded against.

When she had been bundled out with great protest, and Arthur had had to close the door on her, and nearly did not succeed, despite all his muscles, he turned round to find Merlin staring at him with a smile so poorly concealed he ought not to have tried to hide it at all; he looked an absolute pack of stupid. His ears were absurd. Arthur had never seen anyone more ridiculous looking; it was fortunate he had a few (very few) redeeming features of personality. “What are you looking at, Merlin?” he barked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” Merlin said in a voice which implied in fact he was looking very hard, with great scrutiny, that he was amused by the looking, and that Arthur should sack him for it.

“I didn’t lose to Morgana at the quintain. And I certainly didn’t cry afterward.”

“After you didn’t lose to her.”

“Yes, Merlin, that’s right; would you like me to repeat it for you, whilst you’re in the dungeon, with nothing to distract you?”

“Then who would carry your provisions to Tintagel? And make your camp? And your supper?”

“I’m sure I’d manage. I’m not entirely helpless, you know.”

The door was opened once more. “I was just popping back in to say you still haven’t barred the door, and I’ll cover for you with Uther. Really, for Merlin, but since you can’t live without him, and you’re going to tote him about behind you just like that doll you had as a child--”

“What doll, don’t be absurd--”

“Oh, Arthur, you must remember it? It was made of straw; Gaius made it for you. You had half a dozen dresses for it. I assume you’ve still got it round here somewhere. Under your pillow, perhaps?”

“Isn’t there a window somewhere for you to stare uselessly out, looking pretty?” he thundered. “Good bye.”

“I like her,” Merlin said, after she had had the door shut in her face again, folding up the cloak in his hands.

“Of course you would,” Arthur said sourly. “You wouldn’t know good taste if it bit you and was poisonous, and your leg had to be sawn off.”

“If it was venomous.”
“What?”

“It’s venomous if it bites you and you get sick; it’s poisonous if you bite it and you get sick. Sometimes you don’t have to bite it, like animals can be poisonous because they can secrete things that are harmful to humans, but it has to be passive, to be poisonous. Poison is defensive, venom is offensive.”

“Merlin.”

It was tempting to feel the euphoria of adventure, and the possibility of the open meadows: but Merlin resisted it, because it was so damn early. The mists had come by in the night, and left the grasses sweating, and now they hardly rustled, but only made a damp thwapping beneath the hooves, and left the meadows free to the rooks, who were glad of their opportunity, and in the trees overhead made a rousing argument for why they should all be shot. They had nothing to challenge them, since even the trees were subdued, and trembled for no passing wind beneath their dews.

It was however a beautiful morning, though Merlin did not want to acknowledge it, and away from the fecal bother of an entire citadel and its livestock processing their various meals the world was sweet with itself, and smelt of freedom, if there is a particular smell to an open field which flows without seam into an anonymous wood; and of course there is, or at least there was for Merlin, who had a keen nose, and could discern where the land became shadowy, and the moss grew cool within it. It is a certain feeling, to go striding off over a fragrant grass, and to not see where the fragrant grass ends, but only an endless world going on after it, wave upon wave; and he had it now, even if he had determined to be peevish. The morning came without pretense to make his eyes like new; and then he could not quite view anything as its old self, but saw like a child who has never been anywhere. They went on at as steady a clip as Merlin could manage, and whilst the miles fell away behind them, he begin to feel as if he liked everything once more, including Arthur; though that, of course, was only because Arthur was a part of the morning, and the sun was rising in his hair.

They did not stop to eat, but only slowed till their horses could keep in placid step with one another, and passed some bread back and forth, because Arthur was worried he might arrive too late for Duke Morold to stab his stupid fat head, which in the earliest hours did not seem so terrible, whilst Arthur was prodding him awake with a persistent boot, but now would be somewhat unfortunate, since after all he had promised a dragon to take care of Avalon’s greatest hope. Also he supposed he could do it without the promise to Kilgharrah, whilst Arthur was smiling at him in the fresh sunlight. There was the usual transformation in Arthur when he had left Camelot’s borders, and no longer felt himself a prince, but only a boy on a great adventure. He seemed not to notice he might be riding to his death, and teased Merlin, and plucked at his reins, and sometimes took them entirely in his hand, and set off at a gallop, so Merlin had no choice but to be in on the lark. He touched Merlin’s shoulder and mussed his hair and even put Merlin’s head under his arm once when they were riding closely together, and then they chased one another over the next hill, and Arthur was almost considerate, and rode at a pace which Merlin would be able to match, in order to not upset the game, and the spirit of it.

But when they had settled down to their fire that evening, and the woods were murmurous all round them, Arthur went quiet. He sat staring into the flames, eating his smoked venison with a contemplative air. When Merlin sat down beside him, he looked up and patted Merlin’s shoulder absently, and leaned back on his elbows.
There was a nice moment; Merlin did not mean to be overly aware of it, but it was a good companionable quiet, and he sank into it as if it were a warm bath. His knee was touching Arthur’s, and Arthur did not even seem to mind, though Merlin had watched him look at the intersection of their legs, and knew he had noticed it.

“Merlin,” he said after some time, pulling apart a twig in his fingers. “Do you think I did right, in saving Aland?”

“Yeah, Arthur. I think you did brilliantly.” It was a moment to be quiet, and Merlin matched his voice to it; he was soft in a way he thought people were rarely soft to Arthur.

“Despite what he did?” Arthur looked up at him. It was a raw look. Merlin realised in the fleeting way he had, sometimes, when Arthur was not being a complete tosser, that Arthur was only young, and frightened; and not hardly loved enough.

“You didn’t know what he did,” Merlin continued in the same tone, drawing the guilt gently out of Arthur, so it wouldn’t fester.

“But knowing what I know about magic users—”

“Arthur,” he said, firmly now. He put a hand on Arthur’s knee, and looked at him not as a liege, which he never did anyway, but now as a friend, and smiled at him as if it did not hurt him, to be an other, to have a gulf between them that Arthur could not even know about. He thought, briefly, what Arthur would do with his advice, if Arthur knew what he was; and then he was done being selfish, and only clamped the knee harder in his hand, so Arthur could feel the sincerity in it, and him. “You didn’t know. He was a child who wasn’t guilty of anything other than being born the wrong way, as far as you knew. And I don’t believe he did what Uther said. I don’t believe you abetted that. I don’t think you could.”

“The men saw it with their own eyes, Merlin.”

“Sometimes people are blind to everything other than their own expectations. They saw something terrible, after the fact; but, Arthur, we saw him. We knew him. Do you really think he could have done that, that he could have killed his own mother?”

Arthur looked off into the woods, but did not disturb the hand on his knee. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

Arthur scratched at the back of his head with the twig, and squinted a little into the fire. “I know what I want to believe. But I can’t afford myself that sort of comfort; I can’t absolve myself of the guilt I will share, if he hurts someone else.”

“Could you have absolved yourself of the guilt, if you had let him die, and it turned out he hadn’t hurt anyone?”

“Morgana said almost the same thing,” Arthur said, and then sighed, as if that tired him.

“Morgana’s a wise woman.”

“Right. ‘Wise’ is the word. Not ‘shrewish’, or ‘infuriating’, or ‘utterly mad’.”

“I think she’s brilliant.”

Arthur eyed him. “I’m sure you do. Or parts of her, anyway.”
Merlin felt his ears flame up. “I wasn’t looking at anything! I wouldn’t. I don’t do that. Morgana, she’s...you know. Practically hideous. A bit like a troll. I like her personality.”

Arthur pushed the side of his head. “Right.”

Then there was a quiet come over them, and it was the sort achieved only in a lone wood, with a roaring fire, and a cooperative population, who was not overly chirpy, and did not get up to the usual suspicious business in the bushes, which lay perfectly calm, and did not jump at murderous shadows, or cast them. Merlin felt it to be the sort of environment in which Arthur was too lazy, and too satisfied, to stab anything, and so he said, “So what happened to the doll?”

Arthur gave him a Look. It was definitely a capitalised one. He fidgeted with the twig some more, and hunched up his shoulders, as if his skin had suddenly become unbearable to him, and he no longer knew how to wear it. But he did not cuff Merlin upside the head, and instead said, “My father threw it off the ramparts and it was trampled by several carts. There wasn’t much salvageable after that.”

“Did you really have dresses for it?”

Arthur heaved a sigh that went through the hunched shoulders, and further distressed them. “I believe my father is entirely mistaken about magic; the true evil threatening this realm is Morgana. Yes, Merlin, I did.” Merlin was gearing up for a good laugh, but there was a look on Arthur’s face of impending confession, and it made him look a little sickly, and young; and then he couldn’t do it, but let the mirth die in his throat, unsatisfied. “I used to pretend it was my mother. It was my mother’s maid sewed the dresses; she made them just like some my mother had. She used scraps from some of her old gowns. And on pain of death, you will never breathe a word of this to Morgana. She doesn’t know that last bit.”

The firelight was blinding to Merlin’s eyes, and the smoke choking; and that was why he felt a little hot in his throat, and his eyes. “That’s actually a bit sweet. For a total arse.”

Arthur made a face as if he had been kicked somewhere sensitive.

“I’d do anything to have something of my father.”

“Were you very young, when you lost him?” Arthur asked, looking up from the twig finally, but still scratching the back of his neck uncomfortably, whilst the distress of being somewhat redeemable slowly went out of him.

“Yeah. I didn’t know him at all. I wasn’t even born when he died. Well, Mum said he died. I don’t think he did. I think he just left us.”

“Why would you say that?”

Merlin shrugged, and now he had picked up his own twig. “Just a feeling I get. Just the way she talks about him sometimes. She still loves him, and she’s still angry with him. And sometimes it feels like she’s trying to compensate for him, like she doesn’t want me to feel it was anything wrong with me that sent him away.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t.” Arthur said with surprising earnestness. And then they were both absorbed in their twigs, and Merlin felt the quiet not as it had been before, unobtrusive, supportive; but as if it were an extra person, sitting between them. He looked sideways at Arthur, who was looking sideways at him. “What’s your mother like?” Arthur asked.

“She’s the best mum in all the world. She’d help anyone. I don’t think there are very many people
like her in all the world, and I’ll never be loved better by any of them. We were very happy together.”

“But you left.”

“Yeah.” He smiled a little, feeling it in his chest, sharply. “Sometimes you just aren’t destined to be happy with someone you love.”

Arthur was looking at him with a vaguely ill look, as if there were the same thing inside his own chest as in Merlin’s, and he was helpless against this intangible misery, which was inexplicable because it could not be joust ed at, or beheaded; so he was nearly frightened looking, and made Merlin feel he shouldn’t have said it. But after Arthur had looked at him for an indeterminate length of time, he said, very quietly, “Do you think I might meet her some day? Your mother?”

“Yeah. I think she’d really like you. She’s a great mum, but she has terrible taste in men.”

And then Arthur smiled, not in the usual prattish way, but so it shone up out of him. There was something which felt as if had come loose in Merlin’s chest then, which probably also was the smoke.

Next evening there was a tavern along their route, and they left their horses cheerful at their oats, and took a room. Naturally Arthur had the bed, whilst Merlin curled up on the floor with Arthur’s cloak, as he had managed to lose all the supplies which Morgana had sent along, and was especially grieved at the loss of Gwen’s cloak, which didn’t irritate Arthur at all. There was a creek fording had gone rather poorly, and Merlin should consider himself lucky to still have his own skin, let alone the stupid cloak, since he had nearly drowned, and was saved only thanks to the fact that he had the foresight to travel in the company of a dashing knight, who had nearly drowned himself, trying to fish out his useless servant, and was still bereft of any thanks over it. But of course the cloak was more important, and mustn’t be forgot, and have a proper lamenting, and dominate the conversation for as long as its mourner had the breath to bemoan it. Arthur had tired of it whilst they were getting into their nightshirts, and hurled his own into Merlin’s face, and Merlin had not even been grateful, but only said, “This smells sweaty,” as if he were a marigold.

But even so Merlin made a spectacle of himself, and purposefully chattered his teeth with the cold, so loudly Arthur could not sleep, even after putting the pillow over his head. He tried threatening Merlin, but it did not make him any warmer. At last when his eyes had started to go gritty, and he lay in his anger counting off the hours he had missed out on whilst the night went impassively on, not even caring he was to have a hard ride in the morning, and then a daring battle, he snapped, “Merlin, for God’s sake, get in the bed.”

And then he still did not sleep, because Merlin put his cold nose on his neck, and his cold hands against Arthur’s back, and would not be deterred even by a good kicking. Then Arthur noticed they were neither of them wearing much more than a tunic, and had to be alert, and lay stiffly, with as little of himself touching as little as Merlin as could be managed in the small bed.

Merlin, of course, snored, and flopped his arms about, and made a general nuisance of himself. He did not respect the invisible boundary which Arthur had demarcated, but rolled over on him, and stayed for a while, twitching, and then flung himself to the other side of the bed, as if fleeing an enemy. He laughed, and once put his arm round Arthur’s neck, and said, “Come on, Arthur! I’ll save you!”
Then Arthur hit him with the pillow till he came with a start out of his sleep and said, “What the hell did you do that for?” and fell seamlessly back into oblivion.

When it was time to get up, there was an awkward moment, when they had both turned over at the same time, and were facing one another, Merlin still in the fuzzy state of inattention which succeeds a restful evening, his hair wild, and Arthur, still in the gritty state of rage which succeeds a fidgety one, his hair perfect. The air seemed to have a certain pressure to it, and to coil up between them. Arthur blinked. Merlin blinked back at him. Merlin’s face, when sleepy, did a pleasant thing that was similar to being handsome. He had a warm bare thigh pressed up against Arthur’s knee. It was like having the staticy tension of a storm force itself suddenly into your blood, and all your limbs perceptive of it, and the hairs responding with prompt vigilance. Of course it was not exactly like that. But the hot susurrus of the bare flesh over his own bare flesh was ticklish, and made him uneasy in himself. Merlin, half-asleep, did not move his leg away, but only jiggled it round a bit, as if he were not sure which direction it ought to go.

Arthur pushed him out of the bed.

He felt loads better once he had done it, and dressed almost in a cheery mood, whilst Merlin mumbled in a loud way some treasonous murder plots, and pulled on Arthur’s mail with unnecessary violence.

They set out whilst the sun was still lolling about the infant stages of its day, and the green meadows underfoot were still loyal to that violet complexion of midnight. The grasses came on gradually as the morning progressed, blushing up as if they had done something wrong in the sunrise, and then settling back into their expected hues. Merlin whinged about the cloak some more, and about how sore his backside was, and then Arthur said, “Do you think your little bottom is going to be all right? That is the important thing here, after all.” Then Arthur’s face suddenly went prickly with a distressed heat, as if he were the idiot who should be ashamed of himself. He tried to think how he could make it obvious to Merlin that he had not observed his bottom closely enough to determine whether or not it was small, or durable, but not to mention it outright, since Merlin would construe it as any interest whatsoever, which he didn’t have.

Tintagel was rising in the distance whilst Arthur wrestled this dilemma, and the meadows gave way to a dusty road which wound continuously up, with the cliffs in sheer relief on either side. Without them the green was nearly unchallenged, and in soft hillocks rolled away and away, into the mists of the world. There was a castle sat above it all, as if it were a progeny of the clouds; it was on the highest of the hills, and faced out over the sea, and had even shut up Merlin, who gazed at it with a bumpkin’s awe.

Of course it was never a lasting silence with Merlin, and he broke it as their horses snorted softly against the demands the hill made of them. “Are you sure we ought to be doing this? What if you’re murdered? What am I supposed to do? Go back and tell Uther, yeah, sorry about that, you know how your son is! Always popping off to his sudden and inevitable doom, that one; what can you do?”

“I’m not going to be murdered, Merlin. And don’t forget to call me ‘sir’,” Arthur said, and spurred his horse, leaving behind Merlin’s response, which was the usual disrespectful nonsense.

Whilst they were climbing the hill, and the world was undulating far away from them on either side, and the sun in a splendid mood brought out all the best parts of the land, and showed them off in a magnificent finery, Merlin held onto the hope that Arthur would burst with his usual arrogant
fanfare into the castle, and be gently rebuffed. The morning was so pleasant, and the air so pure, that it conspired to let him believe that Duke Morold had already taken his leave, and was not presently available to cut off Arthur’s head.

But Arthur upon introducing himself as a knight errant who had come to free Cornwall of its Irish plight was directed to the great hall, where King Mark was engaged in a strained meal with his conqueror. He said, with beautiful manners, because he was sometimes capable of displaying them, though you could have fooled Merlin, “I have the honour of addressing Duke Morold of Ireland?” to the more cheerful of the two men.

“You do,” the man said, fixing Arthur with a squint as he chewed his trout. It was not an overly lingering squint; he seemed to have sussed out Arthur in a moment, to be unimpressed by what he had gathered, and to dismiss it. Possibly this was because Arthur was a mortal man, of mortal human proportions; and even sitting down, Morold was in possession of a stature that could be classified as nearly mythical. He was probably at least a head taller than Arthur, and twice as wide; and Merlin, considering this already an unfortunate beginning, wondered how to get the gauntlet away from Arthur, before he could throw it.

But already it was too late, for Arthur had drawn off the glove, and tossed it with a resounding clang onto the table. The trout trembled before it, but Morold only blinked. Arthur with perfectly lovely elocution said, “My lord the King and all present, hear my terms for this duel, which are that neither my lord Morold, nor any who sent him, rightfully obtained tribute from Cornwall. And I will prove it before God and all present, on the person of his lordship, for the pain and suffering he has wrought.”

Morold, returning to his trout, said, “You are not the first to so claim, boy; the last was wrong to do so, and so are you. But naturally I will honour the challenge. May God keep your young soul.”

So the duel was appointed, and would be fought next morning, on the site of the previous: a little islet in the sea, where no man could interfere, yet near enough the shore he could certainly watch in horror. They were given a spacious chamber, and stared after, and much whispered at, and Merlin, after seeing to the horses, went to request a bath for his ordinary lord, certainly not an enemy of the blood, from nowhere in particular, and specifically not Camelot, and then under a good sweat from all his subterfuge, and the steps, he banged into Arthur’s room to berate him. Arthur was too stupid to be persuaded, but it was nice to give him a good scolding, and to be up front about his own opinion on the matter, so at least that if Arthur died, in his final moments he would know that Merlin had been right, and take it with him forever.

The chambermaids scurried in and out to prepare the bed and light the fire and be indiscreetly dumbstruck over a squire addressing his master in such a manner, and the master simply listening to it, as if he did it all the time.

“Merlin, do leave off your whingeing long enough to be useful,” Arthur said when the tub had been brought up, and the water poured steaming into it. He held out his arms to be undressed, which Merlin did without interrupting his steady stream of criticisms against the plan, and Arthur’s execution of it.

“I don’t see why you have to fight him. Cornwall isn’t your responsibility. Why should you risk your neck for some people who probably wouldn’t even be grateful for it, if they found out who you really are? By the way, I don’t like ‘Robert’; I don’t think it suits you. Not prattish enough.”

Arthur with a wry amusement asked, “What would you have me call myself?”

“‘Gembert’, I think. If you can’t go by the more appropriate ‘Git.’”
“Gembert”? That’s a terrible name.”

“Exactly.”

Arthur lowered himself into the tub with a sigh, draping his arms over the sides. He put his head back, and closed his eyes, whilst Merlin sat quietly on a chair he had pulled up beside it, thinking of the hands cutting up their trout, which certainly could cut up Arthur with the same ease.

“You don’t think I can beat him,” Arthur said, his eyes still closed.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You as much have, this past hour. Your faith in me is astounding, Merlin, really.”

“It’s just, we’ve never seen him fight. And Nantres said he’s really good. And he’s huge, and he’s already defeated one person in single combat over this exact issue.”

“Well, we’ve never seen this Tristan fight either. Perhaps he’s simply not very good, and Morold won not because of his own prowess, but lack of his opponent’s.”

“Perhaps,” Merlin said, and put his chin in his hands.

“You are not worried about me, are you?” Arthur asked, not opening his eyes, but splashing accurately in Merlin’s direction nevertheless.

“Of course not. Morold is welcome to lop off your head; it’s a lot of work for me, trying to keep it on your shoulders. It’d be nice to have a break.”

“And what exactly have you done to keep my head on my shoulders, Merlin?” Arthur demanded, splashing him again.

“You have no idea. You’re very careless with it.” He flinched back from another spray which came sharp as glass into his eyes.

“This is absolutely fantastic,” Arthur sighed, sinking a little deeper into the tub, and sloshing a bit of water over the side.

“You know, some of us have also been on horseback for days and could use a soak in a hot bath too,” Merlin pointed out, and Arthur’s eyes suddenly opened with an almost violence, and were too big.

“Are you suggesting we share this tub?” He looked at Merlin as if Merlin had unexpectedly bitten him, and might do it again, and Merlin, confused, looked back at him in the same way.

“No? I didn’t remotely suggest that? I was only taking the usual piss for you being an inconsiderate wanker?”

Arthur blinked a little. “Right. Well. That’s good. Because I’d really rather just let Morold cut off my head.”

“Me too. But, you know, you could let me have the tub after you.”

Arthur was still looking at him a bit warily. “I suppose I could do.”

And Merlin found that it was absolutely fantastic, after Arthur was out of it and dressed for the evening, and Merlin had reheated the tub with a bit of sly magic, though Arthur was a bit weird
about the whole thing, and averted his eyes whilst Merlin undressed, and pretended he was busy with his sword, which clearly he wasn’t, but only oiled an already oiled blade, and then cleared his throat for a bit, and looked over only when Merlin was safely in the tub, and away once more when he was climbing out of it.

There was a knock at the door when Merlin had finished dressing himself, and Arthur answered it in some strange haste, skirting round Merlin as if he were afraid of being bitten again. It was the seneschal at the door, who came to bring his lord King Mark’s regrets. “He asked me to convey his thanks, and to wish you luck tomorrow, and ensure that you are comfortable, and have everything you need. He is attending his nephew Tristan.”

“I thank your lord for his concern. His hospitality is flawless, and we lack for nothing. How is his nephew?” Arthur asked.

“Poorly, I’m afraid,” the seneschal replied.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Arthur said, and in the silence that follows the exchange of trite pleasantries, the seneschal put his head to one side, and looked at Arthur in a way that made Merlin want to step in front of him. There was something considering in it; he seemed, in looking at Arthur, to look through him, and behold everything.

“I hope, Sir Robert, your skill is equal to your confidence.” Then Merlin’s blood was as stone in his veins, and by the set of Arthur’s shoulders, his own had petrified as well; and between them there was a long silence, where there was the simple matter of breathing, and nothing more complicated attempted.

“I was seneschal in the time of the lady who was once master of this castle. She was called Igraine. There is much of her in you, strangely.”

Merlin put out his hand for Arthur’s shoulder. It was absolutely rigid beneath his fingers, and flinched when he touched it. He was prepared to move Arthur, bodily, and to put into practice the vast vocabulary which he had sharpened in service to Arthur, and now could use in a myriad of ways his mother would not have approved of. Of course it was not the done thing to shout at the seneschal of the castle at which you were lodging; but after all Merlin was only an unwashed mass, and didn’t know.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Strange, indeed.” But he was struggling to go on, and Merlin could feel, under his fingertips, the agony in him, the rashness which in its hot youth wanted its mother, and was desperate to snatch at any ghost of her.

“She had a son by Uther Pendragon; Arthur, I believe he is called?” The seneschal gave them both a weary look, and rubbed his beard. “Don’t worry; it isn’t a secret I’m particularly inclined to reveal. If you can defeat Morold, I don’t care if you were hatched from a bloody viper’s nest. And I don’t believe the son is responsible for the sins of his father.”

Merlin still had his eyes skinned for any hurt done to Arthur, and was ready to oppose any strike at this raw topic; but the seneschal was only tired, and sad looking; and then he felt how fraught are the empty spaces people leave behind them. It was one thing, to see Arthur’s grief for a woman he had created in his childhood, and loved stupidly, without knowing what it really was to love her; and another to see this man, who had loved a warm human, and all the indiscretions of her.

“I hope, Arthur Pendragon, you have inherited the martial talents of your father, and nothing else.” The seneschal was prepared to take his leave; he had passed on the message of his king, and his own; and the past had come grim into his eyes, and was urging him onward.
But Arthur could not contain himself; he was still absolutely fixed beneath Merlin’s hand: but his voice came jittering out of him, hoarse, incomplete; it had made up for the chiseled limbs, which like the statue’s were merely displayed, and not used, and erupted into the space between them. “If you knew my mother, tell me something of her. Anything.”

The seneschal did not pity him, and Merlin was glad to see it; Arthur could not have borne it, and then Merlin would have had to fight the seneschal. The seneschal said, with some warmth in his voice, not as if he were quite talking to a friend, but as if he had at least stumbled onto a common ground with an acquaintance, “She’s happy, I think.”

The shoulder twitched now, as if the words had stunned it, and it could not help but respond. “My mother’s dead. She died in childbirth.”

“Ah.” And now the seneschal was very sorry indeed, and looked a little more softly on Arthur. “That’s what you were told.”

“What do you mean? Of course that’s what I was told--it’s the truth.”

“It is not. Igraine is alive; or she was, some few years ago. I haven’t seen her in some time. But she certainly survived you.”

Arthur had stepped back. Merlin felt that he was too hot, too unsteady, that everything was trying to get out of him at once; his magic was sick with the sensation of it. He knew what had been done to Arthur, that he was helpless to repair it, that he was helpless even to assuage it, a little.

“I’m sorry,” the seneschal said, and was gone.

Arthur had paced for hours, till finally with a fifth reminder that in the morning he was to fight a duel, Merlin persuaded him into bed. There he merely laid stiffly, staring up at the ceiling, which Merlin could see from the pallet which had been brought in for him. He felt a sharpness in his belly. He said, “Arthur,” quietly into the darkness, to test it.

There was nothing. He could see the eyes unmoving beneath the piece of fringe that was uncooperative, and had fallen over Arthur’s forehead; but there was no other life. There was the slow movement of unhurried breathing, and it was his own; from Arthur there was only a frightening silence, as if he were no longer living, but merely a lifelike representation of it.

They went on like this for a good hour. Merlin turned on his side from time to time, to face Arthur, to see was he ready to exist once more; was he ready to be alive, though it hurt; was he ready to understand there was a friend, waiting for him, till he had worked his way through it. And every time it was no, every time the eyes were still invested in the ceiling, where perhaps there was an answer; till finally the voice in which Arthur had asked the seneschal about his mother came out of the darkness, and it said, defeatedly, “Do you think what that woman said was true, then? The one in the cave, with the children? Do you think my mother left me there?”

“No,” Merlin said, but that was not enough; and he had nothing which could be enough.

“Why did my father lie to me about her? Why would he tell me she had died?”

“Maybe he didn’t. Maybe the seneschal lied. He could see it would upset you; he wanted to ruffle you up before the duel tomorrow.”
And why would he want to do that? If I lose, his country continues to be plundered.”

Because there’s bad blood between the Pendragons and Tintagel. That’s why your father didn’t want you to come. Maybe...maybe he wants revenge. Maybe he wants to see you hurt. You don’t know what happened between the kingdoms before you were born.”

“If he wanted revenge, he could simply have told everyone who I am.”

It was like a wounding, not knowing what to say. Merlin lay breathing into the dark, feeling how lonely it was to not be comforting, to sense at suffering, and to simply gape at it. He had thought, some evenings, when he remembered against the backdrop of Gaius’ snoring, and the ordinary sounds of ordinary nightfall, that he was alone, truly, in a way that humans weren’t, that probably you could die of loneliness. In the horrible way of a stomach wound, or a long illness: when you were stolen away bit by bit, and sometimes were hardly cognisant of it happening. He thought it was happening to Arthur now. He could feel, in the most terrifying of gradual increments, the slow and resigned slipping away of him.

“Arthur, listen to me.” He said it firmly. He said it as if he were the prince, and Arthur was his to be commanded. “We’ll sort it out about your mother. I promise. But tomorrow, you’re going to win. And I’ll be proud to call you my prince. And I don’t see how anyone couldn’t be. Whatever happened with your mother, it wasn’t you, or anything you lacked.”

There was a slow whispering of linen. Merlin had been staring at the bed, at the carving on it, all through his speech; and now their eyes locked. Arthur’s face was desperately young, then.

He said, after a long moment, “Thank you, Merlin.” And he did not smile easily, or broadly; but there was a soft glow of affection in it that brought the colour back into him.

There was a large turn out next morning on the shore. The day was a brilliant one, and not in keeping with Merlin’s mood; and it seemed to take a sort of pleasure in this, and to rub its exuberance in his face. The birds had shown up as well, and sang in accordance with a banquet, and not a death match; and the blooms in sweet ignorance stirred from their sleep into a gilded animation, so the hills breathed with their striking movements. Morold had already rowed himself out to the isle, after getting into his armour with a nonchalance that was not encouraging. The boat was like a toy beneath him, and Arthur’s head would be as well, if he let it get within pinching distance. Merlin was in doubt of the man’s human status; he was more like a boar on two legs, and ought to have been disqualified.

“Don’t get all showy just because there are a lot of people watching. Get in there, do your thing, and get the hell out.” He adjusted the mail on Arthur’s shoulders.

“Are you telling me how to fight, Merlin?”

“No, I’m telling you how not to fight.”

Arthur made a little noise in the back of his throat; it was characteristically rude, and welcome. Merlin put on his helmet, leaving the visor up. Arthur was nervous, and had on his stern face; he must have looked very fierce to the audience, and competent--but to Merlin he was only all the soft joinings of him, which could be pierced, and the fallible bones Merlin could feel in handing the gauntlets off to Arthur, and brushing his fingers. Morold did not appear to be made of the same stuff; possibly because he was not at all pretty, and Arthur was, and might as well have been a
damsel beside him. He looked exactly the sort of thing which men like Morold broke, for the fun of it.

There was not any of the usual banter. Arthur took his sword grimly, and belted it on grimly. He squared his shoulders, to make them appear bigger.

“Right,” Merlin said, because it was time for the departure, and he did not know what else to say.

“Right,” Arthur said, for the same reasons. He looked at Merlin, and for a moment was not so stern; there was even a tenderness in his look, it seemed to Merlin, who felt the look go through him, and the unbearable moment of separation upon them. Arthur hit Merlin with a closed fist against the chest, not hard. “Merlin, if I die--”

“You won’t. You won’t, Arthur,” he said, softly.

Arthur did not respond; he touched Merlin’s shoulder with a gloved hand, holding it firmly for a moment.

And then he climbed into the small craft which was waiting for him, and taking up the oars, sent it unhesitatingly into the sea.

Arthur was cold. He felt his hand like wood on the pommel of his sword, and the spray fossilising the rest of him. The isle was far enough, from the shore; and immediate once he was actually rowing toward it. He felt the displeasure of the sea, and his challenge of it; and meanwhile Morold grew winking toward the sun, as if he were capable of reaching it.

When the boat was stowed, and Arthur had put his tremulous legs over it and onto the rocky shore, Morold with cool professionalism drew his sword, and waited for Arthur to do likewise.

There were not any words. There was a feeling in the air, which indicated the time had come, and there was no need for the usual banal announcement, or banter. They saluted with their swords, and positioned their shields. Arthur could feel his heart was mad, and longing to get out of him; and his fingers inside the gauntlets were wet as the ground, and not hardly as steady. He thought, briefly, how it would be to die, having barely got round to living; and then the sword came down overhand at him, and he had to swing to meet it, and to forget everything else.

He felt the sheer force of Morold behind the strike, all the weight of him, and broke away without bothering to test it; his footwork was uneasy on the slick rocks, and wanted to betray him, but he rolled under another swing, and found it obedient enough when he rose, and slashed at Morold’s neck. The blow was answered: but he had already found that Morold was not as easy in his massive frame, and was lumbering about bringing it round to bear. It struck Morold nearly simultaneously: and Arthur saw in the eyes that regarded him through the slit in their helm that it was to be an equal battle, and the eyes were not well pleased about it.

They came at one another with a great crash; Morold had thrown himself whole-heartedly into it, in order to fall on Arthur with a strength Arthur could not match. But Arthur spun past as if Morold were a dance partner which he was showing up, and made a slash at his hamstring that touched, nearly fatally. Morold leapt away from it, and thrust up his shield barely in time to take Arthur’s next stroke upon it.

Their blades threw out a great fire as they hacked at one another, and the sun poured off in rivulets:
and then the sea rose in concert, and doused it all at once. It pushed Arthur to his knees, heaving under the fall of it. He caught a blow on his shield, and felt the bones of his forearm vibrate, and the agitation of it all down his arm, into the elbow. There was a buzzing in his ears. He had taken a glancing blow to the head, and the steel was still full-voiced with it.

But Morold was slowing, and his shield went up with less frequency. He blew out breaths from his mouth like a bull getting himself up to charge. Arthur tried his stamina with a flurry of strikes, and got through with two of them, drawing a bright gush from the massive shoulder, and the flank. But he had brought himself within reach of the arms to do so, and one of the bullish hands caught him a blow to the ribs that staggered him. There were stars in front of the visor, and now when he moved, his left side screamed out with a human grief. He leapt back from a slash at his gut, and then, having engaged once more, and forcing Morold’s blade with a squeal into the rock underfoot, punched him in the face, so the helm rang out like a gong.

Morold swayed. Arthur pressed in with all his strength, kicking the other blade out of his way, and with his own driving up toward the stomach; he brought his forehead down across the nose piece, and then his elbow up into the chin.

It was the finishing blow—only instead of a man in front of him, there was simply a wet space, which the sea harried with the wind from its cliffs, whipping it all round him.

“Arthur, behind you!” It was Merlin’s voice, and came impossibly all the way from the shore, over the waves, over the pounding in his head; he turned instinctively, forgoing all the intuitions of his body, and giving himself over absolutely to the voice: and, impossibly, his shield thundered as it met a blow from some unseen quarter, for Morold was not behind him either, according to his eyes.

But now there came the soft illumination from the caves of Balor, and it lit up the outline of Morold, and flared hotly round the sword which pulled back briefly from its failure, and then darted in toward Arthur’s head. He felt the same warmth of the illumination, its good will for him, and instead of yielding, and falling back, he ducked under the sword, and brought up his own. He felt underneath his blow the leaping of a belly that he could see only vaguely; but he sensed it, and where to drive, and struck it a deadly wound.

The light stumbled back. He could not see the details of Morold, but the lines of him hunched in on themselves for a moment. He smelt the familiar animality of the blood where it has spilt hot from a fatal quarter.

But there are many beasts which die hard, and Morold was one of them; the glow in which he was limned rushed forward, and the shield with a flare which made the sun ashamed of itself cracked Arthur’s helmet a startling blow; and then his wounded side, feeling itself pulled at, gave him such a sick jolt he felt briefly as if he were separating through all his body, and the halves were now independent of one another, and could not reconcile themselves.

But Uther had once bade the master at arms to crack one of his ribs, to make him fight on, so that he might know what it was, to be thick in battle, and getting the worst of it, and triumph regardless: he fell to the blow, but went down striking, and the strike was true. He felt it stick in the bones which the illumination hinted at, and now the outline of Morold’s hand vanished. There was a howl: and between Arthur and the light there lay a human hand, perfectly ordinary, and pale.

“Arthur!” the voice shouted now, and breathing hard, he looked up through the sweat which ran from his hair to blind him, and saw the vast Morold-shaped contour raging toward him.

He rolled under it. He slashed as he did so, and felt the easy yielding of a hamstring, and coming smoothly to his feet, pirouetted. His sword for a moment blazed up like a torch, whilst it came high
over his head, and the sun gave it honorary rights: and then it flamed out in the meat of Morold’s neck, where the blood returned it to its usual status of common steel. The big body flashed, and became whole once more beneath the light; and then there was the slow ponderous tilting of it to one side, the same insensate disbelief, as in an animal that does not believe in its own death.

When the corpse struck the isle, the illumination flickered, and gently went out.

Arthur took off his helmet, and let it fall. His mashed side was frantic with the misery of it, and there was blood from somewhere, hot and now cold as his body warmed it, and the sea congealed it. He did feel this: but tangentially. It did not worry him now. He was gasping the fiery breaths of a long sprint, with the bile sitting comfortably in his throat, waiting for him to be less vigilant. This was tangential too.

He was still feeling the warmth of that strange illumination, and looking out over the sea, to the dark blot of a black-haired man watching him from the shore.

Arthur was feted, even after the discovery of his identity (though possibly less enthusiastically). He stayed one evening to be celebrated, and to be patched up by Merlin, and then they set out over the green hills of Cornwall. He was mostly silent; and Merlin rode easy in this silence, attributing it to his mother, and to his wounds. Merlin helped him down from his horse when his movements were particularly accommodating of his bad side, and checked his bandages, and made him supper with the cheer of one who has brought his master back in one piece, and not had to carry him in the satchel with their food. He smiled at Arthur over the fire, and slept in a satisfied ease at his side.

Arthur watched him in the moonlight, when he was supposed to be resting his wounds. He thought of the light, and the feeling of it; and there was a sickness in his belly, separate from the protestations of his ribs. He did not want to consider it, and could consider little else. When it was day, and Merlin was himself, Arthur doubted in his suspicions; but when the moon silvered him, and all around them was Cornwall, otherworldly, he had to wonder if he had trusted the soft and human parts of himself to someone who was not similarly giving; he had to wonder if he had befriended someone who knew he was not worthy of any secrets, and could never be.

They were nearly to Camelot when he decided to forget what he had seen, or not seen. There was the small complication that it would break his heart. He had acknowledged it would break his heart, and was too tired to reflect on anything, after that.

But his mother he could not forgo, and when he had gone to his father for his scolding, and stood quietly all through it, with his hand on his sword, and his head high, he asked, softly, “Father, what happened to my mother? Don’t lie to me. Please. I couldn’t bear it.” His voice wavered a little. He had not meant to be vulnerable; but he was sore, and exhausted, and he was afraid of what he had possibly discovered, and how tender it had left him. He wanted something true in his life. He wanted someone to consider him worthy of it.

Uther paused in his tirade. “What do you mean? You know what happened to your mother, Arthur.”

“Did she really die?” Arthur asked, and now he looked away from the wall on which he had fixated, into his father’s eyes. “I heard...I heard from a man who knew her when she was lady of Tintagel that she lives.”

Uther went pale. It was so abrupt Arthur was suddenly frightened. “How dare you,” Uther
whispered. “I saw her die with my own eyes, Arthur. It was the worst day of my life. For you of all people, to question her sacrifice--to doubt how she suffered, bringing you into this world, and what she gave up. Get out of my sight. I can’t even look at you.”

And Arthur, sick, did.

It was Merlin found him later on the battlements, and stood quietly beside him. He seemed to not even need to be told, but simply sensed it, and knew to be there, and unobtrusive.

Arthur looked for a long while out over his lands, and swallowing, said, “I’m a fool, Merlin.”

“No you aren’t. You’re a son. It’s ok to love her, and wonder about her.”

And Arthur let go of his final doubts and believed not in any delusion of battle, which he had seen through the distorting confluence of sweat, and pain, but in the man beside him, and his goodness.
Here, Thro' the Feeble Twilight of This World

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King'. The quote in the first paragraph is from a medieval manual quoted on this site: https://www.ancient.eu/article/1234/the-household-staff-in-an-english-medieval-castle/ I'm not sure of the original source of it. Also, the quote from the manuscript Arthur is reading is taken from Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'Vita Merlini', with some slight adjustments. Thank you for your comments!

“‘Take off his robe and bring him a mantle to keep him from cold, then bring him to the fire, and take off his shoes and his hose…then comb his head, then spread down his bed, lay the head sheet and the pillows, and when your sovereign is in bed, draw the curtains...Then drive out dog or cat, and see that there be basin and urinal set near your sovereign, then take your leave mannerly that your sovereign may take his rest merrily.’ Then take your leave mannerly, Merlin. Do you know what that means?”

“No, I don’t think so. Maybe you could demonstrate?”

“It’s not my job to be polite.”

“Well, you never know till you try. It might suit you. Since nothing much does, it wouldn’t hurt to try something new, and see.”

Arthur threw a piece of lunch at him; Merlin dodged it. Arthur cleared his throat, and was preparing his next reading with a lot of prelusive rustling, so that Merlin could feel the dread of its coming, and quiver before it. Sadly, he was only able to get out his next harrumph-hum with great ceremony, and not even to commence the reading, when Merlin with a groan threw himself face first onto Arthur’s bed, his feet sticking out comically. “No more, Arthur! I can’t take it.”

“‘Wake him gently, that your sovereign is at peace with the world upon reentering it, and then—’”

“Lick his boots, and wash his stuck-up face, because he can’t do anything for himself, and then get down on the floor, and be as a footstool, so that your sovereign may rest his weary prat feet—”

“And get off his bed,” Arthur said, putting down the book in order to take up Merlin’s ankles, and to heave him off the bed; but Merlin got his arms round one of the posts, and then there was a lot of undignified tugging on Arthur’s part, and a bit of flailing on Merlin’s, and the end result was that Merlin was still on the bed, and Arthur was on his arse, on the floor. This was easily correctable, since Merlin in his amusement over the sight had relaxed his vigilance on the post, and then he came off quite readily, and flew magnificently, and landed less magnificently, in a disordered confusion of limbs going this way and that.

Arthur sat on him. “Shave his esteemed chin—”

“It doesn’t say ‘esteemed’,” Merlin argued, trying from underneath him to get at the book, by slapping wildly at it, without seeming to be at all concerned with what he might hit in the whole disorganised process, and consequently popping Arthur in the face more than once, and on one
memorable occasion sticking his fingers in Arthur’s mouth, which made Arthur’s brain momentarily forget how to decipher the page in front of him.

When the whole page had been read out, and Merlin was limp with the misery of it, Arthur slapped his cheek a bit, in a manly and not caressing way, and got off him.

“Can I go now?” Merlin asked from the floor. “Gaius asked me to be back at the workshop half an hour ago. I’m going to catch it.”

“Tell him you were attending to your sovereign on an important matter. But, yes, go. I have useful things to accomplish.” He caught Merlin on his way out the door, and tousled his hair thoroughly, so that it stood up in a wild blaze, as if a storm had got it, and was shoved, though in a friendly way.

He waited till Merlin had cleared the hall outside his rooms, and went out whistling into it. He was perfectly content already, though it was barely noon; his father had watched the training that morning, and told the master at arms of Arthur’s brilliance, and smiled at him, in the genuine fatherly way he sometimes had, when Arthur had done something to merit it, which was not often; but when he did, he was amply rewarded. Moreover, the weather was in perfect agreement with his mood, and shone round Camelot as if it had a banquet to attend, and had put on all its baubles. The hills like velvet rolled away into the reddening trees, and the sun appointed itself their crowning diamond. Fall was hinting at its future malevolence in the wind, but redeemed itself by turning the grass underneath his feet with a musical sighing, and jostling the trees into similar concert. The gorse was yielding itself to a less friendly climate, but still in a last defiance crept out to mock the annuals with its heart.

Morgana and Gwen were already setting out into the great lawns of Camelot with a contingent of four knights riding alongside, in order to support the silk awning held over them. Arthur did not saddle up his own mount, but only ran, casually, in order to match their unhurried pace. They were discussing armour, and the advantages of the bucket helm, and its impediments; Gwen was not very much in favour of it, for its issues of ventilation, and Morgana wanted to know if perhaps the cervelliere couldn’t be improved, in order to encompass the coverage of the bucket helm, and the freedom of itself. They did not even notice him as he ran up, but went on as if it mattered to them, whilst the knights politely pretended they were not being unladylike.

“Arthur,” Morgana said when she finally deigned to notice him. “We’re going for a picnic; we wanted a nice outing, so we didn’t invite you.”

“My lady!” Gwen scolded. “I’m sure it would be perfectly lovely either way.”

“You are so sweet, Gwen. I don’t know what I’m going to do when inevitably a whole contingent of men come to fight over your hand, and take you out of my service.”

Arthur cleared his throat, and paused. “How do you mean the bucket helm could be improved?”

“Well,” Gwen said, a little tentatively, “it isn’t very practical, is it? I mean, the coverage is lovely! Much better than the spangenhelm. But the openings for the eyes and mouth are so small, I don’t see how no one’s smothered in one. If you have to wear a second helmet under it just to be able to see and breathe properly during close fighting, then it’s not really doing its job. You’ve got to revert to the helmet with less protection anyway.”

“It’s fine for tourneys.”

“Sure, when you’re jousting. But wouldn’t it be nice to wear something that could do everything?
And not have to wear two helmets during a tourney?"

“I think you should develop something new, Gwen. We can test it on Arthur’s head. It’s so hard
that if the helm fails, he won’t be hurt anyway.” Morgana smiled wickedly at him.

“You know, Morgana, I’ve given Merlin similar advice, and it seems you could use some as well:
you really shouldn’t try to be humorous. It doesn’t suit you.”

“It suits me perfectly fine, and it suits Merlin too. You’re just too self-important to laugh at
yourself. You should really try it sometime; I do it all the time.”

“Laugh at yourself? I shouldn’t wonder.”

“At you. It’s quite easy, I find.”

The knights had stopped in obeisance to their prince, which was more than could be said of some
characters who would remain nameless, and were called Morgana. He was now somewhat self-
conscious of what he had come to say, and dithered for a bit, till Morgana said, “Well, what is it?”
in her usual imperious tone, and goaded him to it.

“I need to speak with Gwen.”

“Speak.”

“Privately.”

“Privately?” Morgana demanded. “And just what is it you plan to do with her privately ?” She put
such emphasis on it that Gwen turned a startling red; and he felt the embarrassment pass into him
as well, and warm his neck down to the collar. He had not intended to blush, and considered
himself too unflappable for it; but Morgana had a way of being unbearable, and imposing it on
others till they could hardly but feel themselves upset in their own skin.

“What do you think I’m going to do with her? What, exactly, do you think I am, Morgana? Do you
really think I would run off into the bushes to ravish your maid?” He saw Gwen was even more
embarrassed, and was sorry to have said it.

“You do seem to have a particular taste for servants. And I shouldn’t wonder at anyone wanting to
take Gwen into the bushes, she’s so beautiful and charming; too beautiful and charming for you,
certainly.”

This was a grave affront to Arthur’s notions of his station, and the station of servants, and the
effects of the discrepancy between them on the standards of consent; he had never taken a servant
into his bed, and never imposed on any of the maids even a milder romance; he was staunchly
correct with them. It hurt him that Morgana viewed him otherwise, that she considered him to be
steered by his impulses, violent as they might be to his people. He was not a very good man, and he
had it on good authority that he was an even worse prince. But he was not so bad as that.

Morgana softened. She looked at him with almost a pity, and he did not understand it; there was a
reconciliatory breeze between them which stirred up Morgana’s hair fetchingly, and made her less
severe. She said, “I didn’t mean it like that, Arthur. I shouldn’t have said it. Come with us;
whatever you have to say to Gwen you can say to me, without ridicule. I promise.” Of course it
wouldn’t do to let Morgana know she had struck at a raw spot, so he cleared his throat, and made
as if he were stupid, and oblivious to her meaning, and she seemed to take him at face value, and
consider him to have missed the connotation of her accusation altogether. So there was a brief
feeling of peace, whilst the roses came on swift winds, to pacify bitter wounds.
They set off over the lawns with Arthur leading Morgana’s horse, though the men had fallen over themselves to offer up their mounts. Arthur was in the sort of mood that necessitates the movement of one’s own limbs, and not the easy complacency of the saddle, and the work going on underneath it, independent of yourself. He wanted to feel the vigour of the sunlight as it retired ever earlier each day, and of himself. It was indescribable, to walk in the fragrant grasses, with the garden in pleasing competition, and to be young. There was a basket passed round when they chose their spot, and as Morgana was still in a conciliatory state, she gave him her marzipan cake, which he knew was an especial favourite. He ate it and felt himself quite looked after.

The knights had retired to a respectful distance, where they could still mind their young master with two ladies of distinguished beauty, but call themselves ignorant of what passed, conversationally, between the three of them.

“What is it you wanted?” Morgana prompted him, eating a strawberry with an expression of ecstasy that embarrassed Arthur.

“I needed to know...about a gift.”

“For Merlin!” Gwen cried out instantly; he winced.

“Of course not for Merlin. Why would you think that?”

“Because why else would you ask Gwen for gift ideas, why the subterfuge, and why do you expect us to believe it’s a coincidence that Merlin’s birthday is next week and you are randomly sniffing round for gift ideas that aren’t for him? We’re not men, Arthur; we aren’t obtuse,” Morgana said crisply. “It’s about time you did something thoughtful for him.”

“Every day I don’t throw him in the stocks, it’s thoughtful of me.”

“You are wretched.”

“What happened to ‘Whatever you have to say to Gwen you can say to me, without ridicule’?”

“It isn’t ridicule to say you’re an absolute twat to him. I can’t say I wouldn’t have assassinated you in his place.”

“I expect you to do it in your own place,” Arthur said wryly.

“One day, Arthur.” She seemed greatly cheered by it. “Anyway, maybe you should get him a new master?”

“My lady,” Gwen said with gentle correction in her tone. “You said you wouldn’t make fun of him.”

“All right; I’m sorry. It’s only it’s so easy to fall into. What do you say, Gwen? What could Arthur get Merlin that would make up for having to serve him? He only has enough money to fund one kingdom.” She dimpled. “That’s the last one, honestly.”

“There’s a book,” Gwen said almost without pausing to consider it. “He was trying to find it in the library a little while ago, but he’s sort of...been banned. I tried to look for it, but I couldn’t find it. If someone would go to the trouble of getting a copy of it, it would mean a lot to him, I know.”

“What do you mean he was banned?”

“It wasn’t his fault the book cases fell over! Geoffrey was a bit harsh.”
“Book cases, plural. Of course. How many did he knock over?”

“Well, he didn’t exactly knock them over. I mean, he sort of did, but he didn’t mean to, and he was awfully sorry about it. Anyone could have tripped and bumped into them like that.” Gwen bit her lip. “There were...about six or so of them? But they were set up so close to one another! They wouldn’t have tumbled into one another like that and knocked the rest down if they were a bit better laid out. Oh! Not that I’m criticising your library! Sorry. I didn’t mean--”

“Guinevere,” Arthur said, and being conscious of her own prickling self-awareness, he didn’t laugh. “‘Anyone’ could hardly have done it. The only person on this earth I know who could be capable of it is Merlin. And I’m sure he’s already devised some method of getting round Geoffrey. But anyway. What’s this book?”

“It’s the Historia Ecclesiastica?”

“Ecclesiastica,” Morgana finished for her. She was playing with Gwen’s hair, as if his conversation were not enough to consume her. “*The Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.

Gwen’s right; he would love it.”

Arthur was suddenly not sure how to end the interaction. He was conscious of the way they were both looking at him, as if he were a small child who had done something cute. He thought of giving the book to Merlin, and being looked at in the same way, and did not know whether he was pleased, or disturbed, and also why the skin under his collar had gotten hot once more, when the day was so benign. But the longer he considered it, the longer he imagined the look on Merlin’s face, and how the delight of having a kindness done to him would pink up the ears, and bring out the dimples in his cheeks, Arthur felt his own corresponding glow. He was somewhat startled to realise that Merlin’s happiness was a source for his own, and that even the conceptualisation of it, the possibility of its existence somewhere in the world, whether Arthur was there to observe it or not, put a new spin on the day, and in fact everything. He was suddenly glad to be alive. It was not that he had dreaded the act of living before; but now he was bursting with the miracle of it. He even liked Morgana, and had the idea to be pleasant to her.

“Thank you,” he said to them both, brushing off the crumbs lunch had left on his tunic.

“I think it’s really sweet of you!” Gwen blurted, as if the thought had come out of her from some unknown quarter, and startled even her. She blushed. Morgana did not blush, but smirked at him.

“Come talk to me about the helm later,” he said to Gwen. “I want to hear your ideas on it.” Then he set off whistling as he had gone into the hallway, pleased with everything that was, and was to come.

“You see, we soak the linen in the ointment, and then we put it inside the wound, as well as on it. It helps the wound to breathe,” Gaius said whilst demonstrating on a knight with a gouge in his side as Merlin watched, squinting at the ugliness of what the sword had done to its victim. “You must keep it open while it heals, to keep it from festering.”

Afterwards the knight was dismissed with his instructions of care, and Merlin returned to sorting herbs, and chattering. He was not able to contain his excitement over his upcoming birthday, and the pending celebration of it. It was like having it for the first time, because there had not been enough money for anything special in Ealdor, but only an extra kiss from his mum; and now Gaius
had promised him an excellent supper, and though he had told her not to, he knew he’d have a
present from Gwen, and one from Morgana as well. Possibly Arthur would forget it, and it would
coincide with the mucking of the stables, or something equally unpleasant, but even horse shit
could not take the shine off it (though he may of course feel differently once in it to his knees). He
ran on for some time without pause whilst Gaius contributed a “Hmm” or the more contemplative
“Mm hhm” which demonstrated that he particularly agreed. There was a comfortable solidarity in
their movements, and the rhythm of them. They worked without consulting one another, but
naturally assumed the other knew his intentions, and were right; the sun came in its last blaze
through the window, and painted all the dust motes, and then it was almost as if they were in their
own private glade, with the fey folk shining about.

Merlin ruminated for a while on the upcoming supper, and noticed as he was coming to the end of
it that Gaius was away somewhere else, that he had a Look on his face. The look was capitalised in
this manner because it was the sort Gaius got when he had something difficult to say. Merlin did
not want to hear it now, whilst he was in this particular mood, when everything was good, and all
that was disagreeable had been eradicated from the world. He wanted it to go on being his
upcoming birthday, and for everything to revolve around the event, and to be courteous of the fact
that it was important to him. He thought life was a thing that shouldn’t intrude when there was a
birthday. “What is it, Gaius?” he asked with a sigh, because Gaius would say it anyway,
eventually, and he did not want to stand here sweating about it.

“Merlin,” Gaius began in a careful tone, as if he were weighing everything he said, and needed it to
be perfect. “It’s clear you and Arthur have grown close.”

“Not that close,” Merlin said, feeling defensive about it. He wondered why it was a thing to be
defensive about. He thought about Arthur sitting on him, and being pinned down by the hard
thighs, in a way that had been almost pleasant. That was because when Arthur was sitting on him
Merlin could not simultaneously be settling something nasty, like the muddy floors. So it was
understandable, to prefer being sat on in those circumstances, and to enjoy, a little, feeling how the
daily training had fashioned Arthur’s leg muscles. Probably Gaius would interpret it the wrong
way, though, since it was not altogether proper to sit on one’s servant, and to dishevel his hair. So
he justified it to himself, and did not explain it aloud, though he had a sudden guilt about it, and felt
he ought to.

“Merlin. There isn’t any arguing the point, my boy.” Gaius paused to study the ointment he was
mixing, and the ratio of his herbs. “You haven’t told him about you, have you?”

“What? No. I haven’t said anything.”

“Good.” And now Gaius looked at him, and Merlin’s stomach fell. He sensed Gaius was about to
break something in him, and hated it, and had to do it regardless. “Arthur is a good man, Merlin,
whatever his shortcomings. I think he will be a good king. I think, in many ways, he will not follow
in his father’s footsteps. But he has still grown up in his shadow. He has still grown up under his
laws, and his prejudice. You must be careful.”

Merlin swallowed. “I know, Gaius.”

“There is still an immense gap between the two of you, Merlin. You can be his servant, and his
confidante; that is a manservant’s privilege. But you must be careful in considering him a friend.
He will never really know you; and I fear what he would do if he did. You musn’t forget that.”

Merlin stood over his herbs. He had forgot the instinctive movements of his fingers, and how to
work them. The sun was warm on him, and it seemed a burden.
He had forgotten it. This was purposeful, sometimes, when he lay in bed at night, and the quiet brought out the logic in him. Then he willed himself to be ignorant, so he could go on. He did not want to be ashamed of himself; he did not want conditional friendships. But sometimes he was entirely accidental about it, when he was sitting with Arthur in the evenings, and they went on just as if they were great companions; and then it hurt to come back from that, and he preferred not to.

He was disappointed in himself. He was disappointed in Arthur, for luring him into a sense of security. He was disappointed to feel loved, and for it to be a falsehood.

“Yeah. Right.” He said it in a cheerful voice. He had overdone it, and knew that Gaius sensed the actual tone of it, the grief.

But he was always meant to be putting on faces, and none of them his own.

Arthur was typically physical with him that evening whilst Merlin was going about the usual bedtime routines. He was in the habit of being free with his hands, and letting them tousle Merlin’s hair, and push his shoulder, and touch his arm when it was not necessary to touch it. Merlin did not want to be touched. It was as if the realisation of Gaius’ warning had chafed him, and it was unbearable to have anything against him, let alone Arthur. He stoked the fire quietly, and turned back the bed covers wordlessly, whilst Arthur watched him from the table, his brow screwed up.

The easy familiarity which Arthur had adopted when they were alone, and he did not have to be a lord, and to prove his mastery to everyone, slowly thinned away, and then the air underwent a sort of hardening, so that it was tangible, and sat between them as if it were an obstacle either would have to hurtle over, if he wanted to reach the other.

Arthur did it first. He said, twirling his knife in the table, “What’s the matter with you?”

“There’s nothing the matter with me.”

“Right. You’ve called me ‘sire’ three times this evening. You’re being...subservient.”

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to be?”

“You’re supposed to be rude, and insubordinate. Much as I hate to admit it, there is a certain enjoyment in it. Gives me a chance to practice my biting one-liners, for when I cross paths with Morgana.”

“Sorry I’m not more entertaining. Sire.”

Arthur spun the knife some more without looking away from him. The firelight fragmented off the blade, and flung itself with abandon round the room. “Come on, Merlin. Out with it. What’s bothering you?”

The confession was sweltering in him. Sometimes he felt as if there was nothing else under his skin. Sometimes he felt he would have to tell, or to die; and those were the only options, to purge himself, or to succumb. So because it was pushing at him, because it wanted either its freedom, or his destruction, he was suddenly angry. And that was not even the word for it, but rather ‘livid’, or ‘enraged’. He was angry beyond any human comprehension of the emotion. And even then he might have kept it down, because he was used to it, because he was used, not to venting his feelings, but to suppressing them: but then Arthur said to him, with perfect seriousness, “Merlin,
you can tell me.” It was terribly unfair. He was then like an animal, and knew to lash out blindly at what had wounded him.

“Arthur, we’re not friends,” he snapped. “I don’t owe you a heart to heart.”

There was a long pause. It was clear he had hurt Arthur; but he felt a certain protectiveness of his anger, and the justification of it. He did not rescind what he had said. He forced himself to wallow in the truth of it.

“I’m aware of that,” Arthur said in a tone that implied he hadn’t been, but now was painfully conscious of it.

It was worse to hurt Arthur than anything else, because he was so desperate not to be affected. He did not even anger, and lash out back, and give Merlin’s resentment something to oppose, but only looked at him with a miserable face that was sorry to have been disappointing. It was the face he made when Uther was vocal about his failures, which was often. Then he shuttered it, but forgot his eyes.

“I won’t require you for the rest of the evening. Thank you, Merlin,” he said stiffly. He was steady about it, but his voice was toneless. He did not look at Merlin anymore, but concentrated on the knife, and that was the worst of all for Merlin. The anger wanted to be sustained, and in fact to be stoked; it had to keep feeding itself on something. It was easier to be hot with it, to feel its righteousness, to be powerful with it. It is simpler, far simpler, to feel an outrage, and to scintillate with it, to not contemplate anything underneath it, which might be the foundation of it. It was simpler to resent Arthur for his obliviousness.

But he hesitated, because Arthur had not let him flare up, had not come out blazing after him. Arthur kept his shoulders very straight, and went back to eating his supper with a studied casualness that was awful to watch. He was a dismal figure in the firelight, conscious of his solitude, and his attempts to rectify it, and his failures. So it was on the verge of Merlin’s tongue to spill everything; he stood shaking with the struggle of it. He wanted to be smart, and he wanted to be loyal. He wanted Arthur to be worthy of a chance; he wanted himself to be worthy of one. But then he remembered he was responsible for more than his own life; that he held Arthur’s as well. It was his duty to live, not because there was any particular need for him, but because there was need for Arthur. It would have to be enough, to fulfill a purpose, and not to be overly concerned with himself, and his delicate human hopes.

He left.

Arthur turned over in his bed. He had been doing it for some time, ever since he had put himself into it, in fact. He was terribly cognisant of how stupid he was. He was hot with shame, and threw off the bearskin rug under which he slept, and then needed the comfort of having something all around him. It was painful to be alone in the bed. It was painful to have been thick about everything. It was painful to have known he should have been circumspect about the existence of his feelings, and to have blared them about obnoxiously anyway. He realised how much of himself he had given to Merlin, expecting that it was amicably received, and felt he could never leave the bed, but deserved to be ashamed, and to flounder miserably in the shame, and to feel nothing else.

But he did get out of the bed. He could not stand it. He could not stand to be still, to steep in his embarrassment. He needed to redistribute it with a good walk.
He took a candle, and went to the library.

He had not known he was going to it, till he turned in at it, and then he was so bitterly aware of his patheticness that he could not stand himself.

He did not look for the book Gwen had suggested to him; or he told himself he was not looking for it. But he could not stand to leave either, and stood shining the candle round the stacks. He began to thumb through some of them, trying not to consciously keep an eye out for the book, and trying also not to consciously not keep an eye out for the book. He tried not to be aware of it at all.

There must have been some few hours that went by; the candle was divesting itself of its structure in a way that certainly suggested it. Arthur was vaguely aware that time was still in possession of its usual essence, that it was going on, and carrying him forward into a new alienation, worse than the earlier one, because he thought it had ended. He would come out the other end of the night with a new awareness of Merlin’s true perception of him, and their relationship, or lack thereof; and pitifully he had come for the book, as if he were still in a position to give it. It was useless to lie to himself about it: he had come for the book. He had tried to purchase Uther’s approval with deeds, and he was now trying to purchase Merlin’s with material goods. He could not barter himself for affection; he was not adequate.

In the morning he would be stricter with himself, and make out to everyone, and certainly himself, as if he did not need anything mundane like friendship. But he was tired. He was heartsick. It was too difficult, in the depths of night, with the castle silent all round him, to pretend he was an island unto himself, and well pleased with it.

The night had begun to emerge from its deeper timbre when he came across the text. It was thin, and dusty. It was not labeled, and not bound, but only had a leather strap round it, to keep the parchments in order. He loosened it with a vague curiosity.

“I am preparing to sing the deeds of the wizard Emrys; pray correct the song, Robert, by restraining my pen. For we know that Philosophy has poured its divine nectar over you, and has made you famous in all things, that you might serve as an example, a leader and teacher in the world. And now, Sisters, accustomed to sing with me, let us sing the work proposed, and strike the cithara.”

Arthur went cold. He recognised the name. He could not consciously place it for a moment, but the more knowledgeable unconscious layers of him were at work, and dredged it up: the sorceress in the cave had called Merlin by it, and the Sidhe Queen as well.

He reread the name, and the title which had preceded it. He did not want to be, and could not help but be taken back to Tintagel, to the gentle blue light, and Merlin’s voice impossibly in his ear. He had forced the suspicion out of himself; but after all he had only pushed it off somewhere, and not eradicated it. It came surging up from where it had been pressed.

He fumbled the leather strap back into place. It was only a stupid poem, by some stupid nutter. He put it back. He turned round, as if concerned there might be something sneaking up on him; there was, but it could not be attended against externally. It was an interior sensation. He felt the urge to get out of himself. He picked up the candle, and put it down again. He was about to learn something he did not want to know, and tried not to be aware of it; he could be nothing else. He thought of Merlin’s harmless, stupid smile, the lack of malice in him. He thought of the foolish ears, and his propensity for tripping when it was least convenient, and his arms were full of Arthur’s bathwater. He thought of a man who could not ride, could not fight, could not safely navigate the stairs. He thought of a man who had been, briefly, his friend.

He picked up the manuscript. He tucked it inside his tunic, where it burnt him.
Merlin lay awake all night. Next morning he was horribly repentant, and banged into Arthur’s chambers to say he was an arse. He said it to an empty room.

He ran the whole length of the castle, as if he were mad, and paused at the other end to lean on a statue, and talk his stomach out of being sick. When he was not in danger of doing his penance with vomit on his shirt, he ran to the tourney field, where the men were already at work pretending to murder one another. Some were more enthusiastic about it than others, and seemed to forget it was play. He heard the master at arms bellowing, and the chorus of grunting that accompanies a field of sweating murder play. He did not hear Arthur.

Sir Leon was crossing the field at that moment with his squire, and smiled at him; Merlin grabbed his mailed arm, which was an insubordination from a servant, but Sir Leon was polite enough to only blink at it, and not to have him flogged. “Where’s Arthur?” Merlin panted.

“Hawking, I believe.”

“Right. Thanks!”

He ran towards the woods, thinking that it was useless to blunder round directionless in them, hoping to come across Arthur, who might have been anywhere in them, and running on anyway. His apology was too restless. It was stamped with the look on Arthur’s face the evening before, and had kept him from sleep all evening, and would keep him from it till he had restored at least the illusion of their friendship. He had realised, in stripping himself of it, that he did not care about the falseness of it, but only needed it in any capacity. He could burn secretly with his knowledge, and the knowledge of what Arthur would do to him if he discovered it. But meanwhile he had to preserve what they could have.

He stumbled into a bush, and fought it for an embarrassing length of time. It was thorny, and violated him, without even the recompense of supper. His jacket was torn, and his cheek, but he did triumph in the end, or anyway, he did get free of it. He ran on.

“Arthur! Arthur!” The woods sent back his own voice, as if dissatisfied with it, and unwilling to pass it on. He stopped to orient himself, spinning round. He was on the verge of being lost. He still had a vague notion of the citadel, and how to point himself towards it, and if he went any deeper, the woods would have him. He took off into them.

He was going full tilt, and almost could not stop himself in time whilst he was plunging into the section of forest that Arthur was just coming out of; they stopped within feet of one another. The raptor on Arthur’s glove turned its head to consider Merlin, and whether he was vulnerable to its talons. It stared too long for Merlin to feel quite easy in himself; but perhaps that was because Arthur had fixed a look of similar intensity on him, and between the two, he was positively naked. (Down to his soul, not his underwear.) Arthur had not slept either. There was a crude stubble coming in, and his eyes were red. He looked at Merlin dully. He stroked the raptor’s head, in order to show his nonchalance; it made Merlin feel as if the cruelty he had inflicted on Arthur he had also somehow done to himself. He was not even sure how to begin, how to be properly sorry in a way that reflected his own inner remorse. It seemed something he could not even express, not adequately, in any human tongue. There was then an interval where they simply looked at one another, and he felt he had not severed everything totally, that Arthur was not entirely lost to him, that he wanted to be, but could not properly close himself. Merlin felt his heart out of his chest, out of any normal human bounds, thunderous in his ears, somehow omnipresent. It was in his throat,
and his belly, and his ears; he felt all the hot pulse points of himself working simultaneously, so he
was not any longer the usual collection of multiple organs, but merely the one, stupid with grief.
His heart told him it was another moment to be honest, to thrust himself into Arthur’s hands, and
see what was done with him. It was not like his brain, and did not sound like Gaius, or his mum. It
was only young, and bruised, and it believed in Arthur.

He opened his mouth. He shut it. Arthur stroked the feathery head. He was evidently too tired to
put on his strict face, and went on looking as Merlin felt.

“Arthur--”

Arthur was staring directly into him now, and not the trees. He was ready for a reconciliation. His
face was entirely open to it; it had forgot to be stern. Merlin felt the responsibility of not crushing
it. He thought what it would be, what it would change, to stand before Arthur, and to say he was a
sorcerer.

He said, “About yesterday. I’m sorry. I was an ass. I was...I don’t know. Just in a bad mood.”

“On your monthly cycle?” Arthur offered, still stroking the soft head as it went constantly this way
and that, seeking prey.

“Something like that, yeah.” The security of the old banter brought some of the usual cheer to
Arthur’s haggard face, and to Merlin’s chest.

So it was that they walked out of the woods together, still cautious, but touching at the shoulder.

Next morning Arthur was up before the sun. He leapt out of bed, full of the vigour of someone who
hasn’t slept for all his worries. There was a heaviness of nerves in his chest, and continuously it
sent little jolts through him, so that he was perpetually unsettled, and had to circle the room, and to
fling open the shutters, and then to shut them once more. He sharpened his sword. He sharpened
his dagger. He debated between three tunics, and tried them each on twice, and then decided on a
fourth. He put on every ring he owned, and tapped his knuckles against the table, to hear them
resonate.

He was consumed by the manuscript. It was rubbish, and he had burnt it; it was full of dragons and
things which had not yet come to pass, and things which could not possibly have come to pass, and
deserved no other fate.

But as some things are prone to do once dead, it haunted him. He felt the same guilt as if he had
slain hot flesh and blood, because he had done it out of malice, and ignorance, because it had tried
to tell him something he did not want to hear. Alone, it could not have swayed him: but his own
suspicions had allied themselves with it, and now rebuked him for his cowardice.

He had wrestled all that night with the serenity which ignorance offered him, and with the
insistence of truth, heedful of no blind loyalty, or budding love. It was not careful with him; it did
not let him lie easy in himself and his deliberate oblivion. He sat up at multiple intervals from the
twisted sheets, and put his feet over the side of the bed, and his head in his hands.

At daybreak he crept past a snoring Gaius, and up the singsong stairs; and kneeling on the cramped
bed, shook Merlin awake. There was an evil eye aimed up at him through a wild profusion of black
hair, and after it a groggy, “Arthur? Is something wrong?”

“We’re going boar hunting.”


The light had come to him in the caves when he was in danger; and it had lit up the vast emptiness of the islet and its secret murderer when he was in danger. He pulled Merlin up by the front of his shirt. “Yes.”

Their mounts were not in approval of the outing. There was something in the woods which disturbed them; it was an uneasy morning. There was the latent pressure of an approaching storm, and all the wood was breathless in anticipation of it. The trees which had begun to yield their crowns of emerald to the autumn ruby watched with a human curiosity the snorting beasts stepping past in fine trim. Merlin felt the strain of this strange audience, the jabbing of it at his back, the pricking of it under his skin. He was off; Arthur was off. There was something large at work here, and he did not like it.

When their quarry had been cornered, the horses were not in the spirit of it, and plunged madly, so that even Arthur had some difficulty in dismounting gracefully to finish off the trembling prey with his dagger. Merlin sat in a stiff vigilance on his horse, trying not to be thrown. He hated the approach, the terrifying contradiction of frail man, and massive beast; he did not breathe as it went on. He tried to soothe the frightened animal under him, and the one in him. Both of them wanted to flee, and to take Arthur with them. He felt, looking at the boar, and the malevolence in its stupid black eye, that somehow they had all reached a sudden crossroads, and this was the fatal choice. He told himself he was stupid.

But somehow in rushing the boar, Arthur fumbled; the dagger did not strike true, but left his hand altogether. And the boar in seeing its opening charged.

Merlin reached out instinctively, and flung Arthur out of the way; and whilst he lay senseless on the ground, the boar saw that it could make another go of it, and turned, spilling the vengeful foam from its lips. Merlin whispered under his breath, controlling his horse somehow with his knees as he stretched out a hand; the magic sang furiously in him, sensing the threat, sensing Merlin’s panic: and the dagger rose in an effortless complacency, and turned itself on the boar’s throat. There was a pitiful squeal, and that was all; it died the usual brutal death of the wilds, with no other fanfare.

Merlin immediately hurled himself off the horse. He ran to Arthur. He was shaking; he had seen instantly upon dispatching the boar how still Arthur lay, and fell rather than knelt beside him. He reached out for the white face with his trembling hands, expecting the eyes to be closed: but they were open, and staring at him. Then he was shaking for a different reason altogether.

He did not know the look, but only because he could not imagine seeing it on Arthur’s face: it was hatred. But the unconscious workings of him, more clever than any learned man, recognised it, and the despair which followed it.

But he did not want to know it. He was holding Arthur’s cold face in his hands, and it still felt as if it could belong to him. He said, roughly, “You all right?”

They said nothing all the journey home.

Merlin finished with the horses. His heart beat madly all through it; he said to himself that Arthur had not seen what he had seen. He had not even mentioned it, after all, but only went off quietly once they entered the courtyard, throwing the reins to Merlin.

But when he had finished caring for the horses he felt such a driving urgency in him that he tore along towards Gaius’ chambers, and threw himself like a madman through the door.

“Merlin, what is it?” Gaius asked, half-standing from behind his work table. He looked frightened.

“I think Arthur saw me. In the woods.”

“Slow down, my boy.”

“We went boar hunting. He was going to die, Gaius; the boar was going to--I threw him out of the way, and I killed the boar. And I think--I think he saw me use magic.”

“You think he saw, or you know he saw? Which is true, Merlin, and which do you want to be true?”

Merlin felt his stomach leave him. It dropped impossibly, and was no longer a part of him. He felt it was true of all of him: that there was nothing which now comprised him. He was utterly hollow: and yet still somehow in possession of enough sensations to feel this absence acutely. He did not think it was possible for it to kill a man, absence: and yet it felt that way. “He saw.”

Gaius turned with a terrible look on his face to the bookcase, and yanking out several volumes carelessly, he flung open a cupboard which they had hid, and pulled out a satchel. “You must leave, Merlin. Take this; it’s some food, and blankets. I had hoped it would never come to this, but I prepared anyway. Now, go; I’ll delay as long as I can.”

Merlin clutched the satchel helplessly. His feet were petrified; his judgement was petrified. “He didn’t say anything about it. Maybe he--”

“He’s going to Uther, Merlin. He believes it’s what’s right: and Arthur above all tries to do what is right, whatever the cost to himself. I’m sorry, Merlin. I’ve seen it, over and over again. Go.”

Merlin fled.

Arthur went to his room, and threw a goblet. When it shattered, he felt worse. He rubbed his hands over his face, unbelted his sword, and threw it across the table, so that it clattered satisfyingly. It was not enough. He thought the whole room should feel what he felt, and threw another goblet. There would be no one to clean it up now: and he felt a savage sort of pleasure in leaving the room in the same state as his soul.

He threw up in the chamberpot, and left to seek his father.
“How did you sleep last night, my lady? Any better?” Gwen asked as she brushed out Morgana’s hair. Morgana leant into it, sighing.

“No; I don’t know what’s wrong with me, Gwen. I have the most terrible dreams sometimes. It can’t be...it can’t be normal, don’t you think?”

“Everyone has nightmares sometimes.”

“Not like these.” She looked into her mirror, seeing Gwen’s sweet face reflected in it, seeing the room behind her, unthreatening in the daylight, the sun light-hearted in even its direst corners. “I’ve had nightmares before; they aren’t like these dreams. Sometimes I see the most horrible things. They feel so real. I could swear...I’m not looking at something from my imagination, but a memory. Or...a prediction. I must be mad.”

“Of course not,” Gwen assured her. She set down the brush to hug Morgana round the shoulders. “Whatever’s happening to you, we’ll figure it out. I won’t let you be alone through it.”

They smiled at one another in the mirror. “Truly, Gwen, I don’t know what I would do without you,” Morgana said, and there was a knock at the door.

Gwen opened it on Arthur. Morgana rose without any awareness of it, till she was on her feet; she was suddenly frightened. “Arthur, what is it?” He was absolutely white; he did not seem able to hold himself up, but clutched the door frame in an equally white hand. “Gwen, help him inside. Are you ill?” she asked, shutting the door behind them. “Arthur?” She sat him in her chair, and spreading her skirts gracefully underneath her, sank at his feet. She had thought to talk him through a few calming breaths, with her hands on his knees, but already he was up again, as if it were impossible to be stationary.

“Morgana, if someone--if you--if you...cared about someone, and they weren’t what you’d thought--if they weren’t the sort of person you believed them to be, what would you do?”

Gwen was equally frightened. She spoke up, with a hand to her throat: “What are you talking about? Is this about Merlin? Is he all right?”

“Arthur, I don’t understand,” Morgana said coolly, in order to combat the look on Arthur’s face, and the tone of Gwen’s voice. “What are you talking about? Has someone done something wrong?”

His face seemed to break up. It was terrible to behold him. She knew he wanted a good cry, and had forgot how to. “I don’t know,” he said, raggedly. “Yes.”

“Sit down,” she ordered, and made him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I know you have a good heart. I know sometimes Uther has scoffed at it, and made you feel as if it’s wrong, or a burden: but it isn’t, Arthur. It’s the best part of you. And I know you will look into it, and do the right thing, whatever that is.”

“And what if I don’t know what the right thing is?”

She touched his cheek. She felt in that moment his need for a mother, and there was then a fierce upwelling of maternal rage in her, towards the nebulous something which had hurt him. She would like to thoroughly slap it, however large and armed it may be. “Do you really not know, or do you not wish to know, because it’s difficult? Because it’s painful?”

She had meant it to bring some clarity to him, and perhaps some colour back into him; but he looked worse. He said, with such heavy defeat in his voice, “Thank you, Morgana. You’re right, of
course.”

And then gently removing her hand from his face, he left. Gwen came to clutch her, though neither understood why they needed to be held.

His father was in the great hall, taking his breakfast. Arthur was quite in control of himself by this time, and said in an almost steady voice, “Father, I need to speak privately with you. It’s regarding a matter of…” He realised he could not say ‘treason’. He had not yet reconciled himself to it. He was not ready to have been betrayed by Merlin. He wet his lips. He said: “It’s regarding a matter of grave importance.”

The servants were consequently dismissed. The hall was ominously quiet. He felt as if all the world had stopped to hear him speak, and to be outraged.

Uther looked at him expectantly; and there were consequences to disappointing Uther’s expectations.

But it was impossible not to. Standing there, on the precipice of his confession, Arthur realised it was not about what was right, but what he could bear: and he could not bear Merlin on the pyre, or beneath the headsman’s axe. He tried to be practical, to remember Aland, whom he had believed; he tried to remember his own foolishness. But his tongue was dumb to these practicalities, and could not speak on them.

When he opened his mouth, it was in order to accommodate a long ream of lies about the knights, their martial prowess, his concerns for the current training program, and his ideas on its betterment. He lied solidly, for a good several minutes, whilst his father trusted him.

And then he locked himself in his room, and said he was unwell when Morgana tried to visit him, and Gwen brought up food. He lay in his bed, looking round the room, at the coldness of it, all the ways in which it had been undisturbed by any tidying hand, and knew Merlin was gone.

Morgana tried several times to lure Arthur out of his room, or at least to contrive herself into it; but by evening she had given up, and left him to himself. She did not understand what had happened, and could not find Merlin in order to be enlightened; she knew there had been something awful, and was followed all day by a baseless fear. She tried to walk it out of herself, by going round and round the castle, but it only tired her. By evening, when she had given up on Arthur, and given up on comforting herself, she had decided on standing at one of the arrow loops, to look out over the land from its narrow perspective.

And through it she saw, in the sunset, a horse and rider go madly over the stones of the courtyard, as if pursued.

Arthur turned his mare for the woods, and gave her the bit: and then she ran as if the same demons had got hold of her as well as master, and soon they were away among the gorse, nearly invisible, and then entirely.
Merlin had stolen the horse he spoilt with carrots, so it went amiably enough for him, but could not aid with his sense of direction. He had kept off the road, and tried to pick out the darkest woodland path, and the least trod; so consequently, he was hopelessly turned round, and could only hope he was still heading in the same general direction, towards Ealdor.

The terror had collapsed in on itself after the first wild projection of him and beast into the bracken, when the poor horse picked up his mood, and lost its head, and galloped breakneck through the trees. He was now only exhausted. When there was a grey sunset come through the promise of a storm, not yet delivered upon, he thought of stopping, and kept on somehow, leaning against the horse’s neck. He had not heard the bell before he was no longer in earshot of it, and considered himself to have a decent enough headstart, or at least to be far enough into the part of the wood which belonged to the outlaw contingent, and discouraged any man of sane persuasion. But Arthur knew he would return to Ealdor; Arthur knew he would go to see his mother. Arthur could lead an armed detachment along the roads, as the righteous party entitled to such direct journeys, without the complication of bough and bramble. So he had to make use of what time he had, and try to get ahead of them. It was fine to die in the attempt to see his mum; but he at least had to make a good try at it, and not to give up already, before she knew he was sorry.

The moon was out when he heard the hoofbeats. It came out reluctantly, through the clouds, and did not hardly light his path, but almost confused it more; he had to conjure up the light he had sent to guide Arthur in the caves of Balor, and hold it over the horse’s ears.

It was a single rider, going hell for leather. Merlin’s heart started up into his throat; his magic had thrilled at the approach of the traveler, as if it did not know.

Arthur had come for him, alone. He knew the man who was still some distance off as he knew his own bones and skin and sinew.

He debated whether he could outrun him. He debated whether he should.

And then, in a sudden flash of reckless hope, or stupidity, Merlin turned his horse. There was a large clearing just behind him, and it was only some minutes before Arthur came charging into it, his hair flying; his horse was absolutely blowing, and had reached the end of its natural endurance, and gone beyond it. The churning back legs abruptly dug in, and checked its headlong flight when Merlin appeared out of the trees, waiting.

There was the tortured heaving of the poor mare, and nothing else.

Looking at him, Merlin felt the resignation of his position. There was no longer anything reckless in him; simply the tiredness that had leant him on his horse’s neck, and made of every passing copse a miraculous berth. He had nothing to say. He thought, probably so far as Arthur was concerned, everything had been said, by not being said; and there was nothing now but to see the end of it.

“You lied to me,” Arthur said at last. “You’ve been lying to me all this time.”

Merlin felt a bitterness in his throat. “I’m sorry I wanted to live. I thought I had some right to it.”

“But you lied to me,” Arthur snapped, and seemed to crumple a little in his mail, as if it were only a silly make-believe by a child who had put on his father’s armour, feeling himself quite grown up.
“After I--” He stopped. In the woods, in the moonlight, it was easier to say. “After I trusted you.”

Merlin swallowed. “You don’t get that trust back automatically, Arthur. You have to earn it.”

“And I didn’t.” It came out roughly. Merlin was sorry, even now, to have hurt him.

“Do you think you’re the only one who gets to be angry, Arthur?” he shouted. “Your father murders people like me! I had to live every minute of my life, knowing I could never make a mistake, that I could never tell anyone, that I could never trust anyone. You think you’re the only one I’ve had to betray? My whole life my mum, and Gaius, have told me of course I’m not a monster: but I have to assume everyone will treat me as one.” It had come fizzing out of him, rapidly, pouring up from his guts where he’d had to shove it and shove it, and to forget about it. Now he was deflated. Now he could not feel anything else. He had been angry; now he was only empty. It is often like that. “Why are you here?” he asked, tonelessly. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Is that what you think of me?” Arthur asked; probably he had meant it to be steely. It was stricken.

“It’s what I think of everyone,” Merlin said, tiredly, and longed to simply sleep, and to wake up on a new day.

Arthur suddenly dismounted his horse in a fury; he fumbled with his sword belt, getting it wrong several times, and then finally pulling it free of his waist, and hurling the whole lot away from him. “Get off your horse.”

“What?”

“Get off your horse, Merlin,” Arthur demanded, and when Merlin would not do it, Arthur knocked him off himself.

Then they were wrestling in the dirt like children, neither getting the upper hand, because Merlin could not match Arthur’s strength, and Arthur could not match the magic which Merlin now used to ruthlessly cheat. They bit and punched one another, and rolled over dirtying themselves, whilst the horses watched, and looked disbelieving at one another.

“Did someone send you?” Arthur shouted.

“My mum sent me, you prat, to Gaius! Uther was the one who insisted I be your bloody manservant!”

“Yes, you arranged that very nicely, didn’t you?” Arthur grunted, flinging Merlin off him.

“I hated you! I thought you were a great big arse! You think I manoeuvred myself into service to you, you great arrogant tit?” He put Arthur into a headlock.

“Why else would a sorcerer lower himself to skivvy for a prince?”

“You’re right, that’s why I’m here, to spy on your awful love poetry and your dirty underwear,” Merlin choked out through the leg lock Arthur had got round his neck; he caught Arthur’s trousers on fire, but put them out soon as Arthur jerked away from him.

“You cheated! In the marketplace, when we first met!”

“You were trying to kill me with a mace!” Merlin yelled.
They rolled over again, both at once trying to get a bear hug round the other, and end it.

“And at chess!”

“That’s evil, is it? I also heated your bathwater with magic, and saved your stupid life. But do I ever get any thanks for that; no. Do you know how dead you would be if it weren’t for me?”

“There’s only one sort of dead, you idiot; there aren’t levels of it.”

“Well you’d be the deadest one. Get off me, prat.”

“Get off me, sorcerer.”

Merlin bit Arthur. Arthur bit him back. They rubbed dirt in one another’s faces; Arthur pulled out some of Merlin’s hair; Merlin scratched up some of his poncey skin. “I’ve only used it for you, Arthur, you ingrate. That’s what it’s for; that’s why I’m this way: to protect you. To help Albion.”

In the interests of honesty, since he now had the freedom of it, Merlin added: “And to speed up my chores.”

“I never asked you to.”

“You didn’t have to. I just do it.”

“Why?” Arthur snapped. They had come to the end of the clearing, and their endurance; they both sprawled back next to one another, gasping, their legs tangled.

“Because you’re my friend, you wanker.” He had lost the adrenaline of the fight, and said it without any heat. Arthur looked over at him, still trying to catch his breath. He evidently did not yet have enough of it for a response, but some of the anger had gone out of him. He was tawny with dust, and his eyes glowed up out of it.

They had run out of accusations and name-calling, and now lay quietly next to one another whilst the horses lost interest, and turned fervently to their grazing.

“I didn’t tell anyone,” Arthur said at last, quietly, looking up at the moon. “I won’t send anyone after you. You’re free to go wherever you like.” His voice was funny. It sounded to Merlin as if it were only just learning how to say the words. He realised Arthur was keeping down something vast in him, and trying not to choke on it.

Merlin turned his head in the dirt to look at Arthur’s profile. It was battered, but astonishing; he hated that about it. He said, softly, without looking away from it, “There’s only one place I want to go, Arthur.”

And Arthur, looking back at him, seemed to transform: as if relief were a beautifying agent, and softened the fear Merlin now recognised in his eyes, and the cuts on his cheeks. He was not able to speak immediately. He had to turn back to the moon, and say to it: “My servant recently quit.”

“He sounds like an irresponsible tosser.”

“He is.”

“I suppose I could take up his slack.” It was as if Merlin were only just learning the words as well; they stuck in his chest. He could feel their entire aching progress, and the anxious doubt of them, once they had reached his tongue, and could hardly go on.
Arthur pursed his lips. “I suppose you’d probably do as well as he. Not that that’s saying much.” They did their careful routine of sideways looking, so the other could not read too much into it, and then Arthur, beautifully, with his whole face, suddenly smiled over at him, and pounded him on the chest.

So the birthday celebration went off as Merlin had hoped after all, and he had a beautiful stew, with tender venison, and ate custard till he was nearly sick. Afterward he climbed the stairs to his room, questioning the life choices which had led him to such an overburdened stomach, and inside was startled to discover a package on his bed, wrapped in linen. It was done poorly, and confused him; Gwen was the usual suspect in such matters of thoughtfulness, but she would have made a lovely job of it, and used a far nicer fabric.

He opened it, and there, in terrific condition, was a copy of *The Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. He went to sleep holding it, like any good book lover with a new acquisition.

The season turned, bitterly, into a contentious fall, and there was some trouble in the outer fiefs. But when they had for a while tiptoed round the changes in their relationship, feeling out its newness, Arthur and Merlin became categorically unshakeable.

And Arthur was stunningly, briefly, happy.
Hello! As you can see by the title, I've split this update into parts because it's a long one. There will be two parts; the second is almost finished. The green knight's dialogue is mostly taken from Burton Raffel's translation of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', with a few tweaks. Also, the joke Gwen tells I stole from the internet; it's supposedly a real joke that was told sometime in the medieval period, which I believe, because those fuckers were bawdy. I hope you enjoy, and thank you for reading!

The Rising Sun was doing a roaring good business that evening, when a large green man on an equally large green horse rode into it. Arthur did not notice him at first, because the clatter of an iron-footed beast is much the same as the clatter of a drunken-footed tavern, and because he was trying to get Merlin off the table. This was a task of some complexity, since Merlin had for the contents of his stomach one (1) tankard of ale, and consequently was regaling the knights of Camelot, and the rest of the unfortunate patrons, with his rendition of a song. It was not known which song, and possibly it was made up as it went along, but it was salty, and brought out a blush in Arthur, because he had not known that Merlin knew, in such exhaustive detail, you could do that with a barmaid. Additionally, he was murdering it. It was as if he were jealous of the key he could not reach, and had decided to punish it.

Arthur had abandoned the gentler persuasions of food, and tongue clicking, and settled for grasping Merlin round the ankle, and pulling him down onto his arse, when he spotted the man. It was inevitable that he should have, even with Merlin still singing in his ear, as the rest of the bar had now noticed him as well, and fallen as quiet as it was able. The horse clack clacked over the unfriendly floor, which sent up a howl at this latest indignity. They were a stunning pair: there was nothing so unforgivingly green, except for Ireland. The man in green armour, shirt, and tunic: the horse in green braid, tack and stone. The manes were equal, and the emeralds swam through them as in clear waters which are unfraught by any surface disturbance. They all went smoothly into one another, and seemed to have no end. This rider had for each massive calf a silk stocking, and for the massive waist a belt of banded green. His embroidery had seen a finer hand than any Arthur knew, and the butterflies and birds which peopled it sprang as if from life before the blinking eyes. The beard came in one unending foam down his arms, and died at the elbow; he was half-enclosed by the mane of his head, and the one of his chin.

There were a dozen gold bells that sang out with strange joy as he came on: and all the watching public felt themselves present for a miracle. He had not the ordinary complexion of any ordinary man, but in addition to his colour, glowed like a maiden, and beyond: he was like a bolt of lightning made mortal. The clouds had birthed him, and the earth kept him; and now he came on scintillating from pore and saddle and spur.

Merlin, who was now sitting on the table, leaned over in order to offer his thoughtful observation: “He’s green, Arthur.” Then he burst out laughing. It was not so amusing to Arthur, who would never again hear out of the ear he had said it into.

“Merlin, come down from there,” he said, but Merlin, like a friendly child, was trying to introduce
himself to the rider.

He wore no mail, no helmet, and carried neither shield nor spear; but only a branch of holly in one hand, and a massive axe in the other, which was faithful to the colour scheme. It was also some four feet wide, and stropped like a razor. Arthur pulled Merlin out of its range by his coat.

“Your court sings of its daring--so do they dare it, any of these eager young knights, to give a blow and take a blow? I’ll offer this noble axe and let them swing its weight as they like, and I’ll sit without armour and invite them to strike as they please. Anyone with the nerve to try it, take this axe here! Hurry, I’m waiting!” the man suddenly thundered, in a voice that shook the huddled masses, and also the horse, who seemed otherwise unflinching.

There was an awkward silence. It is difficult to say, “Bugger off, you mad arsehole!” to a man with such impeccable fashion sense. (Also he was at least seven feet in height, according to the soberest of the witnesses, and over nine, according to the rest.)

He was now looking directly at Merlin, who was suffering another fit of hilarity. “Do you answer my challenge, then?” the man roared, and before Arthur could yell back in a resonant voice, “No; I do” and shove Merlin out of the way, a man came flying out of the crowd. He was in possession of truly fabulous hair, which formed a nimbus round his head as he flew, and was no less pleasing for its flight, but almost more stunning than at rest. He was also in possession of a tankard, and did not lose his grip on it when he punched the giant in the face.

“Sorry,” he said to Arthur, who was half off the bench, and quite obviously poised to be the hero, and had had it most rudely ruined. “I didn't think it was fair, him putting it on the little one like that.” He held out his hand to Merlin, who looked at him with love in his eyes; it was the sort of adulation which only the stupid drunk has the capacity to feel, and made Arthur want to rough up the man’s hair, or possibly even cut it. “Gwaine.”

“Merlin! That was brilliant!”

“Then you will rise to my challenge?” the giant asked in his booming voice, dismounting his horse whilst the man called Gwaine set down his tankard, now empty.

Merlin handed him another, and put his chin in his hands.

Arthur ground his teeth, for something to do, since obviously he was supplementary. God forbid he take up the challenge, when he had dozens of successful ones to his name; obviously this Gwaine was perfectly capable, though Arthur doubted he had fought an invisible man, or magical snakes, or plague beasts. Possibly a comb, which certainly he had subdued; but that was all. He wanted to point out to Merlin that his nose was rather large.

Gwaine shrugged. “Why not?”

“Then take up this axe, and strike true. And in a month and a day, I will return blow for blow. Strike, brave knight!” he shouted, and dipped down his head, so that the hair parted over his neck, and showed the soft flesh of it, which seemed as vulnerable as the skin of any other neck.

“You must be even drunker than I am, mate,” Gwaine said, but took up the axe as asked, and eying the edge of it, which seemed to drink all the light the tavern could provide, and still to hunger, swung it. He swung it true indeed: Arthur heard the ordinary violence of mortal flesh cleaved fatally, the wet sticking of the blade, and the squeal of frightened bone; the head came off. No one had quite expected it, and flinched back. The body was not perturbed by the loss of its head, but only stood as it was, bent over to receive the stroke. This caused a general murmur. Then
as the head rolled round, quite jolly with the bells in its beard, the general murmur swept into a cheer, and everyone began to kick it back and forth. It is the same instinct which drives the cat: if it can be rolled round, it must be rolled round. The head laughed as it was kicked whilst Gwaine stood with dripping blade, looking to Arthur for guidance. Arthur did not have it. Merlin led the participants in a chant as they kicked the head.

The body was not long idle, but tottered after its head, and collected it straightaway, because even a drunk will not argue with a man who can suffer to have his head cut off, and then go back to his usual activities of living. He mounted the horse once more, and holding up the head by its long hair, turned it so all the tavern could see the lids in quivering movement, and the lips which opened now to speak. He was entirely casual about the whole business, as if he did it every day. From the lips there came the deafening voice, rolling out as the storm rolls out over the quieting hillocks: “Gwaine, be ready to ride as you promised me. Hunt me well until you find me, as you swore to, here in this tavern, heard by these knights. Find the green chapel, come to take what you’ve given: seek me, and nothing can keep me from you. Come! Or be called a coward forever.”

And then taking up his reins, the man turned and rode out as he had rode in, to wherever it was he had come from.

Then of course his father needed to be told, and then Arthur had to stand, and take his scolding for not having answered the challenge himself, and afterward to return to the tavern, in order to collect Merlin. He was sitting across from Gwaine, and they were chatting like old friends. It was stunning to find that there was another mortal man with the same propensity for idle chatter, and the ability to sustain it; he was not sorry to break up the romance. It seemed to Arthur a great evil, which would justify to Merlin the veracity of his monologues. Moreover, the monologues were Arthur’s burden to bear, and should not be inflicted upon the simple populace.

“Come on,” he interrupted. He made only a marginal show of politeness; he had said ‘hello’ to Gwaine on arrival. It was enough to acknowledge him, and then to forget him. “You’ve evening chores.”

“Is he always like this?” Gwaine asked, ignoring him in turn. He directed everything he said to Merlin, as if Merlin were fascinating.

“Yeah,” Merlin said in a regretful tone.

Arthur pulled him up by the collar of his shirt.

“Come see me before you leave!” Merlin called out cheerfully as Arthur wrangled him, waving like a simpleton. He walked sideways, into a group he did not know, but was fast friends with; Arthur drew him out of it. This was hilarious to Merlin. Arthur sighed, and put Merlin’s arm round his neck.

He did not take him back to Gaius; it was a far longer journey, with more steps, and they had made the mistake of it once before, when they were both equally sauced, and singing like mad. He took him back to his own chambers, and dumped him on the pallet Merlin sometimes used, when Arthur was sick, or wounded, or bored. Merlin had landed on his back, with both arms flung straight out, and appeared quite dead. “You are entirely useless, Merlin,” Arthur groused, and pulled off his boots. Then it was that Merlin smiled up at him out of his stupor, with the same look of guileless love on his face that he had shown in response to his role as Gwaine’s endangered
damsel; and then Arthur felt it was all right to be putting his manservant to bed, when it should have been the other way around.

He stripped off the covers from his own bed, and threw them over Merlin; he was not going for firewood, and the last coals had died peacefully amongst themselves. The evening had decided it was not to be taken lightly, and pried round the windows, and in the courtyard upset the standards. It had the rawness of winter, and conveyed this to all things, and especially to Arthur’s spacious chambers, which were hardly less brisk than the cowardly hillsides, flinching before their nemesis, and putting away those rich grasses of summer, for the hardier autumn stock.

Merlin was murmuring to himself, and drooling down his chin. The skinny arms were still outflung, and the covers haphazardly heaped over him, so that his feet were bare, and one leg which had migrated out from underneath them. Arthur rolled his eyes, and knelt down to fold in the arms, and tuck in the feet; Merlin did not stir, but mumbled in a contented way, and was entirely complacent to the adjustment of his limbs, as if he were not a contrary pillock, but a perfect gentleman. He said, “Arthur” once, in a soft tone, and Arthur, feeling that the sound of his name was somehow extraordinary under these circumstances, looked down at Merlin whilst his throat worked improperly, and could not articulate its sentiments on the matter. He put a hand on one of the thin shoulders, and rubbed it briefly with his thumb. He could not say why he did it, only that the human instinct to touch is sometimes an insurmountable one, and it was like that for him now. For a moment it was terrible to look upon Merlin’s vulnerability, on the soft humanity of him, and to feel how it could be taken from him.

He patted the shoulder gently. He said, in a voice he supposed was tender, but did not hardly know, since it had been taken from him so young, “Get some sleep, Merlin.”

Then he curled up in his cloak, on the bed, and was lulled into his dreams by the sound of the breathing which came reassuringly to him from the pallet.

He was woken some hours later by Merlin getting out of the pallet to take off his trousers. “I have to pee,” he announced to the room, and threw up.

So then all of Arthur’s tenderness was absorbed into his feelings of revulsion against himself, for having kept on such a manservant, whilst he threw the wash basin over Merlin, and wrestled him out of the wet tunic, and put him into a dry one. Merlin did not cooperate, but only wanted to sit on the floor and to say “No” with the stubborness of a toddler whenever it was Arthur ordered him to do something reasonable. He threw up again, and laid down on the cold floor, to await the sweet release of death. Arthur, who had got vomit on him, was in agreement with this, and tearing off his own soiled tunic, he snapped, “Well, it can’t find you soon enough!” and crawled, miserable and shirtless, back into his cloak.

Next morning Merlin was perfectly cheery, and rolled Arthur out of his cloak at first light. He had woken under a great heap of Arthur’s bed covers, and spelled himself out of his hangover, and now was effervescent with his own health after such a close shave with death. It was the sort of mood that imposes itself on everything, so the whole room seemed to him wonderful, and benevolent; he anthropomorphized the table with the weak sun on it, and the crust of bread which had been left on it; and even the fireplace was no mere cold pit, but a friend waiting to take him gently unto its warm bosom, once he had bothered to light it.

It was in this state he woke Arthur. “Rise and shine, sire!” he yelled, and with a flourish yanked out
the cloak from underneath him, so that Arthur, marginally aware, flailed, yelped, and went over the side. He was cognisant enough to say a bad word. The cloak had followed after him, and settled now over his face, and Merlin, seizing the advantage of Arthur’s spoilt range of view, leant over to pick up the whole mess, and to set it on its feet. He had seen Arthur was shirtless, and in seeing it remembered the evening through those formless mists of shame; and having remembered it vaguely, vaguely he also recalled having Arthur’s tunic thrown at him. So he had the whole sequence of events, and ought not to have been surprised by the hot feel of Arthur’s bare chest through the cloak. He was surprised. The wool had shifted round from Merlin’s manhandling, and left one pectoral out to the cold. It was properly disturbed, and reacted accordingly. He was doubly surprised by this, that Arthur had nipples, that they were the usual composition of reactive flesh, and coldhearted toward coldhearted mornings.

He dropped Arthur. He was busy standing stupidly, and could not hold onto him any longer.

“Merlin!” Arthur shouted, fighting his way out from under the cloak, his hair going in every direction.

“Sorry,” Merlin said. He was staring at the nipple, as if it had offended, or somehow betrayed him. Arthur gave him an odd look, and covered it.

There was an interval of silence. Arthur seemed now to be fully awake, to be unsure what to do with his present state of consciousness. He pulled the cloak round him as if he were a maiden who had come shyly from her bed, in her dressing gown. They looked at one another, and each was aware of what Merlin had noticed, and aware that Arthur had noticed he had noticed. It was too complex to consider. Merlin ran off for breakfast.

When he returned, Arthur was dressed and sitting at the table. He greeted Merlin in his usual obnoxious way, in a tone of lofty importance, so that he gave the physical impression of looking down on Merlin from a good height whilst he said it, though he was still seated, and Merlin standing. “Have a good time last night, did you?”

“Yeah.”

Arthur gave him a sour look. “You threw up on me!”

“‘It happens.’? Merlin, how many other servants do you think throw up on their masters, and not only live to tell the tale, but continue to run about free, and not in the stocks?”

“I don’t know. I could ask.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “My point is, I really think you ought to appreciate just exactly how lenient I am, and how fortunate you are.”

“Right. I’ll think about it all day. Speaking of,” he said in a casual tone, as if it were possible to slip what he was about to say past Arthur, and to avoid a tantrum. “I’m going to have to cut out early on my chores. I need to pack.”

“When don’t you cut out early on your chores?” Arthur asked, picking over the fruit Merlin had brought him. “And what do you mean pack?”

“Gwaine and I were talking last night--”

“I noticed.” Arthur said it in the same voice in which he might have observed that he had stepped
“Gwaine and I were talking,” Merlin continued, because he wouldn’t be interrupted, Arthur’s poncey station notwithstanding, “and we decided I’m going to go with him. To hunt the green knight.”

Arthur chewed. He did not seem to be fully absorbing Merlin’s announcement, but squinted at Merlin as if he were dense, and had mangled the conversation to an impenetrable degree. “Excuse me?”

“I said—”

“I know what you said, Merlin, I just can’t believe you said it. You can’t just run off with some strange man you just met.”

“Why not? Gwaine’s really nice. And the green knight told Gwaine to find him to ‘take what you’ve given’. He can’t just go and have his head cut off.”

“I don’t see why not; it’s his business.”

“It isn’t fair! That man was obviously using sorcery; he just picked up his head and waltzed off. Gwaine certainly can’t do that.”

“And what are you going to do? Tell him, ‘Oh, don’t worry, I’m a sorcerer; I’ll get you out of this mess. Two magical beings can play at this game.’ Don’t be daft, Merlin. I know it’s the only thing you do well, but find something new to try out.”

“No, but I can help. He doesn’t have to know. I could just help him.”

“Like you surreptitiously helped me?”

“He won’t know, Arthur. What happened with you was a fluke. Maybe you’re just smarter than I thought. Doubtful, but it could be the case.”

“That’s true,” Arthur said, ignoring the last bit. “Still, you aren’t the most subtle person to have ever practised magic inside the very kingdom of the man who banned it on pain of death. You can’t risk it.” He went back to eating, as if that were the final word on it.

“You’re worse than Gaius.”

“Gaius doesn’t have to order you to be burnt at the stake if you get caught. You aren’t going.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Just let him ride off to his doom?”

“You don’t even know him; he could be...a murderer.”

“He’s not a murderer.”

“Right, and you would know after a heartfelt two-hour conversation whilst you were pissed out of your mind.”

Merlin did not refute it, though he was a bit stung, and wanted to downgrade himself to ‘tipsy’; to be ‘pissed’ was to take off one’s trousers, and to throw up on their master, and then to nearly expire on their floor. All of which naturally he had done; but one didn’t talk about that over breakfast. “He’s a good man, Arthur. I can tell.”
“Merlin. You aren’t going.”

“I am.”

“You aren’t. Do you ever, just for a moment, remember your station, or mine?”

“Yeah. You reiterate it every day by being a poncey, supercilious git.”

“Well, apparently not nearly enough, since you still seem to be of the impression that you can just
do as you please, whenever you like, regardless of my opinion on the matter.”

Merlin decided it was time to use his dimples. They were supremely convenient in the presence of
Morgana, who after being in receipt of them seemed to consider him like a very naughty lap dog
who could not be punished, because it knew it had done wrong, but had made it up by being
lovable. Arthur did not like things that were lovable, but was somewhat frightened of them, as if he
knew he were vulnerable to them, and was worried he might in consequence suffer a Feeling.

“Would it help if I said ‘please?’” Merlin asked.

“No,” Arthur said, and did not look up at him. Merlin thought he was conscious of the dimples and
knew to avoid them.

“All right. What if I’m really annoying till you agree?”

“That’s a given, Merlin. You have no other state of being.”

But though Arthur must have considered himself well prepared for it, and in fact was quite smug
all through the day as Merlin trailed after him, getting at every nerve of Arthur’s which he knew to
be exposed, it was decided by nightfall: they would be a trio, and ride out to conquer the green
knight together.

So there was a general flurry of preparation, with Uther in beaming approval of the glory which
Camelot was to win in the slaying of this foul (but nevertheless well-dressed) wizard. There was a
lot of fuss over him, from Morgana and Gwen, who wanted him to be warm, and to be safe.
Morgana thought it was unfair that all grand adventures were the domain of boys, but she hugged
him warmly regardless, and whispered for him to look after Arthur, who was too stupid to do it
himself.

It was not propitious timing for a quest. November was seething; it wanted to be December. There
was not yet any snow, but in every other respect it was a fine imitation, and the hills from their sick
bed looked unfavourably upon callers both foreign and local. Merlin had two coats, and another
cloak of Gwen’s; and before they were over the border, he had Arthur’s as well.

But nevertheless they set off into the wilds of Sherwood, with the winds at their back, and the trees
in bewildered consultation overhead.

It was an ordinary beginning. Most beginnings are; there is not yet the confluence of irony and
happenstance, and coincidence is still quite happy to lie at sweet rest, not harassing anyone. Merlin
kept up a happy chatter with Gwaine, who was an equal raconteur, whilst Arthur sulked in their
wake. In the evenings, Merlin with a whispered command lit the fire, if there was not adequately
dry tinder, and the old-fashioned way, if there was. Arthur eyed him evilly each time it was the
former, and looked about for Gwaine, and afterward pushed his head, and scowled at him. After
they had eaten, Arthur deliberately threw down his bedroll next to Merlin’s, and spread out his saddlebags on the other side. He was persistently unpleasant to Gwaine, who was far more accommodating of it than Arthur deserved. The woods listened in ominously to their various domestic squabbles, and the sky by turns was imminently threatening, and outright threatening. They were rained on twice their second day; but overall Merlin was pleased with the open fields, and his new acquaintance, and the easy way of life when there is a good fresh rain, and the trees laden with it. There is something done to the human soul when it has left its own designs, and got outside its walls; and it was done to Merlin’s soul now, which was little untroubled, inside its usual routines. Arthur had given him the horse that liked him, and they were not always in agreement, but frequently went in the same direction, and almost seemed to flow into one smooth flesh, as Arthur seemed to blend with his own mount, and to be hardly different from it.

They rode over the quiet dead lands, two abreast, when Arthur was brooding, and had fallen behind; and three abreast, when he had some anecdote to impose over Gwaine’s. There came the endless soft music of the hooves, and the streams in sweet harmony raised up their choir from sleeping dells. There is always some bramble with a startling burst of colour, regardless of the season, and at points they swam among it, furze to belly, and the world was as if newly born, it smelt so unreasonably new. Merlin smiled at it, and saw that Arthur was looking at him, and smiling back. Then he was so unthinkably warm it seemed he ought to take off at least one of the coats.

Sometimes in the evenings they slept too close together. It was cold, and the fire was not entirely an adequate foil to this; but still there was not any excuse for it. The bedrolls were perfectly competent in their duties, and they did not need to be in contact at the knees, and along their sides. But Arthur, who was never at rest, and went perpetually from one thing to the next, trying himself, trying his endurance, seemed to relax as best as he was able when they were burrowed into their respective sleeping gear, and the moon was high, and nothing else lay between them. He had been like that since it had come out about Merlin’s magic; it seemed to Merlin that he needed the reassurance of touching Merlin, of feeling him whole, and living. It was sweet, and made Merlin love him a bit, though he would not have called it that exactly.

Of course it was not to always be like that. It was a Quest, after all, and the idyllic part of it ended on the third morning, whilst Merlin and Arthur were filling their water skins at a stream, and bickering. The bickering was not serious; they had each forgot what had started it, and kept it up for the sake of being difficult. Arthur poured a handful of water down his back, and then they argued about whether or not Merlin would catch his death, and then Merlin poured a retaliatory handful down Arthur’s back, and then from out of the trees there crept the cat-like archers of the outlaw robbers.

Arthur’s hand leapt for his sword, but already the bows were trained on him, and on Merlin. He might have tried for it anyway, in the usual reckless way, except the man on the left called out, “Throw down your weapon, or I’ll shoot your friend dead where he stands.” That was enough for him to comply. He threw down the sword and said to Merlin, with perfect composure, his eyes never leaving their enemies, “Get behind me.”

“You get behind me,” Merlin insisted, already trying to shove Arthur out of range, whilst the magic came surging into his fingertips. Before he could release it, there was a sudden commotion in the trees, and two of the waiting party, who would converge on their prey after the archers had subdued them, went tumbling down the hill, and rolled up to the feet of their accomplices. Then Gwaine hurled himself after, and landed on the back of the archer to the left, who shot off his weapon in a panic, but poorly, since he was having his head beat in. Arthur shoved Merlin wide of the shot, as if it had any hope of hitting him in the first place, and scrambled for his sword.
The second archer put his bow round Gwaine’s neck, and straining back with it, tried to dislodge him from the first. Gwaine went on beating the first. He had his legs securely round the man’s waist, and did not seem in any danger of being discouraged.

Arthur charged in swinging. He spun, and lopped off the second archer’s head; Gwaine shouted, “Cheers, mate,” and then was rolling about in the dirt with his adversary, getting the best of it.

Then it seemed that the forest had birthed them, and from the scrub they came on silent feet, with weapons gleaming drawn. Arthur with his usual grandiose faith in his sword arm set about fighting them all at once; Gwaine had rolled free of the archer, who would no longer be shooting anyone, and drawing a knife, tossed it so accurately the man who caught it was still surprised after it had dispatched him. Then from the dead man he had a sword, and waded in after Arthur.

They were magnificent. It was not hyperbole to say so. Arthur with seamless precision spun, and at each turn made a kill, and the blade came free as if from butter, he had placed it so well, and threw off a less clever blade; and Gwaine with an instinctive familiarity of Arthur’s intentions followed his parries, hardly distinguishable to the human eye, assisting them at each turn, and killing what they could not reach. They turned back to back. The swords then were like smoke, and moved as the river moves among unseeing trees on wet autumn mornings. Merlin could follow nothing but the falling bodies. He made sure they did not belong to Arthur or Gwaine by helping their opponents onto their own blades, or their friends’; but in the chaos he had missed one, and so had Arthur. The man had got round behind him; Merlin squeezed out a breathless, “Arthur, behind you!”, but had not even the time for a spell, before the man suddenly grew an arrow from his eye.

There was another shot from the trees behind him; it killed a man to the right of Arthur.

And then with crossbow in hand, Morgana appeared in lieu of another bolt, and threw herself with the same mad abandon as Arthur into the fight. She punched a man in the face, and stabbed him with the arrow she had not had time to reload; a strategic elbow stunned another man, and the dagger which flashed suddenly in her hand finished him. She made industrious use of the ancient tactic of kicking men in the bollocks, and also headbutting, which no one had expected from a girl, and consequently had not bothered to guard against.

“Morgana!” Arthur yelled; Gwaine tossed her a sword.

“Say, ‘thank you’, Arthur,” she grunted, stabbing his opponent in the throat. They ran the same man through at the same time, childishly, it seemed to Merlin; and then it was over, and nothing to do but to argue over who had got him. Gwaine, breathing heavily, came to stand beside him, so they could watch the altercation proceed.

“She married?” he asked Merlin, in a winded voice. It still managed to be dazzled. Merlin, who was used to Morgana affecting men in that way, patted him on the back, and said, “No,” with gentle commiseration. He had not meant it to be encouraging: hence the back pat. But Gwaine did not seem at all put off, and that was entirely legitimate, considering his hair.

Morgana and Arthur had now reached the particularly rousing part of their argument. Arthur was ordering her to go home, and trying to take the sword out of her hand; Morgana was ordering him to leave off, and trying to keep the sword in her hand. Arthur did not want to be forceful with a girl, and set himself to the frivolous tug of war with perhaps a quarter of his true strength; but also he did not want to be kicked in the bollocks. “Go home, Morgana. My father will be livid.”

“I can handle Uther.”

“Right. I think running off into the woods dressed as a man to fight some bandits will require a
little more than blinking quickly at him, and doing your hair nicely.”

“I didn’t come to fight bandits; that was incidental, because you got yourself into trouble. I came to find the green knight.”

“You are not coming with us.”

“I am. Gwen and I are tired of sitting round minding the women’s work. We think we should be allowed to do whatever we like, just as the men are.”

“Well--you can’t!”

“Why not?” Morgana snapped, and pushed him. It was not expected for ladies to shove a full-grown knight in bloodied mail, and he stumbled, and checked himself on a root, and then it was a near brush with humiliation, for he nearly sat down hard on his ass, whilst Merlin and Gwaine watched feverishly. They tried to bet on the outcome, but as they had each bet on Morgana, it did not progress.

“Because it’s not--it’s not proper! You could be hurt!”

“And you’re so unassailable? If I hadn’t shot that man, you’d be dead.”

“I had him, Morgana!”

She rolled her eyes. “Merlin, could you help me carry some of this?” She had reverted back to the genuine sweetness which she used with Gwen, and did not order him, but only wanted to know if he would like to do it. She now had an assortment of various arms which she had taken from the dead men, in addition to her crossbow.

“And what are you going to do with that?” Arthur demanded. “Add it to your dowry?”

“Don’t be silly, Arthur. I’ll need it for the wedding night, if Uther marries me off to any of those old goats he’s always eyeing up. Now can we please be pleasant about this? Gwen is waiting with the horses; she’ll be upset if we’re angry with one another.” And she held out her hand to have it shaken, like a man.

“You’re not coming!” Arthur shouted in her face, and sheathing his sword, stalked off into the trees, because he knew he had been thwarted, and in order for him to process it, it was necessary that he do it alone, where no one could be smug to his face.

So that was how the girls joined upon the Quest; Gwen ran straightaway toward his arms, but stopped before the romantic denouement, because Merlin was lugging Morgana’s new armoury. She said, “Is everyone all right?” and wrung her hands, as if they were not all hale before her, and there might have been a hidden scratch, quite nasty. She had a reassuring hug with Morgana, and they shared how each had been scared for the other, and looked at one another with poignant eyes, whilst Arthur was furious. He crossed his arms, and made a passing fair attempt at skewering Morgana with his scowl.

They had not brought any pavilions, because Gwaine was the rough sleeping type, and Arthur was not about to be outdone, when he could certainly stomach a little rain as well as anyone; but Morgana and Gwen did not need to prove their virility, and had packed a tent to keep off the cruel nights, and wanted Merlin to share it with them. Merlin was not in any mind to fight this; Arthur was.

“It’s not proper for the two of you to share a tent with him.”
“‘Not proper,’” Morgana scoffed, so hard Merlin was concerned she might have broken something.
“What’s Merlin going to do? He’s a perfect gentleman. And anyway, he gets cold. You know he does. If you cared about his well-being whatsoever, you’d want him in the tent.”

“He’s not that delicate, he can sleep by the fire.”

“You mean he can sleep by you,” Morgana said, and Arthur’s face suddenly turned a ripe sort of colour, and the argument was over.

It was a lovely sleep, sandwiched between them; they were soft to snuggle into, for one, and did not kick him, or flick his ear, or wrestle him through the bed clothes whenever he made a mildly unflattering comment. But already by the second night he missed Arthur, the particular warmth of him, and the soft slow cadences of his own particular breathing. The girls were civilised, and did not elbow him awake, or fling him unceremoniously out of the bedroll; but still they were not preferred.

Obviously he could not tell Arthur this outright, but had to creep out of the tent when night was stillest, and the world off contemplating its various travails. The wind with occasional naughtiness went sighing through the rushes, and set off the trees; but mostly it was merely those old cold bones of livelier hours, when the day has picked over what it pleases, and left the rest. Gwaine was snoring by the fire, and the girls with more ladylike murmurs turned in the grip of Ibormeith immortal. It was only Arthur at guard duty, and the numerous spirits which harrow the midnight dells. Merlin sat down beside him, clasping his hands between his knees. It was almost cosy; they were in the grip of a great oak, and the roots it had thrust up through the earth, so that they were squeezed narrowly together, with their shoulders touching. Arthur had his sword across his knees, and his head back against the tree. The fire was distant, and outlined his adam’s apple, and hinted at the broader features of face and limb, but did not describe them in any detail. He bumped Merlin’s knee with his own when he sat down, and was content to do nothing else.

There was a satisfying rhythm to their breathing. Merlin felt he could sleep better here, than in any lavish get-up, with cotton head sheets. He was just deciding he might like to drift off against Arthur when Arthur said, into the dark, not facing him at all, but leaving his head tilted back against the trunk, his eyes roving past the trees, into the haunted depths, “I don’t think you’re a monster. Except when you sing.”

“Has that been bothering you all this time?”

“No,” Arthur said, and then sighed. He scratched his ear with his usual habit of oafishness, when he was being considerate. “Yes. I’m sorry for everything my father’s done to you.”

Merlin looked over at him. The face was still undefined, but he could feel the embarrassment of it, in the shoulder against his own, and the uncertain flitting of the hand round the hilt of the sword. “Don’t be sorry for him, Arthur. Just be better than him,” he said quietly.

They did look at one another then. Arthur was soft, by some contrivance of the moonlight. He looked at Merlin with his lips a little parted, and his eyes in deep shadow. Merlin felt it as something physical. It was almost as if Arthur had touched him, and was still touching him, and he shivered, but did not break the stare. It stretched on, almost unendurably. It was something to be followed up on; it was something which wanted the relief of human contact. Arthur’s knee stirred against his. Merlin felt the fluttering of it in his belly; there was a soft pulling there, which would not be pacified. It was the only thing which fluttered; they were the two spots of earthly existence, in the slow calm wood of autumn.

Arthur said, “Couldn’t sleep?” in an overly casual voice. He looked away finally. “That’s why you
shouldn’t sleep next to Morgana, Merlin. You can hardly expect a restful night whilst keeping one eye open all through it.”

“Nah,” Merlin said in the same voice, working his shoulders back into the tree, and into Arthur’s. “Morgana’s fine. She’s lovely, really. I just thought you might need company.”

“Very kind of you.”

“Yeah. Especially since you’re insufferable.” He heaved a long sigh. “But we all make our sacrifices.”

Arthur snorted. It was not a very princely snort. “Right. We’re all very humbled by your willingness to eschew everything to hang round a handsome prince, and get his desserts, and his cast-off clothes.”

“They’re just going to be thrown out anyway. I wouldn’t give yourself any credit for it.”

“The desserts, or the clothes?”

“Both, if you have any respect for your figure.”

“What’s wrong with my figure?” Arthur demanded.

“Nothing,” Merlin said with absolute innocence. “Just, you know, you might want to watch it. All those feasts.”

“Merlin, I challenge you to find one inch of spare flesh--”

“Found it,” Merlin interrupted. “It’s flapping round on your face.”

Arthur put down his sword, and taking Merlin’s head up under his arm, roughly disheveled it, till Merlin yielded, and then they pulled a double guard shift, though Gwaine offered to take over it, so they could talk, and watch out for dawn, and sit humbled before it, together.

In the mornings, autumn was like a poem, and broke softly on yonder hill top. But as the day progressed, and the ride progressed, its mood began to turn; perhaps it felt challenged. Perhaps it felt thwarted. There was not any concern in these tiny human beasts, who navigated its bluffs as if they were not intruders, but like the rabbit had made their homes among the hedge. Consequently, Merlin suspected, it threw out great handfuls of rain, and hail, and drove them shuddering together inside the tent. It smelt like wet men who have travelled a great distance. Merlin thought it was unfair that the girls did not seem to be quite so fragrant, and that he was no longer between them, but mashed up against Arthur, who rolled himself up miserably on the far side of the tent, and went to sleep with his knees tucked into his chest, and his arms folded. They were all quite snippy with one another, and quarrelled, except Gwen, who was busy continuously trying to mend the quarrels, and Gwaine, who was content with anything, so long as he was included in it. He did not know what the world had done to Gwaine, but he knew it had not done good to him. He was like a dog, and seemed uncomplicated in his love, but only to give it and give it, and did not mind whether he had it in return, so long as he was allowed to feel it. He was like Arthur, without Arthur’s swaggering. Merlin tried to be kind with a sort of kindness that Gwaine had probably not known; he liked him tremendously, and was sorry the world did not have the same excellent taste.
There were few taverns along their path, but they did stop off at one now and again, and arranged themselves by gender in the allotted rooms, the girls in one, Gwaine in another, and Arthur and Merlin in the third, when Arthur was not guarding the door to Morgana and Gwen’s. “It’s not safe for women to travel alone,” he said when Merlin came in drowsy search of him one evening, and found him with naked blade barring their room. “There are rapists.”

“Yeah. And Morgana will stab them,” Merlin said, and shaking his head at Arthur’s naivete, wandered back to the bed, which he had claimed in Arthur’s absence, and would not be made to give up.

Contrary to the green knight’s faith in his renown, there were not many who had heard of him, though they asked at every town, and of every stray traveller after the lair of this strange creature. They were pointed vaguely in the direction of Wales, and to Wales they went, in the fast bitter evenings of fading November. It was hard going, and claimed even some of Gwen’s spirit. But in the evenings when they sat huddled round the fire, fast against one another, Morgana started up a drinking game, and Gwaine, supplier of the intoxicant, obliged in plying them with all that was necessary to loosen the chattering teeth. Then they were made to each tell something about themselves that was silly, or off-beat, whilst the others decided whether it was truth or fable. Arthur did not participate, because he was too patrician to have anything in him that was frivolous, or childish, till the alcohol was red in his cheeks, and then he offered up the most ridiculous of the contributions, and once admitted to liking how Merlin did his hair, though Merlin did nothing in particular, and in fact his daily routine was to roll out of bed, to glance in the mirror, and to decide he was presentable. Arthur was not the only victim of excessive drink; Gwen even told a joke, which set them all to rolling wildly, at the unexpectedness of it: “A game of truth-telling was being played at court by a queen and her retinue. One of the knights was asked if he had fathered any children, and he admitted that he had not. The queen nodded, saying, “You do not have the look of a man who could please his mistress when you hold her naked in your arms; your beard is little more than the kind of fuzz that ladies have in certain places, and it is easy to tell from the state of the hay whether the pitchfork is any good.” The knight then asked, “Lady, answer me truthfully: is there hair between your legs?” And when the queen replied, “None at all,” he said, “Indeed I do believe you, for grass does not grow on a well-beaten path.”

Morgana shrieked out, “Gwen!” with scandalised delight, and Gwen, with her hands over her face, said, “I’m sorry! I heard it from one of the knights!” Arthur gallantly offered to slay whoever it was had been free with their tongue in front of the ladies, and then he fell over onto Merlin, and laughed uproariously.

So it went on like that, whilst the weather turned in itself, trying to decide its true path, and was in the sallow light of morning autumn, and by evening already winter. Merlin shrank into himself, and had as many woollens as he liked, and was sat by the fire first, whilst Morgana and Gwen clucked over him. He had to whisper the frost off his boots in the mornings, and to crack the ice on the streams for their cooking water; but he thought he should have liked it to go on forever in the same vein.

“I like this place,” Merlin said one evening of the ordinary forest scape into which they had gone to collect firewood, and smiled at it. Arthur looked at him in the queer way he deserved. He looked round. He could see the usual assortment of trees, and their various accoutrements. The moss was in its place, and the varying waters fed their varying recipients in the common way, by being wet, and rushing round. There was a brilliant moon getting on, and the trees beneath it hoisted up their
silvering limbs, to be further graced; but it was the same as any other night with a good moon, and
the natural landscape to refine it.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“I dunno,” Merlin said, stacking the wood in his arms. “It just feels...nice. You don’t notice it?”

Arthur cocked his head. “How many nips did you take from Gwaine’s flask tonight?”

“None. It isn’t that. It’s my magic. I feel...I don’t know how to describe it. I can feel everything
living. I can feel the trees existing, and all the things underneath them, even the worms. They’re all
connected, to one another, and to the earth. It’s like this sort of...humming. It’s stronger in some
places than others. Here it’s...deafening. But in a good way.”

“Oh huh.” Arthur picked up a log.

“I’m serious!”

“I didn’t say you weren’t.” They collected in silence for another moment. Arthur strained toward
the ground underneath his boots, to feel the brisk survival of it. He had never contemplated the
worms before; he thought of them now, and how they lived, and all the small beings to which he
was not attuned, and Merlin was. That was the disastrous conceit of humans: to suppose
themselves the only living occupants, though all the world trembled with other feet, and wept at
other catastrophes. It did not surprise him that Merlin should know it. He looked sideways once
more at him, whilst they rooted quietly among the dirt. Something had come over his face, and
now he was interspersing his foraging with peeking at Arthur, and then hastily away. He did this
for some time. He was fighting something, to be free of it; it would not come easily out of him. The
whole thin body was tight with it. And Arthur, though it pained him, did not demand its exposure,
but waited for Merlin to offer it freely, or not at all.

“Do you want to feel it?” Merlin asked softly at last. “I think I could probably--with my magic...I
think I could show you what I feel.”

Arthur stopped.

Merlin had set down the stack in his arms. He wiped his hands on his trousers. He looked at
Arthur as if he expected Arthur to break his heart, and held out his hand.

There was a wave of instinctive revulsion in him. He felt the wrongness of what he had been asked;
there was a shudder through him. He had inside him all the old education, and the old prejudices,
and they did not want to be touched. They did not want to be corrected, or to face what they had
done; they thought only how abhorrent it would be, to take the hand, and to feel the corruption
burn up the outdated heart of them. He held the logs which he had collected against him. He kept
them between himself, and the hand.

Merlin said, thickly, as if he had got to go round something very solid, “It won’t hurt. I wouldn’t hurt
you. Can you just trust me, Arthur?” He did not drop the hand. He had so much faith in him; it hurt
to oppose it. It hurt to go on standing there with the wood awkwardly in his wooden arms, letting
Merlin reach out, and be disappointed.

He put down the wood, slowly. Merlin kept the hand patiently out; his face slowly seemed to
believe that it would not be stricken, but did not smile, as if it were afraid to assume.

Arthur pulled off his gloves. He felt oddly vulnerable, as if he were taking off something more
important. He closed the distance between them; his naked hand was tender in the wind. He
wondered if that was already the magic, if already it was pulling him to it, and forcing itself on him, if all the pores of him were now suddenly more sensitive to every changing breeze. He did not like it; he did not like that something should impose itself on him, that it should make him feel with an unnaturalness of feeling. He did not like that his own human sensations should be stolen from him, and something alien put into their place.

But it was only Merlin. The magic was not a foreign being of indeterminate motives; it was Merlin, who was not any of the teachings which Uther had instilled in him.

He took the hand. His fingers slid over the calluses on Merlin’s palm, as developed as his own. They were not cold as he had expected, but warm; they moved against his with an involuntary flinch. Merlin had held his breath on seeing the hand reach back for his, and was now letting it out between them. It was solid white between them, and dimly, with sudden surprise, Arthur realised it was cold; he had not felt it. He felt the fingers moving in his own, and the impressions they made all up his arm to his elbow. He thought it was the magic, and then Merlin’s eyes flared, and he realised it had not started yet; it was only the whispery moving about of human flesh, and the wake it left in his own flesh.

Merlin whispered something he could not understand. Arthur braced himself: but the hand pressed his own reassuringly, and the strange yellow eyes looked out at him from his friend’s face, not with any inhuman knowledge, but only softhearted joy. There was a tingling in Arthur’s fingers, which at first he did not notice: and then a great rushing, a sudden vibration that lifted the hairs on his arms. His knees buckled under it; Merlin tightened his grip. He was suddenly connected to it: really it was that simple. He had stood forever outside of all other things: and now he was intimately amongst them. The world was reverberating with all its secret wonders, the niches of it, the smallest molecules which in the waving grasses hummed their singular frequencies. He felt the moss push up its questing head and the careful shoots of future spring dreaming in far burrows; he was dizzy with it. He was alive in a thousand ways, in a thousand nooks, and giddy with it. When the evening breeze pushed down the wavering bough, he felt it bend its retreating limbs, the human stretch and ache of them. He felt its numberless souls, the hardy bud and dying twig, all the untold living of it.

“See?” Merlin asked softly. “It’s not all bad.”

“Not when it’s you.” This struck Arthur as romantic; but the earth was still moving through him in all its coursing shapes, and was not concerned with prevaricating. It felt all right then to love. It felt a natural thing, which ought not to be castigated, or struck. He wondered, for the few moments when the world beat hot in him, why he should have ever considered it otherwise. He was not looking around him as he realised it, to take in the physical embodiments of the sensations in him, but at Merlin, who glowed with an otherworldly glow. It was not the magic, but his smile. In the spirit of the moment, in the lovely peace of it, and the warmth of all the festive earth, Merlin laced their fingers. It struck Arthur that he had never had anything so intimate. It struck him that he had wanted it, and not known he had wanted it, just the simple touch, the unabashed affection of it. It was the mother’s job to hold her children’s hands; and Igraine had given herself up for her only child, and left his father to ignore his small and foolish wants.

They were holding hands when the magic died out of them, and when Morgana walked into the clearing. “Am I interrupting something?” she asked, and Arthur leapt straight up into the air, away from Merlin.

“Merlin was afraid. Of the dark.”

“What? I was not!”
“Yes you were, Merlin. There’s no need to be ashamed of it. We all have our quirks, don’t we.”

“I’m not afraid of the dark!”

“It’s all right if you are,” Morgana assured him.

“I’m not. Arthur was--”

“Merlin was--falling. I was helping him up.”

“Kind of you,” Morgana said in a voice that heavily implied she knew he was a lying liar. “I suppose you had to stare lovingly into his eyes to make sure he was all right, after all.”

“I don’t think he was doing that,” Merlin said, in a bid to be useful for once.

“I definitely wasn’t.” It didn’t seem to be enough for Morgana. “I don’t know what you saw--”

“But it wasn’t what I thought?”

“What did you think it was?” Merlin asked, handing back Arthur’s glove, which he had lost in flinching away.

“Why don’t the two of you tell me?”

“Why don’t you tell us what you saw, but probably didn’t see, but only thought you saw?” Merlin asked.

“What? Why don’t you let me handle the talking, Merlin. You’re just confusing poor Morgana.”

“I don’t think I’m confused at all.” She crossed her arms, and looked very pointedly at him. He felt as if she had taken a knife to him, and was now handily dressing him as he would dress a good fat deer.

“We were--”

“Arthur is--”

“Let me talk, Merlin, for God’s sake--”

“Fine, Arthur, what were we doing?”

“We were--” And here Arthur stopped again, snapping his mouth shut. He tried to determine if there was anything Morgana would accept. Probably there wasn’t. She was insufferable like that. “I had a...spot on my hand that was...concerning me. Merlin was--”


“I said, Merlin, let me talk--”

“Arthur was practising flirting with a girl.”

“What?”

“Because he’s terrible at it, as you know.”

“Of course,” Morgana said, her arms still crossed.

“I am not--”
“Last time you were required to flirt with some visiting princess, you said, ‘The reason you beat me is because I stopped to smell the roses’ and pulled out a rose. It was hideous. I was so sorry for you both. Just awful, Arthur, really. So we were practising, since he’s expected to be charming, and isn’t. He was the girl.”

“What sort of absolute rubbish are you--”

“So that’s what you really saw. And now he’s embarrassed, as he should be. The practising didn’t go very well.”

“Merlin.”

“Hmm,” Morgana said, and nothing further on the subject. “Make yourselves useful and actually bring the wood back to the fire. Gwen’s cold.”

When she was out of earshot, Arthur hit Merlin across the back of the head and hissed, “What the hell was that?”

“Well, it was obvious you were lying. Morgana isn’t stupid. So you have to admit to something embarrassing to make it believable. What else was I supposed to say?”

“Literally anything else in the human language, you twit.”

“That’s a weird way to say ‘thank you Merlin for rescuing me from my own bumbling ineptness’, but I’ll take it.”

Arthur gave him his most sour look. “Remind me again why I didn’t burn you at the stake?”

And Merlin, as if he were charming, leaned into Arthur’s personal space, and lowered his voice. “Because you like me,” he said, and looked up through his eyelashes, and dimpled, and struck Arthur dumb.

Next morning was chilly but agreeable. Some of the lustre had now come off the adventure, and they were beginning to feel the various aches of it. Gwen had turned her ankle on a malevolent hillock, and Morgana was angry with the earth for its inadequacy of architecture, and with Arthur, for not having done anything about it, when he was to be king.

“It’s my fault the ground is hilly,” Arthur said.

Morgana, who had not slept easy since Camelot, and long before then, barked that most things were, and bound up Gwen’s ankle, and handed her up onto her horse, and after that practised no other kindness, but was persistently wretched.

So they went into the hills, with the Anglesey Islands on their left, and ahead Wirral Forest, dark with myth. Arthur’s nurse had told him bedtime stories of it, of men and monster and all the commonalities of them: for in the Wirral woods, they were each the other, and none could distinguish the mortal from the mythical. Merlin was shifting round in his saddle, and displaying all the usual warning signs of being a girl as they trotted on through the long soft meadows of dead and dying. Morgana, with her coif up in order to shut herself off from the world, and Gwaine’s mock cheer, looked out from it with a face like a thunderhead. It was not any less troubling than the ones overhead. She said, with her eyes on the woods, “We should turn back.”
“This is the direction we were told. Past Holy Head, and on into the north. We can’t avoid the woods.”

“I don’t like them.”

“You heard all the same stories I did as a child, Morgana, that’s all. They are a wood like any other.” Arthur said it to be reassuring, and did not feel reassured. He looked to Merlin.

“We should turn back, Arthur, I mean it,” Morgana insisted, and now there was a bright note of hysteria in her voice which he did not associate with Morgana, who had never been a silly girl, but generally was more savage, and far less cowardly, than any knight. There was the faint tsok tosking of the hooves in the fragrant grasses, and nothing else in these strange friendless hills.

Arthur reined up beside Merlin, and took up the reins of Merlin’s horse, to slow him whilst the others went on ahead. He lowered his voice. “Do you think we shouldn’t go? Is there--do you...feel something?”

“You mean does my magic indicate we’re about to die a horrible mangled death, chewed up by the spirits of your nursemaid’s ghost stories? No. But it’s not my first choice of a campsite. There’s something off about it.”

Arthur looked at the sky, which in darkening toward evening had taken on the sinister hues of a storm. The sun had not merely been encroached upon by dusk, but was being discouraged from its perch by some rather ominous clouds. It was only winter, with its mad disregard of life; but it was like having a prophecy read to him, in the rich climatic bass of the troubadour. He frowned up at it. “I’m afraid that choice is going to be made for us. What do you suppose is wrong with Morgana? She isn’t normally frightened like this.”

“I don’t know. She hasn’t been sleeping well. Probably she’s just on edge,” Merlin said, but he was watching her with a thorough eye.

“We’ll sleep at the border of the woods,” Arthur yelled out to the others. “Just at the edge of the meadow here. I want two volunteers for guard duty. Merlin, you’re volunteering with me.”

“I don’t think you understand what that word means,” Merlin said, but he did trot off without further argument, which was as near as Arthur would ever get to obedience.

All up the hills, whilst the islands far away flashed their rocky promontories, and somewhere the sea was like a dream barely remembered, Gwaine exhausted his clearly infinite resources for idle chatter. He sang in his clear and off-key brogue, and they were not songs fit for ladies; he told jokes of the tavern variety, when it is all right to be crass, because no one will remember it later; there were little pranks on Arthur, to bring Morgana out of her fit, and to see the approval bright in Merlin’s stupid eyes.

But now he was silent as the world was silent. Here the sounds had gone from the land, and there was only a sort of blankness. Silent they rode into it, and silent it received them.

Arthur directed camp to be made beneath a copse of trees that would keep the weather off them, and leaving the horses in Gwen’s care, followed Merlin off into the trees. They did not talk at first whilst they gathered the firewood, but that was unbearable. He had often wanted the world to be something which was restricted to himself, and to Merlin; but now in hearing that it was so, he was shaken. The camp was not so far that they shouldn’t have heard the comforting settling down of it, and the endless blithering of Gwaine. There was nothing. There were the watching trees, and the scrub in impassable embrace, everywhere he looked.
He said, to feel the words in his mouth, “I can’t believe you told Morgana we were flirting.”

“I told her we were *practising* flirting.”

“Yes, Merlin, what a distinction, that changes everything. I’m sure she didn’t think anything of it at all after that.”

“Well, next time I’ll tell her, ‘Sorry, yeah, I was just showing Arthur a bit of magic. Don’t mind us.’”

“It concerns me, Merlin, that you think your two options were confess to treason, or ‘Nothing to see here; Arthur and I are just seducing one another.’”

“You weren’t seducing anyone, trust me. It’s no wonder your marriage has to be arranged.”

“That’s how royal marriages work, Merlin. They aren’t a romance; they’re political alliances.”

“Yeah, and a good job they are, else you’d die alone.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I’ll always have you, heckling me, doing everything improperly, irritating me till I die. You can’t be handsome, charming and brilliant without paying some price, I suppose.”

“I think it’s just that everybody has some sort of trade-off, in life. Like you can’t be a big enormous prat without having someone to remind you that you’re a big enormous prat, which takes the wind out of your pratting.”

“That isn’t a verb.”

“Language is always evolving, Arthur. And no one’s invented any words yet to truly describe the depths of your—” Merlin dropped the wood he was carrying. It seemed to be the usual ineptitude that Arthur expected of him, till he grabbed Arthur in his arms, and put a hand over his mouth. He forced them both to the ground, into the bramble, with Arthur underneath him; Arthur did not know if he was breathless about it, or angry.

And then, hardly breathing, Merlin said, as quietly as he was able, “Don’t make a sound.” Arthur felt the arms tighten round him, and a wash of hot feeling. He could not describe it, only that it was there, and it prickled him. It was separate from the prickling of the brambles. It encompassed him entirely, and blurred the sensation of Merlin’s warm body against his own, which ordinarily he would have felt above all other things. He did feel the beating of Merlin’s heart as if it were his own, and then the rhythm of it caught him, and he knew it was prudent to be frightened.

It seemed to Arthur a very long time. It seemed the world went on as well as it was able to go on in this odd place, where all sentience had already yielded to the coming frosts, and moved on to distant burrows. There was a trembling in the ground, and a trembling in Merlin. He was still draped over Arthur, and had his cheek pressed to Arthur’s cheek. The tension in him was fantastic, as if he were holding something trying to get away from him.

And then silently the brachets came from out of the silent wood, and they were like nothing Arthur had seen before.

No dog had God ever coloured like this: white as the moon they were, with red ears, and the coats shone with their own light, and the ears were as fresh blood on unbroken snow. Merlin froze. The noses twitched with the prescience of all good bitches, and turned with ponderous majesty into the wind.
There came the hunters on ignoble steed. And Arthur, who had been frightened, who had been like all young men in the face of death, when they did not want it to be their time, felt a terror that was like no other terror, and would never be like any other. He tried to come off the ground, with the instinct of the doe routed by the pack. Merlin pushed him down into the dirt. He held Arthur with more than human strength, and pressed their cheeks together. He tried with human touch to flout this inhuman horror.

The hooves passed over the sounding leaves. And the harness in musical accompaniment sang their slow progression, leisurely as hunts were not leisurely. From the bracken they saw the horses of immortal stature, and the raw flesh of their bellies. The coats at various points had been rubbed away, where a mortal wound had displaced the hide, and the nostrils blew no white smoke of weary chase, but red. They had no eyes, but turned on the still wood the cavities where once there had been some dark orb, gently rolling. From out of the steaming wounds there came the industrious grub, with no preference for his home.

Merlin made a sound against his ear that was like an encouraging “Shhh,” not heard but only felt. Arthur was not beyond his terror; but he was beyond reacting to it. He could not have moved. He felt his hand dead on his sword, and knew he could not use it.

The riders turned in slow unison. They were hooded, mailed, and masked; and no human expression or expectation could be got from them. Out of the cold iron faces there stared some roving orbits, hardly more alive than the horses’.

There was now a wind, and it moved in the cloaks, and the manes. It gave them no soft mortal touch, but only delineated between the real and ever moving world, and the things which were not of it.

The brachets did not howl. There was no glottal utterance whatsoever. They stepped on noiselessly, with their noses to the wind, and the hunters with faceless imperturbability stepped on after them. On rotting tooth the bit sounded its merry voice, and was silenced.

The glade did not change with their passing; there was no cheerful nest, suddenly active in the branches once more. But the terror was now only the ordinary human terror of having seen something horrible, and processing it as any other horror is processed.

Merlin scrambled off him. “The others,” he said hoarsely, gripping Arthur’s arm. There was no colour in him.

Arthur drew his sword on the run. They crashed through the bracken with no sense of stealth, but only speed. He hurtled a fallen tree, and ran on almost mindlessly with Merlin beside him, feeling as if he needed to be sick, as if the camp would inspire it in him, as if there could not be anything fortunate in finding it.

There was no one in it. Merlin, almost sobbing from the run, slid to a stop next to him whilst they gathered themselves. The horses were gone. Their friends were gone. There was not any sign they had ever been there, other than a saddlebag on the ground. Arthur clutched at his hair. He was so uncomfortably helpless it seemed the only thing to do was cry, though his father had taken it from him.

And then from out of the trees came Gwaine and Guinevere, with Morgana between them. They each had one of her elbows, and seemed necessary to her current shambling walk, which looked at any moment to be in danger of folding.

“Morgana,” he breathed, and rushed to them. “What happened? Is she all right?”
“I’m fine,” she said shakily, putting out one of her hands, in order to feel for the sleeve of his mail, which she clutched at in an uncharacteristic desperation. “Arthur--Arthur are you ok? Merlin?”

“We’re fine, Morgana,” Merlin assured her, taking one of the cold hands.

“Morgana saved us.” Gwen sounded a bit dazed by it. “I don’t know how she knew. She just--started up while we were getting out our supplies, and told us all to get into the trees. And then--did you see them? The riders? They passed right by us. I don’t know how they didn’t see us. What were they?”

“I don’t know,” Arthur said. “Merlin, go and gather up the horses. Did they flee?”

“They’re still here. We took them with us,” Morgana said, taking slow breaths through her nose, and in doing so inviting some of the colour back into her cheeks. “They should be just in the trees over there.” She stepped out carefully under her own power, testing her knees. “I’m all right,” she said to Gwen, who reached for her. “I don’t know how, but I--felt them. I knew they were coming. What do they want? Who are they?”

“I don’t know,” Arthur said gently, taking her arm when she faltered.

“The Wild Hunt,” Gwaine said suddenly. He was grim with a grimness that scared Arthur; he had not seemed to have it in him, to be dour, and long-faced with any human calamity. “I’ve seen it once before.”

“And?” Merlin asked.

“I was the only living man to do so. Best gather the horses, and ride like none of us ever have before.”

And then from across the long clear meadows, the resonant mort was blown.


They tore wild through the bracken, driven by their baseless preservation, and the horses’. They were barely in control of their mounts, even Arthur, but only pointed them away from the sounding horn, and let them loose. Merlin clung to the saddle horn with both hands, letting his mare take him where she would. He was constantly on the maddening verge of falling off. He could feel himself on the edge of his balance, and the storming void below, waiting to seize him up.

And then it was not merely a future possibility, but an actual event: he felt himself tip. He felt where he was no longer connected to the saddle, the horrifying emptiness of the space into which he would be hurtled, the dizzying heights of it, and the wind impatient to take him--

There was a hand on his collar. It jerked him roughly back into place, and held him there.

It was Arthur, pacing him, his face grimly set, holding him up, running alongside him with his horse firmly in hand, when it had more to give, and was desperate to give it.

Then the woods narrowed into a thicket passable in single file only, and they had to break apart, Arthur in front of him, because the mare had swerved to avoid a tree, and forced herself ahead.
Merlin heard the soft hoofbeats behind them. He heard the jangling bits of metal which adorn even supernatural tack. The hounds on noiseless paw cried in league their triumph, and shook the passing trees. Underneath him, the poor mare shrieked in horror, and leapt a fallen trunk. She rolled back a mad eye, and foamed up horribly round the bit.

He hauled back on the reins. It took all of his natural strength, and some unnatural besides to do it. He slid off, and slapped the heaving flank. She was grateful to leave him, and did not look back.

Arthur turned as, riderless, she shouldered past him, and seeing Merlin standing between the hunt and his friends, tried to check his mount.

“Arthur, go!” he shouted. “I think I can hold them off.”

“Merlin,” Arthur hissed, wrestling his rearing horse. “Merlin, don’t.” His eyes were wild with grief. He tried to dismount, whilst the horse plunged.

“It’ll be ok, Arthur. Don’t worry. Just run as fast as you can, and don’t look back.”

But of course he wouldn’t. Merlin whispered the words which came to him, and Arthur’s horse snapped up its head, giving him a fixed and thoughtful stare.

And then it spun, and ran headlong down the path, taking Arthur from him.
Arthur could not slow his mare. He tried with every considerable skill of horsemanship he possessed. He could not change her course. He could not check her speed.

He dropped the reins. He swung one leg over her neck, so that he was perched sideways. He had to unbuckle his sword one-handed, whilst he clutched the saddle horn in the other. He threw it away from him, and followed after.

There was not much room to leap; he was hemmed in on either side by thick timber, and had to try and clear her churning hooves, without hitting the trees. It was going to be dodgy work. He had to simply jump, and hope he had done properly.

It was certainly the least pleasant thing he had done. But he did roll over his shoulder, and land whole if not entirely hale on the path, not far from his sword. His mail had ridden up, and his back consequently was bitter toward him. He had torn off a nail, and his knee felt hot in its socket, and not altogether pleased by the state of things.

But he was certainly functional, and would do. He picked up his sword, and sprinted back along the path, toward the blowing horn, and the baying hounds.

Merlin had taken refuge behind the fallen log, and put it between himself and the hunt. It was not hardly adequate cover, but it was a natural instinct, and had driven him here. He rested his back against the log, breathing hard. He was grateful he did not have time for the look on Arthur’s face as he was carried away. It did hurt; but only momentarily, because he knew he did not have time to contemplate it. There were now only his rattling breaths, and the forest ominously around him. There was no longer any blowing horn. It seemed that at any moment they should emerge from the trees and turn their awful eyeless faces upon him. He leaned his head back against the log, waiting for it.

There was something coming from the woods, but it was the trampling of a mortal foot. He knew to whom it belonged before Arthur even emerged from the trees, dirty, his shoulders heaving, sword in hand. The resignation which had sat uneasy in his belly, pacing, now flamed up into true panic. He stood up. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Show a little gratitude, Merlin. I did jump off a horse to be here.” And as if he had forgot their predicament, Arthur smiled: not in sad commiseration of their shared fate, but so the light of it shone out of his eyes, and every facet of him. He clasped Merlin by the shoulder soon as he was near enough to do it, and shook him a little. “Next time you try and run off without me: don’t.”
“Arthur,” Merlin said, grabbing him by the shoulders, feeling hot in his throat, and his eyes. “Go back, you idiot. I don’t have a plan. I came here to distract them as long as I could. I’m going to die.”

Now the smile was sad. “I assumed as much. But you shouldn’t do it alone, right?”

He was trying not to cry; he was not successful at it. He looked at Arthur through the warm film of it, and loved him beyond all other love. It was terrible to realise, whilst the sound of the horn floated up one last rending note, and fell silent forever.

Now he felt the press of their unnatural presence, the terrifying void of them, and felt that Arthur felt it too.

“Merlin,” Arthur said, in warning, and it was the only one they had. The brachets came first, blinding in the moonlight. They put up the inquisitive ears of any sane hound, and it was so familiar a gesture it startled him. Then there was the terrible contrast of the undead horses, bleeding from their noses as they trotted out with tails waving. Beside him Arthur stiffened with the effort to not flee. Merlin wished he were not too stupid to do it.

“Stay behind me,” he whispered, stepping forward. This of course was a useless command; as soon as the foremost rider drew his sword, Arthur jerked Merlin behind him, putting himself and his own blade between Merlin and the hunt. “Arthur, they’re dead. You can’t fight them.”

“Then do something, Merlin,” Arthur gritted out, not relinquishing his position, but still standing as if he intended to do something. “Or we both die.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what they are. I don’t have anything, Arthur.”

“Yes you do. You have more inside you than any other man I’ve known.” Arthur kept his voice low, in order for it to be a thing that was only between them. He could not turn from the enemy; but he could make Merlin feel that he had, that they had passed between them one of their Looks. Merlin shut his eyes.

He did not open them on the same scene.

The lead rider had put out his hand, and Arthur had flown to it, with no invocation, without even the soft movement of the beckoning fingers. There was only the gloved hand, outstretched: and Arthur suddenly in it. He had kept hold of his sword, and drove it up through the yielding flesh of the chin, where the mask did not shield it. There was no indication beneath the hood that he had done it. The head did not even fall back from the physical thrust, though Arthur had put all his weight behind it. It passed through no finespun phantasm, but solid flesh; and the solid flesh gave out a wet pop as it should have, and the mask with tranquil ignorance went on oblivious.

There was a sound finally, which Merlin at first did not recognise, because it was the sound of Arthur screaming. It had never struck him that Arthur could feel pain on this level, or at least to acknowledge that he could feel it; but where the gloved hand touched, the human flesh of Arthur’s arm stripped off beneath the mail, and the blood ran raw down his hands. He dropped his sword, and tried to twist out of the grasp; the grasp was implacable. And the brachets and all the gathered horseman did not blink, but simply observed.

“Stop it!” Merlin yelled. “Let him go!” He ran toward the horseman. He did not know he was doing it, till he was struck a great blow to the chest, and whirled away by unseen violence: and then he was breathless on the ground, and Arthur, exhausted, stopped his terrible noises, and took
up an even more terrible silence.

Merlin stood. He reached down into the roots and maggots of the loam, into the soul of every insignificant beast and roach, into the trees who drank the waters of the ever-giving earth. He felt them helpless in his hands. He felt how the rabbit three miles from him stilled, and twitched a cautious inhale, and he felt the fierce hot veins of his friends on distant paths, flush with dread. He reached beyond this. He reached to a place he did not sense, and did not know; he felt out where life ended, and sent his will into it. He guessed where the delineation of it must be, where life and not-life met, and repelled.

“*You can’t have him,*” he thundered, and felt the trees bow to him. He felt that the breezes knew him, and knew to bend their cadence to his wishes. He felt the brachets yip in sudden disconcert, and the winds with respectful terror ply the senseless horn. They drew out the mysterious hollows of it, and reached its lost voices; there was no longer any triumphant mort, but the high whistling of its hidden heart. The brachets laid down their ears, and bent their mighty leg.

He went on. He thrust himself into the senseless nothing of the hunters, where no human logic dictated the frozen veins. He stretched out all the consciousness of him. He reached to understand what he could not understand, and plunged through them. And then he was inside the leader, who was once a man, and had run on young limbs in green fields. And the horse flew wild for joy underneath him over the young and living earth. He felt the tears steaming on his cheeks. He felt the hunters alive and brash, like any young men; and the terrible calamity of their deaths. He saw the bitter curse which kept them never-living, and the midnight plunges into human domains, to steal their living flesh. They were not malicious: but only in frantic search of mortal existence. They had not forgot it, and could only wander in quest of it. They knew they had run riot on endless lawns, and courted at unruly faires. They could not abide the cold moonlight, and its indifference to them: they wanted the grandeur of southern suns on warm receiving flesh.

He thrust his will into them. He felt, distantly, the blood pour scalding from his nose, and from underneath his nails. He heard, distantly, Arthur groan, “*Merlin, stop.*” He imposed himself on them as he had the horse, feeding the wild thunderous blood of him into them. He knew that Arthur had dropped into the grass, and was crawling for his sword. He knew that Arthur said to him once more, “*Merlin, stop. Please,*” and that he could not obey it. He was sorry Arthur was so frightened, and he poured himself into them as if he had lost all substance, and left the corporeality of his pointless human flesh. He felt that he was not mortal, not as other mortals wanted him to be; he was only a disappointment, and did not belong to them, to their exclusionary hearts.

The brachets presented their bellies. The hunters in slow accord turned their faces one by one to greet him. He was as the flesh of them, and lost himself; the earth receded. The winds slipped from him, and resumed their own desires. He felt how cold was the unforgiving moon, and how cold the whole and unreceptive earth.

Arthur had dragged himself to his knees, leaning on his sword. Merlin did not hardly know it, till one of the hands came down on his forearm. He felt it as something other, with no familiarity to him, and no similarity to his own inhumanity. “*Merlin,*” the tortured voice said to him. The face was pitiful; there were dirt and blood in equal measure, and underneath it a waxen flesh, almost inhuman itself.

“What do you demand of us?” the leader asked. The mask did not move; no sound issued from it. He simply thought it, and Merlin received it.

“*Merlin.*” The voice was closer to him now. It had stood. It was leaning against him. It had a warm vessel, which throbbed with vital tides. It was painfully alive, and Merlin remembered it was
something to him. The masks with inexorable patience awaited his command.

"Merlin." The hand wrenched at him. He tried to fling it away, and it would not be flung. It hung onto him; and he remembered at last that it was because the voice belonged to a smug imperious arse, who would have it his way, or none.

"Command us," the leader asked of him, and the masks looked on with no discernible stake in what he might demand.

"Merlin," Arthur called to him; it was from a long distance, but slowly, slowly it came to him, as it always would.

He looked into each staring face, and feeling that they had each been men, and beat as the grubs under him beat, and the wind in living pulse fled through the sighing bough, he said, choking, "Rest."

And softly one by one the bodies fell from weary mount, and slept at last.

And when the last had gone, so went he.

Morgana had left her horse. She had left Gwaine, and Gwen, and run mad into the trees. She did not know why, only that she needed to, and precisely where she ought to go. She heard Gwen in hysterics call out for her, and did not stop.

She found in the clearing the ring of silent riders, silently arranged. The hounds with cooling eyes died as mortal dogs died. The horses laid down their weeping flanks, and closed on fleshless eyes the quivering lashes.

She found in the clearing Arthur, holding Merlin on his lap. There was blood on his mail, and down his chin. His fringe stood out from his forehead, stiff with dirt. He rolled up an anguished eye at her. He said, "I can't wake him," and sounded small. She did not have time for her own grief, but sat down very businesslike.

"Is he breathing?" she asked, and behind her she felt that Gwen and Gwaine had entered the clearing, though she could not see them. It was an impression in the cold aridity of this place, and she knew it as she knew herself. She knew that Gwen was weeping, that she could not assuage it; she knew Arthur was helpless, and could not assuage it. She could be neither. She prompted him again. "Arthur, is he breathing?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," Arthur said, and it was a lie to be addressed later.

"Oh no, Merlin, please," Gwen whispered behind her: she felt then, for a moment, how silly were her own hopes, that to be stern was somehow superior, that it would make any difference, that she would be less impotent. She had thought by miming the illusion of competency she could invite the reality of it; and in Gwen's plea felt she was only as feeble as the rest of them.

She could not take him from Arthur. She thought if he were to die, it was proper for him to do it
there, in Arthur’s arms. She felt it would be easier for him.

She reached out for the still white face. Arthur let out an anguished breath, as if he had expected something of Morgana that she could not be expected to do. He looked at her over the head in his lap, and he was not any hardier than the receded flesh of the cold cheeks. He looked as if he had receded himself. She took up the cold cheeks in her hands, and felt the absoluteness of the cold, as if there were not and had never been any living heart underneath it.

But after a moment she found him. He was adrift in far places. These were not the realms of earthly men, but somewhere inconceivable; she did not like the feel of them. She told them to piss off. She reached with some instinct of her far-buried unconsciousness, and pushed them away from him.

All the colour rushed livid into his face, and he sprang, gasping, to attention in Arthur’s startled arms.

It oughtn’t to have been hard going after that, but the sleet came down as if to kill them, and Arthur found, where there was barely life to find, a troll to assault. He seemed to think he was quite impressive, and afterward with the ichor steaming from his mail expected Merlin to fawn over him. Merlin was not amenable to it.

They had a secret between them, and had had it for some time. It was not of the sordid variety, or else Arthur would have woken each morning in a far better mood, instead of plaguing Morgana. Once Merlin had come back to them, she had the emotional capacity to be concerned for Arthur, who upon inspection was quite badly off. The mail on his arms was continuously refreshed with rich new blood, and on rolling up the sleeves, she found that they had good reason to be so copiously productive, that the flesh beneath them was not any longer holding to where it ought to hold, and had come off in great strips. This was at least mildly alarming, and she expected that Merlin should find it especially so: but he had only said he had a poultice for it, and disappeared with his patient in order to find the horses, and his saddlebag. Arthur did come back expertly bandaged, as if everything were perfectly legitimate; and in doing it, Arthur had mussed his bindings, and showed that already the flesh was whole.

Moreover, Morgana was not any simpering eejit, though it was not feminine of her to flaunt it. She knew Arthur knew what had happened to the hunt. She knew he had lied to her, and it was not in him to practise a deception for himself; therefore Merlin had done it, somehow. She did not know any other means than sorcery by which the undead could perish; but it seemed to her an impossibility, that Merlin could at once be so sweetly unassuming, and all-powerful. It seemed to her that he could not do what he had done, and also fall into the pigs’ trough on occasions in the multiple.

They rode into the hard northern hills, where already it was winter. Through the mires and bogs, across the harsh unyielding crag they went on tired foot and hoof. In the naked branch, the kestrel sang of future springs. And on bitter morns the sea sent out its tarrying ghosts, to dispute them.

“What are you going to do when you find this green knight?” she asked of Gwaine one evening, whilst Merlin and Gwen were gossiping about Gaius, and Arthur was watching them gossip about Gaius, and trying to look as if he were entirely casual about them gossiping about Gaius, with their heads close together.
“Well, he’ll want to cut off my head. I imagine that might be a bit rough.” He stirred up the fire.

She cocked her head at him. “You don’t have any grand plan? Or want to brag to me about the size of your sword, and how easily it will dispatch him?”

Gwaine was looking off over the hills. The fabulous hair shone with a holy lustre. He did not look to be pitying himself, but was only thoughtful. “I’ve got nothing to prove, Morgana. There’s nothing extraordinary in me; leave it to men like Arthur to be the champions. I only came because Merlin seemed so keen on it.”

“Merlin?”

Gwaine smiled a little. “He assumed I’d go, if the alternative was to be thought a coward, because that’s what Arthur would have done. I’ve travelled a lot. I just thought it’d be nice to have someone along for once. I don’t mind how it ends.”

Morgana did not pity him; she felt he did not deserve that. She looked at him in the moonlight, and wondered at all these outside lives which were obscure to her, the secret turnings of them. She wondered at Merlin, who was perhaps only Merlin, and perhaps was something far more, and deferred to other men’s hatreds, in order that they should let him live as one of them. She wondered why it was a particularly human folly, to default to prejudice. It was not anymore powerful than kindness; but it is easier to be outraged, than to be soft.

“You don’t have to risk your life, in order for Merlin to be your friend.”

He looked away from the hills. He smiled at her. The smile did not seek any tenderness; it had only a melancholy resignation. “You haven’t known me very long. You need something entertaining out of it.”

“I think humans are the loneliest creatures I ever met,” Morgana said, watching Arthur. “And we can least bear it.” She looked back at him. There are some gazes which speak with private tongues what lips cannot articulate; she shared it with him now. They understood one another, for one pure moment, as if there were no Gwaine, or Morgana, of separate flesh, but one unified being. It was a perfect apex of human compassion, and could not last. But she felt he had lived the sleepless nights alongside her, and shared her innermost despairs; and in turn she had ridden alone into the world with him, and found it apathetic.

That night she did not sleep, and it was not the usual troubles of lucid dream, but only the simple human conundrums of simple human optimism. She listened to Gwen breathing beside her, and thought how she was able to do it, the mechanical faith of living, and expecting that it will be worth it. She thought of the things which she had felt inside herself, when the Wild Hunt rode, when she had drawn Merlin back into himself, the terrible incomprehension of not knowing herself. She thought of Gwaine, who knew friendship as something sacrificial. She thought how unbearable, that the world should be like that, and put her face into her hands, and quietly cried.

At the base of Cadair Idris, when the sun was in some but not dire straits, Gwaine reined in his horse, and stated, as if he had any say in the matter whatsoever, “We camp here.”

Arthur was pleasant about it. He was quite understanding that some people occasionally got above themselves, and only needed a gentle reminder of their place. “I decide where we camp,” he
snapped, and manoeuvred his horse to block the sight of Merlin from Gwaine, who was persistently imposing himself on Merlin’s attentions, and seemed not to even notice it, and was certainly a right entitled wanker. “We still have a few hours of daylight; we can continue on, and camp on the mountainside.”

“You don’t want to do that,” Gwaine said, smugly knowing.

“That’s one wrong opinion,” Arthur replied.

“Arthur!” Merlin and Morgana scolded him in unison, as if they were each vying to be the leader in Gwaine’s affections, which didn’t bother him. He had tried to encourage better taste and manners in them both, and there was no shame, after his perfectly valiant efforts, in the acceptance of their continuous mutiny. It was just a thing he had to endure.

“Do tell, Gwaine, why we should lose out on several hours of daylight in order to pacify your fear of the dark, or whatever it is that’s got you all upset?”

“Why do you always assume someone is afraid of the dark?” Merlin asked.

“I suspect it’s because he is,” Morgana answered.

“I am not!” he said automatically, without looking away from Gwaine, who was pretending to be unaffected by him, as if it were even possible, which naturally it wasn’t.

“You can’t sleep on this mountain, princess.”

“‘Princess!’ I like that,” Merlin crowed.

“No you don’t.”

“Anyone who spends the night on Cadair Idris dies, leaves it entirely mad, or with enough poetic inspiration to make him the greatest living bard. Some of the troubadours come here in search of their muse; and that’s why so many of them are absolute nutters.”

“I think we should risk it,” Merlin piped up. “You haven’t read Arthur’s poetry, but trust me, if all I have to face is death or madness to improve it, I’ll be getting off lightly.”

Arthur glared at him. “It sounds like a legend made up by some court that couldn’t get rid of a minstrel who’d overstayed his welcome.”

“It isn’t.” Gwaine was already dismounting his horse, and the others with him, whilst Arthur remained stubbornly on his mount, unable to concede that perhaps he had lost, because the others had been indoctrinated by a bit of ostentatious hair, and were now slavishly beholden to it. “I slept on the summit.”

“Well, having heard you sing, I can say with complete confidence the stories are absolute rubbish.”

“Nah; I didn’t have any divine flashes of poetical inspiration. Came down from the peak absolutely starkers. Thought I was a sentient cheese. Wandered till I was nearly dead of exposure, and then I was saved by a little old woman who took me into her home. It was three days before she convinced me I wasn’t going to be eaten; I ran away twice. It wore off eventually, obviously, but you’ve got to survive till then.”

“Arthur could be a cheese,” Merlin said. “He can’t do anything for himself, and he definitely smells like one sometimes. His boots particularly.”
Morgana threw back her head and laughed. Arthur did not like the alliance which they had formed against him; it seemed unfair, when he had done nothing but put up with them, and their defects.

“Come on, Arthur,” Merlin called out, gesturing him down from his horse. Arthur stayed mulishly where was was, in order for Merlin to learn that he could do as he like, and put on whatever airs he wanted, but Arthur certainly was not susceptible to them. But as the others were preparing camp, and attending to the aches of their long ride, Merlin headed off down the trail which they had been following, to stretch his legs, and Arthur, throwing himself now from his horse before Gwaine could offer to accompany him, loosened the girth, and gave the mare over to the grass, to refresh herself. Then he stepped out after Merlin. He did it with an extremely casual air, lest Merlin get an odd idea about Arthur’s dependence upon him. He ran when he was out of sight of Morgana, and walked again when he was within sight of Merlin. The ground was hard underfoot, and barely living; but it had eked out a sparse existence, and in a few places even put out a vegetation which did not seem ruffled by the ordeal of winter. There was the usual scent of the mountains, where the air came to be its most authentic, and the earth drew into itself all of living life, and no insouciant tiller ripped out the good of it, for his own selfish repurposing. He did not like to admit it, but it was calming to walk through it with Merlin, saying nothing, but maintaining a friendly silence, where the companionship is enough, and words do not need to address it.

Unfortunately it was necessary that he eventually break it; he had been holding something inside himself since the Wild Hunt. He had thought to repress it, and it would not be repressed. Some things are like poison, and all that can be done is to let them out; and it is a little like that with love. Not that he was in love. Or had any sort of love toward Merlin, of romantic or platonic inclination. Merlin was all right. If one squinted, or was blind. And also deaf. And quite stupid.

Arthur looked over at him. As the sun was preparing for its retirement, it picked out Merlin’s cheekbones. Arthur was once again struck by the illusion that Merlin might be marginally handsome. He might even be very handsome, by the standard of blokes. It was surprising.

“How are...things?” Arthur blurted out. Merlin gave him a funny look.

“What things?”

“Generally speaking, in the general manner of...things that can be well or...not well.”

Merlin looked at him as if he had been dropped on his head, or as if Merlin should like to drop him on his head. “What?”

“I mean are you...all right? After...everything.”

“You’re not worried about my physical well-being, are you Arthur?”

“No.”

“No, I didn’t think so.” Merlin smiled at him in the gathering dusk. The smile brought his whole face to life.

“You did swoon, after all. I was just wondering if there was anything--anything lingering.”

“I feel fine.” They were now looking at one another, and not the path ahead. “Thanks, Arthur.” It was softly said, and softly Arthur felt it, in his belly.

“I’m glad.” He cleared his throat. “I thought for a moment you were never going to polish my armour again.”
“It’s a bit harder to get rid of me than that.”

“Good,” Arthur said. They smiled stupidly at one another. They had in fact stopped altogether, to do it. Arthur thought it might now be appropriate for a grandiose gesture, and patted him on the shoulder.

Now it was established they were more important to one another than Gwaine and Merlin could ever be to one another, it was easy enough to go on walking, with a new lightness. In the near distance was a lake, which rejected twilight’s efforts to tint it, and went on being unapologetically blue. It lay in a valley with the mountains all round it, absolutely still. There was no mirror had ever cast a reflection so cleanly; on its serene shores the grasses serenely slept. Arthur felt the deep longing of so much water, in such easy reach, and the option to bathe in it, and die of the cold, or to not bathe in it, and to not die of the cold; it was a difficult choice, when he smelt of horse.

Merlin had anticipated him. He said, “You can have a bath, you know; I’m not entirely useless.” He walked out on the shore, looking very lonely beside the vast lake, as nature often remarked upon the desolation of one human man, amidst its own inventions. He knelt on the stones of it, and putting his hand in the shallows, whispered something incomprehensible. He turned away, looking quite pleased with himself. “Go on and touch it.”

Arthur for a moment interpreted this differently, and jerked back his head. It was a moment before he realised Merlin’s invitation was not of the lewd variety. It was a stupid conclusion to reach; but he was tired, and Merlin was odd.

He knelt on the shore, and put his hand into the lake. It flowed up him to the wrist, tepid as bathwater. He laughed aloud, for the sheer joy of knowing he was soon to be clean. “Have I ever told you, Merlin, that you’re almost brilliant?”

“No. You’ve never said anything nice to me in all my life.”

Arthur shed his cloak. “Well, remember this then, and cherish it.” He tossed the cloak to Merlin.

Merlin caught it without any fumbling, and Arthur made an exaggerated expression of great surprise at him. Then he had off the armour, faster than Merlin could have ever put it on, and let it fall. His sword was next. The gauntlets came sailing after, and these Merlin caught as well, in the cloak, with a flourish.

“Are you using your magic?” Arthur asked with suspicion, bending to unlace his boots.

“Yeah,” Merlin said without shame. He caught the first boot one-handed, and the second as well.

“So you could just magic yourself graceful, and instead you choose to be like this.”

“I also choose to not have my head cut off, for the minor convenience of not tripping over my own feet.”

“Fair enough,” Arthur said. He loosened the laces of his tunic. It was now that he noticed Merlin staring at him. It was not that he had not been staring before, waiting for the next item to be lobbed at him; but now Arthur felt it. He felt the physical presence of the look, and how restless he suddenly was. He wanted to be out of his skin, where Merlin’s eyes touched him. There was a strange mesmeric quality to the look, and it slowed him, when he would have whipped off his tunic, and been done with it. He pulled it over his head without breaking the stare till it was absolutely necessary, by the intervention of the fabric over his eyes.

Merlin caught the tunic. He did not look away.
There were the trousers now. Arthur gave some more thought to them. He realised they were now breaching some boundary, but it was a useless sort of realisation, just the knowledge of the wrong, without the willpower to correct it. He pulled down the trousers, whilst Merlin watched. They stared at one another. It was not a very blokeish stare.

Then there was sanity in him finally, and he turned and almost ran into the water.

For a while he splashed round, but as the water was not cooling, and therefore did not discourage what was a perfectly random and unrelated act of male virility, it was not helpful. He concentrated on how the dirt came off him, and the familiar caressing of the water round his neck. As it was not currently wise for him to be caressed in any way, he stood up once more, so that the water retreated to the less reactive skin of his belly. But as that left him with his torso out of the water, and in the wind, he had to retreat once again, and think about Gaius. It was immediately defeating to his entirely coincidental ardour.

Merlin sat on the shore with his arms round his legs, Arthur’s things neatly folded beside him. He did not seem at all interested in Arthur now, but stared off into the mountains with a thoughtfulness of expression that implied there were other things as engrossing as Arthur. Arthur did not appreciate this, but his great nobility of spirit made him excuse it. It was helpful to let the air settle. He waited till it was no longer awkward, but felt like any of their normal outings, and splashed Merlin, though just a little tentatively. Merlin leant to the side, to avoid the spray, and kicked a gout of it back at him.

It was normal to bathe with one’s mates, and Arthur decided that to purposefully avoid suggesting it lent a certain credence to the fact that he had stripped in front of Merlin as he had stripped a thousand other times, and somehow it had been different. Obviously it hadn’t, and leaving Merlin on the shore implied that it had been, which it most definitely hadn’t. Moreover, Merlin smelt of horse as well, and his neckerchief was abysmal.

“Get in,” Arthur ordered.

“What?”

“Go on, then, Merlin; you aren’t pleasant yourself.” He splashed some more water toward him.

“You’re going to share the royal bath with me?”

“I suppose I can be bothered to, when it’s an entire lake.”

“I would have thought that wouldn’t have made a difference,” Merlin said, but began to take off his boots.

Arthur looked away deliberately as Merlin undressed, and then decided that to do it deliberately was again to legitimise the idea that they had not looked at one another as master and servant looked at one another whilst Arthur was naked; it was all right to naturally gaze off into the much more attractive distance, where there were the livid peaks, flaming in the sunset, and not the pale spare body, but to not look at Merlin for the sake of not looking at him was as bad as looking at him for the sake of looking at him, and following this logic, Arthur looked at him. It was just how fate sometimes ran; he turned his head, and it was in the direction of Merlin’s disrobing, and since there was no problem with Merlin’s disrobing, and it had no special meaning for Arthur, there was no reason his head shouldn’t turn in that direction, and for it to all be very casual. He noticed Merlin’s shoulders had put on some bulk, that the muscles in his legs were rounding out, and there was more in the way of his backside than the trousers ever suggested; he looked away again.
“Oh God, this is good,” Merlin sighed as he waded in whilst Arthur studied a very nice patch of grass. He ducked under, and coming up, spit a stream of water into Arthur’s face.

“Hey!” He shoved Merlin’s head under. It was necessary, to keep him from getting above himself, as he was naturally inclined to do. They pushed at one another awkwardly, trying not to drown in the process.

When this was finished, they found a little shelf of rock on which to sit, the water up to their chins, and their legs dangling into the dark unknown, where the lake dropped off to unimaginable depths. They maintained the proper distance between their nakedness, and for a while simply sat, watching the sun hand itself over to the moon.

“Morgana has magic,” Merlin said at last, into the quiet.


“Yeah. I felt it, after I killed the Wild Hunt. When she touched me, I felt her magic calling to mine. That’s why I came back; it was Morgana. She brought me back. Otherwise you probably would have no one to polish your armour.”

“Both of you.” Arthur sighed. “How many sorcerers am I going to be harbouring, by the time this is all said and done?”

“Dunno. Maybe we should start some sort of order.”

“Yes, that’s just what I need, to give Morgana the legitimacy of a bloody order. She’d be running the entire country.”

“She’d probably be good at it.” Merlin wiped some water from his ear. “She doesn’t know, I don’t think.”

“Do you think that’s what her dreams are about?” Arthur asked quietly. “Her magic is trying to assert itself, or something?”

“People have bad dreams sometimes. But I think you’re right; I don’t think people have bad dreams like that. She told me once that they aren’t like dreams at all, but something that’s waiting to happen.” Merlin frowned. “The sleeping draughts.”

“What about them?”

“Maybe Gaius knew all this time. Do you think he would--” Merlin could not finish his thought.

“Do you think he would what?” Arthur prompted.

“Do you think Gaius would...do something? To try and repress it? Do you think he might be...not poisoning her, obviously, but keeping her...in hand? I’m not sure she’s been taking them. She can’t have had enough to last this whole time, I imagine. She wouldn’t have told Gaius she was leaving; he’d have told Uther. And I think, if she had the sort of power I felt when she pulled me back from wherever it was I went, I would have noticed before now.”

“He might have done, to protect her.”

“It’s not protecting her, to lie to her,” Merlin burst out, and Arthur could hear the anger in his voice; it was in the shoulder that bumped up against his own, and in the troubled eyes. “He can’t make that choice for her. And she can’t deny what she is forever; none of us can.” There was an
abrupt quiet from him. It seemed he had for a moment stepped back from the bother of living, and was still as it is not natural for man to be still. “I almost didn’t come back, Arthur.” He said it in the tone of a confession. “The hunt wanted me to go with them. They aren’t like anything that can coexist with humans, and neither am I. That’s how I felt. And I thought, for a moment, how lonely it was going to be, doing that all my life. I thought it would be easier, to go with them. That’s how it feels, Arthur. That’s how it feels when I forget to stop pretending about it.”

“Well you can’t go with them,” Arthur snapped. “You aren’t—you aren’t like them.”

“Yes I am,” Merlin suddenly blazed up, turning to him. “So far as the law is concerned. I’m not even an animal. I’m not anything like something that has any right to existence. I’m something people quest after.” He wiped his ear again with unnecessary aggression, and turned away.

“No once I’m king,” Arthur said. The fight had gone out of him. He looked at Merlin in the darkening evening. “You have my solemn word. As soon as I’m crowned, I’ll change the law.”

“You can’t do that,” Merlin replied, but he was a little calmer now. “Your council will still be your father’s men. Do you think they’d agree to that? Do you think the people would agree to it? They’ve been subjected to the same decades of prejudice you have, Arthur. Uther couldn’t have done this if he hadn’t got people to believe it.”

“We’ll bring the people round. Especially with Morgana on our side.”

Merlin snorted a little, not quite ready to be placated.

“Merlin.” Arthur was not ready to return to the usual comfortable banter. He thought if Merlin did not understand his earnestness, he would lose him, and that was not bearable. “I’m serious.”

They turned toward one another. There was still the proper distance between them, but Arthur could not feel it, when their eyes met. It was a useless precaution, if a simple look could undo it. He watched the movements of Merlin’s lips, as he processed this declaration. The water slid into them, and was gone.

“Thank you, Arthur,” Merlin said at last, a little hoarsely.

Then they had to turn back, before it was strange again. Arthur did let their knees touch. It seemed to be safe, and gave him a feeling of satisfaction.

“We’ll have to tell Morgana as soon as we can,” Arthur said eventually. “It’s not right to keep it from her.”

“It’ll come out sooner or later anyway, when she can’t control it. And that could happen anywhere, in front of anyone.”

“Does magic help wit, do you think, the way it can your abominable hand eye coordination?” He pursed his lips.

“No; Morgana’s just cleverer than you and thinks up better insults.”

Arthur decided this was a terrible avenue of conversation to pursue, and let himself sink into the water, leaning his head back into the grip of it. He was getting on marvelously like this, feeling pleasantly drowsy, when a hand suddenly reached between his legs, and grasped his penis. It was a hearty grip, and once it had established itself, gave a vigorous pull.

“Merlin!” he hollered, exploding out of the water, and finding he was not as weightless as his
surprise had for a moment suggested, he plunged back into it, with his mouth still open. He was too
dumbfounded to surface before it filled, and popped up hacking as if to die.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Merlin asked.

“You just --you touched --” Arthur felt that his face was purple. All the blood had come up from
everywhere, in order to inhabit it. Merlin looked at him in confusion. “Merlin,” he tried again,
since Merlin seemed to be entirely unrepentant, and even entirely ignorant of what he had done,
and why he should not have done it.

A head popped up between them. Merlin thrashed back from it, half-drowning himself.

“Sorry!” the head said. “Oh dear oh dear. That was awkward. Sorry; I really didn’t mean to grab
your--what is it you call it? I’m not familiar with the human terminology.” The rest of the creature
followed after the head, which did not improve it. It was a muddy brown, and blinked two large
green eyes. The torso was of a slippery eel-like substance, and narrowed into a tail which seemed
to have taken similar inspiration. The little teeth were eel-like as well, but the features suggested
some distant kinship with mankind--certainly the ugliest branches, at least.

Merlin and Arthur looked at one another. They looked at the creature. “Um. Hello?” Merlin said
uncertainly.

“Hello! Nice to meet you! Like I said, terribly sorry about earlier,” he said to Arthur. “I’m really
still very new to this.”

“...and what is ‘this’, exactly?” Merlin asked.

“Oh, right! I suppose I ought to give you the whole spiel. Not very sporting of me to just drag you
off and have done with it. Anyway, I’m a morgen, or sometimes we’re called mari-morgens I hear,
but I like Greg, if you don’t mind.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a beautiful woman combing your hair or something?”

“Yeah; sorry, sorry. I think they’re roundabout Cornwall, somewhere? Last I heard. Just me.”

“Ok. Uh, well...sorry we just invaded your lake. We didn’t know,” Merlin said.

“Oh, no trouble at all! No trouble at all, gentlemen! It’s what I’ve been waiting for. Anyway, I
have to drown one of you.” It clapped its hands together. “Any volunteers?”

“No!” Arthur cried.

“Well, I have to say I’ll probably take the smaller one then, since it’s pretty much my first time.
Actually, it is my first time. I guess no need to put on airs, is there? Anyway, he’ll be easier to drag
down into the murky depths and whatnot. Tried to do that earlier with you, and we see how that
went. Big lad, eh?” It nudged Arthur. “You do...big lad sorts of things? Throw trees, that sort of
thing, yeah?”

Arthur did not know how to answer. He looked to Merlin for help.

“Arthur is a knight. He does...knight things?”

“Very nice; very nice. Anyway, back to the drowning. It’s not going to be real terrible. I do have a
little home, it’s very nice, and I’ve got some gold--well, it looks like gold, just a little charm, that,
to bring in the tourists--and a garden. You won’t really drown drown, if that makes you feel any
better. Oh, I mean, you’ll be quite dead, definitely, but then you’ll turn into one of me. Not exactly like me, you’ll look like you, and you’ll get to haunt the lake, and be handsome while doing it—I assume you’re handsome, for a human? I mean, I think you’re grand, really lovely.”

“Thank you?”

“You’re welcome; you’re welcome. But yeah, I think it’ll be brilliant. Nice to have some company. You juggle? Sing? Anything like that? There is, I have to warn you, a bucca that likes to pop in occasionally. Comes up from Cornwall. He does sometimes stay a while, but I’ve three extra rooms, so we’ll be fine. Quite cosy, I imagine.” The creature put a hand to his mouth, and spoke confidentially out the side of it. “He can be a bit dry, you know, goes on for a while about his youth, wants me to critique his poetry. If you just clap, we can all be on that much quicker. It’s not terrible terrible, but it does drag on, so I like to praise him, ‘Marvelous, marvelous, never was another like you, etc. etc.’ That generally does the trick.” He grabbed Merlin’s wrist. “Anyway, we ought to be going. Nice meeting you! Arthur, it was? Pleasure; pleasure. Come back and see us whenever you like. We’ll always be here.”

Arthur grabbed Merlin’s other wrist. “I’m sorry, you can’t drown Merlin.”

The creature cocked its head. “You don’t have gills, do you?” he asked, and started to check Merlin for them. “I thought that wasn’t a human thing. I never heard of a human with gills, but I suppose if you’ve got them, we can sort it out somehow. You do have to drown and come back, so I’m not sure how it works if you can breathe underwater.” He looked at Arthur and tapped his chin. “Hmm.”

“He doesn’t have *gills*, I’m just not letting you take him, morgen.”

“Greg, please. You’re welcome to come with us. It’ll be rough going dragging you both, but if you kick a lot, I think we’ll all get on brilliantly.”

“You’re not drowning us, we’re *leaving* this lake, both of us.”

“Oh, that’s very nice, thanks very much, but I have to stay here.”

“Not you!”

A new voice broke in on the scuffle. From the shore Morgana said, “Oh, you don’t want them.” And beside her Gwaine, walking out to where the shore changed unobtrusively from soil to silt: “Greg, you little bastard, how are you?”

“Sorry? Do I know you?”

“I don’t think we’ve met,” Gwaine said. “I’ve been this way a time or two; I would have remembered you. Funny we never did meet? I came through these mountains a few years ago.”

“Really? What time do you imagine that would have been?”

“Oh, must have been two years ago, at least. In the summer.”

“Oh, lovely, lovely; the summers here are just brilliant.”

“Never seen another like them.”

“Really? Well thank you, thank you very much. I like to think of this little valley as mine.”
“You’ve done an excellent job with it.”

“Really? Well thanks very much! Just passing through, or on business?” the creature asked, letting go of Merlin’s wrist. Morgana was ushering them towards the shore. Arthur, confident in Gwaine’s capacity for useless pleasantries, pushed Merlin ahead of him, and began to swim as quietly as he was able.

“Oh, we’re on a quest.” Gwaine rubbed his chin, and walked round the shore, drawing the morgen’s attention to him, and away from the rescue operation. “Got ourselves into a bit of a pickle a while back. You ever seen some big blokes on horses wearing iron masks pass this way?”

“No, I can’t say I’ve ever seen anything like that. Not with Audric, are they?”

“Audric—no? From Mercia, is he? Big lad, massive shoulders, ginger hair like he was sat at the top of your mountain there during a thunderstorm?”

“No, no—this fellow was blonde. I remember, because I thought, oh, what a nice colour that is, bit like Arthur here, you know we really don’t see much of that. Lot of black hair, very black, and the ginger like you were saying.”

Merlin reached the shore. Gwen was standing on it, and holding out his clothes, with her eyes covered. Morgana afforded them no such courtesy. She crossed her arms, and looked impressed with herself as Arthur lunged onto solid ground, and dashed for his cloak. Gwaine and the morgen were still chatting.

“I thought about drowning him, certainly, but you’ve got to be a bit picky about these things, you know; couldn’t abide the thought of him sucking his teeth like that. Just couldn’t do it.”

“Understandable, mate.”

Merlin was hastily drying himself. Arthur wrapped the cloak round himself, in defence of Morgana’s amusement. “What are you even doing here?”

“We got worried. You were gone so long. We thought something might have happened to you,” Gwen said, still covering her eyes.

“Some of us even hoped it,” Morgana added. She took off her own cloak, and ruffled Merlin’s hair with it. “What are the two of you doing? You’ll catch your death.”

“The lake’s warm. I guess it’s...the magic? From that thing. You know, to lure people in,” Merlin said.

“Right,” Arthur added. “Must have been. Makes perfect sense. Magic. From the creature.”

“So this man is entirely green?” the morgen was asking.

“The horse and everything. You wouldn’t have happened to see him, would you?”

“No, no; but I’d like to! The head bit—that sounds brilliant.”

Arthur yanked on his trousers under the cloak. “Morgana,” he hissed. “This isn’t funny.”

“I haven’t said a word, Arthur.”

“Your face has said several.”
She gave him an unendurable smirk, and waved to Gwaine, still deep in conversation, who in turn made a little gesture with his hand, indicating they should get on with it. And there they left him on the shores of Llyn Cau, chatting away.

Another day’s ride brought them at last to a castle. This would have been a welcome sight regardless, out of this cold dread land which had sexually assaulted him: but this was unlike any castle Arthur had ever beheld. They trotted over lawns unparalleled, through the massive white trees of strapping oak. The moat whispered silkily to itself, in the manner of mountain streams which speak their own immaculate tongue, spoilt by no human diction. The finest singer on the tallest peak could not have struck a cleaner note. It was a faultless music, and accompanied them long before they should have heard it. There was an absolute silence which indulged it; no dire unlife of absent bird and beast, but the sort of hush which is impressed with itself. It was appreciative of its ambience, and respected that others may want to admire it as well.

Out of the moat rose the crafted stone, built not by man but artist immortal: and he had poured his life’s blood into it. All the battlements, the turrets, the loophole windows, and among them the white chimneys, contrasting themselves against the stone--these were so seamlessly complementary to one another they might have been sculpted for exactly the purpose of enrichment rather than fortification. It was so picturesque a lady might have done it in needlework. They reined up on the banks of the moat, and stared at it. It was so grand Arthur felt he ought to have a hat, and taken it off. He had not even his helmet. He felt he had done a disservice to the whole set-up, but all the same when the porter appeared on the wall, he called up, “Sir, would you ask the lord of this house for shelter?” He wanted a bath, and that is not a desire which is ever beholden to shame.

“I can speak already for him,” the porter called back. “You are welcome here as long as you like.” And now he bowed, and went away down the wall, to fetch more men. Arthur nudged Merlin.

“You ought to watch him closely, Merlin. Obviously he knows what he’s doing so far as being accommodating is concerned. You could learn a thing or two.”

“Mm,” Merlin murmured. “He’ll be done with it once he gets to know you.” He was nudged again, harder, for being impertinent.

The porter returned with men to greet them, and down the drawbridge came, sighing at the imposition of it all. Out came the men, and knelt with bowed head to greet this most handsome knight, and the ladies. They were invited to ride the bridge, and ride it they did, one after the other, Arthur in the lead, and Merlin bouncing about after him. Immediately they were swarmed by squires to take their horses, and knights to escort them, and were flown along quite merrily to the great hall. Everyone naturally was glad to see him, and recognised his importance, that he was a knight of some great esteem, and deserved a fete. The ladies behind their veils hid a distinct desire to wed him, and could not be blamed for shyness; they turned aside with becoming blush, and nervous titter.

Merlin rolled his eyes.

Morgana refused to be a lady, and walked with her hand on her sword, and an aura of authority, as if she might have to fight someone, and thought they ought to be sufficiently prepared to lose. Gwaine did not even seem embarrassed to walk behind her, but actually was glad of it. Arthur hurried to cut her off. He almost did not do it, she took up so much space with her unfeminine
stride, and had to squeeze past her to be first into the hall. Gwen gave him an inscrutable look, and turning aside put her hand over her mouth, which made the look less inscrutable.

Merlin had squeezed in after him. He was so close to Arthur their hips nearly touched. He crossed his arms, and surveyed the hall whilst the lord of the castle was being collected, shifting round like a twit. He bumped Arthur several times. Arthur was in the pose which he used to inspect his men, with his hands behind his back, and his chin up, trying to maintain his noble severity. He had to step on Merlin’s foot after Merlin had disturbed it a third time.

Then into the hall came their host, a tall broad man with ample beard the colour of chestnut; he looked as if he could snap Arthur over his knee, though by the expression of his hearty red face, suggested he was in too good a humour to do it. Merlin stiffened a little. Arthur ignored him. He bowed his head. He had opened his mouth to speak when Merlin ran on ahead of him, as was often the problem with Merlin.

“This is my master Gwaine,” he said, and Arthur jerked, and looked at him in horror. The man was almost as taken aback, since it was so stupid a name, and did not suit Arthur. Gwaine was immediately available to fill the clumsy silence. He introduced himself as Princess Arthur, and shook the host’s limp uncomprehending hand.

“No...’Prince Arthur?’” the man asked carefully, to imply no offence, and to give Gwaine time to correct himself.

“No,” Gwaine said, unrepenting. “Titles are a little different in Camelot, where we hail from. We come to seek a man called the Green Knight. Big man, possibly headless. You haven’t seen him, have you? We have an appointment.”

“Your quest is nearly at an end,” the man replied, still trying to recover himself. “Some few hours’ ride from here, you will find the Green Chapel, and there the man you seek. But it is late, and you are my guests, for as long as you please. I can hardly send you on your way, till I have properly seen to you. Everything here is yours to use as you please...Princess Arthur, and my Lord Gwaine.” Then he graciously kissed the hands of the ladies, though they wore trousers. He looked at Merlin, who was obviously in servant’s attire, and experienced a visible difficulty over how to acknowledge him, when the ladies were in armour, and the men were princesses. Before he could decide Merlin was an eccentric king, and give him his own bedchamber, costlier than Arthur’s, Arthur grabbed Merlin by the scruff of his neck and saying, “Sorry, he’s deaf. And dumb,” pulled Merlin behind him before there was further damage.

“He spoke earlier.”

“That’s all he can say,” Arthur said pleasantly. It was to be true, soon as he had Merlin alone, and could cut out his tongue.

When the greetings were completed, and they learnt the lady was abed with an illness, and their lord was called Bertilak, they were taken away to their chambers, and Gwaine led into the most spacious, Arthur and Merlin into some of middling acceptability, by comparison. The ladies were taken down the hall, chatting unconcernedly. Arthur spied the silk by which Gwaine’s chamber was elevated over his own, and the bedspread of supplest fur, and the chair before the fireplace, with rich and quilted cushion, which must have yielded like a cloud to the grateful bodies it welcomed straight from the heartless wind.

Merlin pulled him away. “Stop spying on him.”

“He took my room!”
“Arthur, I know this is difficult for you, but other people’s things don’t belong to you, and they can do what they like with them. They can even give the better room to Gwaine.”

“You mean Princess Arthur. Thank you, Merlin, for enabling that.”

“You’re welcome, sire.”

Arthur slapped his head.

He was somewhat placated by lording it over Merlin whilst Merlin took off his boots, and his shirt, and put him into the bath Bertilak’s people brought, and even moreso when he sank into it, and felt that it was flawless, and smelt of lavender. He could feel the aches being taken out of him, and the grime excusing itself for worthier hosts. And moreover it was not at all sensual, even though Merlin was watching him, and it was still not remotely intimate, when he gave Merlin the tub after he had done with it, and watched Merlin climb into it, and sigh soon as it embraced him. He had observed the muscles that flexed in Merlin’s forearms when he gripped the side of the tub, for science, and also some more unsavoury things, for purposes of comparison. It made him nervous. He had to walk round the chamber, and play with his rings.

Afterwards several men hurried in to lay a table across some trestles, and handsomely appointed it with white cloth and spoons and salts, and meats which dissolved full-bodied on his tongue, and gave him the nearly sexual thrill of a perfect meal. He had fish baked and breadcred, in soup and sauce; and the wine he put away till it lay dubious in his belly, questioning his capacity for it. Then he barred the door, and turned to Merlin, who was clearly itching for privacy. For a moment Arthur’s throat was dry. His fingertips were senseless. Merlin gave him the look he had given Arthur on the shores of the lake whilst he undressed, the same magnitude of looking, when it is an act of physical passion. Arthur felt as if he should back against the door, as if the look meant to assault his person.

He thought, for a quivering instant, when none of his bodily systems were quite in agreement over how he felt about it, that they were about to run at one another. He thought Merlin might throw him against the door. He thought he would allow it. He stood with his heart beating wild in his throat, and the pulse jittery in his wrists.

And then Merlin said, “Bertilak is the Green Knight.”

There were parts of Arthur that greeted this with unwarranted enthusiasm. He blinked. He had prepared to be kissed, or something awful like that, and his adrenaline did not understand why it was now unusable. He blinked again. “What?”

“Bertilak is--”

“I heard you, thank you.”

“Then why did you want me to repeat myself?”

“It was a rhetorical ‘what’, Merlin. I just needed to process it.” He nodded to show he had done it, and laced his hands together in front of him. He did it casually, so Merlin would know there was no particular reason to have his hands precisely there, only that it was a stately posture, and befitting of him.

“That’s why I told him you were Gwaine. When he came in, I thought it was him, but I wasn’t sure; and if it was, I knew he’d react when I mixed you up, and he did. It’s him, Arthur.”

“Well, that excuses it, then.”
“Something’s wrong here. Why would he come all the way to Camelot, under an enchantment, just to challenge your knights?”

“You’re right.” He made a face when Merlin smiled. “It does happen occasionally, I’ve noticed. Maybe he’s in trouble.”

“Yeah. Or he’s going to murder us all in our beds.”

“He could have murdered us all when he rode into that tavern. His axe would have taken off half the heads in that place at one swipe. He must need our help.”

“You just want to be the handsome saviour everywhere you go, so you can crow about it.”

“Handsome?” Arthur repeated.


“If you’re scared, you’re free to go, Merlin.”

Merlin sat on the bed, as if it was to be his for the night, clasping his hands between his knees, and looking up at Arthur with exasperation. “Arthur, do you ever think maybe I get tired sometimes, trying to keep you alive? Like I might want a break?”

“It can’t be more exhausting than trying to keep yourself alive. Anyway, It wouldn’t be prudent to leave till we’ve determined what’s going on. But I will make a concession to your cowardice,” he said magnanimously.

The concession was to stuff up Arthur’s bed with pillows, so that it looked as if he were deep in untroubled sleep upon it, and to share Merlin’s pallet. They had dragged it into a corner which was not visible from the doorway, and then fought over who was to have which side, and after that who was not properly sharing the blanket, and after that who was breathing too loudly. On all occasions it was found to have been Merlin, which seemed to Merlin quite convenient.

“Arthur, how are we supposed to trick anyone into thinking you’re sleeping in that bed when you’re thrashing round like a rabbit in a snare?”

“Your elbow is in my spine!”

“Your spine is in my elbow!”

“Merlin!”

“Here!” Merlin snapped, and put his arms round Arthur. It did not solve the issue of space, but at least addressed the configuration of it. Arthur immediately stopped flopping round in favour of imitating a corpse, and not a fresh one. Merlin had burnt less rigid firewood.

“Well, at least any aspiring assassins will be too busy gawking at us embracing to kill us,” Arthur said at last.

“I’m sure your fearsome reputation can withstand it. Arthur, just relax. Or go back to your own
damn bed.”

“So I can be stabbed in my sleep?”

“You’re the one who said I was being a coward! If you’re sleeping here to alleviate my fears, then trust me, right now, I’d prefer you be murdered.”

“Right now I’d prefer to be murdered.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

They fell silent. Arthur by degrees relaxed infinitesimally. Merlin by degrees relaxed infinitesimally with him. When Arthur was not moving, or speaking, or hardly breathing, it was even pleasant. He smelt nice. Merlin with easing caution wriggled a little closer, so he was flush against Arthur’s broad warm back. Arthur flinched, but allowed it. They lay quietly in the quiet of midnight, feeling themselves alone in all the world. Merlin moved his arms a little, to better accommodate their new position, and his aching shoulder, and Arthur, after a moment, moved with them. He was being lured by the warmth, or had tired of his own stubbornness, and was now if not pliant, at least verging on amiable.

And they were not murdered, or in any way disturbed; but after some time only slept peacefully as they were.

It was annoying being in love with Arthur. It was not much different from not being in love with Arthur, except now when Arthur bent over in front of him, Merlin checked out his ass. This too was hardly different from before, only now when it was done, he admitted it to himself: firstly the act of doing it, and secondly that it was justified, because it was a fine one. He was upset with himself, for having such poor taste, but it could hardly be helped. He was certainly mournful about it, when he looked upon Morgana or Gwen, and realised it ought to have been one of them, and was not. It did not say much for him, that his heart had picked over its options, and run straightaway for the idiot.

It was doubly annoying to be in love with Arthur, and to be no closer to the discovery of the Lord Bertilak’s secret. They were persuaded to stay on, without much persuading, and Merlin poked round every suspicious niche he could find, and even round all the rooms when they were not occupied, and sometimes when he only thought they were not occupied, which was how he espied the Lady Bertilak naked, and panicking, spelled himself invisible, and then could not unspell himself. He wandered round trying to determine what he had cast, and frightened Arthur half out of his wits when he walked into their chambers, and Merlin from nowhere said, “Hi.” The sword came zipping out of its sheath, and nearly skewered him. “Stop stabbing at the air!” Merlin yelped. “I’m the air!”

Arthur said an unprincely word.

When Merlin was sorted, they went out to the lawns, where Morgana was practising against one of the castle knights, and winning. She said, “Hello, Gwaine” in a winded voice, and smirked even whilst she was mindful of her footwork, and the sword opposing her. Gwaine was twirling his own practice blade, and Arthur stopped to watch his opponent draw up opposite him. He had been
created in the image of a mountain, and was double the width of Gwaine.

“He’s very good,” Gwen said with admiration.

Arthur made a sceptical noise. “He may have the strength, but men that large are rarely quick. They rely solely on their physical superiority, and expect it to save them in every instance.”

“Oh, no, I meant Gwaine...Princess Arthur,” she said, looking round to see if anyone had heard her.

Arthur was immediately enraged. He took it as a personal affront, that someone else should be celebrated, when he was standing right there. Merlin sighed. “Arthur, we were doing something, remember--”

“Will the winner face my sword next?” he called out to Gwaine and the knight who were both already focussed on one another, and only shrugged.

Merlin went to stand beside Gwen. He realised morosely that in loving Arthur, he deserved this, that it would have been no trouble at all, to love Gwen, to wed and live beside her; and now that he had the dumb one, it was forever to be like this. Gwen smiled sweetly at him, and rubbed it in.

Gwaine won; it was over in a minute. Arthur took up his place as challenger, and winked at Merlin, who ought to have been exasperated, and was a little charmed.

They were terrifying to behold. Even Morgana stopped her own match in order to be impressed. Merlin had never seen entirely flawless footwork, until Arthur; and now it seemed there were two beings of perfect movement, who drew no mortal breath, whilst they were at their play. He had watched them fight together, and seen their mute rapport; and now as enemies they could not simply strike, and forge onward. Before they had expected their blows to land, and now they had to expect they would not. There was a raptorial study in every movement, in the testing of it, and the cataloguing of its possible flaws: and then the blades tried out their theory, and withdrew to note their particular failures.

Arthur was taller, and faster, and pressed both these advantages; but by some unknown foresight, Gwaine anticipated the consequences of these advantages, and avoided them. He fell neither to the superior reach, nor the superior speed. Merlin, rapt, leaned forward, and saw that Morgana and Gwen were similarly enraptured. The meadow with awe shut off its intrusive birdsong.

Since he was now, officially, for some reason, enamoured of Arthur, Merlin leant somewhat toward him in cheering on a victor; but Gwaine had the better hair, and personality. It was a difficult choice. Reluctantly he decided he would like Arthur to win; he felt it was only the proper thing, to not fancy one’s romantic preference with his head stove in. Then he remembered it was only Arthur, and switched to Gwaine.

They were both now sweating. Arthur had darkened his tunic, and Gwaine’s magnificent hair defied its aptitude for being sexy forevermore, and stuck to his forehead. They came together in another great crash. The sound was like thunder in the clearing, and drew several men to the wall of the castle.

Gwaine slashed at Arthur’s belly; and Arthur, leaping back, slashed at his neck. They met once more, straining. Merlin could see the tension in Arthur’s forearms, and the quivering in Gwaine’s. Their eyes met. They stared into the face of their enemy, and saw he was unyielding.

And suddenly Arthur relaxed the ferocious look on his face, and stepped back. No one was more
surprised than Merlin, except possibly Morgana, according to the expression on her face. Arthur stabbed the blunted practice sword into the ground, and held out his hand. There was an absolute silence, as if all that was natural knew here was a most unnatural occurrence.

Gwaine, laughing, accepted it. He slapped Arthur on the shoulder. It was obviously difficult for Arthur to say what he said next, but he mastered himself, and still breathing hard, said with nevertheless beautiful diction, “I have seldom fought so fine a sword. It would be Camelot’s greatest gain, if you were to decide to make it your home.”

“Are you proposing to me, princess?” Gwaine asked, and Arthur rolling his eyes gave Merlin an aggravated look, as if the blame were his, that Gwaine had not gone on bended knee, to lick his highborn boots.

“You can’t rescind the offer, Arthur,” Morgana intervened in a crisp tone. “Gwaine is the only man I’ll ever marry.”

“You can’t base your marital preferences on how much they annoy me, Morgana,” Arthur replied wryly.

“On the contrary,” she said. “That’s the only consideration of any merit whatsoever.”

Arthur was horrified to learn that he preferred the overcrowded pallet to his own palatial bed. They had kept up their vigilance for five nights, expecting that on any of them Arthur was to be foully murdered; or at least Merlin expected it, and Arthur merely kept up the pretense of expecting it, so that he could lie in the dark beside him, listening to the soft slow whistling of his breath. At the most inopportune of times he remembered the pale head in his lap, and how it had felt to touch it, and feel no living warmth. At the most inopportune of times he remembered taking one of the skinny wrists in his own, and feeling the pulse, and that it was failing. He was sometimes suddenly terrified of its repetition. There would be no fear in him, and no reason for it; and then it struck him cold to the tips of his fingers while Merlin was laughing, or grousing; he saw that Merlin was alive, and remembered he almost had not been. He saw the unnerving juxtaposition of the mischievous dimples, and the impassive absence of them.

He knew, where it was safe to know, in the dark unseeing night, that it was not bearable to be without them.

So he slept beside the warm breathing of his friend, marvelling in it. He listened till he was sure of the breathing’s hardiness, and then let himself into sleep.

On the fifth night they were neither of them asleep; Merlin was an intolerably selfish bedmate, and did not understand the pallet was Arthur’s, and thrashed round as if he had the right to it. Arthur each night laid on his side, with his knees to his chest, and his arms crossed, so that, nobly, he was sacrificing his own personal comfort for the sake of the communal space, in order that it should be unnecessary for Merlin to put his arms round him again, though doubtless Merlin missed it. He tolerated the thrashing beyond any human endurance, and then snapped, “Merlin.”

“Sorry. It’s just hot.” The thrashing was replaced by a more subdued wriggling. There was the sensation of nakedness beside him. He felt Merlin’s bare chest against his back as Merlin turned to find his preferred position, and jerking away from it, almost rolled himself off the pallet.
“Put your shirt back on!”

“It’s too hot!”

“Merlin, you clod, you can’t be naked in this bed with me.”

“I’m not!” Merlin protested. “I still have my trousers on.”

“Well thank God for small miracles,” Arthur said, crowding the edge of the pallet. “Don’t be half naked in this bed with me. Any degree of nakedness is unacceptable.”

“You know, Arthur, sometimes I think you protest too much.”

“Excuse me?” Arthur spluttered. He felt that his cheeks were almost as hot as the skin against his back.

“I’m just saying,” Merlin pointed out, with the aggravating note of innocence in his tone.

“You’re just saying what?”

“Nothing. Obviously. Clearly there’s nothing to say.” The aggravating note of innocence had not left his voice. Arthur regretted any charitable thoughts he had harboured toward Merlin. He had harboured few of them; and even they were too many. He elbowed Merlin, possibly a bit more savagely than he ought to.

“Ow!” Merlin kicked him.

“Merlin,” he snapped again, and in a blind fury, flipped over on top of him, to pinch him into submission whilst Merlin slapped at him. It was a pathetic showing. Arthur sat on his thighs, and pinned Merlin’s arms over his head, and Merlin, with a toddler’s game attempts, tried to throw him.

“Arthur, stop!” Merlin cried out, whipping his head from side to side, in order to get out from under the hand that roughly tousled it. “I’ll turn you into a toad!”

“You won’t,” Arthur said confidently. “Then you’d have an ugly old toad to look after, instead of a handsome prince.”

“I’d prefer the toad.”

“Would you?” Arthur asked, and pinched him again. The bare flesh of Merlin’s ribs started away from it. Arthur felt almost amicable about the entire bed situation, now that Merlin was suffering so.

“Yes. Then I could keep you in a jar, and you couldn’t talk, or make me muck out your stables. Actually, I quite like the idea.” And now from under his breath rose the mysterious conjuring, and the eyes flashed yellow in the dark.

“Merlin—” Arthur warned, and pulling back loosened his grip on Merlin’s wrists. This was all Merlin required, to lunge up from underneath him, and abruptly reverse their circumstances. Arthur found himself underneath Merlin, with hardly any understanding of how he had gotten there. He noticed that Merlin was right—the bed was hot. It was almost intolerable. Merlin was sitting farther up than etiquette allowed, on Arthur’s hips, where he settled in to be insufferably pleased with himself. He pressed down on Arthur’s wrists, and was terribly smug. He shifted round till he was comfortable, confident in his right to be lordly, and sit as long as he pleased in his position of
authority. Arthur at first ignored the thighs gripping him, and then in forcing the ignorance found that he had fixated on them. They were dense with muscle, and very hot through the hose. He swallowed.

Merlin by this point was finished with his smugness. The look of triumph had sharpened into the hot physicality of the look he had given Arthur at the lake. Arthur felt it crawl over him. He felt the fingers shift on his wrists, no longer holding him, but only lingering to maintain the contact, the shivery rasp of flesh under flesh. Merlin opened his hands, and slid his fingers up into Arthur’s. He felt the fingers’ slow intolerable gliding over the underside of his wrist, and wanted to move, and could not.

“Arthur,” Merlin said. He was breathless. He sounded as Arthur felt. They breathed, and looked at one another for a moment. Merlin fluttered his fingers in Arthur’s, testing it. He looked down at Arthur so that Arthur could hardly stir, but lay stiffly transfixed, his heart thundering. He was like a deer in the sights of a crossbow, and did not know how to save himself.

Merlin took away one of his hands, and slid it over Arthur’s jaw. The fingers were not insistent, and barely touched him: but still he felt them, under his skin, where all the apprehensive nerves lived, and burst suddenly into flame. His lips were faintly scored by a soft and tentative thumb; and anxiously they felt how the thumb did not simply touch them and move on, but seized upon every awareness of skin and sinew. He was desperate for the touch to be endless, and had been desperate for it; it was not till he had it, that he recognised in his chest the absence of it. He did not even need the romance of it: but only some small gesture of human touch, to show he was deserving of it. He grabbed the wrist, so it would not leave him. Merlin pressed their foreheads together, and neither of them made anything else of it, but only breathed against one another, their noses brushing.

Then there was a rattling at the door. Arthur was slow to hear it. He opened his eyes, not quite believing that already it was over. Merlin blinked at him. The door rattled once again, and Arthur, coming abruptly to his senses, shoved Merlin off him. He put out his hand to touch the sword which lay beside the pallet.

Into the room came the Lady Bertilak. She went to the bed on silent bare feet.

She had crawled halfway into it when she realised the shape in it was not a man, and looking over the side she found them side by side on the pallet, one of them partially naked.

There was an interval of blinking. They were all equal participants. Finally Merlin said, “Erm. Hello?”

Lady Bertilak arranged herself tidily on the bed, so the skirts she had disordered in crawling up it covered her appropriately. She seemed to have forgotten the art of speech, or even any crude approximation of it. Probably it was the first time she had gone to seduce one of her guests, and found him in bed with his manservant. Not that he was in bed with his manservant, in anything more than the strictly literal sense.

“My Lord,” she said at last. “I come to warn you. The green knight is not what you think.”

Arthur stopped her. “I’m not Gwaine.”

She blinked again. “What?”

“I’m not Gwaine. It isn’t me who comes to fight the green knight.”

“Oh! No; I’m aware of that. You’re Arthur, aren’t you?”

“Thank you, Merlin, I had gone dumb and appreciate your willingness to be my mouthpiece.”

“I know. That’s why I try to do all your thinking for you.”

Arthur kicked him, maintaining a pleasant smile on his face. “I am, my lady. Can I be...of some service to you?” Here he faltered, since there was only one service a strapping knight could generally be expected to provide to a lady who visited him in his chambers at such an hour.

She opened the cloak she wore, and over the tunic beneath it there was a belt of green silk, trimmed in gold, and round the edges sewn with stones; she took it from her and dropping it on the bed, said to him, “I’m sorry; we had no choice. Truly, I am. You must take this. Wear it, I beg you. It’s not Gwaine who is in danger. She intended for you to answer the knight’s challenge. It’s you she wanted here, Arthur.”

“Who?” Merlin asked.

“I’m sorry. I can’t say anything else. I’ve risked so much just to do this.” And so saying, she scrambled off the bed, and slipped out the way she had come, pulling up her cloak.

“Why do they always have to be so cryptic?” Merlin asked when the door had shut behind her.

“I told you these people were in trouble,” Arthur said, throwing off the furs, and going to pick up the belt. He tossed it to Merlin. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“You’re the sorcerer! En...sorcell it or whatever it is you do. What’s so special about it?”

Merlin screwed up his face. He was still half-naked. Arthur was disconcerted by it. He wished Merlin could be normal, and not consider it decent to sit round on his master’s pallet missing integral pieces of his evening dress. “You want me to sniff it or something?”

“No, I don’t want you to sniff it! Can you tell if it’s magic?”

“Yeah, it’s magic. But I dunno what it’s for.”

“Well, at least you’re useful as always. That’s comforting. And put your shirt on.”

“Why? Is it bothering you?” He pointedly did not put his shirt back on. Arthur had never met anyone so difficult.

“No, it’s not bothering me! Why should I pay any mind to it whatsoever?”

“If you’re not paying any mind to it whatsoever, then why are you demanding I put it back on?”

“I--I just think--Merlin! Stop questioning me!”

Merlin was shaking his head in a profound sorrow, as if he had never witnessed anything more sad. But he did unfold himself from the pallet, with the tunic in hand. This seemed an improvement, till still not wearing it, he walked over to Arthur, and leaning down in a way that emphasized the almost entirely insignificant height difference between them, he put the belt onto the bed. He was not remotely respectful of Arthur’s personal space. He looked at Arthur’s lips in an entirely unambiguous way. Arthur leaned back, belatedly. He had almost forgot to do it.
“You probably shouldn’t touch it, till I figure out what it is,” Merlin said, in a low voice.

“Right,” Arthur said, in the same voice.

The tunic was put on at last, and did not help. Arthur had already seen what was under it, and now was persuaded to go on picturing it, by simple virtue of the fact that he could no longer see it. It was perfectly natural, and did not feel like it.

Then Merlin took out his magic book from the saddlebag beside the pallet, and Arthur forgot how unnaturally sweaty he was in the drafty room. “What are you doing?”

“I’m seeing if I can find something on enchanted objects. I want to know what it’s going to do.”

“Merlin, you idiot! You just carry that thing round with you?”

“Yeah, when I can. I wasn’t going to leave it behind for weeks.”

“Do you know how stupid --” Arthur fisted his hand in front of his mouth. It was no use lecturing Merlin of all people on stupidity. He would just go on doing it, to plague Arthur. “What if someone caught you with it?” he said in a more subdued voice.

“It’s safer here than in Camelot. I’d rather be caught out by Gwaine than Uther.”

“For the last time, Merlin, you barely know Gwaine, you can’t just...be friends with him.”

“Not like I’m friends with you?” Merlin asked, raising one of his eyebrows, and Arthur, remembering that he had been stupid, and let Merlin press their foreheads together as if they were girls who did that sort of sentimental thing all the time, flushed hotly. He did not mean to, but blurted out, “No!” Merlin smiled as if it meant something.

“Stop being a jealous prat and come help me look,” Merlin said, and throwing himself comfortably across the bed, he flipped open the book, patting the bed beside him.

At breakfast Gwaine was pale. Morgana had noticed it on meeting him in the corridor, and got a joke in response to her concern. Now he was unsteady, and clutched at the table, and barely kept himself upright through the proceedings. After, she took him by the elbow, and found herself supporting the rest of him as well. She caught him in her arms as his knees buckled. “Arthur, help me!” she called, and was caught in turn, and steadied. He was annoyingly strong, but occasionally put it to some good use, and occasionally could be forgiven it.

“What’s wrong?” Merlin asked, and touched Gwaine’s damp brow with a gentle hand. She knew Arthur would be unbearable about it, and pinched him before he could get properly into his sulk.

“Let’s get him back to his chambers,” Gwen said, and was already in the process of proving herself more helpful than Arthur, who had caught them and considered his duty done, since it was imperative he overanalyze the hand which Merlin had used to touch Gwaine’s poor white forehead, and frowned over it. She pinched him again.

“Stop pinching me, Morgana!” he snapped.

“Oh, be careful!” Gwen scolded with her usual sweetness as Merlin took up one of Gwaine’s arms,
“Not back to the chambers,” Gwaine said in a strained voice, leaning into Merlin. She watched Arthur’s jaw overreact to it, and rolled her eyes. “It would seem our quest is at an end at last. I need to get to the chapel.” He breathed through his nose; the arm over Merlin’s shoulder twitched, and Gwen put out her hands as if to still it, and drew them back, and clasped them under her chin, and looked round quite helplessly, seeing the suffering, and her inability to help it. “I can feel it pulling at me.”

“IT’s the magic,” Merlin said.

Morgana looked him over thoroughly. “How do you know?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Arthur jumped in. “There’s obviously sorcery involved. Anyone can see that. And it’s, of course, evil and...whatnot, so why wouldn’t it be harming him now? It’s bad. And that’s why we’re all here, to fight it.” He stopped, and it seemed he thought he had not said enough, and did not know what else to say. Merlin gave him a long-suffering look.

Gwaine tipped his head back, and a shudder went through him. He was entirely dependent upon Merlin to keep him upright. The men to a man were indecisive, and stood round as if pain were simply a thing to be born with their jaws on the ground, and nothing to be done about it. She took Arthur by the ear, and pointed him down the hall in the direction of the main gate. “Arthur, get the horses ready. Gwen, would you please fetch our things from the rooms?” She was still holding onto Arthur’s ear. She gave it a sharp tweak, to head off any whinging. “Now. That was to Arthur, Gwen, not you.”

So they were competently packed up by Gwen, with all swiftness, and less competently tacked up by Arthur, who had only the two functioning arms to assist him, and obviously was nearly an invalid, it was so monumentally difficult for him to realise the basic functions of being useful. But he did help Gwaine onto his horse, and held him there when he would have fallen, and somewhat redeemed himself.

They set out over lawns still green, and placid; but beyond the land had turned to winter. They came out of those mild and fruitful trees, into the cold northern wastes. The horses did not take kindly to it, and stepped along in the manner of a cat emerging from water, and trying to divest itself of any last vestige of it, shaking out the hooves as they withdrew them, and snorting temperamentally. Arthur offered up his cloak to Merlin, almost as if he were a gentleman.

There were nothing but steep hills in every direction, and rocks which dwarfed them; but Gwaine led them on unhesitating, his spine slowly straightening as they rode on, and the sickly bow which he had adopted over the horn of his saddle gradually correcting itself to a more heroic disposition. There was no active woodland, or friendly life in the bracken, to prove itself awake: but only the cold sleeping valleys, like some dispirited portrait. She saw them to be beautiful, and took none of beauty’s comfort from them, they were so still. She rode with her head high beside Gwen, and put out her hand to be held, when Gwen seemed to need it.

When they had reached a violent brook, which churned up as if boiling, and carried away the fruits of nature’s labours uncaringly, taking into its surge all manner of brushwood, and the poor corpses of unlucky rabbits, Gwaine reined in. There was a glade, and a little knoll by the stream--and seemingly nothing else. But he slid down from his saddle with his hand on his sword, and went down the glade unstaggering, now with the colour in his cheeks. She thought how far he had come, to die unsung. She flung herself down from her horse, crying out, “Wait!”

He turned round to smile at them. There was nothing regretful in it. He had come destitute to them
from out of the world, and now was leaving it quite fulfilled. “It’s just ahead,” he said, and indeed it was, just beyond the knoll, a shabby bit of stones which had seen no human prayer for years. The wilds had taken it back, and were making full use of its crevices. “I don’t think any of you need to be coming for the last of it. Can’t bear to let anyone see what happens to the hair.” He said it just as if it were his most pressing concern. Probably he thought he was not worthy of any long good-bye, and could not bear to chance it.

And almost in unison they climbed down from their mounts, and went resolutely to him.

“Nah,” Merlin said, resting a casual arm round him. “Can’t bear to let anything happen to the hair.”

Morgana thought it was more devastating to him than any mass desertion. She thought how like kindness it was, to inflict an anguish any trite cruelty could only dream of.

Arthur took from under his mail a sash she had never seen, and handing it to Gwaine, said, “Put it on before you enter the chapel. It was given to me by a friend. I think you’ll need it more than I.” She saw the look that ran hot between him and Merlin. He said, “I’m safer, and in more trusted hands, than I ever was before.”

So they entered abreast, into the silent ruins. Where the snow had been kept out by imperfect wall and roof, grass burst up through the mortar, and flourished in the wild way of wild places. The wind sent a solitary note through the pews, and sang itself back to sleep. There was no other call. They heard in the fresh unhindered grasses their feet, and nothing else.

There was no lumbering knight. There was only, in the centre of the church, waiting in a furred cloak, an old woman. It took Morgana a moment to remember she had been in attendance at the castle, during suppers. She had been held in some respect by their hosts, but was unobtrusive, and never spoke to any of them; her face was the ordinary seamed face of any old woman. It suggested no particular importance now.

She said, in a thin, trembling voice, “So, Pendragon. You have come to me.” And before Arthur could answer, there was a great rush of sensation that lifted the hairs at the nape of her neck. She did not understand it, till Gwaine flew backward, and hit the wall behind him with a sickening crack. Gwen screamed. He fell as if dead, whilst the woman with tears in her eyes watched.

But Gwen had run to him, not even heeding that she had to cross in front of the woman to do so, and threw herself over him. She looked up with a tearful face, covering him with every brave and trembling inch of her. Gwaine lifted up his head, and neither he nor the woman were more shaken, to find him still breathing.

She lifted her tremulous hand.

“Stop!” Arthur thundered, and holding out his arm to keep Merlin back, he walked out into the centre of the wreckage, to face her eye to eye. “I am Arthur Pendragon. Whatever ill you bear me, let it be between us alone.”

She let the tears run down her cheeks. She was only an old woman now, trying to find her voice. “Then they can live, and bear witness to your death, and bring its tidings back to your father.”

Merlin started forward, and instinctively Morgana grabbed him, and held him. “Don’t, Merlin,” she whispered into his ear. “Not yet.”

Arthur had sheathed his sword. He said, “Tell me, what harm have I done you? I do not know
“You do not. Your father does. I am one of his victims. I was driven from my home by him, without my sons, who were killed for having my blood in them. I saw them disembowelled. I saw my husband burnt alive. I did nothing but exist; and they nothing but love me. I have run for the rest of my life. And when I only want to die peacefully as I was not allowed to live, your father’s allies hunt me from their own lands, to please him. I can find no haven. I have found home after home, and been flung from them. I have come here in my final months, for lack of anywhere else. I have run, Arthur Pendragon, and feared, for twenty years. I have killed friend and love, by doing nothing but loving them, and in your father’s eyes corrupting them. I must be entirely forsaken, or have their blood on my hands.”

Merlin was shaking. His grief was almost another presence in her arms.

“It’s time,” the woman said, “Uther Pendragon experience actual consequences. I know magic has tried to strike at his heart, in Camelot, and that it has failed. So I have brought you here. The green knight was my invention. This is what you came for, Arthur Pendragon. To assuage an old woman’s bitterness. To give her some purpose, when she has never had any, other than to suffer.”

She put out her hand.

The sword was not drawn. There was no evasive flinch which Morgana knew him to be capable of. He could have broken the wrist, and barely realised it. He knelt. He bowed his head under the reaching hand. He said, quietly, so it seemed a thing only between them, though the church’s spare bones had no other voice, and took up his own: “I cannot know your suffering, having no concept of it. I can only say my father did wrong, and change nothing that has been perpetuated against you. I am sincerely sorry. If you can make this right with my death, then do so.”

“Arthur!” Merlin cried out, and Morgana raised her voice over his. “Kill him for what runs in his blood, as your kind have been killed. Then you’ll feel better, won’t you? Your sons will be avenged? Kill him like your family was killed, not for what he is, but for what you fear he might be. Then at last you will be Uther’s equal.”

The frail hand trembled. Arthur caught it, and held onto it. “I do not want a Camelot like my father’s. I do not want fear to be mistaken as justice. I give you my word. I am sorry for your sons, and for everyone you have loved. None of us is made a monster by the traits they can’t help; I will not forget that.”

Morgana had stepped back slowly from Merlin. She saw the tears standing in his eyes, and knew.

The old woman was hardly standing. She was grounded merely by the hold on her hand. Arthur, still kneeling, said, “What do I call you?”

She shook as if he had threatened her. Through her quivering lips she got out: “Albreda.”

“Albreda,” he said, and probably it was the first time a Pendragon had ever bothered to know it.

She leant forward, her forehead on his forehead, and wept.

Afterward, Merlin went to him as he was tightening the girth on his saddle. He had already looked round to see that none of the others were near them. He touched the cold cheek with his fingertips,
giving it time to flinch away; and when it only froze, Merlin slid his whole palm over it, feeling the soft skin, and the whiskers disrupting it. Arthur did not look at him. Merlin stroked the scratchy cheek a little with his thumb, and brought the eyes round to him.

Arthur looked at him as if it hurt. His throat shifted. He was getting his voice together.

He let the hand lie tenderly on him for another moment. And then grabbing it by the wrist, he said, “Don’t be weird, Merlin,” and pushed it away from him.

It was a long ride back to Camelot, much subdued. The weather was not in their favour, and it turned even more as they came down Cadair Idris, into the frozen valleys. Gwaine had an appointment with Greg the morgen to keep, and went off to keep it. Arthur kept his own counsel, because he had been vulnerable in front of an audience, and now had to stand as a man alone, to prove his machismo.

It was on the evening when Gwaine was keeping company at the lake, and would be there for some time, and Gwen already slept, and Arthur was already at watch, that Merlin sat down beside Morgana at the fire. He rubbed his hands together. It was difficult to know how to start. He clapped his hands a little on his knees, to ready himself. “I have something I need to tell you.” He said it softly, but with a weight she could not mistake.

She was looking into the fire. She did not look away from it. She had a small bit of twig, which she tossed into it. He could see by the steady profile of her face that she was prepared for him, that it was unnecessary to coddle her, that in fact it would be insulting to her. Her chin was fixed, and did not tremble as she spoke. “I know. About you, and about me.”

He rolled the knees of his trousers beneath his palms. “You knew after the Wild Hunt, didn’t you?”

“I suspected. I knew when I saw your face at the chapel. Arthur wasn’t just speaking to her.” She paused a little; and the hand on her own knee did start, as if she had concentrated the great impassivity in her face, while the rest of her must feel, and bear the harshness of it. “I have it too?”

“Yeah,” Merlin said, and longed to tell her otherwise.

She did not turn. “I’m afraid, Merlin,” she whispered.

“So am I. Every day,” he admitted softly, into the darkness.

“How do we bear it?” she whispered back.

“You just don’t do it alone, is all,” he said, and reached out for her hand.

It was long into the night they kept their vigil, with their cold fingers in frightened commiseration with one another.
Spring was slow to visit, but settled in comfortably once it did, and seemed inclined to be chatty, and stay a long while. Merlin was glad to feel it in his bones, and less glad to have Arthur sprawled over his bed when there was nothing to be done about it, other than to look at him. He had flung out his legs over the whole length of the bed, and was lolling about on Merlin’s pillow, which would now smell like him, with one of Merlin’s magic books in his hands. It was difficult to have him in such a promiscuous position, and to pretend he did not notice it. He was not any less in love with Arthur, and possibly was even more so. He had tried in his various interrogations of the book which Arthur now held to see if there was anything to do away with his feelings: not to get rid of the love, but only to introduce some common sense, which naturally on its own would take care of his passion. It was impossible to be both intelligent, and in love with Arthur; the two were natural enemies, and could not co-exist. But so far he had found only a charm for impotence, which was most unnecessary, especially when Arthur was lying on his bed, and a variety of love spells, which were even more unnecessary. He had resorted to staring very hard at Gwen, and willing his heart to be more reasonable. It was not a difficulty to stare at her; but it was fruitless.

“Can you do all of these?” Arthur asked, turning a page.

“No. I’d have to practise. Some things I just do instinctively, but you still have to study magic. And some spells are trickier than others.”

“What about this one? What’s it do?” Arthur held up the book to show the page it was open to.

“It’s for turning inanimate objects into animate ones. Like your brain.”

Arthur made a face at him. “You should cast it on your own.” He went back to leafing through the book. A bit of fringe came loose from the rest, and fell over his eyebrow. Merlin would have liked to tenderly brush it, or to pull it out. It was difficult to be sure which.

It was a pleasant evening, and the flowers in their new and tender forms were shaking off the old weight of deaths untold. A resurrection is always a grand thing, and they were keen to celebrate it, and put out their scent as if it were a fog, and enraptured all the land. Merlin sensed the ceremony of it through the gaps in his shutters, and decided he wanted the full effect. He accomplished this by straddling Arthur on the small bed, and reaching up to open the window. It was justified, since he needed to access the bed in order to reach the window, and Arthur was currently in possession of its entirety. Additionally it was pleasant to bother Arthur, who immediately stiffened, and pretended he had not. He read the same page three times, whilst Merlin took his time with the window. Their knees were in warm contact through the hose, and Merlin heard how it was suddenly difficult for Arthur to breathe. He put the tips of his fingers against Arthur’s knee, as if to steady himself while he yanked at the shutters; they were sympathetic to the eroticism of the moment, and stuck.
Arthur tolerated it poorly. He was falsely absorbed in the book, and jiggled his foot. The
reverberations of the jiggling went through his legs, and gave the points of them which were in hot
contact a friction that made him shudder. He stopped the jiggling. Merlin was sorry for him, but
not terribly, since there was always the option of snogging, and Arthur had chosen not to explore
it.

He fussed with the window for a while, feeling that Arthur wanted to yell at him, and could not.
Merlin finally said, “Oh, sorry” as if he had only just noticed he was straddling Arthur, and
climbed off the bed before Arthur mauled him, and not in the carnal way.

There was an embarrassed silence from Arthur, who read the same page for the fifth time. He
cleared his throat, as if that were indicative of a sole and devoted sexual fascination with the
feminine gender. He darted a look up at Merlin through his lashes, and the look was not indicative
of a sole and devoted sexual fascination with the feminine gender.

Merlin did not understand why a little repression should interfere with fornication, but he did
respect it, and did not hold Arthur down and kiss him. He thought it was quite considerate of him,
and he ought to have some sort of reward for it, such as Arthur’s tongue in his mouth. But Arthur
of course was not in the habit of rewarding him for his exemplary service, and went on pretending
he was not aroused.

The spring on gentle wing came gently to them; it filled the small room with its various
embellishments of light and fragrance, and they were quite content among it. The hills with the
usual productiveness of March sent up the grasses from under their long waterings, and burst them
greenly against the pale trunks of the recovering woods. In the heather the beasts were active once
again, and they at least were intimately appeased, if Merlin was not.

He picked up his copy of the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, and sat down on a stool
beside the bed. Arthur watched him reading it, forgetting to be wholly absorbed in his own text.
“How can you read something so boring?”

“It’s not boring. And if you didn’t want me reading it, you shouldn’t have got it for me.”

“I didn’t!” Arthur protested.

“Yes you did,” Merlin said, not looking up as he turned a page. He did not know why it was
embarrassing for Arthur to be attracted to a man, when that was certainly the least shameful bit of
the entire debacle. It was not disgraceful to like a man, whether the Church was in approval of it or
not; but certainly it was degrading to like such an incomparable numpty.

Arthur sighed. “Gwen told you.”

“No.” Merlin turned another page. The book was far more interesting than not having sex, and he
began to settle into it.

“Yes she did.”

“Gwen’s not like that; she won’t give up a secret like that.”

“So you’re telling me you just figured it out?”

“Yeah. You didn’t make it hard. The wrapping was absolute shit, and you act like a twit every time
I take it out. I don’t know what you’re worried about. It’s not like I’m going to think you’re any
less of a prat just because you got me a birthday present.”
“Well that’s certainly good to know.”

“Yeah. You don’t ever have to worry about that.”

Arthur kicked his foot. Merlin kicked back at him. And simply as that, the tension was dispelled, and Arthur, clearly easier in himself, sank back onto Merlin’s pillow, plumping it up behind him. For some time they read in silence. It was a good quiet; Merlin felt he could dwell in it, and be forever content. It went on like that for some time, while the evening got on with the business of dying.

Arthur during this looked at him several times. He did it in a surreptitious way, or at least in a way he obviously felt was surreptitious. Actually he could not have been more obvious, but Merlin out of a great generosity Arthur did not deserve feigned as if the slyness were actually successful. He read his book as if he did not notice anything.

Finally, Arthur said to him, without any waver in his voice, “Cast a spell on me.”

Merlin blinked. In his surprise he was a moment in disengaging with his book; he had needed something to stare at, in order to convince himself of the world, and its tangibility. “What?”

Arthur fidgeted. “Cast a spell on me. Anything. Well, not anything. Don’t do to me what you did to Aland.”

Merlin blinked again. He did not know whether he was mad, or whether the fault of insanity lay with Arthur. “Why?”

Arthur ruffled his hair. He looked at the ceiling. He looked at the window. He looked at everything which was not Merlin. His eyes did not stop seeking something on which to halt, but finding nothing that was satisfactory, and moreover, nothing that could deny his painful self-awareness of whatever he was about to say, they found instead the waning sunlight which flamed up out of Camelot’s depths, and fixed themselves. The sunlight was no more conducive to ignorance; but at least it must have been pleasant for him to look upon.

He said: “Because I still don’t like magic. Because I still distrust it. Because I don’t...want to be afraid of anything that’s part of you.”

Arthur was generally a great clot, but occasionally he was obviously cognizant that he had said something romantic, because afterwards he looked down on the big hands which always knew what they were about, and did not know how to manage them. If they had been called upon for a beheading, he could have handled them nicely; but in the face of his feelings they were suddenly unintelligible, and it was broadly forgotten by the rest of him that they were even a unit, and then it was always a great surprise to find that in the manipulations of the nerves there must be some small reserve for the strange dumb blocks at the ends of his wrists. He sat staring at them now, as if they were responsible for the sentimentality, and he was disappointed in them.

Merlin swallowed. The book in his lap had lost its materiality; he did not feel it any longer. He was aware of his throat, and the obstruction in it.

“No; no, definitely not,” Merlin said at last, trying to be light about it. The humour was necessary, so he would not say what he was desperate to say. “Too tempting to make you not talk, or turn you into a stable boy. Or make you bald.”

“Make me bald? Can’t you just--isn’t there something...small?”

“I could make something small.” Merlin kept his face absolutely straight, as if he had meant it in
some innocuous way.

Arthur spluttered. “Merlin. Just...something minor. So I can get used to the feel of it. So it’s...normal to me.”

“It’s not normal,” Merlin said softly.

“Well, no, not if you can do it. You’re the strangest person I’ve ever met. But, it isn’t--it isn’t malevolent. On its own. It’s only a tool, isn’t it? My sword is only as moral as its wielder. I just want to understand that. On a...subconscious level.” He was struggling with himself. Merlin thought it was terribly endearing, and had to pretend it was not almost unbearable, to merely sit there instead of smiling foolishly at Arthur’s foolish face, and kissing him.

“I just want to become accustomed to it.”

“Accustomed to it.”

Arthur looked at his hands again. “So I don’t instinctively recoil from it.” He meant so he did not instinctively recoil from Merlin, but could not say it.

Merlin rubbed one of the pages of his book with his thumb. He looked down at it, as if it had a solution. He said, “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing to my face,” Arthur replied hastily, and Merlin looked up into it, and smiled helplessly. He thought about tweaking the aristocratic nose, just to be difficult; but Arthur looked at him so trustingly he lost the heart for mischief, and sat quietly stroking his thumb over the book, trying to think of something appropriately humble.

“In the woods when you had me...listen to them, or whatever it was you did.” Arthur pursed his lips. Merlin knew it was difficult for him, to have uttered so many consecutive sentences that were not even arrogant. Probably Gaius would need to examine him, to be sure of no lasting effects. “That was...almost nice. You could do that again.”

“It’s not the same in the castle. It’s a different energy.”

Arthur closed the magic book and sat up. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, so they were almost knee to knee. “Show me, then.” He held out his hand.

“Arthur, you don’t have to. It’s ok to be a little afraid of it. Power is always something that has an infinite capacity for abuse. And humans have an infinite capacity for perpetuating it. I’m afraid of it, sometimes. Of what I can do. Of what I could do.”

“I feel the same way about having a crown,” Arthur said softly, looking up from under his fringe, and offering a smile that was not in the usual business of smiles, but only wanted to express a deep understanding, to make them complicit in the feeling. With some awkwardness, he pulled back the hand he had offered to Merlin, and rubbed the back of his other hand.

“Do you trust me with my magic?” Merlin asked. “Just me, and what I’ll use it for, regardless of how you feel about it as a whole?”

“Yes,” Arthur said without hesitation.

“And I trust you with a crown. And we’ll both just have to hold one another to not disappointing each other.”
The sad sympathy in the smile slowly went out of it. It softened into a tenderness that was hard to look at. Merlin stared at him with the heart fast in his throat; he thought if he moved slowly enough, he could touch the clean-shaven cheek, and feel it smooth under his thumb. He stretched out with the back of his hand toward Arthur’s jaw, as if there was some disconnect in the intimacy of it, as if the knuckles would not imply what the fingertips did. Arthur watched him warily, but did not twitch. He might not have been capable of it.

They were both transfixed. Arthur sat not moving a muscle. Merlin sat moving only his fingers. They each waited to see what they would do, once they touched the paralyzed face.

Arthur shut his eyes before the first tentative stroke. Merlin sometimes forgot, because Arthur wanted it to be forgotten, how lonely he was, how he did not understand the simpler manifestations of touch, their myriad nuances and comforts, but only knew affection as something that was occasionally necessary, when Uther wanted him to go on performing like a good horse.

He brushed at Arthur’s cheek, and then cupped it. Arthur kept his eyes closed. It was terrible to watch him be so painfully still, as if he knew he must not exist as himself, but must be something that was hardly breathing, in order not to startle the kindness, and remind it on whom it was being wasted. He did not advance anything; he did not sway into the touch, or pull away from it. He only sat. He was only a recipient, hardly convinced he was in receipt of anything.

Merlin slid both his hands round Arthur’s face. He kissed the soft skin between Arthur’s brows, and then the bridge of his nose. Arthur could hardly have felt it, Merlin passed so gently over them; but he shuddered all the way down into the tips of his boots, which touched the tips of Merlin’s, and knocked them lightly together.

Merlin kissed the corner of his mouth. He kissed Arthur’s chin. He kissed the other side of his mouth, not pressing, but only breathing gently into it, hardly grazing whilst he held the still face between his hands. He felt the skin beneath his lips more as a possibility; it was hardly anything corporeal. He skimmed over it, determined to be compassionate to its rigid uncertainty, the unfamiliarity with any such tender handling.

He whispered, “Arthur,” and tried to slide into the arms that came out to meet him.

But they were there to push him back, and they did it roughly.

Arthur stood up, so that he towered over Merlin on his stool. “Don’t.”

Merlin was not feeling compliant. He was tired of having to pretend Arthur did not have feelings. He was tired of having to pretend he did not have feelings, that they were not inclined toward Arthur, that it was nothing of any consequence, to exchange the looks he exchanged with Arthur, and to risk what he risked for Arthur. “Why not?”

“What do you mean, ‘why not’?” Arthur demanded. “You can’t just--”

Merlin stood up. He had a good inch on Arthur, and used it now to stare him down. “I can’t what?”

Now he slid the bar into place on his door, while Arthur with an almost baffled expression on his face watched him do it.

“You have to pack for the tournament. We’re going to London tomorrow, Merlin. We don’t have time to--to,” he stopped as if he had uttered an entire sentence.

“I already have. All your armour is ready and polished. Your sword’s sharpened. And earlier today I was round to Gwen’s for your new helmet.”
“And my horse--”

“Already groomed.”

“Well, in that case,” Arthur snapped, “I suppose you’re perfectly free to molest the crown prince of Camelot.”

“Why not? Gaius is going to be with a patient all night.”

Arthur turned an alarming shade of red. “I don’t think you quite understand your place, not that you ever did--”

“Arthur, stop your blundering. It’s annoying.”

“You’re annoying.”

Merlin was sorry for him. It was difficult to be so thick, surely.

“Merlin,” Arthur snapped, “don’t be ridiculous. I don’t know what’s got into you.”

Merlin considered an erotic pun about what could be got into him, but decided Arthur could not handle it. He was sadly resigned to a solo consolation that evening. It was hardly fair; but there are few circumstances in which loving an idiot are. “Fine. Pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t.”

“Really. Sure.” Merlin put on his faux innocent face; he knew it was appalling to Arthur.

There was a moment of tension which seemed as if it would go on perpetuating itself, and break only when one of them died. Then it was that Arthur sighed, and with a sudden tiredness so bitter Merlin was suddenly regretful of his impertinence, he said, “We’re attending the tournament so my father can secure a marriage match for me. It’s already arranged, it’s just the details need fixing.”

“I know,” Merlin said with the same tiredness.

“It doesn’t matter how I feel about it, or about…” He faltered. He looked at Merlin with a sudden desperation in his eyes. He could not say the rest, and did not need to. His whole being said it: and Merlin with tight chest felt what an ass he had been.

Arthur looked at him a moment longer. “You’re free for the rest of the evening. I won’t require you for supper.”

And then he flung up the bar, and was gone.

Arthur drank steadily into the night. He was absorbed in the contents of his cup, so he did not have to be absorbed in the feel of Merlin, the gentle persistence of him, and the imprint he had left, which burned in Arthur’s belly. He tried wine, and ale, and beer; he thought of his bride, whom he hated. He thought how he would be sealed to her, and never know a moment without her. He would have to take the vow, and be faithful to it. He would never love her: he was already irretrievably deep into love, and could not be fetched out of it. It was reprehensible; but most things
concerning Merlin were. He thought of enduring her bed for the rest of his years, and put a hand into his hair.

When he had drunk sufficient courage into himself, or at least insufficient inhibitions, he crept through the darkened halls, stealing past the guard, and then on the threshold of Gaius’ chambers suffering such a rush of sick uneasiness that he sat down to question himself. He was not an adept interrogator, and let himself go with only a half-hearted inquiry. He opened the door.

Merlin was at the work table, measuring herbs. Arthur had not expected to find him awake, and froze. He had had some romantic notion of bursting into the small bedroom upstairs, with the moon in fantastic halo round his hair. He had pictured it all going very smoothly, and himself being handsome, and charming, and Merlin with a gasp finding him irresistible. Merlin had said as much, in the hypothetical love scene, and then put Arthur’s penis in his mouth. It was all very satisfactory.

Merlin now raised a brow at him. “What are you doing?” Arthur noticed with a frisson in all the places that best liked a good frisson that Merlin’s voice had deepened over the last few months.

In his chambers the beer had advised him that he was something of a seductress, and it was necessary only to give a good smouldering look, and then the business would conduct itself. He had brushed his hair in the looking glass, and the looking glass had confirmed for him the indisputable opinion of the beer. He blinked, having forgot all this. It was difficult to remember anything, whilst Merlin was staring at him.

“Arthur?” Merlin prompted.

“Yes.” He pursed his lips. “I am here...to...” He stopped. He could not think of any reason why he should be in Gaius’ chambers after midnight, when he was perfectly healthy. He knew from the chivalric romances that one did not simply blurt out their intentions, when their intentions were of the genital variety. He began to panic. “These are not my chambers,” he said, as if he had sincerely expected to find them in this part of the castle, at this hour of the night. He saw that it was surprising to Merlin that he was so stupid. It was surprising to himself, when the looking glass had been so complimentary, and corroborated what he had always suspected about his allure and its undeniable potential.

“Arthur, you knob,” Merlin said, getting off his stool.

Arthur crossed the room. His hands were shaking. He felt the same tremors in his belly. He knew if he finished the last few steps which it would take to skirt the table, he would not be able to retrace them. He would go to Merlin, and be done with it, or turn away.

He went to Merlin. He was not suave, as he had expected. He grabbed Merlin by the front of his shirt, and shoved him into the shelf behind him. It rocked, and bounced several bottles off Merlin’s head. The bottles smashed against the floor. “Ow,” Merlin said, and then: “Gaius is going to kill me.” And then they were busy assaulting one another, and it was useless to be concerned about anything.

They fell over on the table. Arthur was still holding onto the front of his shirt, and brought Merlin down with him. In the privacy of his chambers, he had envisioned his finesse, and how artistic it would be. He had seen one perfect shaft of moonlight on his jaw, almost as dazzling as the jaw itself. Merlin, naturally, had been limp in his arms, and moaned helplessly about Arthur’s prowess. And now he was underneath Merlin, who had pinned down Arthur’s wrists with his knees, and he could only submit to having his tongue sucked, which Merlin did with an efficiency Arthur would be jealous about later. It was almost a relief to kiss him. He had felt the possibility of the kissing in
the air between them, and now the actuality of it was like letting out the tension after a good fight. He bit Merlin’s lip. Merlin bit his ear in retaliation, and the hot shock of it went into his toes. He arched up as far as he could with the knees pinning him down, and found Merlin’s mouth, and kissed it till he no longer had the breath to sustain it. They broke apart, with their foreheads together; then they were each trying to overwhelm the other in a mad frenzy, not stopping for breath any longer, but finding that they could at least live, though not comfortably, by breathing through their noses. It was not bearable to separate their mouths; Arthur kissed him so hard their teeth knocked, and there was once a dizzying crack from the foreheads.

“Arthur, stop,” Merlin gasped before Arthur was ready for there to be any reasonable interjection. “If I have sex on this table, Gaius will know somehow. And I’ll have to clean the leech tank every day for a month.”

That did not seem very concerning to Arthur, who kissed at his neck as he tried to pull away. He had broken out from underneath the knees, and ran his hands up Merlin’s thighs. Merlin breathed loudly through his mouth, throwing back his head, and that was more in line with Arthur’s expectations, who were happy to be appeased in such a way. Then Merlin grabbed for his wrists again, and held them over Arthur’s head. Arthur did not mean to be dominated in that way, by a servant half his size; but Merlin had slid down from where he was sitting on Arthur’s chest into his lap, and then it was impossible to do anything other than bang his head painfully on the table, and bite down on his tongue.

Merlin thrust them feverishly together. He rolled his hips in several sharp jerks that were agony for Arthur, and then stopped, and opened Arthur’s mouth with his tongue. He were not elegant about it; Arthur had never done anything as sloppy as kissing Merlin. He bit Merlin’s bottom lip, and sucked it between his teeth, and then found the tip of Merlin’s tongue with his own again, and there any technique failed, and was now simply a muddle of hot skin on hot skin. Arthur broke Merlin’s hold on him again, and shoved his hands under Merlin’s tunic, to feel his heaving belly. He pressed his hand hard against it, feeling the muscles shift under his fingers, the warm sliding of Merlin’s flesh on his flesh; Merlin’s thighs tightened round him, shaking.

“Arthur,” Merlin tried again, pulling back.

“I’ll help you,” Arthur gasped, burying his face in Merlin’s neck, and sliding an arm round his back. “With the leech tank. I’ll help you clean it.” They each grabbed for the other’s hair, and jerked back his head to kiss as if they were struggling for their lives. Merlin pushed Arthur down and kissed him so hard Arthur’s head smacked the table with enough force to vibrate it.

“You won’t,” Merlin panted. He ran his tongue over Arthur’s ear lobe, and into it. It was not unlike sticking his entire body into a fire. He felt his toes curl inside his boots, the rough catching of the nails against the leather. Merlin rolled his hips again. Arthur bit down on his fist. “You can be loud,” Merlin gasped, and putting up his head suddenly, his eyes flashed in the direction of the door.

“What did you do?” Arthur asked hazily.

“It’s a ward. So anyone walking past can’t hear anything. And they’ll be discouraged from wanting to come in.”

“The door’s locked, isn’t it?” Arthur asked, and a sudden panic stopped up the ardour in his veins.

Merlin leant down to kiss him again, sliding his hips more slowly, one luxurious undulation that seemed to Arthur endless, it went on so long through the rest of his body. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s locked. But now nobody will even think of coming in. They’ll just feel the urge to walk right past.” He
took Arthur’s hand away from his mouth. The look Merlin gave him went all the way into his belly, and disturbed it. He held Arthur’s hand out and away from his mouth, staring down into him as he rubbed himself on Arthur. He tongued Arthur filthily, and pulled back to hear Arthur’s breathing quicken. He licked at Arthur’s throat. He bit his shoulder. He kept his hips going all the while, so slowly Arthur could barely stand it. Arthur laid his head back against the table, panting.

Merlin was trying to find the right angle, to draw the sound out of him, and found it in Arthur’s neck, just under his jaw. Arthur arched up into the rolling hips. He did not even have the hand to contain his reaction; Merlin was still holding it away from him. He moaned; it embarrassed him. But Merlin kissed him in an uncoordinated way, and moaned back against his lips. He rubbed their bodies together through the thin hose, and it was almost as if the flesh were directly in contact, Arthur could feel it so warmly. Arthur clutched with his free hand at Merlin’s hip, his eyes rolling back in his head. He curled his toes in his boots, trying to focus on the tension of them, the table which dug into his backside, all the small hurts and difficulties of trying to copulate on a crude wooden table. It did not work. Merlin was rubbing himself now with abandon against Arthur, and sucking his ear. There was not any distraction from it. Arthur reached up to kiss him while he came.

He was still shuddering when Merlin pushed them together a final few times, and stiffened against him; he thrust his tongue messily into Arthur’s mouth, gasping. The hand he buried in the hair at the nape of Arthur’s neck held him so hard it hurt. Arthur was still in the throes of his orgasm, and did not mind it; he dug in the hand on Merlin’s hip to match the pressure on his nape, and jerked Merlin through three more uncoordinated thrusts, finishing it.

Then there was the aftermath; it consisted of lying bonelessly against one another, and blowing hard, like a pair of horses who had been run recklessly, and were foundering. He could not even lift his arms, to put them round Merlin; but possibly that would have been too sentimental. He kissed the tip of Merlin’s ear, which was the only thing he could reach, and felt ashamed of himself.

But Merlin turned his head to smile at him, and then it was not so shameful, or at least could not possibly have felt like it, with the sweaty nose against his own.

Arthur had sobered up next morning. Merlin could tell instantly upon walking into his chambers. He was putting on his own boots, and looked up at Merlin with a careful eye. He had left last evening without kissing Merlin; but he had smiled stupidly at him on the threshold of the main door, till it was almost awkward to be standing so long without commentary.

Merlin took up his jacket wordlessly, and helped him into it. He brushed off the shoulders of it. Arthur stood rigidly, letting him do it. He was so stiff Merlin could have made an unsavoury joke, but did not. He got Arthur’s breakfast in silence, and served it in silence.

When Arthur had finished it, he stood up and stared helplessly at Merlin for a moment. He put his hands behind his back. He said, in a ridiculously formal voice, “I have to apologise for last evening. I was a bit drunk. Not that that excuses it.”

Merlin cocked his head. “Well, I did hate it. Clearly.”

Arthur gave him a pained look. “You always complain about me never apologising, and now that I’m trying to do it, you want to be flippant about it.”
“Yeah. Because you’re apologising for something you shouldn’t be apologising for.”

“Merlin, don’t be difficult.” Arthur straightened the shoulders of his jacket, which Merlin had already straightened. He brushed them off. He cleared his throat. He was generally a great twit; Merlin grabbed the collar of the jacket and yanked him in for a thorough kiss. He let Arthur go when Arthur was nearly completely limp, and hanging uselessly between his hands.

“You can’t do that here, you idiot,” Arthur said breathlessly. “What if my father walked in?”

“Through the locked door?”

“Well, what if he...heard something? What do you think he’d do to you?”

“Well, he already has a reason to cut off my head. It’s not like he can cut off my head twice.”

“I don’t want him to cut off your head at all! I was stupid. We shouldn’t have done that here in the castle.”

“Somewhere else, then?” Merlin asked, keeping hold of Arthur’s jacket. He ran his nose along Arthur’s neck, to feel him shudder.

“Maybe, the woods--” Arthur said, thickly.

“You want to romance me in some dirty old woods?”

“I’m sorry, did you want some rose petals strewn about, and a minstrel to sing your praises?” Arthur said with the old sarcasm in his voice, and the breathlessness gone out of it.

“I’m not saying it wouldn’t be appreciated.”

“Well, I’m sure my father would be happy to put you up in a nice roomy chamber in the dungeons.”

Merlin stole another kiss, more quickly this time, before Arthur could protest it. “Ok. Then meet me by the cave in twenty minutes.” They had spent a rainy hunting trip in it, grousing at one another, and arguing over whether it was or wasn’t Merlin’s fault the weather had ruined Arthur’s afternoon.

“We’re leaving for London today.”

“Not for another two hours.” He leaned in, to blow a hot breath into Arthur’s ear. “It’s not going to take long. I did say I could take you apart with less than one blow, didn’t I?” he whispered, and pulling back, let his hands leave the jacket collar slowly, running them down Arthur’s chest as they went.

And Arthur, staring at him, flushed to the roots of his hair.

In the afternoon, to much acclaim by the birds, the royal entourage rode out to the high roads of Camelot, in the jubilant spirit appropriate to tournaments. It was like an army on the move. Jingling, thunderous, riotous, it violated the peace of spring: but spring at least did not seem to mind, or at least kept up the pretense of not minding, since humanity has never given it any other
choice. The weather in accordance with the general mood showered upon them only a few blossoms, and the sky darkened solely for night. The entourage in its own singular language gave tongue to the various musics of its progress; there was no other sound like it, and no mistaking it for anything else. It came upon other travellers like a storm, and did not pass so swiftly; they stopped to watch it, and to be swallowed by it. Armament and jewel competed for a place secondary to the sun, and no other; the whole blinding mass bent snake-like down the road, at places disappearing, and at others coming like a sunrise over the green hills. There was many a shield sang out its clean note, and many a sword to answer it. In the foaming mouths, the horses tapped out their own accordant refrain, no less lyrical for having been masticated.

Whilst Arthur rode by his father, Merlin alternated between accompanying the girls, and accompanying Gwaine. He was in the thick of the knights, with his own red cape, but broke off at Merlin’s call, and trotted alongside him as if they were equals, chattering at such speeds there was no spectator could follow either of them. In the company of the girls, he whispered with Gwen about what marvels they would see, and felt himself as young as the season. They were giggling when Arthur turned back and frowned at them, riding for some distance twisted round in his saddle, in order to watch Merlin. He had watched him carefully with Gwaine, and was watching him even more carefully with Gwen, as if Merlin in riding casually alongside them, and talking casually to them in his usual manner, was violating an unspoken edict of the new relationship between them. It was reasonable; he had naturally been carnal with Gwen in full view of the party, and the squirrels, at least twice during the hours of Arthur’s patrol. When Arthur looked over his shoulder again, Merlin gave him the most intense stare he could muster. He had expressive eyes, and could make them have sex with Arthur. He winked. Arthur, absolutely red, turned round to mind his blush, and his own damn business.

It was three days to London. They reached it at midday on the third, and rode through the gate, pouring in for miles, and seeming to be absorbed instantly into the crowds, and to mean nothing. There was nowhere the sky was not marred by some tower. It seemed to Merlin he had simply dreamt the concept of size, and its limitations; and now in entering the city he found that he had been fanciful, rather than scientific. He had never conceived of something that was truly massive, but thought he had understood it by virtue of the fact that he had seen woods which seemed to be eternal, and streams he never knew the end of. The world had rolled on beyond him, and naturally he had never considered himself to be its focus, and never thought that beyond what his eye could penetrate, there was only an incoherent mist, trying to decide what to do with itself. The world was massive as it was not conceivable to be massive. But London was aware of its mass, and forced him to consider the reality of it. It is one thing, for the world to be nebulous; and another for it to rear up before you.

“Big, isn’t it?” Gwaine asked, reining in beside him. “York’s the next biggest town, and it isn’t half the size.”

“It’s brilliant,” Merlin said, smiling up at it.

“Wait till you smell it,” Gwaine said, patting him on the shoulder.

The shoulder pat had drawn Arthur. He came on at a canter, to cut into line beside them. He pretended he had done it in order to bark out orders to his men, who had grown somewhat lax during the journey, and now at the passing of their liege, were all of them to a man exemplifications of martial discipline. He drew up his horse. “Gwaine, don’t break formation.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” Merlin asked, for the simple pleasure of being an ass.

“I’m the prince. My place in the formation is wherever I want it to be. Besides, we aren’t riding
“Then why can’t Gwaine ride next to me?”

“Because,” Arthur said, and considered that a fitting argument.

Gwaine drew out his wine skin, and handed it to Arthur as he gathered up the reins of his horse. “Here, Princess. It’ll help with what’s up your arse.” He clucked to the gelding under him, and urged it up into place.

“He was equally sad for himself, and for Arthur. He clicked to his horse to put some distance between them, since Arthur’s hair was resplendent in the sunlight, and his eyes even more so, and Merlin, despite all his best intentions, and cognitive ability, still wanted to have sex with him. They rode together onto the haphazard cobbles, which regularly gave way to dirt and manure. Merlin could smell the acrid imposition of hides tanning in the sun, the harsh tallows, that impossible marriage of close-living man, and his various excretions. He coughed, but was not ready to be disillusioned, and went along into the stream of humanity beaming at it all. Arthur tried not to smile at his unsophistication, and failed, but he did contain it to a small one, which he almost hid from Merlin. They were crowded on all sides by dray carts carrying hogsheads of beer, and some unlucky sheep and chickens whose eventual destinations were as ignominious as the beer’s. Merlin thought he had never seen any livestock so charming.

At London Bridge, they were halted by the crowd, which had stopped to view a man walking a bear the colour of snow. There was a muzzle round its great face, and a leash to keep it mannerly. It was going at a fair clip toward the river, dragging its minder behind him. “It’s huge!” Merlin exclaimed. Arthur’s horse shifted beside him, manoeuvring Arthur’s knee within range to touch his own. Possibly the horse was not solely responsible for it.

“It’s part of the royal menagerie,” Arthur explained.

“The menagerie?” Merlin asked, not taking his eyes off the bear. “You mean London has loads of them?”

“No, you idiot. He’s talking about the stick up your backside.”

“Merlin,” Arthur warned.

“Arthur’s horse shifted beside him, manoeuvring Arthur’s knee within range to touch his own. Possibly the horse was not solely responsible for it.

“They just keep them locked up, and then parade them round once in a while on a leash, so the poor things can feel the illusion of freedom before they go back into their cages?”

“What?”
“You have that stupid look on your face again.”

“Maybe it’s just my face.”

“Probably,” Arthur conceded. “Just don’t do anything idiotic.”

“I won’t. I just sort of relate to him, is all,” he said, and Arthur, sighing a little, gave him one of his commiserating slaps on the shoulder, which was supposed to demonstrate that he could relate to the common man and his unreasonable state of having emotions.

“Poor thing,” Morgana said as she rode up beside them. “I’d like to put that man in a muzzle, and see how he likes it.”

“Well, the same can be said for you, Morgana,” Arthur said almost warmly. “But we’re civilised people.”

“Not when we treat our animals like that,” she snapped. “If we can’t feel sympathy towards something so pitiful, then we can hardly consider ourselves to be in possession of it at all.”

“Pitiful?” Arthur blurted. “Did you see its claws?”

“Physical prowess is hardly the automatic equal of power, or else more than a few peasants would have had us out on our heads, and the crown on their own. He’s three times the man’s size, but he’s had his inferiority reinforced so often he believes it himself. There is nothing more powerful than servility; even the illusion of it is sufficient.”

Merlin looked at her in admiration. If he were inclined toward sanity, instead of Arthur, he thought he would be quite in love with her, and probably let her take all sorts of liberties, sexual and otherwise. He was considering whether or not he could possibly change his mind, and be logical about his affairs, but looking at Arthur in the sun he found he was still stupid, and preferred him above all else. It was a shame.

“You’re both too soft-hearted,” Arthur said.

Morgana, looking now away from the bear, and straight at Arthur, burst out in a wicked smile. She leant in towards him, and lowered her voice. “I hear you’re not soft on much of anything.” And giving him a look he could not misinterpret, she rode away entirely pleased with herself.

Arthur stared at him in horror. Merlin smiled, using the smile which had always worked on his mother, when he had been uncooperative, and deserved a beating. “I may have told Morgana?”

“Do explain,” Arthur said dangerously. “I’m struggling to understand how even you could be so daft.”

“It wasn’t my fault! She knew anyway.” He dropped his voice so they would not be overheard. “She does happen to be a witch, if you remember.”

“I don’t think her clairvoyance is quite that attuned,” Arthur snapped.

“She said she could tell by looking at you. She said you were in too good a mood when we set out for the tourney.”

“I was not!” Arthur protested, as if Merlin had accused him of something contemptible.

“Yeah, she said you were practically clicking your heels. She said you were even nice to a squire
who dropped your sword in a puddle.”

Arthur pursed his lips in a fury. “Sounds like exactly the sort of slander Morgana would perpetuate. You should never listen to her, Merlin. She is obviously and consistently insane.” And then touching up his horse with his heels, he trotted off into the crowd, to be embarrassed among strangers.

Gwen had checked that their pavilion was to Morgana’s liking, and put away their things. She had fussed over the bedding, and put down some lavender, in order to combat the city, which was terribly intrusive; there was not anything further to do, and she felt her hands to be quite extraneous, and knotted them in her skirts. She went to find Merlin.

The tourney was to be held in a suburb to the northwest of the city by the name of Smithfield, and true to its namesake, it was only a flat spare meadow, where in less festive days there were horses sold. There were now all manner of vendors rushing about thrusting their wares on people, and some magnificent jugglers. She felt how congested were the lists, and all the space beyond them, rich with people who might look at her; and she tried to shrink into herself, and looked round for any familiarity, and found only the strange men from all angles, and their horses in fine silk. The horses were done up better than the ladies, and bobbed their sweet heads in recognition of their grandeur. She pet the noses over which the least fierce eyes presided, and thrilled when they acknowledged her with a friendly wriggling of the whiskers in her palms. She left great friends with many of them, and on encountering Arthur’s mare, gave up the apple which she had bought from a woman selling baskets of them. They were close on account of Gwen’s habit of crying in the stables when it was not fair to show she was upset in the castle, where there was any number of people it might disturb. She did not like to be a bother; and the mare was never bothered, but only put her head over the stall, and lipped at her hair, and made her feel quite forgiven.

She did not find Merlin. She was in the process of seeking him when she saw the man. He was in rough homespun, and his weapons had seen better years, and not solely because they were currently in the dirt at his feet, rather than shining at his belt. He looked as if he should like to cry. He was not actively doing it, since it was not befitting a man: but she could see it was inside him, and bursting to come out. She did not like him to be alone.

He was very handsome. He was sitting with his legs outstretched in the dirt, and even so demonstrated himself to be well-built, and with hair that was nearly the rival of Gwaine’s. He had a soft eye. She thought he was quite sweet. She realised it was therefore owed to him a better companion than herself; but there was no one else. She looked round first, to see had he any friends: and when there were none forthcoming, she bit her lip. It was not in her to be much of a comfort to anyone, she was so graceless and simple, but she had seen the methodology which Merlin used to coax Arthur out of his moods, and its success. She ran to purchase a goose pie.

When she came back to the man, he was still sitting forlornly in the dust. No one was much concerned with him; there were plenty of his gender, better armed, better appointed. She stopped, with the pie in her silly numb hands. She had forgot what to do with it. She had forgot the simplest mechanics of humanity, how to operate what operated of its own natural accord. She had forgot how to walk. She had forgot that in the uncomplicated act of opening her mouth, there could be speech, and it might even be used to address him.

It was some time she stood in frozen indecision, trying to decide how he might be approached, and
whether he would even want it; she looked round for Morgana, who could have marched right up to him, and sought out the matter, and fixed it. But as there were no companions to cheer him, neither was there any Morgana; and finally there was something in her which thrust her forward of its own impetus. It was difficult to be near him, but not so difficult as watching him struggle for composure, whilst no one was concerned over how he had lost it.

"Hello!" she said. It had come out poorly; it was as if her voice had stepped out wrong, and fallen over itself. She was horribly cognizant of it. She thought how the soft eye would harden, looking upon her.

He jumped to his feet. He upset the sword in the dirt, and sent it jangling over on its other side. He said, "My lady" in a voice which was conscious of its formality. It was frightening to watch him bow elaborately, as if it were necessary; she thought somehow she had misled him of her station, and impressed upon him an importance which she did not possess.

"Oh! You don’t have to do that. Sorry! I’m not--I’m not a lady. I mean, I am, obviously, physically--not that I’m saying you didn’t realise that, obviously you aren’t blind, I’m just...not a lady you have to bow to.” She stopped. She thought over everything she had just said, and thought it best she be trampled by a cart.

He stared at her in a terror. He was even taller than she had suspected, and made her feel daunted. They stared helplessly at one another. He put his hands formally behind his back. He put them formally in front of himself. He said, "Any lady of such beauty deserves every courtesy.” He did not say it as Arthur would have said it, trusting in his handsomeness to carry it, but wonderingly considered what had escaped with unexpected independence from him, and turned quite red. It seemed an end to his capabilities of human speech.

"I thought you might like--" She held out the pie. He blinked at it. "I mean, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to say you look like you need it or anything--that is a very nice...sword.” It was not even a mediocre sword. "I’m Guinevere?’’

He took the pie. "Lancelot.”

Somehow by some barely spoken accord, they sat down beside one another in the field. Lancelot shrugged almost violently out of his coat, and laid it over the ground, in order that she should not mar her skirts. She spread them out to cover herself appropriately, listening to her pulse. It was omniscient.

"You’re here for the tournament?” she asked.

"I came to fight in it.”

“Well, then, I wish you all the luck.” It was a ridiculous thing to say, as if she might instead have wished him only half the luck, and saved the rest for someone else.

He turned the pie in his hands. "I thank you, Guinevere. But I won’t need it. I’m barred from participation. Only nobles are allowed.”

“You can call me Gwen. I’m sorry. I don’t think that’s fair. I’m sure you’re very good.”

“I suppose I’m never to know,” he said, and the formality had gone from his voice, and a soft yearning which touched her heart overtaken it. She looked at him in the falling light. He was probably not any older than Merlin, though a bit more whiskery. She liked the kindness in his face, and the way he turned the pie in his big calloused hands, delicately, mindful of his strength, and
the things which were caught in it. He did not seem like any strapping knight she had ever seen, aside from his shoulders; there did not seem to be any bluster in him.

“Are you still going to watch? You could sit with me. Not just me! I didn’t mean it that way. The lady Morgana, she’s a ward of King Uther Pendragon’s, she’ll have a nice seat in one of the stalls, instead of on the ground; she always lets me sit with her. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if you joined us. We’ll have a very good view of the lists. I’m here from Camelot. Some of my friends will be competing--well, Gwaine’s my friend, Arthur’s the prince, he’s not really--I can’t consider him a friend--not that he’s arrogant about that sort of thing! It’s the only thing he isn’t arrogant about. He’s great friends with Merlin. Merlin is his manservant.” She stopped. It had all come in such a rush she might as well have drowned him; but he did not seem to mind, and now began to eat the pie in what seemed a far better frame of mind. It was cheering to know she had cheered him, simply by taking him out of his solitude.

She was almost content to be sitting beside him, though they had stopped talking, and were simply partaking in the pageantry of the horses, and the swords which in their practice passes threw off the long hot sun, into the eyes of their admirers. They had been sitting for some time, the pie long finished, when Gwaine’s flawless hair reared out of the crowd, and took itself straight to her. He was there to be sure there was no bother, and she was not being presumed upon.

“We’re all right, Gwaine!” she called out, to deter a mishap. Last month he had nearly got himself out of Camelot on his ear, having put a visiting lord into the boar, for pinching her bum. It was the most interesting feast she ever had the privilege of attending, Morgana had said, and directly afterwards threatened to poison herself, if Uther banished the responsible party. “This is Lancelot.”

“Gwaine,” Gwaine said, squatting in front of him, and holding out a hand. He brushed back the Hair. It was difficult not to think of it in capital letters. Lancelot took his hand. Gwen was gratified to see there passed between them the instant camaraderie that sometimes happened, when two men had eyed one another, and judged in the other something that was pleasing, though they could hardly then name it. “He came to compete in the tourney, but they won’t let him, because he isn’t a noble. It’s a silly rule,” she said, and Lancelot looked at her in a great pink pleasure, for having taken on his cause so readily. She could feel a similar colour in her own cheeks, and felt she was in that moment somehow unfaithful to Merlin, and was ashamed of herself.

“Can’t have some rich toff learning his money is the only thing that makes him superior to a poor man,” Gwaine rubbed his chin. “You know how to get over a disappointment? My mate Merlin and I are having a night on the town. You should come. Have you ever been to London before?”

“No.”

“Well, then, fortunately for you, you’ve just met the city’s best tour guide,” Gwaine said, and hoisting Lancelot to his feet by his elbow, he put an arm round his shoulders. “You’ll love Merlin. Very chatty. Bad taste in princes, but otherwise grand. See you tomorrow, Gwen.”

“Bye!” She waved. She was suddenly lonely. She felt it more acutely, when Lancelot looked over his shoulder at her as he was taken away. It was silly, to feel as if the space beside her were abruptly colder, though the sun inhabited it all the same.

She was brushing off her skirts, and worrying over the coat which he had left when Lancelot returned, breathless, and stopped some feet away, quite at a loss as to what followed. She smiled encouragingly, and held out the coat.

He didn’t take it. It seemed he could not manage both the simple action, and the magnificent feat of speaking to her. “Would you, Guinevere--”
“Gwen, remember? Sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“Gwen.” She could see he was startled at the way it came out of his mouth. “Would you like to come with us?” He asked it as if he were making a proposal of great gravity. He had so clearly sacrificed himself to make the invitation that she did not have the heart to explain to him the nature of Merlin and Gwaine’s adventures, and their indecency so far as they related to ladies. She thought what a cruelty it would be, to crush him.

“I’d love to,” she said, not loving to, but feeling now an obligation toward him, and his current state of not being imprisoned.

Arthur registered himself at one of the stalls, and stood round preening as long as he could bear it. When he was sure he had not been outdone by any of the other competitors, and they knew of their certain destruction, and had got it conveyed to them as wittily as possible, he left in search of Merlin. He was chatting with a firebreather, possibly a little flirtatiously. It was not that interesting a craft. Probably anyone could do it, if he had the time and inclination, and the deficit of logic necessary to setting oneself on fire. But he did not like Merlin to get into his head some ridiculous notion of jealousy, and to prove it he pointedly marched past Merlin with no interest whatsoever, and finding that he was now in an unoccupied square of field with all that was interesting behind him, and only a few mucky tussocks to entertain him, he stared awkwardly into the distance, as if he had meant to do it all along. It might be necessary for him to die on the very spot, rather than turn about and admit to his misjudgement. He was fully prepared to do it, with honour, when Merlin walked up beside him, smiling like a fool. “Hi.”

“Ah, Merlin,” Arthur said, as if it were a surprise to have come upon him, but at least a mildly pleasant one.

“What are you doing?”

It was a good question. Arthur was not prepared for it. He thought it patently unfair of Merlin to question him when he was so busy. He continued to stare out into the distance with his arms crossed, turning himself slightly so that he was at least vaguely in line with the lists, and could be mistaken for possibly being in deep contemplation of them. “Assessing the field. Every little thing can turn a match against you, Merlin. I’m not familiar with these grounds the way I am Camelot’s.”

“You weren’t spying on me?”

Arthur made a face, to show the absurdity of his assumption. “What on earth would give you that idea?”

“The firebreather said you glared at him. I think he was afraid you might have him executed; he left shortly after.”

“Maybe you were just irritating him.” Arthur left it unsaid that Merlin was also irritating him, but by the tone of his voice ensured it was understood.

“Right,” Merlin said, laughing in a way that Arthur knew was aimed at him personally, rather than his wit. “Well, I’ll let you get back to your assessing.”
“And where are you going?” Arthur asked in an undemanding tone, turning round to watch Merlin leave.

“Gwaine and I are going to Cock Lane.” Merlin lit up with his great boobish amusement. “Not named for a rooster.”

Arthur felt his jaw tighten. He felt his teeth in danger of breaking. “I know what it’s named for, Merlin. That is the prostitution district.”

“I know. Did you know one of the streets is actually called ‘Gropecunt Lane?’”

Arthur ignored that. “Merlin, I don’t think it needs to be spelled out why it would be inappropriate for you to solicit the services of a prostitute.”

“I’m not going to solicit the services of a prostitute. I’m just going along for the general carousing. Innocent carousing. Probably be home by nine.”

Arthur frowned at him. “I don’t think you should go. You and Gwaine get into too much trouble together.”

“We’ve never got into any trouble in all our lives. Probably never was two people who got into less trouble in all their lives.” He had on the faux innocent look which annoyed Arthur when it did not refer to some secret between them. He did not like that the look was for Gwaine. It implied a certain complicity. If Merlin were going to collude with anyone, it ought to be him.

“You now have a lifetime ban from the Rising Sun. The cook personally petitioned my father to have you--”

“We didn’t have anything to do with the fire. She just hates me for no reason whatsoever, and blames me for everything.”

“Sure. You also sold my horse--”

“We got her back--”

“There was the incident of nude carolling--”

“But Gwaine did get three marriage proposals out of it.”

“--and let’s not forget the council meeting.” Arthur would not be put off.

“That was our bad. Thanks, by the way, for talking your father down to only a week in the stocks.”

“He wanted to have you flogged. Probably to death, which was no less than you deserved.”

“Good thing I know someone important and handsome who has his ear, right?”

Arthur would also not be flattered. (He was flattered.) He looked sideways at Merlin, who had a trick of being charming, in the right light. In most lights. In all of them, if Arthur were being honest with himself, which he generally tried not to be.

“You could come with us, make sure I don’t get into too much trouble,” Merlin said, smiling at him, and now walking backward, so he could maintain an intense eye contact, with the goal of calling Arthur after him, as if he had in hand some charmed fife, and were drawing him forward against his will, into the breach.
Arthur followed.

There was an unknown man waiting with Gwaine. Additionally, there were Morgana and Gwen. The former was pleased with herself, and the latter nervous. Arthur had already sized up the strange man, and appeared to have taken an instant dislike to him; but Merlin had formerly remarked that Arthur seemed to be generally suspicious of anyone Merlin did not immediately hate, and therefore his opinion could be comfortably dismissed, till there was some matter of legitimate concern, and not merely Arthur’s habitual jealousy.

“Hi!” Merlin said to the strange man, whilst Arthur squared off against Morgana.

“Listen, Morgana, not to be rude--”

“You’re never anything else.”

“Not to be rude,” Arthur continued, not to be put off, “but this is hardly going to be an excursion appropriate for women.”

“For us, or the ones you’ll be visiting in Gropecunt Lane?” Morgana asked innocently.

Arthur choked. “We’re not visiting them--”

“Well, you’re not. I never suspected you were.”

“Are you implying that you are?”

“Why shouldn’t I see something of the way the world operates outside my castle, and how the people not as fortunate as I are forced to make their living?”

“Because you can’t--”

“Can’t what? I’m not so delicate as you think, Arthur. I think I can handle a naked woman or two. I have seen a few in my time.” She adjusted her cloak. She had on trousers underneath it, and probably half the royal armoury.

“We’re going into the city at night, Morgana. It isn’t safe. There are thieves.”

She smiled. “I have a knife, and the perfect ease of mind necessary to use it on a deserving member. One belonging either to human society in general, or more specifically to the male part of it.”

“You know, Morgana, one day you aren’t going to be pretty anymore, and then my father will stop excusing things like this as ‘excessive spirit.’”

“Well, fortunately for me, I’ve decided to just keep being pretty. It’s the only thing men will listen to, after all. Come along, Gwen,” she said pleasantly, and putting her arm through Gwen’s, set off in lead of the party. The men were left to look at one another; the stranger, whom Gwaine called Lancelot, smiled shyly round at them after his introduction, and did nothing else. Merlin had the impression that he felt he was quite itchy in himself, and would have liked to get out of his skin. He had a battered sword on his belt, which might have survived a solitary blow, if it were in possession of some luck; but probably any half-hearted riposte would finish it. Arthur eyed it with disdain.
Merlin poked him—not in the way he would have liked, but it was still satisfactory, and made Arthur start.

They set out noisily, in the general spirit of people new to an individual city, but hardly new to the concept of plaguing it. It was a good night, getting on toward sunset, and still holding in its lingering daylight the hard-dying warmth. Lancelot did not say anything, but smiled when Gwaine went out of his way to be sure he was included, and did not trail after them, feeling himself the stranger he was. Merlin would have liked to be nicer to him, and ask where was he from, and how he had got to London; but Arthur had put an arm possessively round his shoulders, quite the same as if they were only mates about to rabble-rouse, and it was distracting, since of course the rabble-rousing he really should have liked to do was in Arthur’s bed. He grabbed the wrist Arthur left dangling over his shoulder; he would have liked to grab his hand, but then it might be noticed that there was something not entirely laddish in the way they looked at one another. They hadn’t done anything more scintillating than stare intently at one another since leaving Camelot, and Merlin at the first notion of evening was prepared to haul Arthur off by his collar, into some lightless corner.

It was a fair walk from the tourney fields into the district they needed, and the sun was then losing its territory, and wheeling about faster into its retreat as it recognised the inevitability of defeat. The evening was coming on inexorably, and lighting up the tallows one by one. Merlin thought it was an altogether different sort of magic, to see the city, dead, formless, in the great and terrible night: a thing which never contributed, but only consumed; and then to see the lights suddenly call off its dread ghosts, and welcome the living heart. Arthur was watching him watch it, and smiled at him.

“What?” he asked, smiling back.

“Nothing.” Arthur said, with as much sentimentality as he ever managed, “I’m just glad you’re here, is all.”

It was too much for Merlin, who was prepared for imbecility, and not a perfectly pleasant confession; and certainly not the nearly bashful tone in which it had been expressed. He checked that their friends had walked on ahead of them, and were captivated by Gwaine’s tour, which was then covering the proliferation of alehouses, and how many he had been expelled from. He pulled Arthur into one of the side streets, where they were blissfully alone, for the first time in three days. He kissed Arthur so hard Arthur in his surprise almost fell over himself. Merlin caught the front of his tunic, and kissed him some more. He broke away briefly, to give Arthur time to realise it was unacceptable to end the kissing. He let Arthur initiate the next round.

They leant against one of the darkened buildings; the only remaining option was to fall over, and continue unheeding in the dirt. They had a brief snog, no less thorough for its quickness, and then walked out casually to rejoin the group, still feeling the effects of being shameless, and the hope which sinning always breeds: which is to say that there will be an opportunity to do it again, as soon as possible, only nastier.

They walked to their first tavern in rousing good spirits; though the rest of the group did not know it, a sexual indiscretion had been added to the general joviality, thus increasing the anticipation of Arthur and Merlin; and thus increasing their volume. It was infectious, and passed into the others as sexual indiscretions often do.

The men drank competitively, to try and outdo Morgana; Arthur in the process made himself more than a little drunk, and by progressively more tipsy degrees became handsier with Merlin, till he was doing everything with his arm over Merlin’s shoulders, and allowing their thighs to touch on
the table where they were both sitting. Probably Arthur thought he was being deliciously naughty.

Lancelot did not drink, though Gwaine was an able salesman for the benefits of it. He was content to stare at Gwen. Merlin leant over when Arthur was laughing too loudly to hear him, and said into her ear, “Lancelot’s pretty handsome, don’t you think?” She turned pink. She said, rapidly, “Oh no! I wasn’t looking at him! I just--I mean, he’s very sweet. But I don’t think...he’s not for me.” She looked up suddenly from under her lashes at him, and now more quietly, with a strong note in her voice he could not identify, said, “I think there’s only one person I’ll ever love.”

There was a significance in what she said, but not understanding what it could possibly be, Merlin replied, “Well, why can’t it be Lancelot? He seems nice.”

He had hurt her; he could see the emotion in her eyes, but not the reasoning behind it. She was infinitely patient with him for being clumsy, and with a soft smile said, “He is lovely.” It was said in the trite way of obligatory small talk, and regretting whatever romantic tragedy he had made her relive, Merlin patted her shoulder. He would have liked to hug her, but Arthur was still draped round him, rudely bantering with Gwaine. She smiled at him. It was too kind a smile, for the comfort he had offered her; but she was always giving like that.

They went unruly into the streets, and had a narrow brush with a chamber pot which someone tried to empty on them, for being the intolerable combination of obnoxious, and young. Arthur and Gwaine had rather more friendly words than Merlin would have expected from Arthur; he seemed to even be settling into the ‘princess’ nickname, and was only mildly annoyed by it. Probably it was difficult for him to cling to his hatred, when Gwaine was so cheerful in the face of it. It must have seemed to Arthur that in hating Gwaine, he was allowing Gwaine the pleasure of being hated; and then it quite ruined the fun of it.

At the next alehouse, Morgana upon entering it said, “Lovely,” in a voice that heavily implied it was not lovely, but in fact the exact opposite. She was not looking at the decor, which was rude, if Merlin were being polite, but at a man sitting just within the door. There was a whole raucous group of them, well-fed, sturdy young men, some of them in mail. Merlin recognised a few from the tourney field.

The man Morgana was watching looked up to find her eyes on him, and stiffened. He gave her a murderous stare, which she answered more murderously. “Hello, Henry. Raped any more women lately?” she asked loudly when he tried to turn back to his friends.

There was an ominous silence. The entire table had heard it. They were now deciding what to do about it, and looking round at one another. It was a grievous charge against a knight.

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The man stood, knocking over his chair. There was a whole table between him and Morgana; but Arthur, sensing the tangible threat in the air, placed himself casually between them, as if it were a coincidence. He was not threatening, and did not reach for his sword, but he had angled his body so Morgana was entirely behind it, and anything directed against her would first have to conquer him.

“I will not have you repeat this outrageous accusation in public, in front of my friends!” the man snapped.

“Ridiculous?” Morgana snapped back. “Do the women you bed always cry hysterically, then? I should think you’d rather be known as a rapist, than to be so poor at the consensual act that it reduces a woman to tears.”

The man turned purple.
“Morgana, what are you talking about?” Arthur asked.

“She’s talking about how I once took advantage of Camelot’s ‘hospitality’, and this mad bitch tried to stab me.”

“Do not refer to her like that,” Arthur said, and Merlin heard in his voice a low note of real anger, not blustering, but a clean and simple rage, focused. “Morgana, what are you talking about?” he asked again.

“This pig was a guest at Camelot two winters ago, and I caught him trying to force himself on one of the maids. The poor girl was in tears.”

“A maid! A peasant!” he pointed out. “Not a lady! It was hardly rape. And she attacked me for it! She nearly murdered me!”

“I do hate that word ‘nearly’. But I tried my best, and no one can ask anything else.” She smiled wickedly at him. “I’m wearing trousers, and I’m armed. If you like, you can forget the conventions of gender just like you forget those of decency, and duel me like a man.”

“I would never conduct myself so uncharitably with a lady,” he said coldly. “Even a mad cunt like you.”

“What did you just call her?” Arthur demanded, and without giving the man time to respond, punched him in the face. It was a good blow, and knocked him clean over. He fell on top of his chair with a pitiful cry.

“Protecting my virtue, Arthur?” Morgana said. “How sweet of you.” And then, to the man who had jumped up from his own chair, and onto Arthur, she shouted, “Get off him!” She picked up a tankard from the table closest to hand, and struck the man across the face with it. There was a liberal amount of ale flew from it, and Gwaine, looking mournfully after it, seemed on the verge of melancholy. But as a fight is immediately cheering, he threw himself whole-heartedly into it, and with miraculous speed was cured.

Merlin was not a brawler. The heart was willing, but the technique was not. However, he had learnt a thing or two from Arthur, and picking up a stool, applied it with surprising expertise to the stomach of one unique section of the mass which had flung itself on top of Arthur, and then to the chin of it. He was impressed with himself. He spun the chair a little as he had seen Arthur do with his sword.

Arthur for a moment rolled up out of the wriggling pile, like a fish showing itself at the top of a wave, and was gone again. He was being choked. Merlin burnt the hands round his throat to blistering, and with a confused howl the owner pulled them away. Arthur kicked him the rest of the way off, and staggering up with a man on his back, threw him over his shoulder. It was somewhat arousing.

Morgana had kept hold of the tankard, and relieved another assailant of his teeth with it. She had a rhythm down, and smashed first the nose, for purposes of disorientation, and afterwards the mouth, for purposes of pure malice. She hit anyone who charged at Arthur, wading in toward him, first with the tankard, and after that was finally relieved from her, with her elbows. She had no compunctions about anything. She was smaller than all of them, and had to use what advantages she did possess. The most distinctive of these was a complete fearlessness; but second to that was an accurate groin kick.

Meanwhile, Gwaine was on the floor, getting throttled. But as he seemed unbothered by it, and
after a moment of red-faced thrashing, got his elbow into the throttler, Merlin left him happily to it, and yanked Gwen out of the way. She had instinctively bit the hand of a man reaching for Morgana’s cloak, and now seemed unsure what else was expected of her.

Lancelot was the true standout. He had said almost nothing the entire journey there. He was content to watch the others socialising, and to be outside of it, looking in with a smile. He almost disappeared into the background, despite his shoulders. There was nothing disappearing about him now, except his fist, which was swallowed by the mail of one of the men, who bowed over with his mouth open in surprise that he had taken such a blow to the gut, and was still alive to experience it.

Most of the alehouse was now in on it. Merlin was not certain who was on their side; most of them had simply joined for the sheer joy of being drunk, and therefore free of all earthly consequences. They were punching whoever they could reach. They would have punched themselves, for the pure adrenaline of it. Merlin tried to limit himself to anyone who seemed an immediate threat to his friends. He was devoted to making sure Arthur was not killed, accidentally or with active hostility, and missed that he was about to be tackled, till he was actually tackled, and muddled on the floor. He clapped his hands to the man’s ears, but the man was stone drunk, or stupid, and did not care. He pressed his elbow into Merlin’s windpipe.

Then the weight was lifted off him, and flung. It overturned a table. Arthur reached down to collect Merlin by the collar, and having put him on his feet, recommitted himself to the fight by lowering his shoulder, and heaving someone over it. “Merlin, behind you!” he shouted. Merlin ducked. Arthur punched the face that reared up out of the hostilities, and had intended to do Merlin a personal grief.

They moved back to back. Gwen was on a table across from them. She looked helplessly out to him.

“Stay there!” he yelled, shoving back against the crowd as it shoved at him. She clung obediently to the table, and there was no visible intention of her leaving it. He thought at least there was one of them out of it: and then the man Henry plunged out of the crowd, bleeding from his nose, and intent on Morgana. Gwen, biting her lip, hesitated; she was not naturally a fighter, and had no instinctive course of action. But as he passed the table, she flung herself onto his back, and wrapping her legs round him, spent a moment surprised at herself; and then she got an arm round his neck and started to yank at his hair, kicking him. The unexpected weight sent him reeling into a table, overturning it. Gwen kicked at him as if he were a horse. She beat her hands rather ineffectually against his head, but her heart was in it, and Merlin was proud of her.

Henry after a moment regained his training, and simply flung her off. She went down under the stampeding feet, and Merlin lunged after her; then the sword came singing out whilst Henry with a mad rolling eye looked wildly about him. Arthur without hesitating drew his own sword.

There was the sound of arms coming out all round him. It had been a lark when there were only some fists, no matter how passionately applied; but now that there were a dozen sharp objects pointed at Arthur, and Arthur with his usual gittish aplomb confident in his ability to fight them all simultaneously, Merlin was done with the entire unnecessary affair. He grabbed for Arthur’s arm. Arthur, in line with his natural stupidity, had already slipped out of Merlin’s grasp, and charged forward to meet the first answering blade. He vanished into the bristling crowd. Gwaine and Lancelot, hardly any smarter, plunged in after him.

Merlin was trying simultaneously to locate Gwen, and to keep Arthur alive when he heard shouting from the street. He directed some of his magic to the amplification of it, watching the swords blurring round Arthur. It took him a moment to recognise it.
“The watch!” he yelled! “Arthur, they’ve called the watch!”

Somehow the yell penetrated the crowd. It looked up in unison, as one creature, and blinked at him. Then the shouting imposed itself on the crowd, and the crowd understood what was coming for it. It all immediately attempted the exit. Merlin was nearly bowled over by it; he kept his feet, and waited for Arthur to be swept along in the rush toward him, taking him by the arms when he was pushed against Merlin. He held onto him in the midst of the surge, trying simply not to be overwhelmed by it. He was still looking for Gwen, and finally saw her under one of the tables, moving in a way that clearly implied she was alive, and not likely to expire anytime soon. Lancelot had ducked under the table beside her. Gwaine and Morgana were similarly healthy. Seeing it, he grabbed Arthur, and pushed him toward the door.

Gwen had crawled under a table to avoid the stampeding feet. She laid trembling underneath it, with her arms over her head. The tavern was thunderous with its mass exodus, and she felt, though she knew it to be silly, that at any moment it would come down on her ears. She was even teary at the idea of her impending doom, when Lancelot, breathing hard, crawled under the table beside her.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she said quickly, though she was stupid, and had cried. He looked at her with a soft concern. She felt it was very nice of him, when she was being so thoroughly ludicrous.

Morgana was shouting for her; she came out from under the table to call back to her, but the voice was receding, and as it was being taken away from her, its panic was growing. She saw on climbing out from underneath the table that Gwaine and Morgana were caught inextricably up in the crowd, and it was carrying them toward the door. The door could not currently admit any more bodies, and they had hung up at it, and were being squeezed through, painfully, two at a time, thrashing as if they were being born, and angry at the bother of it all.

“We’ll have to go through the kitchen,” she said, and turning to run for it, she stopped when she saw that he had stopped, and was standing with sheathed sword, his hand on the pommel.

“Go, Guinevere. I’ll wait here.”

“You can’t! You’ll be arrested for fighting.”

“I was fighting; I deserve to be arrested.”

She blinked at him. “That’s...very noble, but not very smart. Look, I’m not trying to be rude, but you don’t look like you can pay any fine? You’ll have to sit in prison till you can raise it.”

“Then I will sit in prison, and do my penance.”

He looked entirely sincere. She stared at him in disbelief. She felt a responsibility for him, and the antics which she had known Merlin and Gwaine would get him into; they were lovely, lovely men: but bloody stupid. She did not intend for them to escape the natural consequences of their actions, whilst poor Lancelot sat friendless in some horrid cell, feeling himself quite deserving of it.

She did not know what to do. She grabbed him by the hand, and ran.
Merlin had pushed him out the door first, and then nearly got himself crushed in the press. Arthur had fished him out with an administration of his sword pommel that was so persuasive Merlin popped out at alarming speed, into his arms; they nearly went down. Merlin pulled him up, and shoved Arthur ahead of him. “Go! Go, Arthur!”

They sprinted down the alley. Arthur still had his sword out. Merlin, running beside him, called out, “Give me your sword!”

“What? No!”

They plunged down another alley. There was shouting all round them. From every direction it swelled up, confusing their escape; it was difficult to determine which was the shout of the fleeing aggressor, and which the shout of the official one. Merlin tried to pull the sword out of his hands. “Merlin, stop!”

“You want to be running away from the scene of the crime with a sword in your hands? That won’t look suspicious at all.”

“Well, I’m hardly just going to leave it here!”

“Just give it here, Arthur,” Merlin demanded, and another yank had it out of Arthur’s startled hand, and into Merlin’s. With his other hand Merlin hauled him by the sleeve of his tunic swearing down another street, and into the yard of a small church. “It’ll be safe here for the night; we’ll come back and get it in the morning.” And without any further warning, he went up to the anvil in the centre of the yard, and thrusting up the sword over his head, he plunged it straight down into the stone. Arthur with tearing grief expected the hideous shriek of the blade’s ignoble death; and it was his favourite sword. He considered if there was enough left to skewer Merlin, and then he saw how the stone parted to receive it, and the blade sank silkily into its depths as if into water. The strange yellow glow went slowly out of Merlin’s eyes. Then he launched himself at Arthur, and began to assault his person. He yanked at the belt without permission, and Arthur in the interests of honesty was not going to say he was entirely disappointed by it; but it was not the time. Then Merlin slid the sword sheath off his belt, and flung it somewhere into the black and receiving depths of the churchyard.

“Hey!”

“Look innocent,” Merlin told him, and then linking their arms, strolled out into the lane as if they were passersby, craning his neck toward the commotion, as if he had not been a part of it, and could not imagine the source of the fuss. They walked in such a manner, Arthur’s heart beating wildly, past three uniformed officials, with their very official maces. He wondered who would have their head stove in by one, and hoped by the merit of it being a lady’s head, it would not be Morgana’s, though she never could watch what came out of it.

“Gwaine has her,” Merlin said under his breath, anticipating his concern. “She’ll be fine.”

“That’s not comforting,” Arthur replied dryly.

“Just put a tankard in her hand, and none of them will be any match for her.” He smiled over at Arthur, looking at him just out of the corner of his eye, and watching the uniformed guard out of the other. “Oh. Um. Forget my plan.”
“What is it?” Arthur asked.

“Someone’s pointing at us. I guess we could have kept your sword after all. Too late now.” He grabbed Arthur’s hand. “Run.”

“If only we had kept it, and then I could stab you,” Arthur panted as they ran.

“You still have your dagger,” Merlin pointed out breathlessly.

“True. Remind me to stab you as soon as we’re safely out of here.” He felt a little more cheerful now, and not only because he was holding Merlin’s hand.

Gwen had dragged Lancelot through the kitchen. He was too surprised to resist her, or too polite. They were let out into a little alley, absolutely dark. She considered that there might be robbers, or even a murderer, but preceded him, since the evening had already been difficult enough for him. He was awfully kind about the whole thing, and did not even question the sanity of her friends.

It was immediately obvious to her that they were in a lane of some ill repute. It was just a sense she got, and also the man in the corner, who was receiving an act of sexual congress. It was one of the ungodly ones, since it could not have possibly impregnated his companion. Lancelot, who was slower to spot it, turned the colour of a strawberry upon noticing it. He froze. He looked everywhere else in the alley, and found there were unclaimed wares being peddled. The wares flashed him their breasts. Gwen, panicking, covered his eyes. She did not know how else to lessen his discomfort. She covered her own eyes.

They stood very still, as if that were a solution. The sounds of business being concluded went on round them. She thought if she had died in the tavern brawl, that would have been very nice. Since it was no longer an option, she had to simply stand, feeling poor stiff-shouldered Lancelot beside her, pretending she did not hear the noises the man’s companion was making, and very clearly hearing them. It was like listening to someone with no table manners eating a very good pottage.

There was another noise, over the rude slurping. For a moment she was too busy mourning how she would never again eat pottage, which she quite liked, to place it; and then she knew by the tenor of the shouting that it was the same shouting she had heard outside the alehouse, and realising Lancelot was being given another chance to have himself honourably arrested, she sank quickly onto her knees. She had been inspired by the slurping. Afterwards she would die, as was proper.

Lancelot gave her a terrified look. “What are you doing?”

“Well, um, look like you’re enjoying it?”

“Enjoying what?” It was a fair question. She was kneeling in front of him, and nothing else. She had not even placed a hand on his thigh, or looked up becomingly through her lashes. Her head was now at an awkward level with his groin, which she stared into, blinking. It was innocuous, but Lancelot, sensing some threat from it, or her, covered it.

“I’m not going to--to actually do anything. Just, um, stand there? Lean your head back against the wall.”

Lancelot was frozen. He stammered, “I don’t, um, my lady--”
“Lancelot, I really think you should call me Gwen. I’m staring at your, you know, um...bits. It’s just a little bit...weirdly formal.” And because she could do nothing else, she put her face suddenly into her hands, and began to laugh. The absurdity of it was too enormous. She laughed till the tears came through her fingers, and then hearing the steps of the watch coming fast down the alley, she put her head back up, biting her lips against her hysterics. Lancelot stared down uncomfortably at her. He did not look to be in any sort of throes, particularly of the passionate variety; but the passage was dark, and when the lanterns intruded upon them, he flung up his arm over his eyes, and at least hid the stark panic in them.

The lanterns did not find any threat in the ordinary business proceedings of the alley, and went quietly away. Gwen stayed another moment listening to their footsteps, biting her lip to keep in the mirth, and feeling horribly sorry for him; he was awfully endearing, with his ears burning brighter than the lanterns. She stood up when she felt it was safe, and said, “I’m so sorry, Lancelot.” In some contradiction of this, she burst out laughing again. She tried to hold it in with her hand. “I’m sorry. It’s not funny.” She pursed her lips.

“You don’t look like you think it’s not funny,” he said in something approaching a normal tone, and she uncovered her mouth, unable to hold it in any longer. It was no use leaving the hand there. It was only a reminder of her failure. She bent over, holding her side.

His face had suggested he had no intention of laughing, possibly ever again. But he had caught it off her, and suddenly they were breathlessly supporting one another. Gwen was almost senseless in his arms; he had to hold her up, almost senseless himself.

Meanwhile Morgana and Gwaine were arrested, and taken into custody. But as the custody was somewhat porous, and distracted by the unmanageable influx of potential prisoners, and as Gwaine was more than proficient at evading things like being arrested, they soon were out of it, and the lady escorted safely home to her pavillion, where she wrung her hands till Gwen arrived, and then was perfectly all right.

Merlin had not been stabbed. Possibly this was because evading the watch had become something of an Event, and Arthur was otherwise occupied. They ran at full speed into the many twisting alleys, and knocked over a drunk; he threatened them with a drunk’s unmenacing elocution, and shook his fist. He called them something Merlin thought meant a thing like ‘hooligan’, although that was not the word he used. Merlin did not know the word he used, but recognised a blistering curse on his ancestors when he heard it. Arthur might have stopped to fight him for the honour of their mothers, which the man had called into question, but there was only his dagger, and the footsteps hot behind them.

They were still holding hands. Merlin used the connection to yank Arthur this way, and Arthur to pull Merlin that way. They were both of them fortunate to retain their arms, which each of them nearly pulled from the other, trying to direct him. “Merlin!” Arthur demanded, reaching out to add Merlin’s collar to the grip he had on him. “Would you just --”

“Run in what’s clearly the wrong direction, and get us captured immediately? Thanks; no. Better things to do with my time.”
“If I can lead an army, I think I can lead you through a bloody street.”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“Of course it doesn’t seem like it! You’ve argued every single one of my directions and got us all turned round!”

“So it’s my fault?”

“Yes, but I never hoped to actually hear you admit it. You know what that is, Merlin? Personal growth.”

“I can’t believe you still have the breath to be such a bloody ass,” Merlin gasped. “I’m probably going to die.”

“Try sprinting back and forth in a field in the middle of summer, in full mail, whilst the master at arms waits for you to quite literally faint before he calls a halt. Conditioning like that would have prepared you for this, Merlin. We can start as soon as we return to Camelot.”

“Then I’m definitely going to die here, because I am not doing that.”

He was fully committed to a timely expiration; his conscious mind, and the physical workings of his body which ought to have run on instinctively, but in accordance with how unpleasant it is to indulge in any exertion, when you can be doing anything else, were beginning by intervals to fail. He tripped, and resigned himself to the fall, to the distasteful lying about in the dirty street till someone came to collect the remains of him. He would have managed it nicely, if Arthur were not still holding his hand.

“Arthur, leave me,” he said, with a lovely dramatic ring to it. He was like a romantic hero, sacrificing himself for the sake of his love, and it did not even matter that his love was a tit, because that never made it into the ballads. He hoped his hair was all right.

Arthur, naturally, ruined it. “Get up, you ridiculous git.” He hauled Merlin up by the front of his tunic, and half-carried him into the narrow alley which squeezed down to the right of the lane they came panting through. It was crowded by a solid row of houses, and quite cramped. If Arthur was so invested in his conditioning, and wanted the glory of navigating their escape unruffled, without any vomiting, he was welcome to it. Merlin let his feet drag as Arthur pulled him along.

“Merlin!” he hissed.

“I can’t run anymore, Arthur. I’m physically dying.”

“You didn’t need to specify ‘physically’. It’s not as if you’re mentally going to do it. That’s long been a given. Would you get up?”

“I can’t. I can’t,” Merlin wheezed. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“You will not.”

“Right, just order me not to do it, I expect that will save your shoes.”

“My shoes? Why don’t you vomit on your own?”

“They’re the only ones I’ve got!”

Arthur clapped a hand over his mouth. He had his other arm round Merlin’s waist, and jerked them
both into the shadows. Merlin gratefully leant on him, whilst the watch went unheeding past, calling to one another, and swinging round the lanterns with great show, and never penetrating the little side street by a fortunate combination of slovenly work ethic, and Merlin’s magic.

There was a long moment of breathless hesitation, the long and cautious listening into the night, and the fleeing wardens of it, before it could be determined that they were now guaranteed their freedom. The moment was now allowed to be an erotic one. Formerly it had had to be vigilant, and its participants focused on the precariousness of their position; but now they both noticed, almost simultaneously, that they had naturally assumed the suggestive combination of Arthur’s front side against Merlin’s backside. Arthur let out the characteristic throat clearing he performed when he was embarrassed; some parts of him had observed more aggressively than others the sudden reality of this proximity.

Merlin turned round in his arms. Arthur maintained his aloofness for a moment, but it was a spotty performance, and he spent most of it staring at Merlin’s lips. Merlin bit his ear, for feeling himself above it all. Arthur kissed him a bit desperately. He slid his arms round Merlin’s back, and clutched up great fistfuls of his tunic, as if he could not help himself, and then it was not sad, exactly: but a little sharp. It was as if he were trying to get in as much as he could, while he could. It was as if he were remembering, instead of the abolishing pleasure, which made the kissing its own little world, and no other was as pressing as it, the short sad nature of love. Probably he had never felt it as something which could grow in quiet pleasure; he knew the fierce brief rushes of love, and then they were taken away, once he was caught with them. Merlin had intended to titillate him a little, and then to take him back to the pavillion, and have at him in a real bed, with the urgency of an entire encampment all round them, liable to wake. But Arthur was kissing round his face, and it could not be left, or put off. When he had run out of breath, or the brief self-assuredness he needed in order to do anything, he pressed his forehead against Merlin’s. Merlin slid his fingers into the hair at the nape of Arthur’s neck, and kissed the tip of his nose. He stroked at the nape hair, feeling that Arthur needed it. And they were content, for a moment, to do this and nothing else. Arthur looked at him through his soft dark eyelashes, which he left half-open. He said, and now he was as breathless as Merlin had been, trying to keep up with him, “You know I’ll probably be engaged by tomorrow evening.”

“I know.” Merlin kept smoothing down the little tuft of hair.

Arthur looked at him, a little wild in the eyes. He was clearly trying to say a thing he could not say, and could not keep down anymore. “I won’t--I don’t want to. Do you know that?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s my duty.”

“I know, Arthur, it’s ok.” He touched Arthur’s chin with the tip of his thumb.

“Sometimes, if I could just be--not who I am--”

Merlin kissed the poor stumbling mouth. “I know, Arthur. We just make the most of tonight, ok?” he said softly, still turning the feathery smooth hair over in his fingertips, gently.

They went back to the pavilion, and kissed feverishly in Arthur’s bed, with muffled eagerness, till Merlin gasped, “I’ll make sure no one catches us” and pressed Arthur down into the mattress, pinning his wrists. He bit at Arthur’s neck till Arthur, shivering, pushed his head back helplessly into the pillows, crying out. Merlin stripped off his tunic, and then after some hesitation, Arthur, who was an accomplished kisser, but suddenly shy when there was anything else to be done, wrestled Merlin out of his own. There was a new intimacy in rolling round bare chest to bare chest.
They had not done it yet. Arthur, his hair violently mussed, rolled them over so he was on top, and for a bit held Merlin down, kissing him with great thoroughness. Then he let himself be flung off, and pushed down into the bed again. Merlin, straddling him, pulled him up by his hair and kissed him into a state of shuddering that satisfied him. He let Arthur fall back to the bed, well pleased with himself. He was not yet ready to let out the tension, and stroked Arthur only a little, through his hose. Arthur pulled him down and slid his tongue hot into Merlin, and the stroking in concordance with what Arthur’s tongue was doing to him, and the eagerness it was inciting, picked up greatly. Merlin had not intended to do anything more saucy; he was not sure Arthur was quite ready to be more sexually inappropriate, that to take away the safety of the hose, and the modesty of them, was possibly more than he was prepared to confront. But Merlin, in an ill-timed rush of helpless lust, suddenly yanked them down, and feeling the hot bare skin underneath him, wrapped his hand round it. Arthur made a noise into his mouth. He was caught in the same helpless lust, and thrust up into Merlin’s fist.

He stroked Arthur with a ferocity. He wanted to see the fluttering eyes roll back completely. He wanted to see Arthur, physically superior, twist defenceless underneath him, capable of nothing but letting go everything that was pent-up in him, violently, into Merlin’s hand.

“Merlin,” Arthur gasped, pushing his head back into the pillow and biting down on his fist and clutching wildly for the sheets underneath him. He came in a long hot rush over Merlin’s hand. Merlin watched his face, the wild blonde hair, the helpless mouth, slack, and beneath it the tendons in the braced neck, working with mad abandon.

He was still heaving for breath when Merlin pulled himself out of his own trousers, and had a hasty wank. Arthur watched him do it, and feeling the burning eyes steadily on him was highly motivating. He made eye contact, to see would Arthur back down; and when he didn’t, Merlin, shuddering, came on his chest.

Afterwards Arthur tried to resist the cuddling which Merlin aggressively pursued. It was acceptable to have come on another man, and to have let him come on you, but not to hug him a bit after the act was done, by Arthur’s sound logic. Merlin, who knew that Arthur was in need of affection even more than he was in need of having the priggishness fornicated out of him, wrapped his legs round him, and clung on. Arthur frowned at him and hit him on the head and spoke various abuses about him; then he fell asleep in his arms.

They woke well before Arthur had to be on the field, and did it again. And since there was still some time, when they were well-recovered, they did it once more; and then they were on the verge of tardiness, and it was then that Arthur, suddenly, sat up and blurted out, “You idiot! My sword!” There was afterwards much scrambling about for their clothes, and a mad dash through the tourney field as it was coming to life.

The sword of course was exactly where they had left it. There was a shaft of sunlight that fell with a human sense of the picturesque on the hilt, but otherwise nothing extraordinary about the churchyard. Arthur, who was in a hurry, collected his sheath, and soon as he heard Merlin spell the stone soft once more, yanked on the pommel, and drew out the weapon as if it had only been plunged into a bucket of water.

He turned round. There had been no one round the church when they had burst into the yard; and now as was the unfortunate habit soon as you were guilty of something you did not want observed
by any human soul, there was suddenly an entire host of human souls. They blinked at him. Arthur blinked back. He looked at Merlin, who looked back at him.

“Why,” Arthur gritted out under his breath, “didn’t you tell me there were people watching me?”

“Why,” Merlin gritted out back, “do you always expect me to do everything for you? ‘Wash my underthings, Merlin. Scrub my back, Merlin. Be my own two eyes, Merlin, because I’m too important to see.’”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

The group was still standing in its eerie statuesque way. Arthur wondered how they might react if he and Merlin simply walked off before either of them could be burnt for practising sorcery, and in a sacred space, no less. They were none of them overly armed, and he thought probably he could hold them off whilst Merlin at least fled with his neck intact.

And then one of the men toward the front cried out, “It’s a miracle!” and looked upon him as if he should have liked to kneel at Arthur’s feet, and touch Arthur’s feet very reverently, which Arthur felt to be quite an appropriate reaction to his presence, and which Merlin recoiled at.

“A miracle! Did you see that?” a woman shouted. “That man just pulled a sword out of solid stone, he did!”

“Well, this is awkward,” Merlin said. “Imagine how they’ll feel when they realise it’s just you.”

“Shut up, Merlin.”

There was then a curious flood from the nearby street, which had heard what was clearly a lot of nonsense, and had to see the nonsense for itself. Arthur held the sword awkwardly, and yanked it back when a few worshipful hands attempted to touch it. “Merlin. What do I do?”

“Just wave. And look miraculous,” Merlin suggested, and reached over for Arthur’s arm when Arthur kept it dumbly by his side, and gesturing with it to the crowd, flapped it with an artless independence of movement that made it seem as if Arthur had had a terrible medical episode, and was now still in the shuddering throes of it.

They did make it back in time for Arthur’s first joust, though he missed the parade of knights and the ladies who led them with great ceremony, and thus he went favourless to the lists, which must have struck the crowd as a great oversight when with his helm up he swept the host a bow from his saddle. He rode brilliantly, even though Merlin had distracted him, and nearly lost him his sword; the mare thundering under him plunged gamely down the list, whilst from the opposite direction his opponent came plunging gamely back. He felt the usual intermingling of man and beast, when neither he nor horse were separate creatures of independent will, but ran as if in direct communication with one another, his soul to the mare’s; the saddle came away under him, and the stirrups, and he sensed only the unflagging gait, and the reverberations through his horse’s legs, and his own, the tiny indeterminate turnings of rock and sod and shield sliver under the churning hooves, the tiny indeterminate changes which they made to the run, and the outcomes which he had to the most finite degree try and anticipate. The sun broke open on the breast of his opponent,
trying to deter him; but he had already set the lance under his arm, and knew where to aim it. Blind, he was all-seeing; blind, he struck the enemy shield a square blow, and sent its wielder reeling in his stirrups. The soft wood of his lance shattered spectacularly.

He unhorsed the man on his second ride, and took off his helmet so the crowd, naturally already wild, could attain an even greater peak of satisfaction.

Afterwards he strode up to Merlin, and taking off his gloves, barked, “Merlin, give me your neckerchief.”

“What? No! It’s mine,” Merlin insisted, like a child. Like a child he had leaves in his hair, and dirt on one of his cheekbones.

“What on earth were you doing?” Arthur asked, plucking out one of the leaves.

“I fell out of a tree,” Merlin said casually, trying to fight him off as he yanked at the neckerchief.

“And what were you doing in a tree?”

“I climbed it to have a better view. You were all right, by the way. I’ve definitely seen better.” He swatted at Arthur’s hands. “Stop! Why do you need my neckerchief?”

Arthur had gotten it away from him, and held it over his head, ostensibly out of Merlin’s reach, forgetting that Merlin had the very paltry advantage in height, since it was nearly unnoticeable. “I need a lady’s favour for my next joust; Gwaine already has one. And you’re certainly close enough to a girl. This ought to do just fine.”

“So you’re saying you can’t get one on your own?”

“Of course not; don’t be thick. Sometimes it’s tiring to have women throw themselves at you, however, Merlin. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Right.” He snatched the neckerchief back out of Arthur’s hands, and thrust it behind his back as Arthur lunged at him. “I’ll give it back as soon as you admit you’re a big soft-hearted romantic and you want to wear my favour instead of a lady’s.” He was surprisingly adept at dodging Arthur. Arthur highly suspected he was not being entirely honest in the fight; he grabbed him round the waist and tried to wrestle him, and Merlin would not be wrestled, but slipped out of his arms so gracefully Arthur was now certain he was using magic in the middle of the tourney field, like a big numpty. However, Arthur’s footwork was not entirely useless even in the face of such dire defrauding: he used it to dart round behind Merlin, and grabbed for the neckerchief.

“Stop it!” Merlin said with a laugh that ruined the command.

They were still tussling when Gwaine rode past, and leaning down from his horse, he seized the neckerchief neatly out of Merlin’s hands, and tossed it into Arthur’s. “I’m with Princess on this one for once,” he said to Merlin, and winked knowingly at Arthur. “Tourneys can get a bit rough. Every man should have a little something from his sweetheart, to help see him through it.”

“Do you think he knows?” Arthur demanded as soon as Gwaine rode away.

“No, Arthur. I think he’s taking the piss out of you for being an absolute knob over something so stupid as a neckerchief,” Merlin explained with resigned patience.
Arthur was getting on with his father. Morgana hated the look it produced on his face. It was as if he suddenly understood happiness, and every one of its myriad possibilities; and when Uther turned away his approval, as he always did eventually, when he needed to control Arthur, the knowledge would die out of him. He would forget it had ever existed in him. Arthur had been strung along in this way his entire life. He did not have any concept of his feelings, he did not know the core of them, and what they entailed, and how to react to them, because he had always judged himself by others’; he knew he was handsome, because the court had told him so; he knew he was useless, because Uther had told him so. He had won the joust today, not to disprove this, because he knew it was not a thing to be refuted, but only in order to have, fleetingly, momentarily, the smile on Uther’s face. It was not, truly, that he ever expected to prove himself: but he thought by being as impressive as he was able, he could occasionally be considered more than a simple disappointment who had killed his mother, and gone on to do nothing so big as that.

The banquet to which they had adjourned was going on all round her, in a riotous joy. She was bored with it, and the men who thought her a reward for their most questionable wit. She stood up in the middle of an anecdote, and made her way down the table to Arthur; the teller open-mouthed sat in mute shock at her resistance.

“Meet me in the garden; I have a proposal,” she said into his ear, whilst Uther had turned away to King Olaf, whose daughter he had sat at his other side, well away from Arthur, as if he might commence the proposed engagement early, in front of the guests. She looked at the soft white bosom, which was engaged in a more than reasonable quantity of heaving. They were decent theatrics; but quite altogether wasted on a man who had spent the night doing what she knew he had been doing.

Arthur frowned up at her.

“It’s about Merlin,” she said, to lure him out.

He was lured out. She was taking a turn round the garden, and looking up at the manor in which the banquet was being thrown when he came soft-footed through the hedges, one hand on his sword.

“Oh, I’m not going to ambush you,” she said, taking the hand away from its weapon, and slipping it through her arm. “Your bride-to-be is a horrible spoilt bitch.”

“I’m aware,” Arthur said dryly.

“And do you want to do something about it, or do you want to be shackled to that for the rest of your life?”

“What does this have to do with Merlin?” Arthur asked.

Morgana sighed, and patted his hand, as if he were a good boy, though of course he was quite stupid, and she couldn’t say why she had ever helped him. “It has to do with him because you’re in love with him.”

Arthur immediately stiffened. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Don’t lie to me, Arthur; I’ve known even before you ever did. Don’t you want more time with him?”
He was quiet. She heard the soft-heeled tread on the dirt, and the thoughtful breathing. He said, with the formality he used when he was confronted with the idea that perhaps he was a man, with a man’s simple inclinations toward his own simple longings, “She might be...odious, but the union is a good one. It will benefit Camelot.”

“And will she be a good queen to Camelot?” Morgana demanded. “Will she care for your people the way you do? Or will she take the throne beside you simply because it is a throne, and she can wield it the way she’s wielded everything, in whatever way she likes?”

Arthur looked sideways at her. “Of course not. But you know it’s not my decision, Morgana. You know both our marriages will be used to seal whatever political alliance my father thinks will be most advantageous to the kingdom. It doesn’t matter whether I like her or not.”

“You talk as if you’re some helpless child; of course it’s your decision. You just have to learn to tell Uther to go to hell.”

“Not all of us can get away with that,” Arthur pointed out.

“You can’t get away with anything you don’t try.”

He stopped their leisurely walk, and turned so they were now directly across from one another, and he could look down into her eyes. He had wrinkled up his nose the way he did when he was confused, or trying in the best way he knew to resist the human condition of feeling. She knew he needed to be touched, and would not ask for it, and did not even know it himself, but would go on attributing the loneliness to a unique and personal feeling, which was only something he had not yet trained out of himself. She reached up, and cupped his cheek. “Arthur,” she said softly. “I know it isn’t fashionable of us to say so, but I want you to be happy.”

“And you’re saying Merlin is the--”

“Shh; don’t talk,” she interrupted him. “It makes it harder for me to be nice to you. I’m saying this marriage would make you miserable, and despite that you’ll go forward with it, because you feel it’s your duty, that it’s something you deserve, because if you aren’t Camelot’s sacrifice, if you haven’t given up every bit of your happiness, for your father, for your people, then you have failed all of us. You feel your mother died birthing you, and you owe that debt to everyone except yourself. That it’s not your own life, but hers, and you have to use it honourably.”

He tried not to be conscious of what she had said. He tried as hard at it as he tried to be a good and admirable son to Uther; and it was terrible to see, and to do nothing about it. She gave the cold cheek a little stroke. “I’m saying, if you’re smart enough to agree, I’ll ruin this engagement for you. It shouldn’t be difficult,” she said lightly. “All I have to do is talk her out of marrying you. She has Olaf wrapped round her little finger. If she refuses you, he won’t force her. And what could be simpler than persuading a woman to dislike you? You do it yourself all the time, without any help whatsoever from me.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “I think you’ll find it’s a tad trickier than you imagine, Morgana.”

“Is it now?” she asked, and arched an eyebrow at him.

She left him with a coy smile in the garden; he stood still and thoughtful in the midst of it, and the moonlight came and broke round him as if it were a stone it had to pass round. “Morgana,” he called out when she had reached the edge of the garden, where the music from the banquet now once again intruded upon her. “What do I do about--about Merlin? About my feelings for him?”
There was a note of true and depthless anguish in his voice. She turned round, and went back to take the flustered face in her hands, and pull the forehead down to kiss it. “You stop thinking it’s something to be ashamed of,” she said softly, as he needed to hear it.

He came storming up to her next evening in his tent, where she was playing chess with Merlin. They both ignored him; it was a deciding game. “You told her I’m impotent?” Arthur snapped, struggling out of his sword belt, which his rage had made a contraption of insurmountable difficulty.

“He’s not that, at least,” Merlin said absently, folding his hands under his chin, and surveying the board. Arthur turned purple.

“Is he any good at it?” Morgana asked, moving a pawn. “I can’t imagine he would be.”

“Mm; yeah. Surprisingly.”

“Good for you, Merlin.”

“My father,” Arthur interrupted imperiously, “is right now reassuring King Olaf that in fact everything does work, in every sense of the word, because of course no one wants a groom who can’t produce heirs. So thank you for that humiliation, Morgana.”

“Any time, Arthur. Tell Uther diagrams may help.”

“Or I can tell him,” Merlin said, with a wicked smile.

Arthur, kicking aside the sword belt he had finally conquered, snapped, “Are the two of you using magic to beat one another at chess? What have I told you--”

“You’ve told us not to practise it in the open, which we’re not doing,” Merlin said. “Besides, if anyone walks in, all they’re going to see is that we’re really, really good at chess.”

“I’m glad you think this is all very funny, Merlin.”

“What? The chess match, or your penis?”

Arthur at the mention of his penis by someone who had recently touched it turned as red as a proper maiden; or at least it was a shade Morgana assumed proper maidens acquired in times of trial, since she did not rightly know by her own personal experience. She enjoyed a laugh at his expense.

“Fine,” Arthur said to them both. “See if I lift a finger against your execution.” He stormed out of the tent. He stormed back into it, and stood moodily at the entrance to guard their match, with his arms folded. It was like being presided over by a thundercloud which at any moment was prepared to unleash its portents, and quite ruin one’s picnic. But as it was advantageous to have him directly at hand to be teased, she did not mind it, and in fact found that it was quite pleasant. Merlin was an able tormentor, and between the two of them they wound him up magnificently, till she thought he would execute them both himself, informally, without the usual ceremony; it was sometimes good to be a lady, and not to have one’s head put under some man’s questionable armpit, as was now being done to Merlin’s head.
“Morgana, light him on fire!” he cried out pleadingly whilst Arthur stumped round the tent with him, dragging Merlin thrashing afterward.

“Honestly, Merlin, even you can’t have been stupid enough to teach her how to do that.”

“He’s taken up with you, Arthur. Clearly his stupidity is limitless. No offence, Merlin.”

“None taken. I agree,” Merlin replied amicably enough, with his head still under Arthur’s arm.

And watching them she thought they could not possibly come to what the dreams had shown her they would come to; it was not comprehensible, that they should laugh as they were laughing, and be fallible. It was not just, that they should be only silly sweet boys, and death undiscerning.

Gwen by the third day of the tournament thought she had done quite nicely in drawing Lancelot out of himself. They were all of them watching the jousts from Morgana’s stall, at a lovely vantage point, happily supplied by a steady influx of goose pies and duck pies and mutton pies and also those of lark, finch, and hen, which disappeared with alarming regularity into Lancelot, without the proper intervals of normal digestion. But he was quite satisfied, and sometimes even talked to her whilst he hung over the railing, to be as close as he was able to the grandeur of the horses and their blinding masters. It was somewhat relaxing to have mimed a sexual act in a dirty alleyway; you could be certain nothing afterwards could ever be quite so demeaning, and then it took off the pressure a bit, when she dithered over asking about his life, so there was only a moment (or possibly two) in which she retreated into herself, to overthink did she really need to form her words quite the way she had thought of forming them, and would they come out rather all right, and would he receive them rather all right, and would it all run on rather smoothly, and so on. Then it was easy to say to herself, Guinevere of Camelot (sometimes she had to be quite stern in addressing herself), you put your face in his penis. Obviously not in his penis, of course she hadn’t even touched it, in fact it was probable he did not even have one, for all she had not familiarised herself with it, but it was bracing, to know she could not now do anything worse to either of them.

It was on the afternoon of the third, whilst he was leaning over the railing, and watching Arthur complete his ride with almost a worshipful look, quite in love with the whole presentation, that Gwaine, coming to the foot of their stall, whistled through his teeth.

“You mind if I steal them?” he asked Morgana, flicking his fringe out of his eyes. The ladies on the bench in front of him were nearly ensorcelled by the gesture.

“Not as long as you bring Gwen back intact.”

“My solemn word, my lady,” he said, sweeping her a ridiculous bow.

“Are n’t you supposed to be riding soon?” Gwen asked.

“Yeah. Just need a bit of help with my armour. Bring our boy,” he said, and materialising a sweet white flower from his tunic, he graciously bowed it into the hands of one of the nearest ladies.

“Come on, Lancelot,” she said hastily, picking up her skirts. “There’s going to be a slaughter,” she whispered to him. The ladies who had not been so favour ed were already eyeing their more fortunate seatmate. She grasped Lancelot by the sleeve, to hurry him out of the killing zone.

It was a quick walk to Gwaine’s pavillion. His horse was placidly mouthing up grass outside it, and
with a suspicious dark eye ascertained they were not about to keep him from it, and went on peacefully.

“Congratulations, Lancelot. You’re going to ride in the tourney.” And without any warning, Gwaine dropped his own mail jingling over the head of poor startled Lancelot, and when the arms did not take it upon themselves to manage the sleeves, he did it for them. He put his own belt round Lancelot’s waist, and his own sword into it. The helmet went plonk onto his head, with a great rattling din.

“What?” Gwen said.

“Really?” Lancelot said.

“Time to prove yourself, boyo.” Gwaine gave him a ringing slap to the chest, and taking him by the shoulders, gave him the friendly shake which she had seen Arthur give to Merlin, though something seemed to be missing from this one.

“But what if he’s hurt?” she asked.

They had not even considered it. They would not consider it now. Men, Morgana was fond of telling her, do not let a little thing like physical peril limit even the slenderest of chances to slake their egos.

“Don’t you worry, Gwen. I know talent when I see it,” Gwaine assured her.

“Talent can still be killed.”

“He won’t be killed. Maimed at worst.” It was quite enjoyable to both of them, to stand round joking about his life, as if it could not be thrown away under a horse. She wished suddenly that she had the gall to slap them, to see if it did anything reasonable to their brains.

“Give him something to remember you by, Gwen.”

“What? I don’t have anything.”

“Sure you do,” Gwaine said, and pulling out a little sprig of heather from her pocket which she certainly had not put there herself, he winked, and tucked it into Lancelot’s collar. She looked at the helmet behind which was Lancelot’s gentle face. She blushed at it. The helmet blushed back at her, according to the visor.

Then it was time to usher him along to the horse, to hand up the lance and shield, to slap at his poorly-booted foot, and to see off the entire show, to progress alongside it as it went jingling, resonant, rattling, off to the lists, quite beside itself. The armour seemed to be echoing long after the horse had paused, as if its inhabitant were continuously vibrating, trying at once to separate, and to keep himself together, according to the whims of his excitement, and his reason, and which was currently more persuasive than the other. Gwen chewed at her lip. She looked at him far above on the horse, and imagined how it would be to come off it, whilst there was another horse bearing down on it, and a great big stick into the bargain. She said, “Lancelot!” without even noticing that she had planned to say it. It seemed to leap independently from her, but did not have the courtesy of supplying her a follow-up comment.

The helmet turned to her. She wrung her hands at it.

There was now a gauntlet on one of the big hands; it pushed up the visor, so he could look unhindered at her. She looked back. It seemed to her that it lasted quite some time. There was a sort
of pain in her stomach, not entirely pleasant, not entirely unpleasant.

“If I win, the victory is yours, Guinevere,” he said, and then Gwaine was being announced to the spectators, and Lancelot clucked to the horse, and rode straight-shouldered into the lists.

She did not return to the stall where Gwaine was now sitting with Morgana, but remained at the fence which separated the rest of the field from the jousting. She thought by being closer to him she could limit a calamity. It was a stupid gesture; but she could not do anything else. To be in the stall, helpless, to watch from above as he was struck, or unhorsed, was unbearable; and somehow to be on the same level field as him felt an almost tolerable compromise.

Arthur was leading his mare past and brushing out his sweaty hair, his helmet under one arm. He drew up next to her with a confused look. He looked at her. He looked at Gwaine’s horse as it trotted up to the host’s stall, and the rider lifted his lance in acknowledgement. “Is that Lancelot?” he asked. “What on earth is he doing?”

“I don’t know,” Gwen sighed.

“How could Gwaine let him do this? He’ll be killed!” Arthur blurted out, and then looking at her once more, said, “Not killed, I’m sure. He’ll be fine.” He did not have a convincing tone, but at least drew up next to her, so she did not have to see it alone. The mare set her lip on Gwen’s shoulder.

She held the fence very hard by its top rail as he rode down along the list, and wheeled round to face his opponent. He seemed at least to manage the horse; she saw Arthur judging his seat, and finding nothing to critique. She hoped he knew how to fall off it as neatly.

“He rides well,” Arthur offered, as if keeping in the saddle at this moment of low tension, with the mount still passive under him, and his enemy’s lance long from him, was some prediction of military prowess. She said nothing. She held the fence till one of her nails cracked.

She wondered if under the armour he breathed as she did, in a quick shallow fluttering that hurt her heart. It was suspended entirely when the horses took up their position, and the customary silence of anticipation fell over the stalls. She felt as if she could not watch it, but must. Beside her, Arthur leant on the railing, draping his wrists casually over it.

And then the horses leapt to speed. They did not seem to build up to it, but were simply standing, and then at the full height of their potential. Musically down the list they went, every greave singing. She had not imagined the din of it, the thunderous unearthly rage; she realised the other jousts had been quite subdued, and humanity would here be decided, its ambiguous fate between the two points of the lances. She drew back from the railing, and folded her hands in front of her face.

They met in a great peal. She covered her eyes. Arthur was laughing with a pleased sort of surprise beside her. “Look at that.”

“I don’t want to,” she said numbly.

“It’s all right, Guinevere,” he told her. “Look.”

She looked. There was a confusion of dust, and in the middle of it, some movement of equine nature. She saw there was a flashing from it; she saw it was a shield. She saw it was Gwaine’s shield, still attached to Lancelot’s arm, still attached to Lancelot’s body.

From across the field, Merlin came pelting toward them. He ran straightaway for Gwen, who was
momentarily baffled by the body on the ground, which seemed not to be Lancelot, but hardly could have been anyone else. “That was brilliant! Was that Lancelot?” He grabbed her by the elbows; she noticed then that her body was attempting to sit, without having notified her.

“Were you in a tree again?” Arthur demanded.

“Yeah. I told you it’s the best seat.”

“You have leaves in your hair again.”

“I know. It’s the absolute worst thing that could happen to me. I’m beside myself.” Merlin shook her. “Gwen? Are you crying?”

“No,” she sniffled. “I thought he was going to be killed!”

“He’s not killed. One blow! That was amazing! His first bout! Arthur didn’t even do that!”

Arthur cleared his throat.

“You didn’t,” Merlin said.

“Well, I would have, if I were against Sir Grummond!”

“You wouldn’t have.”

“Merlin .”

“He looks good, doesn’t he?” Merlin said to her a bit cheekily, helping her back to her feet.

“Merlin .”

“What? I didn’t mean for me. For Gwen.” Gwaine’s horse was now cantering toward the fence, quite obviously pleased with itself. Merlin shoved her toward the opening in the fence. “You should go give him a kiss.”

“What?” she said in a daze.

“That was a great ride, Gwen. If you don’t, I’m going to. He deserves it.”

Arthur’s face twisted alarmingly, as if he were suddenly in pain. “Don’t even, Merlin--”

“What are you going to do about it?” Merlin asked him.

“I’ll—tie you up in my tent!” Arthur blurted out. Merlin under his breath said something she could not make out; but Arthur had heard it, and it embarrassed him. She was sympathetic. Lancelot was now before her, with the helmet off. His hair was attractively disturbed.

“Great job, Lance!” Merlin called out, and Arthur for some reason cuffed him across the back of the head.

He looked at her as if he were waiting for her to pronounce judgement on the bout, and it was the only criteria by which he could consider himself triumph or failure. She froze. Merlin rescued her.

“Gwen said you were brilliant.”

“Yeah! Um, not that I really understand much about it? But it looked really good. Really, really good, Lancelot. Top job.” She gave him two thumbs up, and hated herself.
Merlin beamed at them. He gave them a look as if they were his children, and had done something he was proud of. Arthur rolled his eyes and putting an arm round his shoulders, muscled him away, leading the mare after them. “Come on, then.”

“I want to watch.”

“Don’t be a deviant, Merlin.”

“They’re cute, though, don’t you think?”

Gwen laughed horribly. It sounded like something from a mule. “He’s kidding, Merlin’s very--jokey. I mean, not that I don’t think you’re cute! I don’t think you are cute. I don’t think anything about you, really. Except that was a really good ride! I’m sure you’re quite proud. You should be.” She prayed to die.

But he was a good dear soul, and only smiled down at her.

They had a nice leisurely evening in Arthur’s tent; the festivities both ceremonial and sexual in nature had concluded, and they were now lying about Arthur’s bed, sweaty and half-dressed. It was a good state of existence; Merlin quite enjoyed it. He had the opportunity to admire Arthur’s chest, and even to stroke it a little, whilst Arthur was too drowsy to be insufferable about it.

“Lancelot was really something today, wasn’t he? I mean, that was brilliant. I never would have expected it from him. Where do you think he learnt to fight like that?”

“I don’t know. When he was detailing the entirety of his history to me because we’re great friends, and I otherwise know everything about him, he forgot to mention it.”

“I know it must seem like it to you, but you don’t have to be an ass all the time. I’m just saying. He isn’t a noble. He wouldn’t have had the sort of training you did. Where’d he learn to ride like that? He doesn’t even have a proper sword; he obviously can’t afford a horse.”

“Merlin, it’s sleeping time now,” Arthur said, closing his eyes to demonstrate it, and wriggling down under the blankets. He folded his arms across his chest, to show he was serious about the pronouncement.

“I dunno. I just think he’s great. And he’s really nice. You know, humble. Unlike some people I could mention.”

Arthur’s foot shot out, and caught him squarely across the backside. He was nearly up-ended over the side of the bed, and grabbing up a fistful of blankets, saved himself at the last moment. “If you like him so much, why don’t you go spend the night in his bed? I’m sure it’s very nice on the ground, in the cold,” Arthur pointed out.

“Yeah, but you wouldn’t be there, so you have to sort of weigh the negatives against the positives.”

Arthur kicked him again.

“Ow! Although Gwen might be a bit upset with me if I did that, don’t you think? Yeah?” He nudged Arthur with his elbow. “I think it’s great. They’d be perfect together.”
“Merlin. Go. To. Sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah, I will, in just a minute. Do you think he’ll ride again tomorrow? Or fight in the melee? Or any of the individual matches? I’d like to see that. Just to see what he’s like with a sword. Maybe he should be one of your knights. We could always use men like him.”

Arthur rolled over half onto him, putting his arms round Merlin’s waist, and crushing him into the bedcovers; his face sank into the pillow, which tragically interfered with his ability to mock Arthur. He freed it. “You’re not embracing me, are you?”

“No, I’m throttling you.”

“Shouldn’t your arms be round my neck, then?” Merlin asked.

“They will be,” Arthur said dangerously.

It went on like that all through the week. There was the tourney, the banquet, the tent. By the time they had reached the last, they were in a heightened state of sexual awareness, and flung off their clothes haphazardly, sometimes forgetting the smaller items, and only afterwards realising Merlin was still wearing a sock with perilous claim to his foot, his entire heel out. They had difficulties in getting off Arthur’s tunic once, and being in urgent distress, left it stuck round his head, and kissed awkwardly through it whilst Merlin skimmed down their trousers.

They mistreated the bed abysmally. There was no inch of it unscathed. They were not any less abused; Arthur had a mark on his collarbone that the tunic had to be carefully arranged round, and the neckerchief was given back to Merlin, to hide his throat.

“Why don’t you bite me somewhere a little more inconspicuous?” Arthur once demanded whilst Merlin sucked at his neck.

“There’s just no pleasing you, is there?” Merlin asked, and bit his nipple. Arthur muffled a suspiciously erotic noise in his hand. “Did you like that?” Merlin asked.

“Of course not,” Arthur said disdainfully, and threw back his head when Merlin did it again.

In between this Arthur performed brilliantly in the jousts and single combat; he was absolutely undefeated. He was very nearly untouched altogether. Merlin stood at the fences and watched him with Gwen in attendance, who was watching Lancelot, and praying to herself. Gwaine had relinquished his sword and horse entirely to him, and could now sit round tossing his hair whilst his ranking rose. Lancelot fought as successfully as Arthur. He seemed to have been born to it, and moved through the forms of engagement which come by sweat and blood as if he did not even think about them. He was impelled by some instinct which never failed him, and seemed by a gift of prophecy to know where next his assailant would cut, and how he would swing; and with similar prescience understood how best to counter the opposing sword before it quite knew its own ambitions.

Arthur after watching a match to its conclusion, greeted Lancelot as he was coming off the field, removing his helmet as he went. “Very impressive, Lancelot.”

“Thank you, Sire.”
“Arthur’s fine,” Arthur said, and attacked him.

Gwen screamed. She clutched for Merlin’s sleeve; he clutched back at her own sleeve. “What the hell are you doing?” he shouted to Arthur.

Arthur bashed at Lancelot with a violence that was fatal. If Lancelot had not got up his own sword, he’d have taken Arthur’s to his head, and had no more head. They scattered several spectators, including Merlin and Gwen, who had nearly leapt into Merlin’s arms, and forgotten to apologise for it.

“Come on, Lancelot,” Arthur grunted. “Is that the best you’ve got? You’re not even trying. Go on. Kill me if you can.” He disengaged, and spun his sword. Lancelot looked at him with a wild dark eye, not unlike a horse; he was startled nearly out of his talents, and froze. Arthur went at him again.

“A tourney field with all sorts of rules—that’s one thing. You’d be dead on a battlefield within minutes.” Arthur slashed at his hamstring; Lancelot leapt with precise timing over it. “Come on, then!”

When they met again, Lancelot’s face under the wet dark hair was fierce. Merlin saw that formerly he had nearly been lazy; he was unconscious about his fighting, and did it only as a routine which he performed impeccably because it was as familiar to him as the act of living. And now something had come to life within him. They plunged at one another so quickly Merlin lost which blade belonged to which; and Gwen crying out clutched him round the waist, and hid her face in his chest. Arthur punched Lancelot in the face; and Lancelot with nearly inhuman recovery punched him back, and putting his shoulder under Arthur’s armpit, flipped him over his back. His sword crashed down onto the soil which Arthur vacated half a second before it would have been disastrous to not vacate it; and driving up Arthur winded Lancelot with a blow to his stomach, and brought the sword pommel to his temple, to decide the fight: but the temple seemed to dissolve, it was gone so quickly, and spinning round, they momentarily lost one another in their rhythm; and finding one another once more, they met in a great thunderous clash, and quaked the world in its anchors, or so it seemed to Merlin, standing on it.

They were each bleeding, Arthur from his lip, Lancelot from his nose, when Arthur breaking away sheathed his sword in the ground, to show it was done. He was blowing hard. “You’re right, Merlin. He ought to be one of my knights.” And clapping a thunderstruck Lancelot on his shoulder, he walked off, leaving Merlin to collect the sword.

Merlin was putting Arthur into his armour for the final event when a man burst into the pavillion. It was fortuitous timing; he had been kissing the back of Arthur’s neck while Arthur with excessive half-heartedness lectured him on the foolhardiness of doing it in broad daylight. He had only just pulled away from the distracting hair at the base of Arthur’s neck when the tent shuddered, and the man blundered into it, panting. “Prince Arthur of Camelot?”

Arthur paused in the strenuous act of being dressed by someone else. “Er, yes?”

“I am Tristan. From Cornwall.” He knelt and bowed his head. He had seized Arthur’s hand in doing it, and held it now so firmly Merlin could see that Arthur was hurt by it, badly enough that he could not admit to it. “My uncle King Mark has passed.”
“I’m...sorry to hear that. We didn’t know.”

“It’s only just happened this last week.” He held onto Arthur’s hand. Arthur lifted an eyebrow at Merlin. “I have come to pledge myself to you for the aid you rendered Cornwall. As soon as my duty to my uncle was done, I rode as hard as I could to you.”

“Tristan--you were the nephew who fought Morold? I thought you died.”

“Yes, my Lord, I failed where you succeeded. I could not free the people of Cornwall. But I have recovered from my wounds, and now I pledge myself heart and mortal soul to you.” He said it with such conviction Merlin felt awkward to have witnessed it. He felt the only thing remaining was the consummation on the marital bed. Arthur looked with a helpless pleading at him; his face did not know whether to laugh, or succumb to abject terror. Tristan kissed the rings on the hand he held in a way that Merlin had not even kissed Arthur. “So long as I live, no harm will ever touch you, my Lord.” He kissed the rings again.

Merlin and Arthur looked at one another. Merlin thought Tristan perfectly decent, if misguided, and sucked his lips hard inward, to keep down the laugh. He thought it would shatter him, to give in to it.

“Thank you for the honour,” Arthur said stiffly. “You are welcome to Camelot, Tristan of Cornwall.”

“Thank you! Thank you my Lord!” Tristan cried, and in an ecstasy nearly took off the hand entirely. Then as suddenly as he had burst into the tent, he exited it. They heard his sword rattling all the way down the field, not any less exuberant than its owner.

“Well,” Merlin said. “That was--”

“Intense.”

They looked at one another again. There was a moment of silence in which they tried to decide what to do; and then they dissolved into a laughter that required each of them to hold up the other.

Arthur survived the melee. He survived the banquet. He survived the walk back to Smithfield. But this did not make the world and its designs upon Arthur any less suspicious to Tristan, who trailed after him with his hand on his sword, looking very severe about the whole business. Arthur introduced him to Gwaine. He smiled very amiably throughout the introduction, as if it were a casual one which had only incidentally occurred to him, since naturally he had just happened to stumble across Gwaine in the course of returning to his tent. He said, “Help me” into Gwaine’s ear, and left Tristan in his care. He sprinted back to his tent.

“Good Lord, when he makes a pledge does he mean it. I thought he was going to fight that poor squire who spilled a drop of wine on my tunic. It isn’t that it’s not nice to be appreciated for once, but next he’ll want to hold my chamber pot for me, in case an assassin should pop up out of it,” he said as he ducked into the tent. He had expected to find Merlin waiting for him; he found Merlin and Morgana. They were both looking at him with the terrible sort of tenderness that precedes bad news, and in his belly a sudden foaming coldness took root. He tried to be light about it. He tried to combat what he did not yet know, and did not care to know. “It’s not so bad; no need to look like that. Merlin might even pick up a few tips from him.”
“Arthur,” Merlin said to him, standing up, as if it were necessary to be closer to Arthur, to deliver his news at eye level, to be prepared to receive him, if he should need to be received. “Tristan said something to Morgana at the banquet tonight. About your mother. He said it was no wonder Igraine had turned out such a son. He said she’s the kindest woman he’s ever met.”

Arthur was pulling off his gloves. He stopped. He toyed with the fingers of them, where the kidskin no longer was inhabited, but flopped about empty. “My mother lived at Tintagel before she came to Camelot; that isn’t so strange. He heard stories about her.”

“He didn’t hear stories about her, Arthur,” Morgana said gently. “He knew her.”

Arthur yanked off his gloves in a sharp heave. He tossed them into the corner of the pavilion. “He knew her before--”

“He knew her before she died bearing you.”

Arthur felt there was something strange with his face. He felt at various points along his body that the flesh had gone hot, not knowing how it was to respond, not knowing how it was to exist when it seemed now that the world was false. “He’s mistaken. Or he’s lying. I asked my father--”

“Arthur.” Merlin said it patiently. He stepped forward to set his hands on Arthur’s shoulders. “I think he lied to you. I think your mother’s still alive.”

“She couldn’t be.” Arthur looked away from him. He found in the act of swallowing an immense difficulty, as if he had never learnt it; as if he had never learnt any of the natural articulations of his body, which were now by turns failing him dismally. “If she is, then she--she left me.”

“I know.” Merlin slid a hand over his cheek. He was careful as he did it; he moved so that Arthur had no reason to flinch from it. “But you don’t know why she did it. You’re owed the truth, if you want it.”

“I can’t ask my father,” Arthur said through numb lips. “He’s already denied it. He’s told me over and over again she died in childbirth. He’ll never tell me any differently.”

Merlin stroked his cheek a little. He was nearly as upset as Arthur. He was making the usual face he made, when something had come along innocuously enough, and broken his gentle heart. “Gaius would know, if anyone does. Do you want me to take you to him?”

Arthur thought of the mother he had built in his head. He thought of how he had worked her from his imagination as if it were stone, and could last just as long, never-changing. He thought how she was to him, now, as holy as a church carving; and how she might be with the real warmth and fallibility of all living humans. He thought how it would be to know she had held him, and afterwards given him up.

“Yes,” he said softly.

Merlin watched Gaius struggle within himself. He watched him decide to lie, and decide against it. He said at last, “Arthur, some things are best left alone.”

“Then she is alive,” Arthur replied. Merlin was standing just behind him. He did not move now,
but made sure his shoulder was touching Arthur’s.

“Last I knew she was, but you must understand, that was several years ago. I don’t know what’s happened to her in the meantime.”

“But she didn’t die giving birth to me. She was--she was alive, as many as, what, how many years, Gaius? Five? Ten?”

Gaius looked away. “Six.”

“Why did he--” Arthur stopped. He was struggling for his composure as desperately as he had ever struggled in any life or death conflict. He had not yet gained it when he spoke; but Merlin could hear he did not have time for it, he had to go on as he might have in any battle, whilst his men died round him, and he died with them. “Why did my father lie to me?”

“Your father has his own reasons that I will not reveal. That is to be taken up with Uther and Uther alone.”

“Where is she?”

Gaius took off his glasses. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. He could not look up as he spoke. He said to the glasses, “Sometimes, my boy, it is better not to know too much about ourselves and what and who has shaped us.”

“He deserves to make that choice for himself, Gaius. He deserves to know, if that is his choice,” Merlin said. It burnt up out of him; he had not meant to say it, but simply had to let it go, before it consumed him.

There was a long stillness, whilst the night went on in its usual inculpable way, not pandering to the moment, but by the obtuseness of it showing that the world was not sympathetic to human ills, and never would be.

“Essetir,” Gaius said at last. “In a city called Southwold. She had an apothecary shop there, last I knew.”

So the tournament concluded, and its participants rolled up their shining arms, and left the field barren. There were three of them that would not ride out as they had ridden in, but were now being slowly eaten by their ravenous graves; but that is the way of tournaments, and life.

The inimitable Morgana had finally known failure; she had not prevented the wedding, but only postponed it. The Lady Vivien was coming to Camelot, to give the prospective spouses the necessary time to persuade the lady’s hand into her reluctant husband’s.

Lancelot had given back the sword, and the horse, and the armour which it pained him to remove. Gwen stood in the emptying field with him, and looking up into his face said, “You won’t come back with us? Arthur did say he wanted you for one of his knights.”

“I will not be a knight of Camelot so long as I am a peasant, and Uther is king. But if I can prove myself worthy of the title to even him, then I will be worthy indeed of it. You’ll hear of me, Guinevere, I’m sure of it. And one day Camelot will be my home; I am sure of that too.” And giving her a flower, he blushed horribly, and went out of her life.
Arthur did not speak as they rode out of the gates of London. He had Tristan at his left hand, and Merlin at his right. They rode thus into the world which had changed irrevocably for him.

Chapter End Notes

RIP to other people's headcanons, but Merlin waltzed into Camelot, witnessed the execution of a magic user, immediately tried to fight the son of the guy in charge of executing said magic user, went to jail three seconds later, and then three more seconds later used his magic to try and teach the fucking prince of Camelot a lesson in front of multiple witnesses: that boy is the sexual aggressor and I accept no criticism.

Also, at last we come to Igraine.
Happy He With Such a Mother

Chapter Notes

I stole this title from Tennyson's 'The Princess'. Also, 'Southwold' was a name that came up when I used a random fantasy town name generator, so that's where that bit of brilliant originality came from. As I mentioned in the last part, this fic is the last piece of the first book, and finishes out this sort of alternative season one that I decided to write, instead of being a responsible adult who doesn't spend all their free time rewriting a BBC family show that's over a decade old. Onto book two/season two, and new dramatics. I hope you enjoy, and thank you sincerely to everyone who has commented and left kudos so far.

It was on a bitter Wednesday in the week following the tourney that Arthur and Merlin set out to seek Arthur’s mother. There was a thick fog which seemed by the timing of it to be the design of some malicious foresight. Morgana watched from the window of her room as they led out the horses, and disappeared into the world as if they had never existed in it. She was kneading the neckline of her dressing gown between thumb and forefinger. She thought somehow this would keep the dread contained inside her, where it could be considered only an accident of nerves, which were liable to act up in any young lady at any given time. If it were given rein, if she let it come outside of her as it wished, and expend itself upon the furniture, she would have granted it credibility; and she did not like for it to have the legitimacy which she feared it deserved.

The fog went on nonchalantly. In one fell breath it sent itself like a frost to the youthful greens of spring, and killed the spirit of them; they were only like a very old man now, who has lost all faith in himself to be colourful, and waits to die. She thought of poor Merlin shivering in it, and trying not to think it a very unfortunate omen; and with a hand at her throat she thought how they had gone into it the way something goes into the sea, and never returns.

There was a knock at her door after some time. She was still standing at the window. She was still feeling in herself all the movements of her distress, and trying to contain them to the silly lonely doubts of a silly lonely girl. She thought it was only Gwen’s usual courtesy, and called out, “It’s open!”

It was Gwaine who came into the chamber, still in his mail. “Can’t sleep?” he asked softly from behind her, and startled her out of her trance. “I saw you from the courtyard.”

“What? Oh. I thought you were Gwen. No.” She looked at the mail. She looked at the grimness of his face. “Just back from patrol?”

“Yeah.” He was taking off his gloves with an air of comfort he should not have felt in a fine lady’s chambers, when the fine lady’s guardian was so free with his pyres. He joined her at the window. “Arthur’s gone, hasn’t he?”

“Yes. To find his mother.”

There was a quietness between them that she did not often care to break; it was the sort of mutual understanding which is content to lie in an easy silence, speaking neither its ills nor its joys. But she could not hold within herself what she knew he already sensed. It was not enough for it to be
perceived; it was too loud in her breast. It was too pressing. She had tried to make it simply a feeling, and not a premonition; but never is such an awareness content to remain only a little excitement, which is born and dead within the same hour. “I have such a terrible feeling, Gwaine,” she whispered to him, clutching at her neckline. “I keep seeing him dead. I thought it would go away, I thought I was only being silly, and I can’t see when or how it happens—so how am I to help it? But now I feel as if I’ve done something horrible, letting them go off into the world. I feel something is about to change irrevocably.”


“No. It’s Merlin. Merlin is going to die,” she said, and felt herself quite supernatural, issuing such a proclamation in the cold and unlit chamber, whilst the fog with slow menace entreated the windows for entrance.

Arthur did not talk. Merlin chattered nervously. They had wrapped the horse’s bits, to silence them, and rode away noiseless into the hills, and there was nothing so quiet as the world then, with the fog at intervals trying to burn away in the sun, and elsewhere sleeping untouched. Merlin did not like it. He felt as he plunged in and out of the shrouds of it to be quite alone, though Arthur’s hair burnt up out of it, and led him as the sun ought to have led him, with yellow and unerring guidance.

They rode without stopping till it was evening; the day had only half-materialised, and slid away without protest. There was a good roaring fire: but the light found that life was unsatisfactory in such a dismal world, and hardly ventured beyond its own comfort. Merlin saw that the trees did not reflect it, and no beast came questing curiously after it. The fog had never actually relented, though it had at points put on a show of it; and now it was back to harry his bones. He clapped together his hands, to warm them. There is a trick such weather has of getting under the skin, and staying as if it is welcome, or at least invincible: and then there is no point in going after it, however good your intentions. Merlin felt the slow despair of it, that warmth was some invention of his own dreams, and nothing the world had ever offered. He felt all the graves of all the earth raise up their native bones, and looked about suspiciously whenever the wood made a noise that was like a rabbit, or a murderous poltergeist. He played nervously round with a little globe of light he kept in his hand, rolling it from finger to finger, whilst Arthur watched him from the other side of the fire.

“You should get some sleep,” he told Arthur finally, putting out the light, as if that were the only thing keeping him awake.

“Young has to keep watch,” Arthur said. There was a fleshless sort of quality to his voice. He had stripped out all the individuality from it, till it might have been anyone speaking, so long as they had had the proper elocution lessons. He sat with his arms round his knees, looking into the fire. Merlin thought how terribly alone he looked, and how it must have felt to be inside of it, to live inescapably in the feeling of solitude. He knew himself what it felt like; but it is not enough, to know one’s own tragedies. You can never go into another’s, and take off the strain of it with experience.

“I can do it,” he offered.

“You can take the next shift, in a few hours,” Arthur said, and of course there was no second shift, but only Arthur, staring into the fire, and Merlin, trying to sleep under Arthur’s cloak. Of course he was never able to actually do it; so long as Arthur was awake, he was awake, and quite suffocating
with it. It was intolerable to think ahead into the near future, to imagine Arthur anything more than happy; but he could not picture the happiness, possibly because he had not seen it come into Arthur’s eyes since the tourney. He had forgot what it looked like on Arthur’s face. He was afraid of the strange woman they were riding toward, and the authority she wielded.

He thought on the second day how difficult it was to feel inside him such an immense power, and to look at Arthur and know it was powerless.

On the third they stopped over at an inn, where they looked after the horses, and went up to bed. Arthur had eaten only a handful of bread since leaving Camelot; and he was not now inclined toward anything more, though there was a good rich stew, trying to draw him in. He undressed without any fuss, not even chiding Merlin for mucking it up, or ruffling his hair. Merlin saw that his hands were shaking as he undid his cloak, and took it off for him, laying it over a stool.

They shared the bed, entirely platonically. Arthur lay on his back. Merlin rolled to his side, to give him some privacy. He thought it was hardly bearable to let Arthur endure it alone; but it was unfair to intrude on him.

At the second inn, under similar circumstances, with the cloak laid neatly over the stool, and the candle blown out, Arthur into the quiet said, “What would you say to your father if you could see him now?”

Merlin rolled onto his back. He put his hands behind his head. “I don’t know. I guess I’d want to know why he left.”

“And what if you didn’t like the answer?”

“I wouldn’t,” he said softly. “No matter what it was. I wouldn’t like anything that made him leave me.”

“But you’d want to know regardless?”

“Yeah.”

They listened for a moment to their own thoughts. The world was comparatively calm in itself, and it seemed to Merlin there could have been nothing so turbulent in it, that the small bare room was now the root of every earthly woe. He felt it was loud with their thinking, as if they had done too much of it, and left some fantastic imprint on the air. It was like the way a person who dies leaves behind every facet of himself, but the ones you most want to keep.

“What if she doesn’t like me?” Arthur asked after the long silence.

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“Well,” he said, and swallowed so that Merlin could hear it. “My father doesn’t.”

How painful it is sometimes, not to bear the pain yourself, but only to watch its cruelty in someone whose joy is dearer than your breath.

He turned toward Arthur. He did not reach out for him, in case Arthur did not want it. But he did prop himself on an elbow, and look very hard at him, in a way that was almost like touching.

“Arthur. Your worth isn’t dependent upon what they think of you. Your father’s a tit. And you are a good, just man anyway; and whether your parents know that or not doesn’t make it any less true.”

Arthur sighed through his nose. “You can’t talk about your king like that.”
He ignored that. “Listen to me. You are going to do fantastic things; I know it. You will be the greatest king Albion has ever known. I believe this with everything I am. And it’s because of who you are, Arthur. It’s because of the man I have seen, and the things he’s accomplished. If your mother thinks any less of you, then she’s wrong, and doesn’t deserve you.”

Arthur looked over at him. His face was soft in the way it was not often soft. “What a lot of rubbish you talk,” he said, and hesitating, he reached out and touched Merlin’s cheek with the backs of his fingers. Merlin held the hand against him, and turning his face, kissed at the shy fingers, giving them room to pull back if they wished. But Arthur kept them there, and even smiled a little at him.

It was four days later they rode into Essitir, and one more after that into Southwold. It was only an ordinary city like any other, and came at them with the usual scents of dung and sweat, and the rushes which had been laid out to confront the former. They passed quite anonymously into it all. To Merlin it seemed Arthur should have never gone unremarked anywhere; but that was only because he loved him, and it was difficult to understand that there was anyone who did not. But here he was only a random knight errant; and there were so many of those one more was unexceptional.

There was a good wind getting up, and Arthur took it as a sign. He said, “It’s too late to find her now. We’ll have to wait till the morning.” He was white-lipped. Merlin said, quietly, “Arthur, there are still several hours of daylight left; the shops will still be open.” He stopped alongside Arthur, to let a cart pass. “But if you need to wait, it’s all right. We can look in the morning.”

Arthur was watching the cart. He watched it pass into a side street, and vanish where the city sloped away from them, into the anonymous corridors where there were citizens living their lives unseen, where perhaps she was living her own unseen, never thinking her son had come to disrupt the smooth revolvings of it. Merlin saw how his fingers gripped the reins, and reached out to touch his knee. “Arthur.”

“No,” Arthur said, swallowing. He was still looking away. “You’re right. I’m being a coward.”

“You’re not. It’s ok if you’re not ready.”

Arthur turned to find his eyes. “No. Let’s go.” He clicked to the horse, which sensing his unease moved off nervously into the crowd.

There were two apothecaries, and when Merlin said, “Is there an Igraine at one of them?” to the merchant Arthur had stopped, they heard, for the first time, the confirmation that they had been looking for: indeed there was an Igraine on Horsemonger Street, and he had had his chamomile from there, for the best price he had yet encountered. Arthur paid him generously, and thanked him. He looked ill.

“Could be another Igraine,” Merlin said. He was concerned by the look on Arthur’s face. There was a kind of despair in it that comes from not knowing whether to hope or fear. His mare caught the feeling of it, and fidgeted underneath him. She looked over her shoulder, and gave the boot a commiserating touch with her muzzle. Merlin could see that he did not even notice it.

Horsemonger Street was thick with foot traffic; they dismounted and lead the horses snorting through it, down the winding stream of peddlers and customers toward the wooden sign which
indicated that they had found the apothecary. There was a strange precision to Arthur’s stride, as if he were only just learning how to walk, and was concerned with the perfection of its metre, and with placing his foot exactly as he had previously placed it, not succumbing to the little quirks of the individual stride as it developed, but trying to do it as if it were a thing he had read about in a book, and wanted to execute quite properly. Merlin’s heart was beating in his throat. He was probably at least as scared as Arthur. If it all went poorly, he would have to watch it, and do nothing. He would have to know how Arthur must be hurting, and know that he could love him, and try to be a replacement for her, and only hurt them both in the clumsy process of trying to do the work of his own love, and hers. When they had reached the door, he wanted to call Arthur back; he thought they had been quite foolhardy. He thought it was all a terrible mistake.

But it was Arthur’s choice to make. It was Arthur’s heart to be broken; and he did not own it, whatever claim his own had staked on it.

Arthur looked at him. He tied the horses to the mounting block outside, and opened the door, and breathed in a fortifying breath to himself, and went in.

There was a woman at the counter. Merlin knew immediately it was her; Arthur had taken the bones of his cheeks from her, and the bright hair. Looking at her now, Merlin could see how the spirit of her had passed into Arthur, and thought how Uther must have been haunted by it. There was a bell over the door, and it sang as they entered, and drew up her head. And looking at them with some faint suspicion of a recognition she did not understand, Arthur’s mother smiled through her bewilderment, and the smile was Arthur’s when he did it naturally, for Merlin and not the court.

“Hi,” Merlin said, because Arthur could not. “Igraine?”

“Yes?” she said to him, but she was looking at Arthur. She knew him, but did not know why she knew him. Possibly she thought he was an old customer who had left some pleasant or unpleasant impression ages ago, and now the phantom of their interaction was teasing at her. But the customer was nearly in tears. He had such great big eyes when he was sad, and made Merlin a bit teary himself. He thought for a moment that if Igraine hurt Arthur, he’d bring the shop down on her; and was terrified of himself.

“Is there something the matter? Are you ill?” she asked, and stopped labelling the jar she was handling.

“No. No,” Arthur said, in a voice that was like a child asking to be comforted in the dark. “My name is Arthur. Pendragon.”

And now she knew, and the knowledge changed her entire face. She held onto the counter, to keep her feet. She whispered, “Has he come for me? Uther? Have you brought your father to me?”

“What?” Arthur said. He was startled. “No. It’s just me. And my friend; this is Merlin. My father doesn’t know I’m here. He wouldn’t want me to be here.”

She held onto the counter. She looked him over for a long moment, whiter even than Arthur. “I’m so glad you survived. It was wicked of me, and I’ve thought of it all my life since. I’m so sorry,” she whispered, and burst into tears.

The tears were Arthur’s undoing. Merlin had never seen him be comfortable with them; he was generally known to awkwardly pat the shoulder of the weeper, and say something which he thought was inspiring, and would remind the grief that it was inappropriate to be sad, when it could instead be stalwart, and manly. But this was a different sort of crying altogether. It was his
mother’s, and new and frightening to him. He said, “Mother,” as if the word had stuck fast in his throat, and were killing him. He tried to hug her over the counter.

Merlin had seen him embraced, generally by himself, or Morgana when she was being rambunctious; he had never seen Arthur initiate it. He made a sort of childlike rush, intending that he should fling himself on her, or Igraine fling herself on him: it was the impression he had of mothers, that they were not fathers, and therefore had nothing in common with them; that they were prepared, at any moment whatsoever, to be hugged, and delighted in it. Merlin stood as she flinched back from him. And then it was terrible, and Arthur, lumberingly halting, and putting down his arms at his sides, not knowing what else to do with them, stopped like a man mortally wounded in the middle of the floor. He was still standing because he had refused to comprehend the fatal blow; but it had struck him nevertheless, and the guts of him at least knew it.

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry,” Igraine sniffled, wiping at her eyes. “You must come into the back. I’ll close up the shop. We can talk. I have long owed you an apology.”

She gave them a bit of cheese and bread, and hot spiced wine. She still had the instincts of a mother, and could not sit idle whilst there were two young men who had not eaten everything she had to offer. “I think—oh, there must be some of the raspberry pie left over...did you want any?” She was fluttering about nervously, sorting through everything she owned, as if the pie might be hiding in one of her tisanes. “No thank you,” Arthur said stiffly. He had only sipped at his wine; he had not touched his bread or cheese.

Igraine said, “Oh, all right,” and went on looking for it, as if the pie were of a great significance. Merlin saw that her hands were shaking, and was sorry for them both. He no longer felt any malice toward her; he felt only that she was a lonely and frightened woman who did not mean any harm to Arthur, but would harm him regardless, and suffer for it.

“What did you mean when you said you’re glad I survived?”

She sat down in a chair across from Arthur. She looked at him tearily. It was difficult for her, Merlin thought, to recognise the small helpless child she had birthed in the form of a man; she was trying to reconcile the two. “What?”

“You said, ‘I’m so glad you survived. It was wicked of me, and I’ve thought of it all my life since.’” He pressed the cup of spiced wine in his hands. He had closed up his face since trying to embrace her; but as usual he had forgot that his eyes said nearly as much, and possibly more: and Merlin knew by them that he was raw inside, and there was nothing she could say that would not set off the nerves inside him. He was simply waiting to be devastated. He had already guessed what she meant, and Merlin thought it was the same as his own assumption. There was no good could come from having it confirmed. He tried to head it off by saying, “Arthur, I think she probably meant—” but that was no good, as Arthur just ran over the top of it.

“That sorceress with the cave in the woods, the one with all the dead children—did you leave me there? Outside the cave? For her to take?”

Igraine had a look in her eyes that Merlin had seen in wounded deer. He ought to have been angrier with her, and could not be. “You didn’t know? Your father didn’t tell you? I thought—I thought he must have. To turn you against me.”
“I was told it. I didn’t believe it.”

She looked away. “You were so very small.” She brought a hand to her mouth. “I couldn’t believe—I couldn’t believe I could feel such such anger toward something I ought to love. But you were a part of him. I was young and foolish. I saw Uther do terrible things to me, to my people; and I thought...I thought there was no child of his that could be--I thought here was his blood, in a new man, who would go on to do the same terrible things to others. And it was better to stop it. I had heard of a sorceress who stole infants away into the woods, and killed them. I was too much a coward to do it myself. I left you outside her cave, to die by her hand, or exposure. And then I ran. And I pictured you lying there, having never done any harm, Uther’s child or no, and I went back. But you were already gone.” She put her hands into her lap, and nervously laced and unlaced them. “I demanded she let me in; I begged at her doorstep. But it was only a stone, and didn’t hear me.”

Merlin wished they had never come. He wished they had stayed at the inn, drowsing in one another’s arms, and forgetting all the world.

“It was Gaius who saved you, wasn’t it? He helped me escape your father. He thought I was taking you so that you would be out of Uther’s hands; but he must have suspected somehow.”

“Why,” Arthur asked, with his voice on the edge of breaking, “did you hate my father so much?”

Igraine looked up from her hands. There was a soft sympathy in her face. “Do you love him?”

“He’s my father.”

“And whatever he’s done he remains your father, and it’s natural to love him. I oughtn’t to disabuse you of it.” She reached out for his cheek, but couldn’t make herself touch it, and pulled back just when it was clear that Arthur was already straining toward the touch, desperate for it.

“I want to know what he’s done. If I am to be king, I need to know how he’s done wrong with it, and how to be better than him.”

There was utter silence. Merlin heard them all breathing in it. He thought of reaching out for Arthur’s hand, but knew he would not be receptive to it.

“Uther,” Igraine began softly, “met me when my husband and I were visiting Camelot. He invited my husband into his home, and seeing that his wife was young, and far more beautiful than I sit here before you now, he decided that I must belong to him. But I loved my husband, and I was faithful to him, and I refused him. Powerful men do not understand a refusal. They think it is something temporary. They think under different circumstances the answer will be different; and of course they can shape the circumstances as they please. So Uther and my husband went to war over me. And one night, my husband returned home to Tintagel; I lay with him. Afterwards I learnt my poor husband had already died in the fighting the evening before, that your father under the guise of an enchantment had come to me with my husband’s face, and tricked me. I was pregnant. He took me home to Camelot. And then I lost the child.” She paused. She was looking into the past, and seemed to have forgot them both entirely. She might have been waiting years to get the story out of her, like a sickness. “Your father was devastated. He did love me, the way he loves everything: which is to say he had subjugated me, and because I was too tired to do anything about it, I gave into it, and he took my obedience for love. That is what it means to him.” She twisted her hands again. “Afterwards, Gaius said I was barren. I was relieved; I hated to bear anything of his inside me. I sometimes think of our first child, and wonder if it was my hatred that killed them.”

Merlin watched the story unfold on Arthur’s face. He watched it settle into him, and alter him in a way that could not be undone.
“But Uther wanted an heir. He went to a sorceress by the name of Nimueh, and asked her for the power to create a life.”

“What,” Arthur said numbly. It was not a question. He did not have the inflection to lift it at the end, and make it a query. “My father used--he used magic to--”

“Yes. You were the result of it. But there are consequences for magic like that. You cannot create a life out of nothing; you cannot expect that there won’t be something needed in exchange. You must exchange a life for a life. I was young. I was frightened.” She swallowed, and there were tears on her cheeks again. “I begged Nimueh not to take mine. But she was bound by her own laws; she had to take something. She took our crops, and we starved. So many of us. And Uther--began to kill anyone who practised magic. She warned him there would be a price to pay for your creation, but kings do not suppose that there should be any power within their grasp that they are not within their rights to wield. I think--” she paused. “I think he could not bear what he had done to his own people. It might have broken his heart, to accept that he had done it to them himself. But that is supposing he has one. That is supposing I am not ascribing a conscience to him, because it would be useless to hate a man without one, who could hardly be bothered by it.”

She seemed to have done now. She had run to the end of it, and was exhausted. She lifted her wet eyes to Arthur. “Did you want to know it all?” she whispered. “Has it brought you any peace, to hear the truth of it?”

“No,” he said roughly.

“No. I don’t suppose it has brought it to either of us. I can only say I’m sorry. I was no better than him, to have taken it out on an innocent.” She did touch his cheek now, quickly, as if she thought it might burn her to leave her fingers against his face. Merlin thought it might have been kinder to not have touched him at all. He saw that it wakened some hope in Arthur, that his mother had hated him long before he could even understand it, and now touched him with the intimacy that a stranger never ventured, no matter how fleetingly.

And then she said: “I hope...I hope you can understand this. I hope you know it isn’t your fault. I don’t know what sort of man you are; perhaps you’re nothing like him. But I want nothing to do with any Pendragon. I came here to live quietly. Camelot is now far in my past. For myself, I need it to stay there. I’m sorry to be selfish.” Her face crumpled a little. “You must have waited a very long time for a mother, and now you’ve got such a poor one.”

“I understand.” Arthur said it in a voice that was almost normal. He stood. There was a formal rigidity in his back.

“Please take something for the ride back,” she begged.

“There’s no need. We have our own provisions.” And kissing her hand with cold decorum, as if she were any courtier, Arthur went out of the shop.

“He’s nothing like Uther, if it brings you some peace,” Merlin said quietly. He could not quite bear to leave. Possibly he thought there was still some slim likelihood of reconciling them, if he could only communicate to her through the inadequate medium of language what he felt inside of him when he looked at Arthur.

But she only said, “I’m glad” and wiped at her cheeks. There was nothing more to be done. He went out after Arthur.
They rode out of Southwold in silence. Arthur could hear Merlin thinking very loudly at him; but he was mercifully and uncharacteristically quiet. He led them some ways outside the city and into the woods before he dismounted, tossing his mare’s reins over her neck.

“Where are you going?” Merlin asked.

“To pee. So unless you want to watch me, then stay here. I’ll be back in a minute.” Arthur was pleased to hear that there was almost the usual crispness in his tone that he used whenever Merlin was being difficult. He walked off into the trees. He went far enough in that Merlin could see and hear nothing of him.

He thought he would not be able to do it, and have to keep it inside of him, and die slowly of it. He put his hand on the trunk of a tree to brace himself whilst his head spun with the effort of trying to contain his weeping, and to let it out. It had been drummed into him since birth not to do it; but he was sick with it. He could feel that it was corrosive, and thought it better to shame himself, where there was no one to see, than to burn with it.

But he was rather dysfunctional altogether, as humans went, and only hiccuped dryly for a while. It was strange to feel the internal heaving, and for it to bring up nothing. He thought perhaps that would be the end of it, and he would not have to choose between his pride and his grief. But having thought it, and feeling the relief of the choice being taken out of his hands, he suddenly burst into tears, and sank down into the grass, crying noisily into his hands. It did not make him feel any better. He saw why he had avoided doing it. But now that he had started it, he could not stop it. He had to let the thing run its course, and hope that afterward he could still be considered quite admirable.

The gloves had got snot all over them; and in a fury he stripped them off, to feel the bare skin against his hot wet face. It was comforting to have this human touch, even if it were his own.

He put his face on his knees. It was tremendously lonely; and lonelier still to feel that he had rather got exactly what he deserved in expecting that possibly he would be loved.

It was an hour later Merlin came and sat next to him, and let the horses loose to graze. To Arthur’s horror there was one more fat tear in him, and it dripped down his nose. Merlin kindly ignored it. He did not in any way touch Arthur. He sat with their knees almost grazing, but did not disturb the sanctity of Arthur’s grief.

“I don’t know how to face him,” Arthur said at last. He said it in the colourless voice of pure exhaustion. “I’ll have to kill him.”

“You can’t kill him. You’d plunge Camelot into civil war.”

“I know. But how--how can I talk to him as if I don’t know? How can I act as if nothing’s changed?”

“You don’t have to. You deserve answers. You just can’t let your anger do to you what it did to Uther.”
Arthur looked down at his hands. He had clasped them over his knees, where they looked to be very feeble suddenly.

There was a lovely day getting on, and it offended him. He did not know why it should have the right to be peaceful when he did not. He mopped at his face, knowing he ought to have done it surreptitiously, so that Merlin did not pity him as soon as Arthur had turned his back; but the cheerful twilight and his own heart had conspired by their rude contrast to make him so miserable he did not care. He wiped at his eyes, and flung off the fat tear with violence. “Maybe we shouldn’t go back.”

“What do you mean?”

“We could go somewhere you’d be safe.”

“There’s nowhere like that for me, Arthur,” Merlin told him quietly.

“We could go somewhere you’d be—safer,” Arthur said, hearing that it was desperately done, and cringing at himself. But now that it was out, it would not be drawn back: and neither did it have the wherewithal to be ashamed of itself, and kept tumbling out its sad little plans, though of course they would be crushed. “We could go somewhere no one knows us.”

“And do what?”

“I don’t know! Be—farmers, or something.”

“Arthur, you don’t know the first thing about farming, and if you did, you would never have suggested you give up your evening baths and inability to dress yourself to till a field.”

“Who said I won’t have any baths, or that I’m going to have to dress myself?” He was gratified to hear it was less pathetic; he was stupidly grateful to Merlin for the light tone of his voice, which allowed the general timbre of the conversation to be turned just a little. “I’d have you with me.”

“No, no; if you’re a farmer, you don’t get a manservant. You’ll have to make up your mind: farmer or prince.”

He stirred the hands on his knees. He had swung back to being solemn. He looked up at Merlin, and the soft mirth went out of Merlin’s face. They were now both sober. “If it meant you were safe I’d be a farmer, and grateful for it.”

Merlin shut his eyes and sighed a little. He pressed his forehead to Arthur’s. “We both have to go back to Camelot. Your people need you, Arthur.” His hand went up into the hair at the nape of Arthur’s neck, and softly laid itself there, and did nothing else, but let the warmth and companionship of it work its particularly human magic. “And you need me, because you’re a completely hopeless pillock and you’d be dead within seconds if not for me.” He rubbed his nose a little against Arthur’s, which Arthur felt was terrifically maudlin of him, and embarrassing; but Merlin was dim about that sort of thing, and did not even notice he ought to have been ashamed.

“But we don’t have to go back right away. Your father isn’t going to be any less angry if you take two weeks instead of one to return.”

Arthur hesitated, deciding whether he was bold enough to do it; and then he kissed Merlin gently on the mouth, only for a moment, but with all the feeling that was in him, that he tried to pretend he did not know about. It was terrible for a moment, whilst the soft mouth simply received the kiss; and then it smiled against him, and he felt there was some good in the world, and the evening not wholly despicable.
Previously sex had been expressed in a mad frenzy, under the duress of discovery. Their clothes had come off almost independently, under their own separate will; but now that they had taken up temporary residence in a city some miles east of Southwold, where they had a private room at an inn, and nowhere to be, other than the market in the afternoons, where they ate irresponsibly, and walked with their hands almost brushing, it was a leisurely affair. There was a lot of slow and purposeful kissing, before their trousers even came off. Merlin in particular liked to kiss his shoulders, and his chest, and all down his stomach, sliding his hands along Arthur’s sides as he went; he seemed to be almost more fulfilled by it than the actual climax. It was all a bit gushy for Arthur, who thought they might as well have been girls, if they were going to caress one another and all that nonsense; but it was difficult to talk himself out of it, firstly because it was pleasant, against all reason; and secondly because afterwards there was to be an orgasm.

On one evening Merlin was doing his usual bit, and with a methodical sort of exploration, as if someone would ask him some questions about it afterward, licking and sucking at various points of Arthur’s body, to see which was most reactive. He blew a hot breath over Arthur’s nipple when he pulled his mouth back from it; Arthur shifted restlessly under it. This was to Merlin confirmation that it was almost unbearable for him, and a little more attention to it would bring the noises up from the back of Arthur’s throat. He sucked at it. Arthur, knowing he was being insolent, and only wanted to see Arthur do something undignified, like beg, twisted his hands in the sheets and kept himself stoic. Well, his foot twitched a bit, but that was only a cramp. It was mostly a cramp. It was not at all a cramp, but one did not tell their insubordinate manservant that.

Merlin went down his body, passing hotly over his stomach, and afterward the air of the room rushing in to flinch the skin with its bracing contrast. He watched the tousled black head work its way down to his hips. He was having some difficulties in maintaining the stoicism. Merlin kissed his hip bone. It was not overtly sexy; but as he was so close to certain other sections of Arthur, it was certainly interesting.

He looked up at Arthur from beneath his fringe, and Arthur’s throat went a little dry. He felt his stomach no longer to be solid, but only a warm liquidy sort of sensation. There was a heaviness to the air. Merlin had done it all with the look, which was not even one of the yellow-eyed ones. He said to Arthur, “Tell me to stop if you don’t want to” and then he slid his mouth down over Arthur.

He had not done it before. Arthur held very still for the new sensation of it, the warm wetness and the friction of it, sliding in a way that Merlin’s hand could not. He threw his head back into the pillows; he couldn’t hold it up any longer.

There were parts of Arthur that still questioned whether it was altogether proper and manly to have sex with his male servant; but they were not currently in charge of him. Merlin’s tongue slid around the head of him, and then all the way down as he sank further, and eventually took Arthur into his throat. Arthur bit down on his hand. He felt the hot slippery workings of Merlin’s throat round him; and then infuriatingly Merlin slipped off.

He pinned Arthur down to the bed and kissed him with hot slow strokes of his tongue. Arthur gave up all his rash ideas of indifference, and moaning into it, wrapped his hand round Merlin’s neck. Merlin rubbed a little against him, with the same leisurely speed by which his tongue was driving Arthur almost to madness. He grabbed for Merlin’s hip with his other hand, and tried to press them harder together; but Merlin slithered away, back down his stomach, and stroking Arthur with his hand for a long moment, twisting it slowly, and rubbing with his thumb at the head, and then
pulling back when Arthur arched up into it, he got back to it with his mouth.

He was good at it. Arthur made a mental note to be jealous about that as well; he doubted any physical thing came with natural grace to Merlin. He wondered who else he had done it with; and then he was busy having it done to him, and could only yank at the head of wild black hair, when it was going too slowly, and pant through his nose.

Merlin brought him shuddering to the edge, and pulled away. He kissed Arthur again.

“What?” Merlin breathed into his ear, biting it.

“I’ll give you the entire kingdom,” Arthur panted.

“Don’t want it.” He slid himself along Arthur with an unhurried undulation of his hips. He held Arthur’s wrists over his head, staring down at him through the rumpled hair; the stare was almost as intimate as the thrusting hips. He sucked Arthur’s lower lip into his mouth. It did something unspeakable to Arthur’s control; he strained up to wildly kiss at Merlin’s face, wherever he could get his own face against it.

Merlin pulled away again.

He went straightaway to business this time. Arthur bit his hand again, but it only muffled him a bit; it did not constrain anything. Merlin slid his hand down over him, and his mouth afterward, so the friction went all the way down at once, and never let up, whether he was only licking at the head, or plunging down to the back of his throat. Arthur drove up into him a little, when he was too gone to be passive; and Merlin seemed to like it, and even drove down harder to meet him, digging his fingers into Arthur’s hip.

There was a sort of white haze in front of his eyes. He did not notice whether he had them open or shut. He felt the maddening pressure of Merlin sucking hard at the head whilst his hand furiously jerked him; he thought for a moment he had reached some stasis where he would be forever suspended in the maddening pleasure, without finding the end of it: and then he was coming.

He clutched at Merlin’s hair. It was wildly inappropriate, and wildly arousing, to be coming inside of him, rather than doing it messily on his chest, or in the bed sheets. He stopped worrying whether he was being too girly, or tartish, and letting go of the hair, he reached up to grab the headboard with both hands, so he could squeeze something as hard as he needed to, and not break anything more precious than a bit of wood.

He was shaking when he finished; Merlin came up, and wiping his mouth, started to stroke himself. He was panting hard. Arthur watched his hand going frantically, and imagined Merlin coming hot onto his chest, his shoulders heaving; and the image was satisfying, but not as much as it might be. “Stop,” he gasped. He was not remotely recovered, but pushed Merlin onto his back, and then for a moment just loomed over him, wondering how he ought to start. He bent over him. It was daunting: possibly moreso than having a sword drawn on him by some hand that wanted to kill him. But he was not going to be cowardly about it. He plunged at it as if it were something that wanted to fight him. Probably it was not an auspicious start: but Merlin did not seem to mind it.

There was first the business of getting his teeth out of the way. When he had sorted that, he tried to imitate what Merlin had done to him, since it had worked rather well. He tried the varying speeds and pressures, and found that it felt like dying to go all the way down, but that if he stroked at the base with his hand, whilst he ran his tongue over the rest of it, Merlin’s thighs shook under him and
he said Arthur’s name in a tone of voice that made Arthur feel very smug. He found the entire business filthy, and liked it immensely; he even touched himself a little whilst he was doing it, though he couldn’t have gone again so soon.

Merlin was pushy, and kept grabbing at his neck. He shoved up into Arthur when Arthur tried to tease him, and pull back off him as Merlin had done; he propped himself on his elbows so he could watch, and then Arthur suddenly felt an absurd shyness, and wondered if he was getting on quite all right. Then Merlin gasped at him, “Yeah, right there” and he felt he was a natural talent, as was to be expected. Merlin pulled the hairs at the nape of Arthur’s neck. He put his fist in his mouth.

Arthur found his revenge in yanking away when he felt Merlin was close, and stroked himself instead of Merlin, so that Merlin had to watch, and suffer. But Merlin reached out and grabbed him by the throat, and pulled them both down to the bed, and dug his nails into Arthur’s backside, and rubbed against him till Arthur cried out, and was coming again. He felt dimly by the shuddering of him that Merlin was in the throes of it as well, and buried his face in Merlin’s shoulder, heaving for breath.

“You tart,” Arthur panted when they had finished. “How many other people have you done that with?”

“Oh, the entire village,” Merlin said, winded. “Yeah. Everybody came to me for favours.”

Arthur hit him weakly across the shoulder.

“Nobody, you jealous arse. I do have some natural talents, you know.”

“Natural sex talents. You.”

“Right, can’t fool you, can I. Yeah, I’ve done it with loads of people. I’ve lost count actually. There’s probably nobody I haven’t done it with. Ask anyone in Camelot. All the knights. Everybody.”

“Shut up, Merlin,” Arthur said, and leant down to kiss him.

“Where would we go if we did run away?” Merlin asked on another evening when they were settling down to sleep, with all their limbs comfortably intertwined. Arthur had given up fighting him on the cuddling; he did put on a brief show of only enduring it, rather than enjoying it, but he was no less a participant. He was certainly not making any effort of opposition against the hand petting his hair.


“That was fast. You’ve thought about this.”

“No I haven’t!”

“Yes you have, haven’t you, you sop.”

Arthur tried to wriggle away from him. He didn’t get very far; Merlin started to kiss at his neck, which usually stopped his nonsense. “Why would we go to Nemeth?”
“Same reason we sent Aland there. It’d be better for you.”

Merlin stopped the kissing; he was too fond to do it. Instead he nuzzled his nose in behind Arthur’s ear, thinking what an absolute stupid arsehole he was, and how proportionate his love was to Arthur’s idiocy. “That’s sweet.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes it is.”

“No it isn’t, take it back, Merlin.”

“Sorry, can’t do that. Turns out you’re not completely insufferable. I never would have suspected it.”

Arthur sat on him and held a pillow over his face. But since they were well into the refractory period, it was easy enough to persuade him he ought to take away the pillow, and put something else altogether into Merlin’s face.

It was out of the dark on the following evening that the question came to him, when Arthur ought to have been sleeping: “Do you think you’d have ever told me about your magic?”

“I dunno. I wanted to. There were so many times I almost did. I just...never could bring myself to do it. I didn’t want you to think any differently of me.”

Arthur was silent so long Merlin looked over, to see had he drifted off; and found that the bright eyes were open underneath the messy fringe, and seeking some lost wisdom in the ceiling overhead. “I’m sorry you felt you couldn’t tell me.”

“It wasn’t you.”

“My father routinely beheads your kind, and I’ve never raised much of a hue and cry over it.”

“All right, it was you a bit.”

“But did you really think I would kill you?” Arthur asked, a bit hoarsely, and looked over at him. “You didn’t think we were...closer than that?” It was obviously unthinkable to him, and hurt him to think Merlin could have considered him capable of it. But love is not an equal adversary to hate.

“It doesn’t matter,” Merlin said softly. “When you’ve heard all your life you’ll be despised for who you are, you can never be close enough with anyone. It’s all a sort of illusion, and you feel it constantly on the verge of coming down round you. You assume anyone’s only ever liked you because they don’t know you. And if they did, they’d hate you. You can’t really trust yourself to anyone.”

Arthur went back to frowning at the ceiling. He put out his hand, without looking at Merlin. He did it stiffly, flushing at himself for showing an ordinary human weakness; but when Merlin had slipped his own into it, there was a brief smile from him, self-conscious of itself, and fleeting; but happy to have lived even for its brief life.
It went on like that. Arthur did not talk about his mother, and Merlin worried over it, and his quietness in that evening time when there is nothing left but contemplation. Then he tucked up behind Arthur’s back, so he could sleep knowing he was unlonely, though of course it is never enough simply to be present for a grieving friend, and expect they will feel less isolated. They generally kept to themselves, though the friendly proprietress of the inn certainly tried to know them better, and sometimes flirted outrageously with Merlin, till Merlin had to kick Arthur under their dinner table, he was so close to throttling her. Spring was getting on marvelously outside the window, and it seemed a shame to destroy the composure of it. It seemed an ugly thing, to ride back through the green world, to Camelot’s sad, mad king, and his lies. Merlin could see as the week finished itself out Arthur growing proportionately more uneasy. He first went through the quiet trouble of it, and was only half-present for anything they did outside their bed; and then he turned to pacing round the room, as if that would get out some of the unease, as if it could simply be walked off, and the matter exhaust itself.

In the afternoons they took out the horses, and went at a hard charge into the nearby woods, till Arthur had burnt some of the nervousness out of him. Then they drowsed under the sun in the sweet new grasses, where it was less troublesome to be human. Sometimes just to have the sun on you, in the vast unlimited world, is quite enough. It was not quite enough for Arthur, but nearly so. It was difficult to get him up and back into the inn. He had the horses on his side, who wanted to keep at the grass, and not to be locked up in a stall with an unpleasant neighbour who would be fed before them.

Merlin was sorry to be strict about it. He was feeling the great tearing struggle between his duty to the future, and his duty to a friend who had been hurt. He was continuously on the verge of telling Arthur they ought to go to Nemeth after all, and forget who they were, and what they were supposed to accomplish. It was not simply a pleasant week, but an altering one; he saw that they had the potential for a quiet life without the steady pressure of fate and death, and he was sick at the thought that he would have to give it up for the daily trauma of being himself amongst his many and unknowing enemies. They could open a shop same as Igraine, and he could teach Arthur some basic herb lore, and they could help the world in a different sort of way altogether, without the flash and grandstanding of their respective destinies: and in the alternative future he would not have to give up Arthur to marriage or battle, but could sit comfortably round a hearth arguing with him as if they were married themselves.

But they would neither of them stand for it, Arthur particularly. He was like the devoted lover in the best of the ballads, and he would always come back round to Camelot on bended knee, to serve and love it. He thought in the depths of his grief that he could choose Merlin, and be happy with him; but Merlin knew the both of them better than that, that there was not inside of him anything great enough to inspire sacrifice; and that Arthur possibly thought he could divide his heart, when Camelot already had the whole of it, forevermore.

On the final day he got Arthur up in the usual way. He had thought about it at length, and decided that to be tender about it was crueler. He said, “Rise and shine, sire!” into Arthur’s ear in an obnoxious voice, and pulled Arthur out of bed together with all the blankets. They landed in a wild heap which blurted out, “Merlin, you fumbling, half-wit idiot.” It was cheering to hear the old gumption in his voice.

But he did not speak whilst Merlin dressed him, and the red tunic was overly flamboyant against his pale skin. Merlin kissed him between his eyebrows, where the skin was furrowed; probably it ruined the effect he had been going for by yanking Arthur out of bed, and getting himself shouted
The mail went on efficiently; he did not linger over it, but put Arthur into it as if it were any other day. Arthur belted on his sword, looking almost sturdy.

But he stopped before they had opened the door, and turning back to Merlin, grabbed him suddenly by the collar of his tunic, and pulled him in for a kiss. It was an anxious sort of kiss, as if he were not certain he ought to have done it; Merlin had to encourage him by holding his face.

It was over in a moment, but not because it was any less thorough a variety of kiss. Arthur looked at him when it was done, not yet articulate.

“It’ll be all right, Arthur. I promise,” Merlin said to him, and Arthur, smiling a little, made up for the kiss by punching him in the shoulder.

It was the sort of cloudless day when all the world is pleased to be alive; not only pleased, but thrills to it: so that the individual music of stream and beast and city were harmoniously married, and lived out their romance in symphonious union.

They set out into it without speaking.

Morgana kept a patient watch at the window. She was away from it only when Gwaine arrived for their daily card game, or when Gwen brought in her meals. She knew there was no logic in sitting round presiding over a return which had not yet happened; and it would be a success or failure without her, and there would be heartbreak or not without her. It was hard to accept. They were a little like her children, and she fretted over having let them out into the world, when one of them could not even dress himself.

“Come away from there,” Gwaine called to her; he had already set himself up comfortably on her bed with the cards. It was an unthinkable transgression, to be lounging round a lady’s bed clothes: but he was nearly as harmless as Merlin, and had a healthy respect for not only Morgana as a person of inviolable autonomy, with a right to herself; but also for the knife she carried under her sleeve. There was a different intimacy to sprawling over the bed with the cards; a table could not have accomplished it. It was the childishness of it, to be doing something in bed she was not supposed to be doing, with someone she was not supposed to be doing it with: it was such a small and harmless naughtiness that she felt much wickeder than if they had really been seducing one another. It cheered her to be bad.

Gwaine was an insatiable gossip, and knew every scandal of every stature; they sometimes chatted so long into the night he had to sneak out as if they had been lovers, instead of interlocutors of endless means, who had got wind of Sir Belvedere’s pox. “So he’s standing there, absolutely starkers,” he was saying now, turning over one of his cards. “The poor mad bastard.”

“The other knights took all his clothes?”

“Well, he’s an insufferable little cunt, he is,” Gwaine said matter-of-factly. He had tried initially to be gentlemanly in front of her; and she had cured him of it almost instantly, and was now privileged to hear all the words men did not want her to hear. She had not even thought them capable of some of their oratory inventions, and liked to try them out at inopportune moments, when it was most embarrassing for king and court. “I’ve taken him under my wing.”
“Which is how he ended up starkers, I suppose,” she replied, smirking a little.

“My lady, I resent that.”

“Well, you do have quite the reputation,” she said, with all the double entendre of which she was capable, which was not nearly enough to make him blush, and that was the only way in which he was inferior to Arthur.

“He takes offence to everything. And he’s mad about Arthur, so obviously insane. It’s a volatile combination.”

“To just come flying down from Cornwall to swear allegiance to Arthur is a clear sign of insanity; I shouldn’t wonder if the poor man is eventually locked away somewhere. Just because he liberated your country is no reason to say pleasant things about him.” She had kept her voice light, but Gwaine was looking at her anyway, in the clever way he had. It was easy to see the hair, and to dismiss him; men were handsome, or they were clever: for lacking one, they had either no necessity, or every necessity, of the other. But he had been round a great lot of the world, for reasons he still would not disclose to her, and knew when it was being false to him.

“Merlin’s fine. He’s got Arthur with him.”

She frowned down at her cards. “I wish that could comfort me.”

“He won’t let anything happen to our Merlin. I’d sooner worry about him not coming back.”

“I’d worry about that too, except it’s not his face I see in my dreams.”

She had not told him about the magic, because it had not been necessary to; she had lost control of herself one day in her fear for them, and burnt up one of her curtains: and he had simply put out the fire, as if he had expected to do it, and brought up a little pudding, to make her feel better.

“But you don’t know exactly what it means, or when it’s going to happen. It’s only something that could possibly happen, eventually, if we take all the wrong paths to it.”

“How you can have been out in the world so long and survived an optimist, I’ll never understand.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

“And you have that in abundance,” she said, and pinched his cheek, and heard through the open window the sound of hooves in the courtyard, and upset the cards, and Gwaine, by hurtling herself off the bed, and toward the window. She grabbed at the sill. “They’re here, Gwaine! Both of them!” She was so relieved she cried a bit, to let off some of the pressure. Then she was flinging herself down the stairs, trying in her rush to manage her skirts, and not being overly concerned by any passing victim, who might have fallen prey to her elbows. As a lady she had the privilege of not being cursed at, though plainly there was a great desire to do it anyway; she ran on with only the single-minded concern of reaching them, and holding one or both, possibly at once.

“Merlin!” she yelled when she had burst into the courtyard as they were dismounting. He brightened upon seeing her, and was trying to greet her when she flung herself into his arms, almost knocking him over. His horse rolled back a judgemental eye at them.

“Hi!” he said, giving her a good squeeze. “You all right?”

“Are you all right?” she asked him, touching his face, and feeling that there was some stubble coming in which surprised her, since he was one of her dependents, and could hardly be so grown.
“I’m fine too, thank you, Morgana. It was a lovely trip,” Arthur said dryly, tossing the reins over his mare’s neck. She looked up at him, and saw that he was tired, and older: not in the usual inexorable way of time flowing on, but in the way that people are old because it has become terrible to be young, and ignorant. She let go of Merlin.

“Arthur, what--”

“Have the horses seen to, Merlin,” he said, stripping off his gloves. “I’m going to see my father.” He nodded to Gwaine, who had come up behind her, a little breathless having tried to match her pace.

Merlin stared after him, frowning. He handed off the horses to a squire, and set out after Arthur.

Morgana seized him by the elbow. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t want him to be alone. We found his mother; it didn’t go well.” He dropped his voice. “He found out some things about his father that were--upsetting. I’m not sure they should be alone together. I don’t know what he’ll do.”

“Uther will have you thrown out or worse if you try and intrude on a private conversation between them.”

“I don’t have to actually go in there. Just, you know...I’ll hover a bit outside. Make sure everything’s all right.”

“You mean make sure Arthur doesn’t kill him?” she asked.

“That’s about it, yeah.”

“Well,” Gwaine said, putting a hand on the pommel of his sword, “I think we could probably keep him in line, between the three of us.”

His father received him in the middle of a council meeting, and dismissed every advisor and guard. His stare blazed up out of him. He used it on Arthur as if he should have liked for it to kill him.

“Have you no sense of duty and honour anymore? To abandon your bride, when I am trying to secure--”

“I don’t think we should be talking about honour, father, when one of us doesn’t have any.”

There was a long silence. Uther sat down slowly, so that every possible menace could be extrapolated from the simple act of taking his chair. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t think we should be talking about honour, father, when one of us doesn’t have any.”

Arthur swallowed. He had intended not to be a coward, and to confront his father squarely. It was more difficult than anything. It was the problem of love, and how slowly it leaves us, though we ought to have let it loose long ago. It ought to have been simple to face his father, and let the hatred in him burn up all the gentler threads of blood and bond; but he had always loved him, and doubting whether he had got the love in return, redoubled his own efforts. He was not able to be cold. It was bitterly disappointing; but there was a comfort in being bitterly disappointing, since he had been little else.

“I found my mother,” he said, and watched how this took hold of Uther. The anger went out of him,
instantly. He was suddenly a shell of himself. He looked up palely at Arthur.

“Arthur, your mother--”

“Is alive. She didn’t die in childbirth. She’s been alive all this time. You blamed--” He had to break off. It had come out of him with such violence he had to lean one of his hands on the table. “You blamed me for killing her.”

“I never did, Arthur. I’m sorry if you felt otherwise.”

“Do you know how many times I heard the nurses whispering as I was growing up, that you could barely look at me when I was born, that I was too much like her, that it was so difficult for you to bear, when I had--” His chin was trembling a little. He felt how much more he had to say, and could not say it.

“I never meant for you to feel that way. I was trying to protect you, Arthur. Your mother abandoned you. We nearly lost you because of that woman--”

“I know what you did to her!” he shouted, and Uther reeled back in his chair. “Don’t lie to me anymore. You raped her, and took her like she was a war prize.”

“I never did,” Uther said coldly. “How dare you even accuse me of such. I loved your mother.”

“If it’s the same sort of love you’ve shown to me, I can understand how she might have misconstrued it.”

Uther stood up slowly. The blazing was back in his eyes. Arthur was prepared to shrink before it, and held himself very still, so he would not. “This conversation is over. Retire to your chambers. Give yourself time to be something other than a hysterical woman.”

“The conversation is over when I say it is, father.” He was proud of himself for it; he had even steadied his voice, and spoke as if he were nearly sure of himself. “Everything you’ve done against magic, everyone you’ve persecuted--it was to punish your own guilt. You had me conceived by magic, ignored the consequences, and our people suffered for it. And you--”

“It was to punish my folly!” Uther roared. “Do you think I understood that my people would starve? Do you think that was explained to me? I wanted an heir--I wanted you. And I let myself be corrupted for it. And innocents suffered.”

Arthur, who had never heard that Uther wanted him, and grown up thinking probably he didn’t, felt a sudden hotness in his throat. “So more of them must suffer?”

“Those who suffer under me are not the innocents. You have an idealised view of men, Arthur. You have not seen the half of them. You are young.”

“I’ve seen enough! I’ve seen enough to know that you have been blinded by your own disastrous choices, that you have conferred them on everyone, that you assume, because you used magic improperly, evilly, that that is the fate of all who touch it. But there are people who do not have your faults, father.”

“Who has put this nonsense into your head?” Uther demanded. “Your mother? Your mother--”

“Don’t speak of her!”

“I will speak of whatever I like, in my own chambers, in my own kingdom, and you will listen to
me, and abide by me. You are not yet king."

"Then have me arrested for my insolence! But I will not hold my tongue any longer--"

"You will!" Uther screamed. "You naive little fool."

And Arthur, through the tears in his eyes, drew his sword.

Merlin was standing with his ear pressed to the door of the throne room. Morgana watched his face change. He looked up grimly at her. "Time to intervene."

They surged inside as Arthur drew his sword. Merlin shouted, "Arthur, don’t!" and raised his hand. And then the terrible feeling came once more hot and thundering inside her breast: she saw the eyes flash gold with magic, and the wild singing of it boiled madly in her own veins, and lifted up the hairs on her neck. There was a moment before he could release the spell, and reveal himself, and she did the only thing she could think of, which was to hit him in the side of the head, as hard as she could. The eyes lost their yellow, and were now only a bit mystified; she caught him in her arms as he staggered back.

Gwaine had run on ahead of them. He had drawn his own sword, and leapt now between Uther and Arthur. "Stop. Stop, Arthur," he said, and he did it so gently it was nothing like an order, but just a heartfelt plea to the goodness in him. He grabbed for Arthur’s wrist as the sword came down onto his own.

"Let me through!" Arthur yelled at him; but it was only a wild despair that would soon lose its heart, and have nothing further to power it. She sat with Merlin half-sensible in her arms, and watched his face crumple. He was heaving for breath. Gwaine, still holding his wrist, pushed up the hand, shoving the sword from his own. He grabbed at Arthur’s mail. "It’s all right. It’s all right," he said in the same tender voice, and caught Arthur as all the violence went out of him, and the sword dropped naked onto the floor, singing out.

Arthur slithered through Gwaine’s hands. Alone in the middle of the floor he sobbed the breath back into him; it was the worst kind of weeping, and wrung out his whole body. It seemed to her that he was trying to bring up something from his belly, and being unable to purge it, had got to sit, and choke on it whilst they all looked on impotently.

And then Uther on his hands and knees crawled out to his son, and looking terribly old, put his arms round him.

In the midst of evening, at the hour when the candles had spent themselves, and she felt herself quite safe, the pale spiritless face of Merlin came into her sleep, and ruptured it.

She did not afterwards rest again. She felt the crisis of the throne room had been the crisis of his death; and having averted it, she had gone to bed feeling nothing more than the heartbreak of leading Arthur back to his chambers by the loneliest passageways, so no one could see him.

The world toiled away towards the hour of its rebirth; and she lay with the blankets pulled to her
throat, seeing into the empty flesh of him.
Chapter Notes

Not too much to say here for once, except the title is taken from an essay of G.K. Chesterton's. The full quote is: 'Love does take us and transfigure and torture us. It does break our hearts with an unbearable beauty, like the unbearable beauty of music.'

A deep and abiding thanks to everyone who has left comments. Know that I read them all feverishly, and afterwards rend my garments and wail a little.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world was deep into spring, and already thinking of inventing summer. It was once more the anniversary of the Great Purge, and it was to be celebrated with all the usual jubilance of a royal birth, or marriage. So Camelot was running about as if it were a bit of livestock with its head only just off, carrying in the flowers which had been rudely plucked from their hillside slumbers, and doing up the banquet hall as if it were a sort of bride who needed the embellishments, having not got them from nature. Most of all, it was anticipating the delivery of three foul sorcerers who had been committing some mischief on the northern borders in the form of civil disobedience: they were coming in on a cart that evening, quite as they deserved, all bound in iron.

Merlin was distracting himself in the usual manner, which was to say that he and Gwaine were being troublesome. Their current scheme could be summed up thusly: they were stealing an entire pheasant from the kitchen. It was a rather complicated affair. Neither of them were allowed into the kitchen; in fact there were sentries posted against the very possibility. Arthur’s meals had to be handed off to Merlin by a page who brought them to the door, shoved them very swiftly into Merlin’s hands, and then scurried back inside, before the criminal could devise some new means of infiltration. To get round this, they had fashioned a device which consisted of a bit of twine with a hook on the end of it, both of which they had stolen from Gaius. The hook was then lowered into the grate through which the steam vented themselves, directly into the path of the pheasant, which was only minding its own business, waiting to be eaten. Gwaine was in charge of the lowering, and Merlin in guiding him, and also the surveillance of cook, and any known spies, some of whom turned about just as the hook had nearly reached its goal, so that at various intervals in its excruciating progress, it had to be suddenly whisked up once more, out of their sight. Gwaine had his tongue out of the side of his mouth, to help his concentration. Merlin’s nose was squashed against the grate.

“Hold. Hold!” he hissed at Gwaine, who obediently froze. Cook was suspicious. She turned round with a ladle in her hand, and there was a friction of deep awe down Merlin’s spine; he felt the danger of it even here, far from its reach.

In the end the task was accomplished, and the pheasant, fortified with some of Merlin’s magic, since the twine couldn’t possibly have held it alone, bravely though it struggled, came twirling up to the grate, which Gwaine plucked up and moved aside. They divided up the spoils, and clapping each other on the shoulder, went off to their respective tasks.
Arthur was sleeping. It was the lovely warm kind of sleep, when every accoutrement of the bed has contrived to form a sort of loving cocoon about its occupant. He was very grateful to it, and intended to never leave it.

Then there was a rough yank at him, and he felt the bed begin to slide away from him. He was not entirely ready to be conscious; he cracked open an eye, half-heartedly. There was a man standing over him who seemed familiar to him, but the features were murky. He opened the eye whole-heartedly. It was Merlin, pulling him off the bed.


“Well, I tried shaking you, and you wouldn’t wake up, so now we’ve got to do it the hard way, as usual.”

Arthur flailed at him, but his arms were bound by the blankets (and, he suspected, by a bit of Merlin’s magic as well), and the flailing was ineffectual. Merlin continued to pull. Arthur tried to grab for one of the posts, as if that for some reason had a hope of success, when the flailing had not. The post rushed with indifference past him. He made a great resounding thwack against the floor, and lay for a moment devotedly hating Merlin. He should have taken great pleasure in stabbing him; but his sword was across the room, and it was an insurmountable effort to leave the blankets, even to accomplish such a justified murder.

Merlin was now rushing about the room, throwing things hastily into their chests and cupboards, and with a wave of his hand stoking the fire. “Can’t stay; I have to go help Gaius.”

“You’re the prince’s manservant. Your priority is supposed to be serving your great and honourable liege.”

“My great and honourable liege won’t make me taste the unguent for boils if I’m late again. It tastes like your boots smell. I’m sort of in trouble with him; he’s going to kill me if I’m not back to the workshop in five minutes.”


“Ring for it. You have an entire castle full of servants.”

“And how am I meant to get dressed?”

Merlin stopped the ridiculous scrambling about, and knelt beside him. He picked out one of Arthur’s arms from the mess of bedcovers, and frowned thoughtfully at it. “It’s just as I suspected: it’s not broken.” There was now an unnerving smile on his face. “If you’re really worried about whether or not you can dress yourself, I think I saw Tristan heading this way. I’m sure he’d be happy to assist you.”

Arthur grabbed at Merlin’s forearm before he could withdraw. “Merlin, don’t leave me alone with that man. He’ll chew up my breakfast and put it in my mouth for me. He probably considers it beneath me to have to hold myself whilst I pee.”

“I’m pretty sure you do consider it beneath yourself.”

“Merlin.”

Merlin insolently ruffled his hair, and then leaning in said, “Hey, kiss me” in his usual pushy tone.
“No!” Arthur protested, feeling that the domesticity of good-bye kisses was a bit much. He got up on an elbow to meet Merlin halfway. Merlin rushed it a bit, but it was a satisfactory kiss nonetheless; Arthur tried to pull him back into it as Merlin pushed back on his heels.

“I have to go,” Merlin murmured against him whilst they kissed again. “Meet me at the cave later tonight?”

“I can’t,” Arthur said, trying to hold him in place by the nape of his neck. “I have a speech to write.”

“You do not.”

“I do too!”

“You’ve never in your entire life since I came into it written any of your own speeches, and anyway, I know when you’re lying.” Merlin pressed their foreheads together. “But fine, keep your secrets. I’ll just get it out of Morgana later.”

“My affairs are none of Morgana’s business,” Arthur said crisply.

“Everyone’s affairs are Morgana’s business,” Merlin replied, and kissed him hastily again as there was a knock at the door; he went to answer it with a hateful smile on his face, and entirely too cheerfully said, “Tristan! Good to see you. Arthur was just asking for you.”

“My lord,” Tristan said, and entering the room, bowed deeply with his hand on his sword. “How can I assist you today?”

“My lord,” Merlin said also, and bowed as if he were not an unbearable, disobedient and altogether horrid arse. He went out with a horrible little smile to himself.

Arthur fell back into the blankets.

It was a miserable evening. The day had woken cheerily enough, and as it progressed, began to feel all the bitter aches of living; so that when the sun closed its eyes on the height of dusk, and took with it all light and chance for good humour, it was decided that it should be taken out on the land, and on Arthur. Arthur had crept through it on foot, afraid someone would notice the absence of his horse, and he was now thoroughly soaked, and muddy. There was a good strong hail slapping him about, and not in the way he liked to be slapped about (not that he did). He felt the bitterness of having done a good deed, and the good deed turning out to be quite the wretched slog, ungrateful for his sacrifices.

The moon showed him out to the high road, occasionally, when it was not in a temper, and decided it might be all right to come out of the clouds for a peek. It was helpful, but not necessary; he could have navigated the route blindfolded, and now decided he might, just to impress Merlin, who had got absolutely uppity, now that he had the good fortune of sleeping with Arthur.

He climbed a tree overlooking the road. It was hard going with his cloak, which snagged all the way up, and at moments nearly toppled him out altogether. He called it a word he had learnt from Gwaine, and heaved them all into the uppermost crown, where there was a good sturdy fork for him to wedge himself into. He sneezed, and felt offended at the entire situation. There was a good lather getting up under his cloak, and the wind sought it out maliciously, so there could be nothing
bearable about the entire thing. He leaned his head back against the trunk, and breathed into the neckerchief Merlin had forgot in his chambers, which he wore now round his nose and mouth. It was at least warming; of course it smelt like Merlin, which certainly was annoying, and not at all comforting, but as there was little that was pleasant at the moment, he had to take the small pleasures with their caveats.

The night went on as if it intended to take its time, and did not mind that he was in a wet dirty tree in a wet dirty cloak; the moon had left him entirely, and though the hail had softened into a rain, it was not an improvement. Even the new growths of spring, quite up for anything after the hard winter, were bending away from it; and the woods with a discontent rustle at intervals shook out their leaves, and dumped their watery burdens when it was all simply too much.

Arthur watched the road. He held the pommel of his sword till it hurt. He was damp and frightened; and the dampness increased the fright, and the fright the dampness, so that by the amplification of the two it seemed to him he had never been as wet, or as terrified. He flexed his fingers. There was some relief in it; he felt that in easing the stiffness of them he had solved something, and the accomplishment of it cheered him a little. But still there was the waiting to endure, and that is a mighty chisel, and chips away even the most stalwart of us. He was certainly feeling quite whittled down, and uncertain whether he was frightened that he had missed the cart, or frightened that he had not, when there was a change in the rain. It did not turn away its wrathful eye, or let up: but it was no longer alone. There came through it the creaking of wheels, and the displeasure of the horse responsible for turning them. It was snorting with all the peevishness Arthur felt.

He crouched down, pulling his hood round him. His heart had either stopped, or run on so quickly no human consciousness could now sense it. He felt he was going to be sick. It was not knightly of him: but for a moment he imagined the cart passing unmolested underneath, with its pitiful captors swaying in their bindings, and the escort trotting happily away into the world, to their hearths.

Then he leapt down onto the back of the rider now directly underneath him, and knocked him cleanly off his horse.

There was the expected chaos of an ambush in the dark; someone tried to shoot him, and instead shot the cart driver. He fell with an indignant squawk from his seat, having taken the arrow in his shoulder, and being more startled than hurt; but he was evidently a man with some training, and as he fell, pulled his dagger on the two figures wrestling in the mud. Arthur had got the upper hand, but the escort was now closing on him, and in addition to not being killed, he had also to concern himself with not killing any of them. He had also the neckerchief to look after, which was still in place, but only tenuously. He punched the man underneath him in the temple, and at least had one less thing to consider; and tightening up the neckerchief, rolled from underneath the dagger, barely visible in the driving rain. It was a bit like a shaft of moonlight, uncertainly flashing here and there, as if it were deciding whether or not it was right to have shown itself. Arthur braced his hands beside either ear, and arching himself, flipped neatly back onto his feet; the driver had not expected this from the sort of ne’er-do-well who lived in a tree, and hesitated. It was injurious to him: Arthur grabbed his wrist, and wrenching the dagger out of it, flipped the man over his back, bending the joint disastrously, so that with the sort of crackling that was much like the presiding tree branches, cackling together in the wind, the wrist was out of service, and the man too; he screamed and clutched it to him. Arthur choked him unconscious.

Then he was tackled. He knocked his head against one of the wheels, and nearly blacked out: but as there was a knife inches from his face, he felt motivated enough to go on, and fought viciously against it. It was hard going whilst his head spun, but as he had either the luxury of being sick, or being stabbed, he devoted himself to the former, and it was almost pleasant to wrestle in the mud
with the bile in his throat, considering the alternative. But it was not going as well as he imagined it
might when the man on top of him was suddenly torn away, quite unexpectedly, screaming. He
slammed into the cart, and fell silent into the mud.

There were two other escorts, and they had dismounted to face him, and approached cautiously,
possibly expecting that he was in league with their prisoners, and might have a dirty trick or two up
his sleeve. But they were not to reach him: the same force which had disposed of the man who had
tackled him picked them up right off the ground, as if God were having a little joke at their
expense, and liked to admire his handiwork; they hovered for a moment, crying out and twisting
round, as if that might help, and then they were bashed like dolls against one another, their heads
sounding magnificently: and they were tossed aside.

Arthur, breathing hard, straightened from his crouch.

“That was stupid,” Merlin said from behind him. It was coldly done; and Arthur turning round,
saw that he was white with fury.

“What are you doing here?” he blurted out.

“Saving your stupid useless backside!” Merlin shouted. “How could you be so stupid?”

“Me? What do you think you’re doing here? If anyone finds out about this, you’ll be executed --”

“You think you won’t?” Merlin yelled. “You think Uther will look the other way because you’re--”
He stopped, panting. He looked to the captives cowering in the back of the waggon: one slight
tenage girl, and two middle-aged men, all of them thoroughly knocked about, and watching
tensely. He softened. “Let’s get them out of here before anyone comes to.”

So they went swiftly through the driver’s pockets, not speaking to one another, and having
unearthed the key, set about unlocking the manacles, and helping the prisoners down from the cart.
Merlin had even brought along a little satchel with food and some unguent in it, for their various
abrasions; he spoke softly to the girl, who upon her release immediately put her face into her hands,
and sobbed out her poor little heart. Arthur hovered awkwardly in the background, trying to be
inconspicuous; he did not know what else to be, when people were hurting. It was presumptuous to
assume he would be of any use.

But Merlin saw them off kindly into the woods, and the girl, much recovered, looked up at him
worshipfully, and even waved to Arthur before she was taken off by one of the men, into the dark
lonely wood.

Then Merlin turned on him less kindly, and grabbing him by the arm, wrestled him from the road,
and into the trees, where he yanked off the neckerchief. Arthur wrestled him back; he was not
going to be manhandled by someone on whom he had an easy hundred pounds. (Sixty, if he took
into consideration that the daily and onerous but quite justifiable labour of serving him had put
some not inconsiderable meat onto Merlin’s bones.) He pulled his arm away; Merlin pulled it back.

“Arthur,” he hissed out between his teeth. “That was exceptionally stupid, even for you.”

“That’s my line, thank you, Merlin.”

“Not tonight it isn’t,” Merlin snapped, and shook him. “What the hell were you thinking?”
The shaking had made him mulish; Arthur shut his mouth, and glared at him.

“Arthur.”
“What am I to do?” Arthur snapped back. “To sit here and tell you how I’ll change things when I’m king? To say something pretty from time to time, to make myself feel better, to assure myself I’m not like my father, while injustice is carried on under my nose? I can’t just--do nothing, Merlin! I’ve done that long enough.”

Merlin let him go. He had pressed his mouth into a thin line. He was breathing hard. He looked as if he would like to hit Arthur. Then he simply looked as if something had penetrated into the guts of him; and then the fight left Arthur altogether. He was desperate to touch Merlin; but he had never understood the distinctions of human touch, and how and when they might be tolerated from him. He wanted to believe that here were the only circumstances under which he would never be rejected; and here was the only person who would never forsake him. But he had made an assumption of love about Igraine, and he had learnt his foolishness; and how terrible to have it confirmed by Merlin, whom he loved just as sadly and helplessly as he had ever loved his mother.

But Merlin sighed, and looking a little more favourably upon him said, “You want to help free sorcerers?”

“Yes. It isn’t enough to say I disapprove of oppression, is it? I can oppose it, or I can be a party to it.”

Merlin stared at him. There was the look in his eyes that made Arthur a bit warm in the pit of his stomach, and he thought, with the great relief of having something taken off him, that he was to be forgiven; Merlin grabbed one of his shoulders, a little tightly for reconciliation: but he did not shake Arthur again. “I suppose you might do as king. Marginally. Since we have no other options.” He did not kiss Arthur, as Arthur had hoped, but he did run a hand down the side of his face, to show he was now more favourably inclined toward him.

Arthur did not mean to, but smiled at him, and he felt how the smile beamed out all the secrets of him, the tiny restless motions of every feeling he could not share. Merlin said to him, “You’re an idiot” with such fondness in his voice that Arthur found that even the water running down into his boots was not so unfriendly after all, when previously he had considered it a personal affront against his exalted being.

“We’ll save people, Arthur,” Merlin said with a new intensity in his voice. He tightened the hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “But don’t do it without me. We’ll do it together. Ok?”

“Right. I suppose you can be of some limited use.”

“Some.” The smile was brief and a little pained on Merlin’s face. “You have to be careful, Arthur. If Uther catches you--” His throat worked with great difficulty. “He hates sorcery more than he loves anything. Just remember that.”

“Certainly more than he loves me.” He had tried to say it wryly, but saw by Merlin’s face that it had come out in an altogether different tone.

“Yeah. But there are other people who make up for it. You know Morgana, she puts on a good front, but really she likes you a lot.”

“Really? Anyone else?”

Merlin squinted out into the rain, rubbing his forehead, as if the act of considering it hurt him, which probably it did. “I don’t think so. Yeah, she’s definitely all I can think of. I think Gaius, maybe? He does have a soft spot for idiots.”
“You would certainly know.”

They smiled a little stupidly at one another; Arthur had found it was establishing itself as a habit, which he did not approve of at all. He punched Merlin in the shoulder. Merlin punched him back, and the punch was almost painful, thanks to Arthur’s meticulous training of it.

So they walked the long road back to Camelot as friends, sharing Arthur’s cloak, since Merlin had thought to bring food and medicine for the prisoners, and naturally forgot any warm clothing for himself.

Of course the sorcerers were quite the loss, and Uther was put out by it, if so mild a term can be appointed to his reaction. But the feasting went on as feasting must, and the people (and their ruler) were appeased (marginally) by the execution of a thief, who was made much of, and heartily mocked, so that the killing of him was quite as worthy an affair as the death of any foul magician.

Life then returned to its usual tributaries, flowing away and meeting up as it is wont to do. The citizens passed in and out of their citadel, and died and lived as they always had. There was nothing particularly standout about any of it. Merlin did his chores with great protest, and put the most odious of woodland creatures into Arthur’s boots, who by their lack of fur fail the human standards of cuteness, and then can be quite mistreated any way the race devises. On Tuesday evenings he convened with Morgana in Arthur’s chambers, to practise magic. They had moved their studies from Morgana’s rooms after one of Arthur’s tantrums had displaced them to his own, as if in watching over it with his arms folded, he could prevent the calamity of discovery. Gwaine joined most of their sessions, to accomplish his nightly task of aggravating Arthur, and to volunteer his services as test subject for the spells which Arthur would not allow to be cast on himself; and this was how he spent one day as a frog, but as he had a lovely little dish of water with river stones, and a lily pad, he had a perfectly grand time, and wouldn’t mind doing it again.

On Wednesdays were Merlin’s rote lessons, and the lessons were conducted in the following way: he played a scale, and Arthur called the scale absolute rubbish; then Merlin gave him a comically large nose, and Arthur yelled till he had his own back. After that, Merlin played a little tune, and if it was quite lovely, Arthur pronounced it to be tolerable; and if he had muffed it, Arthur took away the rote, and with an air of grievous conceit, showed how it ought to be done. Merlin during the latter did not pay any attention to the lesson being imparted, but dreamily spent his expenditures of thought on the image of taking up the rote from Arthur’s practised fingers, and smashing it into his face.

The lessons were generally concluded by an argument, and the argument by kissing. Arthur had strict rules about sex within the bounds of the citadel, but he was less severe about the kissing, since it could be broken off swiftly, and there was no displaced clothing to replace. Merlin was not entirely in favour of snogging for an hour when there was to be no satisfaction at the end of it; but as there was much murmuring in between, and the murmuring was not all prattish (though much of it was), and Arthur was prone to forgetting himself, and relaxing into Merlin’s arms, even when they were no longer kissing, but only talking, it was not absolutely dreadful. They fell asleep on one occasion, and then Merlin was startled awake by Arthur shaking him, and hissing out his name. “Go and check if Gaius is asleep!” Arthur demanded in the same surreptitious hiss.

“What?” Merlin asked blearily. “You go check!” He put the pillow over his face.

“I can’t!” Arthur snatched the pillow away, and hit him with it. “He can’t know I slept here!”
“Then don’t tell him.”

“Merlin.”

“Just say you were passing by, and you decided to come and wake me up, because you’re an intolerable lout, and you do things like that. He’d buy it; he knows you’re an arsehole.”

“Mer. Lin.”

So then Arthur had to be escorted down the stairs as if he were a child, and snuck out the door, whilst Gaius snored obliviously. Dawn was not yet a vague twinkle in the eye of its mother; Merlin tried to sleep as he held open the door for Arthur, and to dream pleasantly of killing him. Then Arthur gave him two hasty good-bye kisses, and Merlin decided in the morning he would not interrogate Gaius on poisons, and which was the most painful of them all.

Thursdays he had supper with Gwen and her father, though Arthur complained long and loudly about the unfairness of being expected to serve himself whilst his employee ran round doing quite as he pleased. Merlin said, “Yeah, it’s a cruel world. I don’t know how any of us stand it,” and maliciously called for Tristan, and went away quite warmed by the look of abject horror on Arthur’s face.

He was relentlessly minded by Morgana, and had to assure her that he was not presently going to die, since Arthur would be cross with him for it, and then whenever they met up again, he’d have a lecture on it; she was not comforted, and assigned Gwaine as his guard when she was unable to act in the capacity of one: but as Gwaine was never opposed to misconduct, they were able to carry out all manner of deviousness whilst they were supposed to be vigilant against Morgana’s visions of his impending demise.

It was a perfectly pleasant way to exist; but of course it could not last.

The lady Vivian did not like Camelot. The gardens were somewhat adequate, and she spent much of her time sitting round them, so the lady Morgana could see how much prettier she was; but the lady Morgana was generally oblivious to her when she was not detailing the numerous penile flaws of Prince Arthur, possibly because she was quite as stupid as the rest of them.

She did not like Arthur either; in fact she actively hated him. Occasionally she was made to picnic with him, and then he paid her only what attention was compulsory, and spent the rest of it on his manservant, whom she also hated. They were an excruciating combination, and often smiled at one another, as if their lives were anything to celebrate. But of course they knew little else, and must have thought their existence to be perfectly all right, having no point of superior comparison.

She was walking off the helplessness of being a woman, and the expectations of uselessness, and of rote obedience, and thinking to herself how she could extract herself from the insufferable future which some men had envisaged for her; it was not a lovely afternoon: even the weather had abandoned its habits of charm which she knew in her own kingdom, and only sulkily went about its duty of being present. She had evaded her escort, and was pacing the lawns near the woods when she had the sudden inkling that she ought to go into them. They were a nasty old wood, and she could not think why she might be drawn to them; but nevertheless she walked out to them as the inkling bidded her to do. Perhaps there was some fearsome beast, and it could be tamed as fearsome beasts were often tamed in the ballads of her homeland, by taking its repast in the laps of
maiden's fair. Her lap was certainly up to the task; of course it was gruesome to submit to some vulgar animal: but afterward she would have its loyalty, and its abilities of pillage and plunder.

There was not any beast awaiting her; there was a beautiful lady in a cape, with the hood down. She smiled as Vivian approached; her lips were of that perfect and rosy red which the poem designates as a rosebud: and they looked quite as soft. She was a little transfixed by them. Then they parted, and ruined the illusion of inoffensiveness: it was only a mouth like any other, inundated with small white teeth, and capable of any volume of rubbish.

“Who are you?” Vivian demanded. She looked at the exposed white bosom, only to see if it was quite as smooth or delicate as her own, which naturally it wasn’t.

“I’m here to help you, Vivian. I have come to put the power of all Camelot at your feet.”

“I already have it,” Vivian said dismissively. “I’m to marry the prince. It all will belong to me.”

The woman smiled. “But that is not what you desire, is it? The prince?”

“Of course not. Who would? He’s entirely unbearable.”

“I agree. And I would not see you throw yourself away on him, when there’s no need for it, when Camelot, and much, much more, can be yours with my help. You don’t need Arthur.” She smiled, dazzlingly.

Of course she did not trust any random woman in some loathsome forest, who might have been a witch, or more odiously, a peasant. Nevertheless, she did not deny the attraction of the offer, and how it might benefit her, and injure Arthur. She crossed her arms, and regarded the woman with interested suspicion. “So what do you propose?”

“Deliver Arthur to me; I cannot get at him in Camelot. I have tried. I have a use for him. Bring him to me, and anything you desire shall be yours.”

“And how am I supposed to do that? It’s a mutual loathing between us, I’m happy to say. He won’t listen to anything I say.”

“You will not do the luring, Vivian.” And saying this, the woman reached into her cloak, and brought out an ornate ring with a ruby glowing at its centre, and quite a nasty feeling about it. She had an instinctive revulsion to it, and should have liked to fling it back into the woman’s face, and flee. “The person Arthur values most in all the world is a man called Merlin.”

“His manservant?”

“Yes; and with the help of this ring, Merlin will fall deeply in love with you, and do whatever you bid. You will bring him to me: and he will bring Arthur to me.”

“But he’s a servant.”

“It will hurt Arthur,” the woman pointed out, and it was a pleasant enough consideration, but she was not entirely done with pondering the matter overall, and gave the ring a withering look where it lay in the woman’s palm, to show she would not be pressed.

“Why don’t I just use the ring on Arthur, then? Why not force Arthur to fall in love with me, and bring him directly to you?”

“Because,” the woman said, and now she smiled as if she were baring a set of fangs, “it will hurt
Arthur. To lose Merlin, I think, is the worst of any of his fates.”

For a moment they stared at one another, and Vivian felt now the electricity of a mutual understanding, the pleasantness of it in her veins, and oddly now all the world in concert, impressing upon her the rightness of this woman. She felt that the ring was drawing her in, the sweet sharp yearning of it for her; and in response, her own sweet sharp yearning for it. She slid her hand over the woman’s, feeling the soft white flesh underneath, and looked up into her blinding smile.

“My boot,” Arthur gasped. “It’s still--Merlin!” He hopped, as if to emphasise that he was still improperly over-shod; and Merlin taking him by the shoulders shoved him back into the pile of bedcovers he had stashed in the cave on one of his previous forays, and climbed on top of him.

“Leave it,” he panted, and leaned down to kiss Arthur with bruising enthusiasm. There had been quite a lot of rote lessons, with their unsatisfactory conclusions; so he did not bother with any languid foreplay, but straddled Arthur, and taking them both out of their trousers, rubbed mindlessly against him till they had both come, and then collapsed down into his arms.

“You got it on my tunic!” Arthur protested.

“Right. Sorry,” Merlin replied breathlessly. “Next time I’ll be more mindful of that,” he said, and in the interests of not being a liar, came fantastically and with great satisfaction in Arthur’s mouth, when they had sufficiently recovered. Arthur was naturally inclined to tartishness on the subject of fellatio, and practised it whenever he had a chance, and now could do all sorts of things with his tongue; Merlin could barely stand whenever he finished, though of course it was not proper to mention that to Arthur, who recently had made him cry out, “Oh God, Arthur” and was still smug about it.

Afterwards they lay recuperating in the blankets, with Arthur’s chin on Merlin’s shoulder. He now made only a very feeble show of displeasure about the cuddling, generally with his head on Merlin’s chest. They were lying with their hands clasped, which only weeks ago he would not have allowed; and Merlin was proud of him for his development of characteristics which were not knobbish, and kissed the side of his head to show it. He smoothed down the hair he had mussed.

They only had an hour before Arthur had to return for a council meeting, so the cuddling was tragically short-lived, though whilst they were dressing one another, they did accidentally have sex once more, and ruined Arthur’s trousers.

“I can’t go to a council meeting like this!”

“So take a bath,” Merlin said. He was still sitting in Arthur’s lap, kissing his slack lips.

“I don’t have time!”

“I’ll dunk you in a river on our way back,” Merlin promised, and as he did not like to break his promises, he was true to his word: so in the end Arthur was late after all, and took his place with exaggerated dignity, and wet hair. Merlin stared at the back of his head whilst he attended him, and stifled his desperate urge to laugh. He poured Arthur’s wine, and stood as upright as if he were a proper servant, and had not recently defiled anyone currently discussing grain reserves.
They flirted all the way back to Arthur’s chambers, though Arthur was too thick to know it, and thought they were arguing. Merlin shoved him through the door, and kissed him frantically, till Arthur was stupid with it; then he abruptly let him go, and pulled out his chair for lunch. Arthur frowned at his betrayal.

“Your the one who said no sex in the castle.”

“Well, one of us has to be responsible and level-headed, and keep you from being executed!”

“Not being executed is overrated,” Merlin said, and got on his knees under the table, and proved it. Arthur surrendered completely to his inability to control him, and shuddered, and gripped the table so hard it creaked.

“See you tonight at the cave,” Merlin told him afterwards, and wiggling his eyebrows, went out of the room whilst Arthur was still hardly sensible.

“Did you know there’s a book about you in the library?” Arthur asked sleepily. They were comfortably interlaced, listening to that soft aria of evening which is most poignant in the deep hours of twilight’s long retirement.

“A book? About me?”

“Well, not anymore. I burnt it.” Arthur turned a little restlessly in his arms, trying to determine where he would not be jabbed by a shoulder or knee, and finding no respite, simply resigned himself to the discomforts of taking a skinny man to bed. “It was...I don’t know what it was. It referred to a sorcerer called Emrys. I thought it was a lot of rubbish at first. I remembered the Sidhe had called you ‘Emry’s’, and the...the sorceress in the woods.” It was like bringing up something hot in his throat, to remember her, to remember that his mother had given him freely, in expectation that he would soon be like the little pink bodies far away in their ever untroubled slumbers. He had weighed on her so dearly he had driven her to atrocity; and he could not forgive himself, for being so unforgivable. He did not like to wonder if she had done right in leaving him, and if Gaius had done wrong in saving him, and could not help wondering. “I think they were meant to be prophecies. It was when I first realised, about your magic. I knew it then, but I didn’t want to. So I burnt the book, and took you boar hunting.” He frowned, and ran his hand up Merlin’s arm, concentrating on how he had disturbed the hairs. “I went to tell my father.”

“It’s all right.”

“It isn’t.”

“You didn’t, so.”

“But I almost did. I told him I had something of grave importance to discuss with him, and then I lied about something to do with the men, and training them. I don’t even remember what I said. I don’t think I knew whilst I was saying it. I just...couldn’t.”

“Arthur. It’s ok.”

Arthur ran his hand up the arm again, concentrating with great focus on the task of doing a wrong to the natural disposition of the hairs, and then of righting it. “I’m sorry.” It was difficult to articulate; he knew it was right for Merlin to abandon him. He knew that Merlin would not have
faced the temptation, and nearly yielded to it; that it was enough for a man to be his friend, and to be insulated by the friendship from any outward pressures of duty.

But Merlin only rubbed his chin against the top of Arthur’s head, and then kissed it. “Arthur. It’s. All. Right. You big stupid.”

It was frightening to feel himself loved, to know the incendiary nature of love, and how quickly it burnt up in the face of his unworthiness. But it was difficult to feel it, and resist; it was difficult to be in the warmth of it, in the soft mutability of it, to feel simultaneously how it could shift underneath him, as he met the requirements of it, or did not meet them, and how it was presently embracing him. He was scared to lose it; but he was also scared to leave it. It was a little like walking before he understood the mechanics of it, to choose of his own free will to go deeper into it; he was positively wobbly, and terrified of a tumble. He imagined how it would be, to not hold himself a little aloof, to keep back a piece of himself that would make out all right, in the inevitable disappointment.

But then he looked up at Merlin, who was looking down with a smile; and the choice was made for itself.

Gwen was walking across the courtyard humming to herself one afternoon when she spotted Merlin and Arthur. Merlin had said something particularly funny, and Arthur had thrown back his head to laugh at it. He clapped Merlin on the shoulder. It was not any different than any other time she had seen them ribbing one another, but there was suddenly inside her the incontrovertible click of things falling into their true place, and showing her the world as it really was. She realised she had sailed blindly along, believing herself to be Merlin’s beau, or believing herself at least to be in possession of the possibility of being his beau, when he was already in love with Arthur. She had been silly with her imagination, and applied it indiscriminately to their kiss, and those projections of the future which a kiss always draws up in optimistic hearts.

In a moment she violently hated them. She thought it would pass; but the next moment was the same, and the one after that. She was only capable of the one emotion, and it had burnt up everything else, and left her vicious. Then it was easy to imagine the whole world was equally evil, that it had noticed all her stupid little daydreams, and the flowers she had given Merlin as tokens of her undying affection, and laughed at her.

She ran crying off to the stables, where Arthur’s mare received her with a concerned look. She let herself into the stall, and sank down into the straw, where she could have herself a proper cry. The hatred was dying out in her, and the coals of it were only a terrible pity for herself. She hiccupped wretchedly. She wondered how long she had been stupid, and put her face in her hands.

It was a miserable business. She was quite thirsty when it was over, and felt as if she had run a very great distance. It was exhausting to be sad, and the effort of it had ruined her for any evening chores; but she did feel a bit better. She was not any less in love with Merlin, and he was not any less in love with Arthur; but now she understood that the two could exist simultaneously in the same world, without the bitterness of being adversaries. She wiped her eyes, and looked up to find Arthur looking down at her. They both froze.

He had an expression of acute panic on his face. He rested his hands on the stall door, not knowing what else to do with them. He cleared his throat. “Is there--is there something I can do for you, Guinevere?”
Of course she was not inclined to be tender or even tolerant of him; but he was so uncomfortable, and so stubbornly resistant to it, that she did feel he was not altogether a monster. “No.” She wiped at her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Do you want me to get Morgana?”

“No! Don’t bother her. It’s only something silly.”

Arthur frowned. “I’m sure it isn’t, if it’s upset you so badly.”

“It is, I promise. It’s nothing. I was just feeling a bit...overwhelmed. By my chores.”

“Your chores?”

“Yes, that’s all. Sometimes it’s difficult work, and I’m just--I just get a bit tired sometimes, that’s all.”

“You’re tired.” Arthur frowned again. “If it’s too much for you, Morgana would gladly reduce your duties--”

“No, no; it’s fine. It’s just--I guess, cook was a bit sharp with me?”

Arthur’s fingers stirred anxiously on the stall door. “I can have a word with her--”

“No, please! You don’t need to. Not on my behalf.”

“You’re crying, in my stall--”

“I can do it elsewhere, I’m sorry, I just didn’t--I didn’t know where to go--”

“Guinevere,” he said sternly. “That isn’t what I meant. You’re welcome to stay as long as you need to. But if the cook is reducing the staff to tears, that’s something I ought to address.”

Gwen wiped at her cheeks again. “It wasn’t my work, and it wasn’t the cook, Arthur. Please just don’t ask me? I promise it’s all right. I’ll be fine. You don’t need to worry about me.”

Arthur stared doubtfully at her, pursing his lips. But it was enough to relieve the difficulties of standing in the presence of a teary servant, and feeling he had fulfilled the proprieties of duty and decency, he scurried off into the stables.

She sat for a while longer, cleaning up her cheeks, and petting the mare, who with an animal’s simple estimation of their own capacity for being helpful, continuously butted her shoulder, and lipped up her hair. When she was a little more composed, she looked up to find Arthur looking down at her once more.

“I thought you could use this,” he said, and handed down a cup full of cool water. He was terrifically shy about it, and afterwards even wiped his hands on his trousers. He did not seem to know what else was expected of him, but hovered round waiting to fulfill it. It was too soon to be very kindly toward him: but all at once her heart yielded, and she forgave him. She smiled a little at him; and Arthur feeling the shift, and not comprehending it, smiled back at her.

“Right, ok, so focus. Can you sort of feel, like, a warmth? Like--the memory of fire, against your
"skin?"

"Yes."

"Ok. Just sort of nudge it. Gently. Gently!"

Arthur’s hearth blew outward a mighty conflagration; and Gwaine, on hand with the water bucket, came running to douse it.

"Right. Ok.” Merlin loosened his neckerchief. “Let’s try again.”

"Let’s not,” Arthur snapped.

“Be quiet, Arthur. It was your fault anyway,” Morgana snapped back.

“Me? How is it my fault?”

“You’re breathing too loudly. I can’t stand it.”

"Breathing too loudly.”


The hearth blew outward once more, and this time in its enthusiasm it did a grief to Arthur’s favourite chair.

“You did want us to practise here,” Merlin reminded him, pointing the charred leg in an accusatory manner at him. Arthur in the interests of carrying out the last usefulness of it, tried to wield it against him; and Gwaine, still on hand with the water bucket, came running to douse him.

There was eventually a stirring in the old routine, in the usual way of routines, which are by far the most mortal of us, and cannot even outlast man. It was only a very small ripple at first, and the ripple was this: Merlin was late to serve him supper. This however was not even the ripple itself, since Merlin was routinely and maliciously late; it was the reason for his lateness. Arthur had looked out the window, and seen that he was in the courtyard below, talking to the lady Vivian, and laughing as if he enjoyed it. But when he walked into the room he had a steaming supper for Arthur, and a kiss, and Arthur thought no more of it.

They met whenever they could by the cave, and stumbled into it full of enthusiasm. There was never any flagging in it that Arthur could detect. The kissing was just the same, and afterwards the gentle come down, when they lay about in one another’s arms, not voicing what the lying about meant to them, but knowing it all the same. He was quite certain it was genuine, and could not find that there was any transitioning out of it. In the privacy of his chambers, Merlin even rolled them about on Arthur’s bed, and kissed his neck, and slid his fingers into Arthur’s, and looked at him in a way which Arthur took to mean he was enamoured.

So it was only aggravating when he convened outside the cave for a rendezvous and found that he
had convened alone, and spent two hours of his priceless time waiting to see had he been stood up; and when he determined that he had, and stormed into Merlin’s room to find that he was not dead, and therefore not in possession of any valid excuse, Merlin said, “Hmm? Oh, sorry; I must have forgot.” It was not heartbreaking to have been forgotten then, but only infuriating, since Merlin after all pulled him down onto the bed, and the edict against sex in the castle was dismissed, though they had to be quiet about it, and move carefully, so the bed did not sound. Then he was all right, because he had got his forehead kissed, and the fringe stroked off it.

But he ought to have been wary of it. He ought to have remembered his mother by the obligation of blood was bound to love him; and still she had failed at it.

It was three weeks after the woman in the woods had come to her that Vivian startled out of her dreams, and putting on a cloak, went out into the depths of evening to find her once more.

“What’s taking so long?” the woman demanded.

“I don’t know; you said he would be desperately in love with me!”

“He ought to be. There’s a powerful enchantment in that ring. I can’t believe anyone or anything could be strong enough to override it.”

“Well,” Vivian said sharply, “apparently your ring is stupid.”

“Perhaps I’ve sent a bratty child to do a woman’s work,” the woman snapped, and held out her hand for the ring. “Give it here. I’ll cast a stronger spell on it. And if it still proves to be inadequate, perhaps I’ll need to find myself a different vessel for it.”

Arthur was reviewing council documents when Morgana let herself loudly into his room, slamming the door behind her. “What’s wrong with Merlin?”

“Aside from the usual, I haven’t noticed anything,” he said, not looking up from his task.

“What have you done to him?”

Arthur, who had done several things to Merlin, in excruciating and messy detail, blinked up at her. “You don’t mean you want-- specifics of our--”

“Of course not,” she interrupted him. “I want to know why he’s being weird.”

“I think that’s just how he is.”

“Don’t be funny, Arthur, it doesn’t suit you.” She helped herself to the chair across from him.

“Make yourself right at home, Morgana.”

She elected to ignore his sarcasm, and pushed the heap of papers away from him. He threw up his quill in a pique, and folded his hands in front of him on the desk. “I’m sure you don’t care, but I do
have duties of state to carry out, several of which you just shoved aside as if they were--"

"The terrible poetry you write to Merlin?"

He scoffed so hard it nearly pulled something. "I do not--"

"Arthur I go through all your things regularly. I know." She smirked at him.

He felt himself go hot to the tips of his ears. "I never wrote him poetry! I wrote one note, and it was to scold him because he was so late with my breakfast I never did get it before leaving for training." He had written another, but had burnt it before there were any eyes other than his own laid on its contents.

"I don’t go through your things, Arthur, I just knew you’d give yourself away if I said I did. You’re clearly embarrassing and sentimental. I’ll be sure and tell Gwaine next time we play cards, so we can make fun of you."

"You can’t tell Gwaine, Morgana, do you think this is funny? If my father finds out, Merlin will be killed."

"Do you think he doesn’t already know? You were so ridiculous while hunting that green knight we weren’t three evenings into it when Gwaine leaned over to me and said, ‘So, as I understand it, the princess wants to kiss Merlin, and doesn’t know it, and Merlin wants to kiss the princess, but only occasionally, because he’s an arse.’ He’s known all along. He’s not going to tattle on you. Don’t be such a fool.” She rolled up the sleeves of her dress, as if it were a tunic, and she had got some messy task from which she needed to save it. “Now. It hasn’t happened in a while; perhaps we’ve thwarted it. But I’ve been having visions of Merlin dying."

"What? Why didn’t you tell me before?" Arthur demanded.

"Because I knew you’d be hysterical about it."

"I am not hysterical--"

"You’re already yelling about it, and I haven’t even told you anything. There’s nothing to worry about; Gwaine and I have been keeping an eye on him. But he’s acting strangely now, and I want to know why."

"Perhaps he’s tired of being spied on." Arthur paused, looking at her in a dawning understanding. "How close of an eye have you kept on him?"

"Don’t worry; neither Gwaine nor I have seen anything that would cause us lasting trauma. We trust that when he’s with you, he’s safe enough, except for his maidenhead, of course. Though I suspect yours was always at far greater risk than his.” She smirked again. Arthur wondered why it was against all the rules of chivalry to strike a woman. “He’s being strange, Arthur,” she said more seriously now. “Gwen’s noticed it too. Just keep a close watch on him. I expect that’s no hardship for you?"

"It isn’t," he admitted through clenched teeth, and she patted his hand, as if he were a very good child, or a dog who had done as she asked, without even the impetus of a treat.

Before she left, with her hand on the latch of the door she looked over her shoulder at him and said, quite softly, “I just want to be sure he’s safe. You aren’t the only one who couldn’t bear to let something happen to him.” Then she was gone, and he was left with a rather tremendous thickness in his throat.
Merlin was not strange; actually he was perfectly light-hearted, and did not understand what all the fuzz was about. There was only one crude spot in the otherwise smooth turnings of his life, and it was that occasionally Arthur made an attempt of affection upon him. But as he had to work himself up to each of them, it was easy enough to slide out from underneath the hand that went hesitantly to his shoulder, or duck the kiss which Arthur had to drive at him as if it were a sword, and it frightened him to think he should not make his target. At first he was accommodating of the minor attempts, though he felt each of them to be an affront to his lady; but it was beyond his capacity to be endlessly tolerant of them, and he found that he was soon hardened to them. His heart had harboured a kernel of sympathy for the shyness in the fingers that reached for him, and the lips that sought him; but as his love grew, his tolerance proportionately shrunk, and he began to feel now the hardship of falseness: it was contemptible to play at content, when he had discovered the real and ever-lasting article of it. In the beginning he pitied Arthur: to have such riches, and little else. He thought him like a sad little child, who knows what he has been told, and nothing of the world beyond him, which has never touched him. Then it occurred to him that Arthur was under the impression that his own small and pathetic efforts of love were in any way comparable to the true magnitude of it: and that Merlin was a faithful participant in those sad comprehensions of youth which grasp at their first stirrings of emotion, and declare them fully mature. It was all very nice to be kindly about it; but Arthur was stupid with misinterpretation, and would have to see that they had had a pleasant enough time, whilst Merlin was bored; but now there was the authentic thing in his grasp, and he would have to throw out anything lesser. He began to duck the kisses with less sensitivity. He stopped making excuses for them; when he pushed Arthur’s face away once, and Arthur, not unlike a dog who has been kicked, if the dog could afterwards ask what it had done wrong, said, “What is it? Are you ill?”, Merlin said simply, “No; I just don’t want to.”

Arthur was gentlemanly; Merlin was pleased to say that much about him. He did not press. He said, “Oh” in a very small voice, for a noble, and sat quietly at his supper table, and left Merlin to himself. He snuck a great many side looks at him, but was not bothersome about his rejection, and even tried to give Merlin the dessert from his tray, as if he were trying to make up for a crime he did not understand having committed.

So Merlin, weaning him off bit by bit, made him to comprehend that the inseparability of them was only as fleeting a thing as any of life’s whims are fleeting, and that being now ensconced in something of significance, he had to give up the frivolous boyhood romps of the cave. He was now beholden to a true romance, and did all its biddings. He sat at the feet of his lady, and listened to her musical voice ordering round her servants; he found a new delight in fetching her whatever she pleased, at all hours of the night: and found also a strange contentment in the escalating misery of Arthur, on whom he had never wished any ill, unless he was mucking out his stables.

“You are being strange,” Arthur accused him one evening, grabbing at Merlin’s arm after he had dispensed with supper, and prepared to leave. “What are you doing with the lady Vivian?”

Merlin looked down into the frowning face. He found in himself an old echo of his tenderness toward it. He thought, confusedly, that he loved it, beyond what love is generally understood to be. He looked down at the bright yellow hair, and the eyes which showed a little hurt round their edges. The comprehension of love was being created anew in him. The picture was beginning to
come clear in his mind, of what it meant to be himself, to be human; he realised that all the articulations of it, the precision, had slid away from him; that he had, in recent days, done a strange thing: and that was to go outside himself, and wander somewhere alien. It was like coming to the edge of a strange wood, and seeing the sun.

But then he had a twinge, like a sort of tweak, as a dog might feel on its leash, and he blinked. The frowning face was nothing he was very fond of. It was too much to say he had anything like loathing for it; that assigned a passion to it. In fact he was very near indifference: but it did irritate him to see the hurt round the eyes, the way it is always angering when someone’s own stupidity has caused the wound, and the crime is assigned to you, because the heart which prickles with it has no interest in justice, but only the positioning of the responsibility they cannot bear to shoulder. He said, almost accusingly, “I’m not being strange. I’m in love.”

Arthur blinked. “What?” His lips parted a little. Merlin remembered they had done it under his own; but he did not remember how he felt about them having done so. It hurt his head. There was some doubt in himself: and then the guilt, for betraying his lady. He thought it was quite time to be decisive about the whole thing. “With the lady Vivian.”


“I don’t.”

“You said, and I quote, ‘She’s an arrogant brat, and I never thought I’d say that again after meeting you. I never thought it would stand out enough for me to comment on it.’”

Merlin shrugged. “She’s not. I just didn’t know her before.”

“She called Gwen lazy, and slapped her. I’m pretty sure Morgana is still trying to determine how to best poison her supper without having the maids blamed for it.”

“She’s lonely, Arthur. She’s been taken from her home to be given to some foreign prince she doesn’t know, and doesn’t like, as if she’s a horse. And no one’s asked her how she feels about it, no one cares what she wants.”

“No one’s asked me how I feel about it either. I don’t see you championing my cause. Merlin, did you hear me? I said she slapped Gwen.”

“She was upset. Gwen shouldn’t have provoked her.”

“What? Are you listening to yourself?”

“I am. I finally am. I tried to fight it; she’s a noble, I’m a servant.”

“Right. And that’s stopped you before.” Arthur had wrinkled up his forehead. Merlin felt that he had once harboured an opinion on the expression; he rather thought he had touched it with the tips of his fingers, to smooth it.

“Arthur, I know this might be difficult for you. I know she’s to be your fiancée --”

“I don’t care about that, you simpleton.” He twisted round in his chair. He seemed on the verge of getting out of it. Merlin did not know what he intended, but he thought it might be some unpleasant affection. He was possibly on the verge of a desperate act; sometimes Arthur was quite the romantic. It would not have suited, to be seized, and kissed, in some sad rashness.
He said, “Listen, I’m sorry. I know we were, you know. But you didn’t think that was going to last, did you?” The words muddled him; they had the same feel of the impression he had got earlier, of coming from outside him: of being supplied to him by foreign lips, in a tongue whose speech in his mouth was an ungainly imitation of itself. He sensed how to sharpen the words, and where to stick them. He said, “These sorts of things don’t last, Arthur. You know better than that, don’t you? After all, you heard what your mother said. Don’t you think, if anyone were really going to stick by you, it would be her? If she can’t manage it, what do you expect from me?”

Arthur’s entire being was in his eyes. It was gravely injured, and did not bother to hide itself away. It would have been prudent to crawl off into some private death; but he was slow, and perhaps did not realise he was pathetic.

“What would you say that to me?” he asked. It sounded from far away out of his throat, as if it had had to come a very long way, through very much indeed.

Some instinct pressed Merlin to touch the white cheek. He did it gently, and felt that he did not want to let go of it.

But he asked, “Do you want me to lie to you?” and the cheek turned itself away.

Arthur put himself to bed. He did not stay for long. He paced round the room. When the pacing had accomplished nothing, he stood watching the fire with his chin in his hand. He had questioned everything he knew. He had hated himself, and Merlin; and finding that none of these circuitous movements of despair which rapidly cycled him from rage to self-admonition changed his circumstances, he broke one of his cups. But that did not change anything either.

He had questioned everything he knew and assumed: but all faith must endure a similar trial. He came out of the questioning with his still intact. He decided there was something greater at work than his own inadequacy. He put on his jacket, and breathed out nervously, and clapped his hands together; then he left his chambers for Merlin’s.

Gaius was out; he went swiftly up the stairs, two at a time, and flung open the door. He did not intend for Merlin to put him off with any rubbish attempts at prevarication, or sleeping.

There were two people busily engaged on the bed, and they sprang apart when the door thundered open. The lady Vivian patted at her disheveled hair. She went white; and rapidly returned to her own natural high colouring, when she saw that it was only Arthur. She put up her chin a little, and stared him down.

Arthur supposed he must have felt something; but in the first moment there was only a great coldness, whilst he saw that Merlin’s hair stood up as it had stood up when he put his own hands into it. Merlin blinked at him. His tunic was half-open. He said, a little muggily, “Oh. Hi.”

It was too hard a thing to endure. It was too hard to exist at that moment. He could not even shout; and there was no anger in him. He shut the door softly after him.
It was excruciating after that. Merlin considered the awkwardness to have passed, now that everything was in the open; in the intimacy of his chambers they had confronted the magnitude of the change, and were now free to discuss it. He chattered happily whilst he went about cleaning Arthur’s room, and Arthur went about pretending he could stand upright with ease. In council meetings he was reprimanded by Uther, for sleeping; but he could not do it in the evenings, when there was the pacing to be done, and the malicious reprimanding of himself. He sometimes threw himself facedown into his pillows, but did not surrender to the relief of tears; he had tried them once, and it had not made him any more lovable; and there was a sort of bitter satisfaction in keeping them inside his throat, where they hurt as he deserved to be hurt. His mother had taught him the stinging lesson of his foolishness; and he had persisted in being foolish. He sometimes considered that Merlin had been right to teach him another, and then he went back to wishing a tragedy of the erective variety upon him.

He was terrifically sorry for himself two long days, and then on the evening of the second he walked into his chambers to find Gwaine lying on his bed, eating an apple.

“Excuse me,” Arthur said with all the rudeness he possessed.

“You’re excused, princess, but honestly, this is the last time. I’ve been too lenient with you.”

Arthur took off his gloves, and tossed them onto the supper table. He did it as if they had offended him. He kicked out the chair, to sit down to his cold supper, which Merlin had brought and abandoned for more interesting pursuits. “What are you doing here?”

“I come at the behest of Morgana. She says you’re too stupid to notice what’s wrong with Merlin, so she’s taken it upon herself to pursue the matter. She’s had a long chat with Gaius. Merlin is enchanted.”

“Merlin is what?”

“Yeah, there’s some spell making him snog the lady Vivian or something like that.”

Arthur was in the process of putting a piece of bread in his mouth, because it required no effort of taste from him; he stopped. He looked up at Gwaine, who in the most insouciant and mannerless way possible dominated the entire bed; he had thoughtfully spread-eagled, so there would be no corner of it which he had not violated in some way. Arthur threw the bread at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You know how our boy does that thing where his eyes turn yellow, and then something levitates? Well, it’s like that, only someone’s doing it to him. With his penis.”

“I know what you mean, I just mean--how can Gaius be sure?”

“How can Gaius be sure Merlin isn’t actually in love with a wretched little arsehole who slapped Gwen? Common sense, I think.”

Arthur rubbed his face. It was too difficult to be hopeful, when the hope might still be crushed; he looked up doubtfully at Gwaine.

Gwaine sat up with the apple, propping his elbows on his knees. His chewing was abysmal. The apple ran down his chin in various forms both liquid and solid; it splattered on Arthur’s bed. “Do you want your man back or not?” he asked Arthur. The common expectations of etiquette did not concern him, and he maintained simultaneously his gibbering and his chewing.

“He is not my--” Arthur blurted out, and then sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose and said,
“Fine. What do we have to do?”

“It’s definitely a love charm,” Gaius said. “I’ve seen a few of them in my time. Unfortunately the problem with love charms is the variety of them; it’s no simple matter to break one. There are as many methods of breaking them as of casting them.” He was pottering about his rooms, picking up various vials, and putting them down once more whilst Arthur, Gwaine and Morgana wondered when he would be useful. At least Arthur was wondering it; probably there was only a lonely whistling in Gwaine’s head.

“So how do we break this one?” Arthur asked finally, since Gaius did not seem inclined to break his thoughtfulness for the sake of any useful elaboration. It was the usual unfortunate business of trying to talk to a scientist, when you are not a scientist; theirs is a mysterious realm, and admits no uninitiated. He was not trying to be exclusive: it was only that he had an awful lot of books in his head, and they did not have the same books in their heads; and then it is quite like trying to speak a language the other has never heard, with every confidence and expectation that he has heard it.

“That would depend upon the nature of the spell, I’m afraid, which is what we need to determine. It may be that a lock of his hair was used; or possibly there is a talisman. He could have taken a potion in his food, or there’s a charm hidden about his room. The cure depends upon the administration. If he consumed a potion, we will need to formulate an antidote. If there is a talisman controlling him, it will have to be destroyed. If a lock of his hair was used to bind him, then he would have to be kissed by someone he deeply cares for. There is no telling which it is.”

Gwaie nudged him at the last, as soon as Gaius had turned away. Arthur nudged him back. Gwaine stepped on his foot. Arthur kicked his shin. Then Morgana reached over and grabbed Arthur by the ear and pulled down on it till all propensity for violence had left him.

“What happens if the person who cast the spell dies?” Morgana asked.

Gaius looked up severely at her from the bottle of herbs he was holding. “That would certainly do the trick, whatever the method used.”

“So all we have to do is kill the lady Vivian.” Morgana looked prepared to do it immediately and without hesitation, and also with abiding pleasure.

“If you are prepared to start a war with King Olaf. That is not my recommendation. There is also every possibility the lady Vivian did not cast the spell; there are plenty of minor hedge witches capable of a simple love charm. Most of them are not particularly advanced magic.”

“Then how do we determine how the spell was cast, and how we are to break it?” Arthur asked.

“I’m afraid there is nothing to do but keep an eye on both Merlin as well as the lady Vivian. Is he wearing any jewelry you don’t recognise? Check under the lady Vivian’s pillow, for any of his personal effects. Question who had access to his food, and whether there was any chance for tampering. And I don’t believe I need to remind any of you to do it discreetly. If the lady Vivian is caught practising enchantments, Uther will start the war himself.”
Morgana assigned Gwaine and Arthur to Merlin duty, whilst she dealt with the lady Vivian. They were diligent in their task, and crept down many a corridor, and peeked round many a corner, with their heads stacked one over the other, as if they were conspirators: but the end result was simply that Arthur had to watch Merlin fawning over someone who wasn’t him, and get dust in his nose, and both were equally unpleasant. His only secret and miserable pleasure was that the lady Vivian acted toward Merlin with the same undiscerning loathing with which she treated Camelot in general, and slapped away his hands, and called him names even Arthur had not thought of. But there were no consequences, and no detrimental effect upon his devotion: he was simply pleased the lady Vivian had noticed him at all, and smiled as he had once smiled at Arthur, and then Arthur felt as if something inside him had curled up round a belly wound, and waited to die of it. He shouted at Gwaine for looking sympathetic, and did not feel any better. He shouted at Merlin for neglecting his chores, and did not feel any better. He sat alone in his rooms when the day had gone, and there was a longing in him which he knew it was not proper to feel. It was excusable to have a fleeting pang for the whole and persistent misery of the human race, and the difficulty in belonging to it: but to pine for something as useless as love was quite another story. Uther was fond of reminding him that a prince had no friends, because he would not get any as king; and there was no need to make the transition such a rude one. But he had gone and had one anyway, and now not having him was a bit like dying. It was a little dramatic, but the human animal is like that, and depends upon its fellows to bear its many hard decades. Of course it was pleasant to have had his extremities coddled in various obscene manners; but that is never what we miss. He did not feel the absence of any sexual play (except in the morning when the male form, remembering its virility, naturally checks to be sure everything is still in order): it was the endless pottering about, and the endless chattering which he felt in his throat and his eyes, the sad lingering lives of these things which he had had, and no longer did, the immensity of them in the spacious chambers which were not spacious enough, and belonged as much to Merlin as to him, to the echoes of him, to the bits which the room had gathered up, and jealously kept.

He had spent another three days pitying himself, and taking it out on his men, when Gwaine suddenly materialised from round a corner in the hallway, grabbed Arthur by the scruff of his neck, and hauled him into the armoury. It had been a fruitless afternoon; the master-at-arms had yelled at him for poor concentration, and Uther had yelled at him for disappointing the master-at-arms; also he had dropped a mace on his foot, and possibly cracked a toe. He was not in the mood for Gwaine. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Arthur demanded, struggling valiantly as he was flung into the armoury; it enraged him to be reminded by the ensuing wrestling match that Gwaine was in possession of some strength, and a bit of technique. They were no match for Arthur’s, and it was only anything like a draw because his toe hurt, and he was distracted by the utter and predictable stupidity of Merlin having got himself caught up in a love charm, when he could have been availing himself of what little usefulness he possessed by cleaning the armour Arthur had worn through a perfectly dismal storm that had struck him, while in the midst of it, as a personal offence against him. It was still banging round outside, and he took a moment to consider his abuses against Gwaine whilst listening to it, and violently hating it. He was in the habit of violently hating everything these days.

“I don’t know what you think you’re--” Arthur broke off the lecture. The armoury had another visitor, and the visitor was Merlin. He looked up from the sword he was sharpening, and smiled cheerily. “Hi, Arthur!”

Arthur could not decide whether to glare at Gwaine, or Merlin; he settled an eye on both of them, hoping he had not limited himself too much in dividing his malice. He crossed his arms.

Gwaine dropped the bar on the door, and stood by it. “Well, go on and kiss him. I’ll watch the door.”
“What?”

“You heard what Gaius said.”

“Gaius said a lot of things.”

“Yeah, and one of the things he said was that we can break this by having someone Merlin loves kiss him. Much as I hate to admit his terrible taste, that’s you, princess. So go on and snog the life out of him, and get our boy back.”

Merlin, absolutely uninterested in the proceedings, whistled as he sharpened.

“Gaius said it might work, depending upon the spell, which we haven’t even identified, and therefore have no idea how to break.”

“But it might work. No sense in not trying it, right? Go on.”

“I am not --”

“Christ’s sake, Arthur, I’ll even face the door. No one will witness you being slightly less insufferable. Do you think I want to watch you visit that horror upon my friend?”


“He’s a right dumb bastard,” Gwaine said in a tone of agreement. Arthur wondered how very much of a loss Morgana would consider it, if Gwaine were discovered tragically stabbed to death. Then he said, “Arthur” in a serious voice, with a look of profound sympathy; and it was hardly anything Arthur could bear.

He was still in full mail. He dithered for a moment. He took off his gloves. He was conscious of the danger, of the publicity of snogging in the armoury, which did not have the hallowed reputation of his chambers, and at various points throughout the day admitted and ejected babbling streams of pages and squires. They would wonder why it was locked. They would wonder why he was shut up with his manservant and a comely knight. They would wonder why they had looked up to him, when he was so afflicted with a sexual deviancy; their disapproval brought out a cold sweat on his brow. But it is simple to say we are afraid of people, of their prejudice, when really we are afraid of ourselves, and whether or not we have the courage to be something it is not entirely desirable to be. Moreover, he had to contemplate taking the face in his hands, and feeling the contours of the cheekbones beneath his thumbs, and feeling inside of him the immense and moving act of loneliness, and the enormity of success, or rejection. He wanted, desperately, for the kiss to be an act of grave importance; he wanted it to be like a very good sword, which in the hands of the right wielder suffers no defeat, regardless of its opponent.

“Don’t look,” he commanded Gwaine, who turned and faced the door and did not even protest.

Merlin was still sharpening. He seemed to have paid hardly any attention to the proceedings; he smiled brilliantly at Arthur when Arthur nervously approached him, but that was it. “How was training?” he asked as if they were still on their usual speaking terms.

“Terrible, because I have a lazy, good-for-nothing servant who didn’t bother to attend me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Merlin said, with none of the expected sarcasm; it was a bit like speaking to his twin, who had got all the facial features, and none of the personality defects.

Gwaine hissed through his teeth at him. “Stop arguing with him, princess, and get on with it.”
“I am getting on with it!” Arthur snapped. But he did not get on with it. He stood contemplating his strategy, as if he were leading an ambush, and the lives of his men were in his hands. Then he panicked, and simply rushed in, knocked Merlin into the table, panicked again, and grabbing for his face, jabbed his lips vaguely in the direction of Merlin’s lips, got his chin, readjusted, landed squarely on his mouth, and held on. His arms came round Merlin. He was aware of Gwaine in the room. He was aware of the castle outside the door, which at any moment might expect to be admitted. He stood for a moment kissing in this self-conscious way; he knew there was nothing very exciting about it. He knew he was like a stupid child, pressing his mouth against another mouth in dumb simulation of the act which he had heard so much of, from the poets. In a rush of stinging self-recrimination, he thought how useless fear and pity had contrived to make him: and then he seized the front of Merlin’s tunic, and aggressively poured himself into the kiss. It was frightening: he knew Merlin would feel what it meant to him. He knew there was so much love in him it had come loose in a thundering rush, as if it had bashed down a dam, and was now overwhelming everything in its path. He knew if it were not enough, if the spell held firm against it, he would have to go back to his room and weep, because he could not bear having the heartbreak of them both, Merlin and his mother, equally indifferent to him.

When he pulled back, he was breathing hard, and the consciousness of Gwaine in the room again crept back to him, and made him feel the stupidity of his vulnerability. He let himself feel it, and the anger it provoked in him; but the focus was Merlin, and how to bring him back to himself, and to the rest of them.

Merlin smiled at him in confusion. His ears were a little pink. Arthur hesitantly brought up his hands, and cupped Merlin’s face in them. The confusion did not clear: but Merlin touched Arthur’s face with the tips of his fingers, and stroked it a little. Arthur leant into it. He felt he could even venture to press their foreheads together. They were almost kissing again, the soft sort that is more an act of shared breath than any titillating physicality. Arthur hesitated again, and then brushed their noses against one another, the way Merlin had sometimes done to him like the terrible sop he was, clutching at the back of Merlin’s neck and wanting as he had never wanted anything else to stay as he was, till the world ended, or they did. Then Merlin said against his mouth, “Wait a minute; you’re not the lady Vivian. Good one, Arthur,” and laughed in delight at the prank.

Arthur pulled back. “It didn’t work,” he said flatly over his shoulder to Gwaine.

“Did you use tongue?” Gwaine asked.

“What? No! I hardly think that matters.”

“Merlin, my friend, you poor bastard.”

“Well of course I’ve used tongue before!” Arthur blazed up at him. He shoved Merlin back from him.

“Merlin,” Gwaine said, and crossing the room slapped him a good ringing blow across the cheek. “Wake up.”

Merlin reeled back against the table. “Ow!”

“Sorry. But you’re being a terrible little daft eejit, and we want you back.”

“Sorry about that,” Merlin apologised sincerely. “But you can’t help being in love, you know?”

Gwaine sighed. He looked at Arthur. Arthur scowled at him. “You didn’t drink anything funny, did you, mate?”
“I don’t think so? Why?”

“Because it’s this stupid asshole you love, not the lady Vivian, my friend, and it’s bloody miserable watching him pine after you.”

Arthur punched him in the shoulder.

Merlin squinted thoughtfully at Arthur, wrinkling his forehead. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure I’m in love with the lady Vivian. She told me so. She’d never lie to me.”

Arthur rubbed his forehead and sighed. It was too tiring to be subjected to Merlin when he was even stupider than usual. He picked up his gloves, and flung aside the bar on the door. It was useless to do anything but go back to his room and sulk in front of the fire, where at least he could be warm and miserable.

Gwaine grabbed him by the arm as he tried to leave, and jerked him back. Arthur looked round at him. “Arthur, we’ll get him back. I promise.” He said it with a sincerity that made Arthur’s heart thump. It was almost like having a friend who cared about him, and about whom he cared reluctantly in return. He pressed his lips into a tight line, so Gwaine would not get any ideas about the sudden and disconcerting affection he was experiencing. “Right,” he replied tonelessly, and walked out of the armoury.

Merlin had followed him.

He did not realise it immediately; he walked on for some distance worrying the gloves restlessly in his hand before he noticed the footsteps behind him. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings,” a voice suddenly piped up at his ear. He jumped, and swung round to find Merlin walking just behind him, both his hands behind his back.

Arthur frowned at him. “You didn’t.”

“Yeah, I did. It’s ok; you can have feelings, Arthur. Just probably not about me, since I’m already spoken for and everything.”

Arthur felt a little like he had been kicked, and tried to ignore it. He decided it would be easiest to keep walking, and pretend Merlin did not exist. He attempted it; but Merlin trailed after him once again, hurrying till he was now level with Arthur’s shoulder, and their arms brushed in the narrow corridor whilst they walked. “Aren’t you supposed to be mooning after the lady Vivian?” Arthur demanded crossly.

“It was a nice kiss,” Merlin said. “You shouldn’t be embarrassed about it.”

He grabbed Merlin by the collar of his tunic and hustled him round the corner, into a private alcove out of the area of main traffic. “Merlin, you idiot, you can’t say that out here!”

Merlin looked round the privacy of their settings, and looked at Arthur. “Are you going to do it again?”

“What? No! Do you want to be killed?”

“You can do it again, if you want to.”

Arthur opened his mouth, but there was nothing forthcoming, so he shut it again. He repeated the same useless motion of his jaw a few times, and finally said, “But aren’t you--didn’t you just tell me you’re in love with Vivian?”
Merlin frowned. “Yeah. I think so. Sometimes I’m not sure. I wasn’t really sure in the armoury. I’m supposed to be? I think? She’s--she’s a bit of an arsehole.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Sometimes I remember--not liking her? But that can’t be right. No.” He shook his head. “I definitely like her.”

“You idiot,” Arthur said tightly, and dragged him out of the alcove and into his chambers and shut the door and locked it soundly and then dug his hands into Merlin’s hair and kissed him thoroughly, with tongue. “It’s a spell, you gibbering, stupid numpty. You don’t like her at all.”

“I don’t?” Merlin asked hazily, but he was kissing back, and trying to wrestle off Arthur’s mail.

“No. We’re--I thought we were…” Arthur trailed off. He could not say ‘in love’; he could not be sure of that at all. He had suspected it; certainly it was true of himself, and likely true of Merlin: but he could not depend upon it. He went back to kissing Merlin, thinking the enchantment was wavering, and if he only charged at it enough in his usual manner of defeating things, it would yield to him. He pushed Merlin back onto the bed. Merlin pulled Arthur down on top of him. His mail was still on, and created quite the difficulty; Merlin struggled with it whilst they were kissing, and had it off finally, and rolled Arthur over and straddled him.

Arthur yanked him down so they were belly to belly and held him in place by the back of his neck, kissing Merlin with a tenderness that embarrassed him; he tried to make it more abjectly sexual, but almost against his will kept stroking his tongue slowly into Merlin’s mouth, and slid his arms round Merlin’s back, to hold him where they could keep their foreheads against one another, and breathe into one another. Merlin pressed down into him. He held Arthur back. He touched his fringe and the hair at the nape of his neck and slid them together and heaved a relieved sigh into Arthur’s neck, as if there were a great comfort in finally coming here, as one returning to their hearth after a long day. He kissed Arthur back with the same tenderness.

The spell had not come off. It had certainly wavered; it was struggling against Merlin’s own considerable magic, and his own considerable feelings for Arthur. But there was still the cruelty in it. There was still the power of a powerful sorceress, who knew far more of her practice than some raw bumpkin. It was not enough for them to love one another; that is the most difficult bit about it. But they went on as if it were. Merlin slid his fingers through Arthur’s, and holding their clasped hands against his chest, leant down to kiss Arthur’s neck and his face and his panting mouth. He breathed out, “I think it’s you, Arthur” and stroked the fringe off his sweaty forehead, and kissed his nose, and between his eyebrows. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Arthur gasped. “It had better be!”

“And you love me?” Merlin asked.

Arthur looked up at him. He was certainly frightened; there can be no doubting that. But the implication in that ‘and’ told him he was simply returning something Merlin had already confessed. He propped himself up on his elbows, as if he needed to brace himself, to let it out of him. He stared up at Merlin. He swallowed. Merlin bent down to kiss him; and it was a confirming kiss, which said it was all right to be vulnerable, since he was not alone in it. He said, “Yes. I do,”
and tipped back his face to be kissed again.

Merlin laughed at him. “What, really?”

It was greatly disappointing to Nimueh that she could not see the look on Arthur’s face; but she felt through the spell the immense satisfaction of having hurt him.

He froze immediately, sensing his mistake, and Merlin laughed heartily at him, at his foolishness, and unlaced their hands, and said, “Arthur, it was just a lark, you know that, right?”

And Arthur thought he should have expected it. It was his only experience of love, to have it offered conditionally to him, and then to have it withdrawn when he felt himself almost comfortable in it.

Merlin went off in a sunny mood to find his lady; and Arthur stayed in bed for the rest of the afternoon, and wondered why it was ever necessary to get out of it again. Gwaine and Morgana persistently attempted to cheer him; but he slammed the bar into place and made them do it through the door, where he could ignore it.

Gwen was folding Morgana’s fresh laundry, and thinking of Lancelot. She did this occasionally; she thought of him gallivanting about in a world that might be cruel to him, and fretted. She did not mean anything in particular by it; he was only so gentle, and the world was sometimes difficult about that. It did not like to let people have uncomplicated goodness in their hearts, but had to introduce all sorts of nasty business into them. It would hurt him to know that the world was not as it ought to have been, but at every turn practised cruelty and avarice, and you had only the faltering human tendency of kindness to challenge it, which sometimes was a thing like a very blunted stick against a riding army.

So she was thinking only of his poor moral attitudes, still very tender with hope, and that was it; though there were many other things to think of. But she still felt she ought to be faithful to Merlin, or at least to her feelings for him; it was hard to give them up. So though she was not blind, and had noticed Lancelot’s broad shoulders, and his tendency to be extraordinarily handsome, her regard was purely of the simple human variety which the race’s members sometimes feel for one another, in passing, solely because they share a scientific classification. She did nearly miss a step once in regarding him; but they were treacherous, and had even dominated Merlin on more than one (or even three) occasions.

When she was done folding the laundry, but not done thinking of Lancelot, she passed the broad window, where the day was coming in fitfully. There had been a hard rain, and the sun was still a bit sullen. She looked out into it, and saw Arthur going through the courtyard with his head down.

She wanted to be naturally good, and would have liked to say to herself that her heart in its most secret chambers felt only an honourable sympathy; but the first strike into the depths of her which the blonde head inspired was bitterness. She felt its nasty thrill. She had learnt there was an unlovely satisfaction in hatred, and sometimes was inspired to wallow in it. But watching him she had to let the instinctive pity into her; and the hatred rapidly left her. Morgana had told her about the enchantment, and after she had cried a little bit once more for herself, for not having lost Merlin, for never having had him to lose, she put some bluebells in Arthur’s chambers.

It was not easy on her wage to continuously supply him with little trinkets, but she kept it up
throughout the week, so at least he had the brief joy of a surprise every evening when he came in from training, or council. He wore the scarf from Tuesday when the wind was horrid, and the bluebells had a specially designated table by his bed. Today she had left him a book Morgana said he had liked as a child, and had taken from him, for the crime of being frivolous; she had had to sneak it out under Geoffrey’s nose, and sweated all the way, feeling in the bosom of her dress the lumpish admonition of it. If she were caught she would get a ban like Merlin’s; but Geoffrey only smiled at her, and went back to his work.

She looked out the window now wondering if he had found it. She saw the mail pouring itself down all the minute shiftings of him as he walked, and leaned her elbows on the sill. He went at a brisk clip through the courtyard, and did not speak with anyone, and did not invite anyone to speak with him. On Thursday he had come up to her, nervously, with his hands behind his back, whilst she was beating a tapestry, and said to her that she ought to keep up the good work, and hurried away; and she had it on the authority of Gwaine that it was the only time he had been pleasant to anyone all week.

Watching him in the courtyard, she felt they were on the verge of a friendship. She had never considered there to be any commonality between them that generally was the root and upkeep of a friendship; but there was Merlin. And he was so lonely. It was hard not to be trapped by her own self-doubt, to see him trapped by his own, and not to have something to talk about; or at least to sit quietly in the presence of it, feeling oneself understood.

He was out of her sight now. The courtyard was glad to see him leave. He had gone through it like a cloud over the sun, and now the light was free to be playful once more, and the world to have its good things.

She closed the curtains, and went out to say good morning to him, so at least one person had said it, and meant it.

Arthur was picking sullenly at his supper that evening when Morgana slammed into his room, the door booming after her. He looked up listlessly, blinked at her, and went back to his supper. It was mostly bread; his stomach was upset, and that was also Merlin’s fault, as were most things.

“Get up, Arthur,” she demanded, throwing his sword across the table, almost into his pottage. “Vivian is taking Merlin somewhere. I saw them wandering off into the woods together.”

“They’re probably running away to elope,” he said, and did not even attempt to pretend he was not bitter about it. He sipped at his ale.

“I said get up.” She shoved a jacket at him, and one of his knives. “No time for your mail; we have to catch up to them before they’ve too much of a head start for you to track them.”

There were few things swift enough to do that, and certainly not Merlin by whatever means of transport he had chosen, but Arthur modestly did not say that. He chewed his bread, and glared over Morgana’s head.

“Why are you still sitting there?” she snapped.

“Because,” he said, throwing down the bread onto his plate, “I don’t care to see whatever it is they’re doing.”
“What if she’s going to hurt him? He’s enchanted, if you aren’t too thick to remember that. He’s in thrall to her, Arthur. And now he’s following her off into the forest in the middle of the night.”

Arthur looked at the collection of gear she had heaved onto the table. Then he pushed it aside. “Isn’t that what the all-powerful sorcery is for?” he snapped. “He keeps telling me he’s not as helpless as I think. Or he did tell me, back when he would actually speak to me. Let him handle whatever Vivian has in store for him.”

“You stupid, selfish boy,” she raged at him, slamming down another knife. He started back from her, but not so far that the table no longer concealed his private bits. “You think you’re the only one who’s been hurt in all his life, and we should all defer to the calamity, and tiptoe round you till you’re ready to not be a bastard again? Do you think if the roles were reversed, Merlin would have given up on you, and hid in his room, and felt terribly sorry for himself? Do you think he would have said ‘to hell with Arthur, he hurt my poor, stunted little heart whilst his mind was not his own, and now he can pay whatever price the world feels it is right for him to pay’? Sit in here then, and be useless, and lose him, and feel sorrier for yourself, and see if it does anything you like, other than prove your own sad little expectations of what you think love is correct.”

And then she flung the jacket into his face, and stormed out.

Of course Arthur followed her. She did not waste her love on the unworthy. She had watched the whole sad human existence do that to itself for far too long; and she had resolved not to do it to herself.

So now they were deep in the stilly night, crouched together in a thicket whilst Arthur studied some infinitesimal indication of life that she could not see. For the past hour he had occasionally knelt down right in her path, and nearly tripped her, and laid his hand to the ground, and frowned round them; and by the time he stood he was sure of their path, and led her down it at a smart trot. He was a little fascinating to watch. He was like an animal steadily wearing down its prey, loping with the confidence of a native through the brush, and now and again murmuring, “This way” and loping off again, into the wet night. Sunset had taken the land, and shaped it into another altogether, so in the dark landmarks were no longer their usual selves, but that strange mirror-like inverse that evening always makes of those afternoon monuments by which we navigate. Morgana was quite lost. Nothing was where it ought to have been; and the sounds that came through the trees struck those foreign notes of midnight, though she knew by some latent instinct they were only the fffpt of wings through the leaves overhead.

Arthur however moved on without any concern. He pulled her by the elbow out of the grasps of treacherous bogs, and anticipated the branches she would whack herself on. He did not speak much, but she saw that he was no longer mourning for himself, that his focus had taken him out of himself, out of his grief, and if the night did nothing else, at least it had done that; but she thought something would come of it.

They were two hours into their trek when the woods opened up into a clearing, and the clearing reared up a castle she had never seen before. The moon came out, possibly by artifice, since it was certainly convenient for the night to have been murky, and then to have cleared at the precise moment they beheld the structure; and to have done it with such artistic instincts. There were walls of ultramarine and vermilion, and the moonlight trotted them out as if they were for sale, picking out the best points of them; there were additionally the figures of gold leaping all about the castle,
as if from life: and Morgana staring at them felt underneath the flawless veins of them the whispering magic.

Arthur held the pommel of his sword. He wrinkled his brow at the castle, as if possibly it only needed a stern look to remember its manners, and not to cause them any trouble. There was no one visible, but he said, rubbing the bridge of his nose, “They’ve come right through here. I don’t suppose it’s possible they’ve avoided the obviously magical castle?”

“I don’t suppose it is,” she replied, and sighing almost simultaneously, they stepped out over the grass to their fates. Arthur drew his sword. She had the knife in her sleeve, but he gave her another, in case it was necessary for her to stab two people at once. He had been a wanker; but he was not altogether horrid.

The interior of the castle was similarly tasteless; she felt Arthur beside her judging it harshly, and was sorry to agree with his criticisms of design, when he had tried to wear a yellow tunic with purple hosen, till Merlin had stopped him. He walked so that he made hardly any impact on the stone, and even the high blank walls found his stride to have a curiously muffled effect, and could not sing it out over the ramparts. She tried her best to imitate him. She held his knife steady in her hand, though the hand wanted to shake.

He preceded her into a chamber of cold green marble, and stopped. She had to duck under his arm with the sword raised in it. He was breathing hard beside her. She noticed that before she noticed the slab of stone like a bier in the centre of the room, and the body upon it. Then she noticed the stone, and nothing else.

The dreams had shown her a still white face; and the room showed her the same still white face. It was disconcerting to find the two, reality and dream, suddenly intersecting at the point of the bier, with poor Merlin dead between them.

It was not like losing someone. She had lost her father, and this was not that. She had lost him before she knew the absoluteness of mortality. She had lost him before her own comprehension of life; and now she understood the two sides of it, the long and lonely struggle of the world between creation and destruction. It was like that. It was like understanding how the world would not always exist.

Arthur ran toward the bier. His face was not like anything human. She thought only animals experienced pain like that, because they did not understand it could pass. She tried to grab his arm. She said, “Arthur!” in a hoarse voice. She thought he would do something mad. She thought he would fling himself on the sword, on the bier.

He dropped the sword, and grabbed Merlin’s face in his hands. It was horrible to see that he had lost all awareness of himself and his dignity. He made an animalistic noise, to match his face. He pressed his forehead to Merlin’s forehead, and shook: but the voice that came up out of him was thick with relief, not despair. “Morgana, he’s alive. He’s breathing.” He pressed the still white face into his neck, whilst he got hold of himself.

“He’s alive, in the most technical sense. He breathes. He is not aware. He cannot feel anything. He does not even dream. He can’t feel you, Arthur. And he never will again.”

The voice was behind them; Arthur came round to face it in one smooth move, the sword in his hand so swiftly Morgana had not seen him retrieve it. His face was white with rage, and she knew he would do something tremendously stupid. “What have you done to him?” he barked.

The woman’s voice was pleased with itself. “Did you like my little love charm? I thought it might
bring you great pain. You can’t imagine how much it pleases me to do that to a Pendragon.”

Morgana turned to face the voice. Its origin was a beautiful dark-haired woman in a cloak, smiling as pleasantly as if they were chatting over pastries. “Do you remember me, Arthur?”

He put himself between the woman and the bier. The sword trembled in his white-knuckled grip. “You’re the woman from the caves, when I went to find the Mortaeus flower.”

“Yes. But you know me quite otherwise now, I think. My name is Nimueh,” the woman said, and Arthur’s brow suddenly cleared, though he was not any less white.

“I know what you said to the woman during that whole Green Knight business. It was very pretty. But I can assure you, you can make no apology to me. I do not care what you plan for Camelot. I do not care what you plan for my kind. You can never undo what your father has done. The Pendragon line is tainted. Your mother said it herself, didn’t she? So you see I’m only doing what is right, and what your father deserves.”

Morgana saw that the bit about his mother had struck him somewhere tender. But he did not abandon his stance in front of the bier. He said, “Merlin’s done nothing wrong. If you want to punish my father, then let him go, and keep me.”

“I wonder what your father would say if he knew his son was in love with a servant? With a male servant? I wonder what that humiliation would do to him?”

Arthur’s shoulders heaved a bit. He tightened his hold on the sword. “I don’t know what you want from me. I can’t change what my father did.”

“You certainly can’t. But though I know it sometimes does not feel like it,” and here the woman’s voice dipped into the confidential sibilance of sympathy, and was almost gentle, “you are the thing Uther loves most in all the world. Perhaps the only thing.”

“Then kill me,” Arthur snapped. “But I won’t let you hurt the people I care about for something my family did.”

Nimueh laughed. “What do you suppose you have to bargain with? Merlin is the only man alive capable of defeating me. Why do you think I brought him here and he now sleeps under my enchantment? It was lovely to have hurt you, Arthur; but that was not the only purpose of this. I can’t have Merlin in Camelot thwarting me.”

“Oh, shut up,” Morgana snapped. She was tired of this nonsense. “If there’s any chest beating to be done, Arthur can handle that. Tell us your wicked plans and be done with it. I suppose we’re not to leave here alive?”

Nimueh seemed somewhat taken aback. It was not surprising; her smugness was indicative of having never been told to shut up before, when it would have done her a great deal of good.

“It was Merlin I was after, but I’m glad you came along, Morgana.”

“I find it rather unfortunate,” Morgana said, and inelegantly tried to set her on fire. Her aim was lacking; but that was the great advantage of fire. It was not very picky about accuracy. The edges of it caught up Nimueh’s hair, and set merrily about their destruction. Then Arthur, who had held it in unbearably long, succumbed to his stupidity, and flung himself forward to run her through. Nimueh made a casual gesture with her hand, and the sword came out of his hand, and flew across the room, and then Arthur flew after it, and cracked into a wall so hard Morgana shuddered with the impact. He settled bonelessly at the base of it, bleeding all down his forehead, quite deathly
still. Morgana, who had caught some of his stupid, made a valiant effort to scratch out Nimueh’s eyes; she was seized by her hair and dragged round a bit fruitlessly, bumping over the floor. Nimueh in her rage had forgot the elegance of her magic, and resorted to grappling. Morgana bit her wrist, and was slapped.

It was startling how much comfort she had drawn from Arthur, and now with him useless on the floor, the responsibility of victory was smothering; she felt how there were three lives under her care, and thrashed out wildly. Nimueh spat at her; and since they had dispensed with all niceties, Morgana punched her in the nose.

Merlin’s magic had been waiting for a break in attention. It had felt round the seams of Nimueh’s power, trying to find where he might slip out. When Morgana lit her hair on fire, it seemed as good a moment as any: and his eyes lurched open blearily, and found overhead a strange ceiling, and underneath him an even stranger bed. He wondered if Arthur had made him sleep on the floor again, and then rolled over to see Morgana and Nimueh slapping at each other. He rolled over to the other side, and saw Arthur unconscious on the floor, bleeding with rather alarming speed.

He was vaguely still in love with Vivian; but the bleeding seemed more critical. He tried to shake the mugginess out of his head, so he would know what to do. He could at least flop awkwardly over the side of the bier, which he did, and deposited himself in a messy heap on the floor. His legs were like wood; he swished them uselessly about behind him, pulling himself forward with his arms toward Arthur, since Morgana was enthusiastically strangling Nimueh, and seemed all right for the moment. He reached out to touch the matted red fringe. Then he collapsed. Nimueh’s magic was still in him, and it clutched at the hot red movements of his veins, and froze them where they coursed. His hands like stone stopped their living articulations, one against Arthur’s cheek, the other on his shoulder. He decided it would have to do. He curled round Arthur to at least shield him, and shut his eyes.

Merlin had broken loose long enough to make himself utterly redundant. He was lying about on the floor beside Arthur, where he had evidently elected to perish, and whilst it was all very lovely to die in the arms of his love if it were a romance, and they had to do it for the aesthetic of Poetry, it did not help her very much. Nimueh was crying out a spell in her ear, and Morgana could feel a queer warmth in her stomach. She knew there was something terrible happening inside her. She looked at the two useless men wrapped round one another, enjoying the melodrama of their tragic love. She slid the knife from her sleeve and into her hand.

There was one thing even witches of great Sight did not expect, and that was to be stabbed in the neck by a lady of gentle breeding. Morgana stuck the big vein in the soft white neck in a frenzy; the blood from it spurted into her face. She clung, panting, to the twitching body, driving in the blade, missing the original wound, slipping over the throat, dissecting the windpipe, nicking the chin: it was ghastly work. She had killed men at the polite distance of sword point, and she had got their blood on her: but never like this. She stabbed till the body stopped seizing. It settled at last into her arms, and she felt the intimacy of the unmoving breast against her own, the strange close confines of death, and how near it brought her to the ruined skin in her arms.
Across from her, Merlin sat up as if he had plunged out of a bad dream, and she gasped at him, “Get her off me. Get her off me, Merlin!”

“You’re ok; you’re ok,” she could hear him saying through the roaring in her ears; and then the dreadful weight was off her, and she was in his arms, having her hair stroked.

Arthur was being called. He came to the surface of his unconsciousness, and recognised the voice. He awoke groaning the name he thought was in some association with it. “Merlin?”

“Arthur? Arthur!” Then his face was seized, before he was quite aware he even had a face, and there was a warm mouth feeling along it, along the corners of his lips, and the tip of his nose. “I thought you might not wake up.”

The world began in pieces to exist around him once more. It was as if it had waited for him to live, and now it was one by one lighting up the crevices of it as he noticed them. He squinted up into the hazy face over him, which had ridiculous ears, or at least ridiculous appendages in the place where he thought the ears were located. His own anatomy was coming back to him in bits and pieces, and he was still reacquainting himself with what was what and went where. “Merlin?” he said again.

“Yeah. How many fingers am I holding up?” the ears asked.

He frowned at them. “Two? Did I get it right?”

“You did, Arthur.” Now there was a smile between the ears, and slowly the eyes took their rightful place above it. Then a hand came from out of nowhere and hit his shoulder. “Why did you let me stay enchanted so long, you numpty?”

“I didn’t realise it was a spell at first,” Arthur replied very gently, so as not to anger his headache. He pressed a hand to his eyes.

“You actually thought I might be in love with the lady Vivian?” The voice he could still not quite locate, though he thought it might be coming out of the smile, which was now a frown; he at least knew it thought he was stupid. He scowled at it.

“Yes, Merlin. You were somewhat convincing.”

“Well are you so stupid?”

“An unfortunate consequence of hanging round you so often,” Arthur retorted, too sharply for his head.

“Do you think you can sit up?”


There was a smile back in the voice. “Come on. Up. Let’s see the damage. It was just your head, so I don’t expect there will be much.” He felt a pair of hands clasp under his armpits, and heave him up out of what he now recognised as a lap. He hoped Merlin had not embarrassed either of them by being soppy in front of Morgana, who would never let him forget it. He was sat upright against the wall whilst Merlin moved round to kneel in front of him, and then there was some prodding about
his eyes and temples, which got a loud, “Ouch! Merlin, you thoughtless fumbling cretin” out of him, and then he was proclaimed ‘healthy, but a prat’, and had his hair ruffled.

“Are you really--is the spell really lifted?” Arthur asked, rolling one of his shoulders. He looked up after a moment of dithering to see Merlin looking down at him, hands clasped between his knees. “I thought that before, and then--” He let himself become wholly absorbed in testing the function of his shoulder joint.

“Nimueh’s dead, Arthur. It’s broken. Trust me. Would you look at me?” There was a hand on his cheek, and it brought his eyes round reluctantly to Merlin’s. Merlin let their foreheads fall together, and Arthur closed his eyes. He breathed against Merlin. He supposed if he were going to trust anyone, it would have to be Merlin; he had seen by the look in Merlin’s eyes that he didn’t have any other choice.

“Don’t let me be enchanted like that again.”

“I’m not your nursemaid, Merlin, I can’t watch you every moment of the day.”

“You could be more observant and realise when I’m not myself.”

“Well, you could--”

“I mean, I actually said Gwen deserved to be slapped--”

“And I said something was obviously wrong with you.”

“But you didn’t go to Gaius; Morgana had to do that. How long would I have sat round mooning after Vivian if it were up to you?”

“Maybe I should have left you to moon after her! At least I had some peace and quiet.”

Merlin smiled brilliantly at him. “I missed you. Say it back, you great big git.”

“I will not,” Arthur said with great dignity.

“Fine. I know you did anyway. I’m going to say it a lot soppier in my head. You’re crying a bit. Also you actually thanked me for making sure your head wound wasn’t fatal, so I know it’s a fantasy.” He pulled Arthur in by his tunic and kissed him a little, pulling back a single nose width. “Sorry for what I said. About your mother. About everything.”

“Well, your brain was addled. Not that that’s any different than usual.”

Merlin kissed him again, still holding his tunic. “Next time I say there’s somebody else, just assume I’m mental.”


“She’s perfectly all right,” Morgana said from the doorway, where she stood with her chin regally positioned, and her dress soaked in blood. “None of it’s mine, no thanks to the two of you.”

“She killed Nimueh,” Merlin said proudly.

“I suppose I’m never to hear the end of that, then?” Arthur asked, wincing a little as Merlin helped him to his feet.

“I’ll let you forget it for a while. We have great things to accomplish, my sweet lovestruck
children.” She clasped her hands together in front of her with great ladylike poise. “It’s time to destroy the lady Vivian for her crimes against Gwen. Oh, and Merlin, I suppose.”

Chapter End Notes

Listen, listen: I promise I'm going to stop dicking Arthur's feelings around. For a little while.
Dame Ragnell

Chapter Notes

Hello, and a late merry Christmas/happy New Year's to everyone who celebrates those holidays; I'd have had this out a bit sooner, but for some reason my family expects me to spend time with them during the holidays instead of just holing up in my room writing gay Arthurian fanfiction. Thank you so much to everyone who has commented, and to everyone in general who is still here, even though this is over 100K already, I'm barely into an alternative season 2, and I'm not even close to running out of Arthurian legends to tarnish. I'm having a lot of fun with this; I hope you are too.

Sadly the conspiracy against the lady Vivian was not swift-footed. In the sweet high days of summer, when the sun is its most enameled, and it is the worst time to be sick, its main conspirator Morgana fell to a fever, though she fought heroically, with much cursing. Gamely she called upon her favourite general to dictate her strategy; and gamely Gwaine sat plumping up the pillows behind her, and telling her she was brilliant when her delirium needed to hear it, and also contriving into her the draughts which Merlin sneaked to him under the belief that he was wily, though he winked too much. There had been a struggle to get the proper herbs into her in the beginning, because she felt they dulled her, and she wanted to be clever when she killed the lady Vivian, and to do it with the proper panache. So there was every necessity of tricking her, when she was finally dense enough to be tricked. It was a shame she was not Arthur, since then they could have got away with it far sooner, and more easily; but not everyone can be told their medicine is a tonic for a receding hairline their manservant has invented, to get their medicine into them.

She would not die; but she would not pleasantly live. She found it was onerous being a human in its tender skin impressionable to various microbes, and informed Gwen she did not fancy it anymore. And Gwen wiped her down with cool cloths, and made comforting noises, of which she knew loads, in many different tones. The pitch in which she conveyed her sympathy to Morgana was a soft and poignant one, the sort she used with children who had found their greatest heartache in every small adversity; with the boys she used a scolding one. She understood the world did not treat fairly with its citizens, according to their own personal merits or demerits; but she agreed that it was a tragedy for it to have sinned against Morgana, whereas the boys brought on most of their own ills.

The curtains were opened so that Morgana could watch the world to which she was to return, someday; it had put on another coat, deeper in shade than the spring, which did not want to be too bold, and tempt its fate: and silver-tongued were its many voices in the great dells of Camelot fair, where the earth brought out its brightest curiosities. From the dread hinterland December the gorse had arrived, and shouted up the hills its bombastic coming; and it was still shouting it even now, though the novelty of the season had long gone out of it for the hellebore, who lay only quietly moaning from time to time, when the wind got up.

Into and out of the sickroom streamed a steady torrent of visitors, most of them some variation of Merlin, Merlin (with her breakfast and some flowers he had forgot, respectively) Arthur (with the awkward commiseration of how dreadful it was to be sick, which he conveyed by standing round
saying, “Well...cheer up; you’re not dead” in a stiff tone), Gwaine (with gossip), Merlin (more flowers), Arthur (more throat clearing), and also a frightened maid who peeped round the corner, curtsied, said begging her pardon, but Morgana had been very kind to her, and she was sorry to hear of the sickness, and left her mum’s best tonic for fevers: and finally Arthur once more, who by the last visit had exhausted his entire capacity for pretty words (or at least marginally prettier ones), and threatened to shave off her eyebrows if she died. This always had some small curative effect upon Morgana, who sat up swiftly as she had not sat up in days, and threw a shoe at him.

Then the lot of them were ushered out by Gwen and Gaius, and had the door shut in their faces, which was only mildly discouraging to ⅔ of them, and not at all to the final ⅓, which was comprised of Gwaine, who had scaled more than a few castles in his time, and who could afterwards be found, through some magic of bodily training, and a complete and utter disregard of the vagaries of gravity, outside the window, shouting “Sir Treyvon has the clap!” and then sliding rapidly down once more before Gaius could assist in his descent. In this way he delivered the vital intelligence of the citadel to her sickbed, though his efforts were frequently and even violently discouraged. “It’s a wonder she’s improving at all, you hooligan!” Gaius often shouted down after him (in varying degrees of paraphrase and politeness), whilst Morgana in the background croaked, “Ask him if Lady Margery’s wig came off at dinner again!”

So their lives progressed, except Arthur’s, which on a warm Tuesday came to a standstill, so that he could have a crisis. As usual, it was all Merlin’s fault. Whilst Morgana’s illness with the playful villainy of disease seemed to provide a lasting relief, and then to hold her under the endless waves of it once more, Arthur was lying in his bed, absolutely awake. The moonlight advanced over his ceiling and the great wheel of the universe in all its mysterious gyrations turned in its usual oiled grooves, disrupting nothing; but they lived without any notice from him.

The situation happened according to the following sequence of events: first Merlin had come into his room with supper, which was Arthur’s first and most grievous mistake. Then Merlin had moved about the room whistling and putting things to rights in between their usual banter. Then he had said, looking up from his folding, “Do you ever think about how we’ve never had an original thought? Humans, I mean. None of them have ever actually come from us.”

“Speak for yourself, Merlin; I’ve had plenty of original thoughts.”

“No, you haven’t. You think you have, but really, where have they come from? Something’s always put it into your head. Some book you read, or conversation you heard, or something your tutor told you. You never spawned it wholly of your own will. Your brain just runs along these tracks, reacting to unconscious prompts, and you don’t even recognise it. What even told me to ask you this? Not me; but I dunno know where I thought of it. Someone made me consider it, and it just sat round in my head, till it seemed the right moment to say it.”

“Don’t be preposterous. Are you not your own man? I mean, as much of one as you can be.”

“Not really,” Merlin said, not even reacting to the gibe. He had gone on whistling inanely, as if it did not bother him to consider the world altogether differently, and to watch as it turned on its nose, and sat round helplessly in the lawlessness of its new existence. “We’ve never come up with anything new. Not you, not me, not any of us. Someone’s done all of it before, and they’ve written about it, or talked about it, and it’s kicked round our heads, and it seems to manifest in new ways, like maybe we think we’re looking at something from a new angle, or we’ve invented a new word, a new machine, I dunno, anything. But where did all the bits come from? You didn’t come up with any of them.”

“Well, of course I did!” Arthur said, personally affronted.
“Don’t get your knickers in a twist; I meant ‘you’ in the general sense. Not you you. But yeah, you too.”

“Don’t talk rubbish, Merlin.”

“If I am talking rubbish, it’s because I read it in some book, and the book told me to say it.”

“Stop it!” Arthur protested. He had dropped his bread in horror.

Then Merlin, as if it were only another evening for him, said cheerfully, “Well, good night, Arthur!” and kissed the top of his head and walked away into the castle with no great show of concern, or even a mild one.

Now in the calm boldness of summer, which did not even steal through his window, but had the temerity to force its way in, and to lie sweltering in all the corners, when he did not have the patience to be hot, Arthur lay considering the movements of his brain. He tried to trace the abstractness of them, to understand the threads which led from one thought to another, to finger all the way back along them to their birth: and he found that he could remember he had been sitting on the lawns of Camelot when this one had occurred to him, and hunting a rabbit when that one, and realised that because he had been existing at the moment, because life had been like quicksilver in his veins, and he had felt the sure human motion of himself, the capability of his sinews, it did not mean that he owned any of the thoughts. It was easy to feel as if he did, when they had come seemingly unbidden to him, out of the mystical fogs of the human synapses, which were always firing off secretly; and he had shot the rabbit of his own accord, at least.

But then he thought of how it had moved in the brush, the instinctive movements of himself, the patient gamboling death trot which he had learnt from another man, and he from another man before him. He had trained his body to response, because another man had told him to train it; so the rabbit had died, not through any willful desire of his own, but because the entire race had been killing rabbits since Adam had propagated it, and it must go on killing them.

As he lay in bed, the ceiling disclosed to him another truth: that already the human race had invented everything, before it invented him; that he had been drawn according to the universal template of humanity, and it had not even possessed the sensitivity to change out its old pigments. That he had loved and lost and yearned and learnt according to unseen whims, because it was expected of him, because his ancestry demanded it, because humanity demanded it, because it was only the cyclical nature of living: and that he had done nothing, and was nothing, and would decide nothing of his own, and change no fate but one which had already decided it would be changed.

He burst into Merlin’s room, and shook him. “Get up, Merlin!”

Merlin rolled over, and opened one eye. “Arthur?” he asked. He said it in the same way that nasty words are said. He glared up out of the nest of his hair. “What time is it?”

“I don’t care what time it is!” Arthur shouted. “I’ve been up all night, you inconsiderate tit! I can’t stop thinking about what you said earlier!”

“That’s never been a problem for you before,” Merlin quipped. He rolled over again, and pulled the sheet over his head.

Arthur poked him repeatedly and viciously in the temple. Merlin repeatedly and viciously ignored him. They were suspended in this impasse for a very long time, till it became obvious that even Merlin’s stout resolve to sleep through all manner of inconsiderate demands was not stout enough to withstand having his head jabbed by a man who jabbed things for a living. He flung himself
upright. “What do you expect me to do about it? I’m sorry I made you think; I’ll never do that again, trust me.”

“I need to talk.”

“Then go back to your room and do it. No one likes the sound of your voice more than you do; you’ll have a much more rapt audience there.”

“Merlin!”

Merlin let out a long-suffering sigh which Arthur did not find to be appropriate, considering it was Arthur who had to put up with Merlin, and Merlin who was privileged to belong to him. “Fine; get into the bed.”

Arthur hesitated.

“Gaius is sitting up with Morgana tonight. Just stay on your side; it’s too hot to share.”

Contrary to this Merlin draped himself over Arthur as soon as Arthur had lifted the sheet and clambored under it; his head went into Arthur’s lap, and both arms round his legs, and then he wriggled a bit. Arthur did not feel a queer softness in his belly at this (actually he probably did not feel anything at all, since he was not his own person, and his emotions were only a bit of puppetry, the essential residue of his ancestors’ ancestors, who had already done all his feeling for him). He looked down at the top of Merlin’s head as Merlin sighed, rubbed his cheek a little against Arthur’s thigh, and promptly began to snore.

Arthur rolled his eyes; but he did not feel any malice in doing it. He touched the untidy hair, a little cautiously. He rested his hand on it. There were the usual all-encompassing motions of affection inside him, which were a little like a good kicking; except a kicking at least felt to him a survivable event. He overcame his caution, a little, and with the hand that was already in Merlin’s hair began to pet the fringe, and then felt down onto the raspy cheek.

He smiled down, and knew it was a dumb smile, with no regard for its own personal safety; but at least there was no one to see it. He flicked one of the massive ears, got no response, flicked it again, harder; and the still and snuffling form of Merlin went on being still and snuffling. He yanked the ear, and Merlin with a yelp sat upright, staring at him with an expression of deep betrayal.

“Good; since you’re up,” Arthur said. He folded his arms over his chest. “What you’ve said has dire connotations for free will, Merlin, and it concerns me.”

“I hate you,” Merlin said pleasantly.

Since the Vivian debacle, Arthur had not properly had sex with him, and he was careful about his affections; he was suspicious in the presence of them, in Merlin’s easy gift of them, and in his own doling out of them, checking to see would he be scolded. He was like a shy cat, determining the inviolability of its surroundings in order to know whether it could give up its heart. But Merlin was good with cats too, and knew that first you had to let it onto the furniture with you, and not to break its tender-hearted trust by touching it; and then to let it sidle up to you of its own free will, with much doubtful narrowing of the eyes; and finally to test the lap with a wary paw, to feel that it had
given the soft vulnerability of its frail and murderous body into the right hands. Arthur in his own way progressed through the various stages: but the breakthrough came when they were sitting at table in his chambers, arguing over a map of the Five Kingdoms, and the hand with which he was not gesturing, which he had kept under the table for precisely this moment, Merlin suddenly realised, shot out with no preamble, and certainly with no grace: and it grabbed for Merlin’s hand, and sweatily clutched it. Arthur pretended he had not done it; he went on with the argument. He went on abusing Merlin’s good name. He additionally went on holding Merlin’s hand, and the redness which came up his neck from the very heart of him burnt up into his cheeks.

Merlin stroked Arthur’s knuckles till the hand finally relaxed out of its self-consciousness, and conducted itself like an actual human appendage, instead of a soggy bit of wood. Then Arthur smiled foolishly at him, and Merlin smiled foolishly back, and he thought it was no wonder they had found one another, when their stupidity was so complementary.

When he was not teaching Arthur how to be a human, he was sitting with Morgana. He liked to read to her in the candlelight, to hear the laboured breathing sigh with the relief of being coddled. Arthur at intervals interrupted them, to pretend he did not care whether Morgana was on the cusp of her terrestrial existence; but when Gwen had slipped off to her bed, and Gaius to his, it was nearly always just the two of them. At the moment of evening when the moon came inquiring at the windows, and Gwaine had hauled off Arthur to the tavern after his third turn round Morgana’s chambers, Merlin opened the book, and picked up the narrative in a soft voice, and found her hand on the bedcovers, where she had put it out in search of companionship.

One evening when the fever had receded, and there was lucidity once more in her eyes, she said suddenly to him, without any prelude, “Do you think I’ll be like Nimueh one day?”

Merlin stopped. He looked up from his reading, to the still and slightly withered shape of her in the voluminous bed linens. “Of course not. Why would you ask that? Nimueh was mad.”

“Nimueh was angry. And so am I, Merlin.” She said it in a voice of confession. She looked up at him from out of the dark: and the summer night rustled the warm and distant denizens of its happy country, and did not touch him. He shivered. “Sometimes it seems to me I’m angry all the time. I suppose as a woman and a sorceress I have the excuse of my oppression; but it frightens me. Don’t you think people do terrible things when they are frightened?”

“Sometimes. If they’re weak.”

“Uther is what he is because of his fear.” Morgana’s fingers twitched in his.

“And Uther is a weak and cowardly man. That’s the difference, Morgana. You can be afraid, and be brave enough not to let it make you cruel. It’s ok to be frightened. But we have the two of us, remember? We’re in this together. I won’t let anything happen to you. And when Arthur is king, things will change. You have to remember that. You have to hold onto that.”

Morgana had been staring fixedly at the ceiling, in a way that unnerved him: and now she dropped the look to his face, and it made him almost lose the grip which he had on her hand. “I’m not sure Uther intends for him to be king,” she said, and nothing further.

Morgana was not improving. She seemed at times to be on the verge of it; and then she slipped back into her illness, losing a little more of herself each time. The shape beneath the bedcovers was
only a shape now; there was little humanity in it anymore. She had crossed the line between human and invalid, which are two creatures of similar physiognomy, and share no other classifications.

Gwen caught Arthur once at Morgana’s bedside whilst she was fitfully sleeping, his head on the bedcovers beside her pale hand. He was not speaking; he was simply sharing in the presence of her. He sat up abruptly when Gwen entered, though she had done it on tiptoe, and cleared his throat. His embarrassment transferred itself to her; she had not meant to catch him out in his vulnerability, and apologised profusely, and tried to duck out of the room: but he said, “Guinevere” in his wry tone, and then she felt the silliness of wringing her hands over his metaphorical nakedness, when she had already seen the literal. Then they sat together waiting for the sun. He spoke to her only once to say, very quietly, “You don’t think she’ll die, do you?”

And Morgana opening her eyes replied, “Of course not, if only to spite you. By the way, give me my comb back; I know you’ve taken it again, you horrid little arse.”

“Well, I can’t find my own,” he sniped back at her.

So she struggled, and sometimes lost; but after all she had only to fall back a bit, and then to rally. Gwen waited patiently to have her back, and day by day at last she began to see that she would, that the flesh was returning from its poetical whiteness to be of actual living flesh, that the romance of disease (so long as it is a lyrical wasting one, and not of the fecal variety) like most things which were expected of women did not appeal to Morgana; and that she would simply throw herself at it, till it was tired of being assaulted. So she came back to them slowly, and the boys in even greater volume ran into and out of her room, bringing her flowers and scandal. They celebrated her birthday in her chambers, though Merlin dropped the little cake they had brought her, and then he and Arthur had a row over it; and then they did not talk to one another for a bit, except to snip at one another, till Gwaine put them each under one of his arms, and held them locked there till they apologised and made it up. It was otherwise lovely; Gwaine taught them all a new card game, and then how to cheat at the card game. Arthur took off his boots and put his feet onto the bed, and looked quite as easy as he had ever looked.

Of course it was not quite so simple as being sick, and then not being sick; the transition into health is not a good-humoured one, and often grumbles about the difficulty of getting up, when there is a bed, and lying about in it never did anyone any harm. Gaius prescribed her a steady flow of tonics, to help the strengthening process; and having run out of the necessary herbs, sent Merlin out one morning to gather them. Gwen was content to leave Morgana in the care of Gwaine, and went out after him with a little basket, and good cheer in her heart.

Those birds who had dreamt of summer all their long winter exile were now singing out their joys; they did not know any sad notes, and simply extolled the virtues of what it is to live in the sweet far meadows, where the heather is dreaming. The soft crepitations of a wood on the move ran on all round her on fleet foot; and the streams with light hearts chuckled to themselves. There was a good strong sun on her shoulders, and she flung off her cloak and laid it over a branch to feel how it stole into the far reaches of her. She was happy in the company of Merlin, and the sun, and did not see how she could feel otherwise, on such a day, on such a task.

They talked for a long while as they picked away at the nooks where the vegetation hid away the good bits of itself, and it was enough to simply be among the fair countryside, and to be with him. She could not forget that he no longer belonged to her in any respect, not even to her fantasies, which now seemed to her an affront to Arthur. It felt like stealing, to imagine herself into Merlin’s life, to insinuate herself into their love, and to prise it apart, even in her own tragic heart. But she could not devalue Merlin’s friendship by feeling herself shunned, so she kept up her own end of the conversation admirably, and was firm in reminding herself that there is great intimacy, and even
great love, in the platonic genus as well; that the romance is of course a very good sort, much feted: but it has all the confusions of lust to complicate it, when love is really the thing.

They drifted apart after some time, Merlin pursuing some mushrooms farther into the woods, and Gwen walking the shores of a little stream to poke round the flowers on its banks. She was humming to herself when some footsteps crackled in the nearby brush, and without looking, she called over her shoulder, “Merlin, would you come here? Have I got the right plant?”

Merlin did not answer. At first she remarked the exceptional event of Merlin’s failure to talk; and then she turned round, and saw that he had not spoken because the footsteps did not belong to him.

There was a lady (and Gwen only so classified her because she was wearing a fine dress, and many great jewels, and because it seemed horribly rude to label her as merely a Thing, which doubtless was more accurate). She was hesitant to say the lady was ugly, mostly because ‘ugly’ did not hardly cover it. The features were vaguely humanish, but the skin was a livid red, and scaly in a way that Merlin had once told her his less polite medicinal cases were scaly. There were two long yellow teeth pushed over the shapeless bottom lip, and the red-rimmed eyes regarded her with an unspecific malice that was more unsettling than any precise threat. It seemed a fair assumption that she was in danger; she dropped her basket and picked up a branch from the ground, and tried to hold it as she had seen Arthur wield his sword. It was awkward work: firstly because a branch is not at all like a sword, and secondly because the woman (?) immediately looked a bit embarrassed for her, which meant the charade that she was anything like Morgana and could kick in the long yellow teeth without mussing her hair already had been foiled. Nevertheless, she held the branch in front of her. It was good to pretend she was capable, and to believe she might not be eaten after all.

“I’m not alone!” she called out in a tremulous voice.

“Oh, that boy? Terrible singer; I knocked the bloody head off him. Couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“Merlin!” Gwen hollered, waving the branch about.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, what did I just say? He’s unconscious, or dead, hopefully. Be a great favour to us all.”

“Don’t come any closer!” Gwen shouted, and tried as best as she was able to look menacing. She suspected it had not worked, since the woman converged on her anyway, and though she put up a gallant fight, with much kicking, and a little screaming, in case there was anyone nearby who had the wherewithal to rescue a damsel in great distress, she had the branch yanked from her hands, and was taken without any ceremony at all.

Merlin was not dead, though he did have a raging headache when he awoke. For a moment he did not understand the origin of the headache: and then he recalled that he had been kneeling down in the grass, perfectly content, and singing a little to himself; and there had come a terrific pain in his head, and after that, nothing till he had come to in the meadow, drooling on himself.

He plunged back through the woods, calling out for Gwen, and finding no evidence of her other than the basket she had brought, on its side in the loam, with its cargo in confusion on the ground beside it. There was clearly no point in calling out for her again; but he followed the natural human instinct of hope, and did it anyway. There were a few inquiries from the birds, who wanted to know what this stranger was on about, and their questions went unanswered in an empty land. He listened
for a moment to this nothing, to the cold annihilation of a world that has no human tongue, though its beasts cry out their every modest existence. Then he ran all the way home to Arthur.

Arthur was in a council meeting, and could not be disturbed for anything so insignificant as a servant, even if the servant were alarmingly sweaty, and pale. Afterwards he burst shouting into the tavern for Gwaine, who was not there, and not in Morgana’s rooms either; then he ran the length of the castle once more, towards his own rooms, and Gaius. But it happened that he passed the council chambers once more, just as they were letting out, and slammed right into Arthur, who scolded him properly in front of their audience whilst Merlin with a feeling of impending death collapsed into his arms. He was hauled off summarily, as if he were a sack of grain.

“What’s wrong?” Arthur asked as soon as he had got him out of Uther’s sight. “Merlin?” He frowned. “You look awful.”

“Thanks,” Merlin panted. “I was knocked--someone hit me on the head,” he gasped. He was beginning to feel the effects of having got the piss knocked out of him, and then having run half a mile. He swayed a little, and thought he might vomit; the swaying at least was assuaged by the arm Arthur put round his waist, though the vomiting did not give a rat’s arse. It was even prepared to do it right in Arthur’s face, though he had been helpful, and was even looking at Merlin in a soft way.

“What? Someone hit you? Who?”

“I don’t know. Gwen and I were--we were out gathering some herbs, for Gaius.” He shook his head. “For Morgana, actually, technically. And then I--I was just picking some--never mind, you don’t know what I’m talking about. I was picking a plant, and next thing I knew, I was waking up with a knot on my head. And Gwen was gone.”

“Are you sure she didn’t just return without you?”

“She wouldn’t have just left me in the woods because I was taking too long! She isn’t you. And anyway, she brought a basket, and it was on its side, with everything in it spilled round. She wouldn’t have left it. Someone took her.”

A little muscle ticked in Arthur’s jaw. He said, “Right” in a steady voice, and took Merlin by the elbow. “Go and saddle the horses. I’ll find Gwaine.”

“And tell Morgana?” Merlin asked, still with the reedy whistling in his throat that signaled to him exercise is bad for one’s longevity, and ought never to be undertaken.

“Of course not,” Arthur said grimly. “I’ll leave that to Gaius. At least he has the means to drug her when she tries to climb out of bed and crawl to the rescue.”

If a writer, any writer, is to be believed (and most of them are filthy liars), it is the start of an Adventure which is the most pure, the most merry, and certainly the most redolent, since the latter half is when everyone’s underwear has been neglected. But for Arthur, aside from the underwear, it was precisely the opposite. The beginning was his time to think; it was the time for philosophy. There was nothing had yet gone wrong: so he had to invent all the things that could go wrong, and all the ways in which he might fail. He never said anything to anyone: but the beginning of a quest made him feel all the ways in which he had been inadequate, to Uther and to himself. He rode out at the head of the meagre procession, in his rightful place, and tried to hide that he would have
immensely appreciated the relief of being sick in a bush.

The world had changed since the last time he had gone out into it, and he could no longer see that it was beautiful, that it was living, that continuously it evolved, that continuously it killed off and revitalised the green and tender bits of itself, just as the human race altered and transformed itself with its own natural rhythms; that neither was any more alive, nor any more right, than the other. It was only an old dead landscape now, with the trees laid down over the top of it, to give it a bit of flash. Now that it was a thing into which Gwen had gone, now that it had swallowed her up, he rather hated it. He felt he was responsible for the disappearance; but it was not bearable to take the whole brunt of it himself, so he had to think there was some blame to be born by the whole nonchalant planet. It is always necessary to have an enemy; and that is true of the whole race.

They were all of them surprisingly silent. Gwaine and Merlin trusted him implicitly, and rode where he told them to ride. If it were for anything less important than Gwen, they’d have ribbed him; but now there was only blind obedience, and it frightened him. It was just like being a king, and he was not ready for that yet. He would have to command entire hordes of men one day who would follow him into anything, and let themselves be killed at his bidding, and he would have to feel the brittle lives in his hands, and know that some of them were to be crushed. He had ridden into battle before, and this was not quite like that; but he felt the colossal responsibility of authority, and his hands shook a little on the reins.

In fact he had lost the trail some hours ago, and only put on a blank face, so they would not know Gwen’s fate was entirely undetermined, that dumb luck might steer him back onto the path which her abductor had taken, and nothing else. He was heading in the same direction which the signs had initially pointed him, and he had to only hope they had vanished in the usual way of capricious prey, who sometimes by the sheer foolishness of accident went on like a shadow, after they had blundered about breaking everything that was breakable.

He had a queer sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew Gwen had left the gifts for him whilst Merlin was gadding about after Vivian, and he felt an obligation to her kindness, though she would not have wanted him to feel that way. He remembered her sat in his mare’s stall, smearing the tears from her cheeks, and felt quite as bad as it was possible to feel. He liked to believe in justice: but the world did not like to believe in it. He knew because she was something good that had come out of a species that seldom produced good, it did not mean anything. She was as perfectly vulnerable as a bad man: and probably even more so.

But he only pointed them along a path that was the only one he could think to take, and patted Merlin’s knee when he looked worried enough that it seemed the thing to do. When sunset took them all abruptly from their various thoughts, he directed the assembling of their camp, and sat breaking a twig in his fingers whilst Merlin asked, “Do you think we’re close?” Then he was certain Merlin must have known, because Merlin had already looked past all his numerous deceptions, to the part of him even he did not know. He was desperate to lie. He wanted to carry the hopelessness a little longer by himself. He said, under his breath, “I don’t know.” Then he scrubbed his hand over his face, feeling suddenly that he might cry. “I lost the trail some time ago. There’s nothing, Merlin. I’m guessing; that’s all.”

“Well,” Gwaine said, and sat down beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched, “it’s a good job Merlin and I are here, then. Wouldn’t want you getting lost, Princess. It gets dark out here.” Then he grabbed Arthur by the shoulder, and shook it a little. “We’ll find her, Arthur.”

“Yeah,” Merlin piped up. “And you’re not here by yourself, you great knob. You could have told us you were having trouble picking up the trail. You didn’t have to worry about it all by yourself.”
It was a lovely moment; he smiled a little at them both. And then something blundered from the brush, and almost fell into their campfire.

“Tristan!” Arthur exclaimed, at the same moment Gwaine was preparing to skewer him. “What are you doing here?”

Merlin, who had called up a little bit of fire in his hand, immediately snuffed it. He hid the hand behind his back, like a child trying to dissemble over a treat he had stolen.

Gwaine picked up the intruder by the back of his shirt, righted him, and smacked off the dust from him. The fair curls were in a wild confusion, and Tristan had bit his lip when he fell. He was sheepish, and bowed to cover it. “My Lord.”

“Never mind the bootlicking, what are you doing here?” Merlin demanded.

“I came to protect my lord,” Tristan answered as if it were perfectly obvious, and Merlin ought to be embarrassed for even asking. “I saw you ride out of the citadel, and set out as quickly as I could. I’ve been trying to catch you up all day.”

“No, on my horse. I left him back in the woods, whilst I investigated the camp. I wasn’t sure it was you; I needed to be quiet.”

“Brilliant job,” Merlin said.

Tristan, laying his hand on his sword, suddenly blazed up rather terrifically. “Watch your tongue!”

“You watch yours, mate,” Gwaine said in a friendly tone, but placed a decidedly less friendly hand on Tristan’s shoulder.

Arthur always struggled with a certain awkwardness in the face of Tristan’s devotion, firstly because it felt a bit brutish to dismiss his good taste, especially because he knew, thanks to Merlin, exactly how low were the usual standards of mankind; and secondly because he had great big green eyes, and wielded them rather like a puppy. “Thank you, Tristan; I appreciate the thought. But I’m quite well-defended. You’re welcome to share our fire tonight, but I think it would be best if you returned to Camelot in the morning.”

“My lord, you have one knight accompanying you.”

“And me!” Merlin interjected again. Tristan frowned at him; his expression was exceptionally unimpressed. He looked at Merlin as if Merlin were a stump who had spoken out to volunteer as the royal courier.

“You’re an unarmed servant,” Tristan replied, as if he were really saying, ‘my horse just evacuated one of you.’

“Merlin is more useful than he looks. Marginally.”

Merlin looked at him as if he would have liked to set Arthur’s head on fire, and Arthur saw that it might be advantageous to have Tristan along after all. Moreover, it looked as if Arthur would not have the choice of denying his company: he had gone to his knee again, in the way he had when he was about to get uncomfortably passionate with Arthur’s ring. Gwaine adopted an expression of patient suferance; he was like a sort of guardian to Tristan, and looked after him by supplying extra trousers when he had helped the knights steal the originals; and also by taking him by the
scuff of his neck out of the fights he had picked against foes he could not best. He now had a look on his face that said he expected stupidity of his child, and was prepared to indulge it within reason, since that was how children learnt.

Arthur heaved a weary sigh. Merlin heaved a wearier one.

In the meantime Gwen had got the same treatment as Merlin, and woke up with a bump on her skull. But at least Merlin had had the advantage of waking in the same place in which he had been assaulted, so that the circumvolutions of the world were familiar to him. The same grass on which he had knelt had conducted itself like a horse that hated to be ridden—but nevertheless it was the same grass. Gwen woke with a memory of the sky under which she had hummed, and the foliage in which she had waded; and looked out over a dreary room which was not her own, not Morgana’s, and certainly not like any of the ones she had cleaned in the citadel at Camelot. It would have been disconcerting enough, in intimate quarters, to have the world like a strange foamless sea under you, undulating its familiarly unfamiliar contours. This was like waking up in a different skin altogether, and not knowing who you were anymore. She felt as if she had been out with Gwaine the night before, which would have explained both the spinning and the strange room.

She sat up, using the ceiling to determine which way she needed to point. The room had the requisite number of doors, windows, chamber pots and other assorted necessities; but there was not much else. The bed at least smelt of a good fresh laundering, and the mattress yielded as nicely as a pair of fond arms, trying to keep her close. She tested each of her limbs, to determine they all still bent and rotated precisely as they had been made to; her head gave her a nasty scolding, but the rest of her seemed pleased to be in accordance once more with their expected functions.

The window showed a thin and nervous grey light, and Gwen decided firstly to see what the world had got up to in her absence. Then she would face the door, and those anxious fictions which her mind created beyond it.

There was a rain, but not a blustery sort of one. It was the type which breathes softly into the world, sorry to intrude. She watched a forest she did not know strain out to meet it, and the roots snatch up their mizzling sustenance. It was a gentler world than the Camelot she had left, where the sun was sometimes over-exuberant, and let out the secret of every blemish. Here the lands let out only their soft and drizzling griefs, and seemed all the more lovely for it.

But it was easy to be captivated, staring out the window into a landscape which had not imprisoned her in a tower, had not hit her over the head, and did not intend for her any of the myriad evils which in her imagination were not only latent possibilities, but tangible realities. She was experiencing all of them simultaneously. She would have liked to be Morgana, and to have given the door a good kicking, and then the investigator of its troubles another good kicking; but instead she stood and clutched a hand to her neck, staring round her. She thought of screaming. She thought of crying. She thought of doing both together, to test the patience and compassion of her captor; but she thought also that probably kidnappers had a rather middling store of both.

She sat down on the bed. She was not Morgana, but regardless she would have to get herself out of her own unfortunate circumstances. She tried to think how she could do it in her own way, and it occurred to her that she could be very pitiful, because then she only had to be as she really was; and then she could hit them over the head with something. People generally did not expect you to be simultaneously gibbering, and armed.
But a look round the room revealed only the same assembly of ordinary paraphernalia expected of any castle room; there was not even a clothes chest. The absolute necessities had been seen to, and nothing else. She might use the washing stand, or even the chamber pot; it would not be terribly dignified for either of them, but at least she would have a story of the toilet variety which she could actually tell in polite company, and there were few who could say that.

She rolled up her sleeves and wiped down her face at the washing stand, patting the courage into her cheeks. She said, “Ok, Gwen” to get her spirits up. It was too dismal to be in the strange room alone with no melancholic echo of other living. There was nothing stirring beyond her door, either because she was too far from the other inhabitants, or because there were no other inhabitants. She did not like the idea of that; it was almost more ominous to have been locked into a dreary old castle without even her jailer for company. Also it was infinitely more difficult to assault someone with a chamber pot if they did not have the decency to be present for the assault.

Whilst the thin grey light advanced over the room as the day grew stronger in itself, Gwen circled her prison. On one of her revolutions she tested the door as a matter of thoroughness: but of course it was locked. The circling was to get the fright out of her: of course it did not work, but the blood did flow back into her stiff limbs, and roused them out of their tingling somnolence. She went round and round the room, as if the fright could be outrun, or at least left waggling awkwardly about behind her. She reminded herself that she had beat a tapestry so hard even Arthur had complimented her on it, and she could beat a kidnapper just as hard.

Then she sat down and cried a little. She did not want to beat anyone; but it was their own fault for stealing her in the first place.

After an appropriate interval of pity, Gwen dried her cheeks and began to calculate the trajectory of a chamber pot en route to a face; she imagined the face at all different heights, so that in the actual moment she could adjust accordingly, on the fly, and not be taken fatally by surprise. She walked herself through each step, the whispery dread of the footsteps on the stairs, the opening of the door, and the soft or coarse or indifferent human face peeping round through it; and the soft or coarse or indifferent human face crumpling under the full indignity of a toilet-wielding maid of questionable gallantry. She did not understand how the knights stabbed people without flinching, but she supposed it was some secret confluence of bravery and thickness.

The interval of pity, and the ensuing plotting, lasted longer than she anticipated; the light had stretched out itself, and now the atrophied wisps of it tried with some courage to be a beacon against the coming night: but they were only a little leftover rain, and the evening did not find them troublesome. She watched the progression of sunset, all its cheerless gradients in the silvery world. It did not have the usual plumage of summer, and simply went about its business, and was done; and from one moment to the next the world was suddenly a stranger to itself.

She did not have a candle, and had to huddle in the darkness, with the chamber pot in her lap, and her heart in her throat. She listened into the castle; and as before she heard only a true silence. Most silence was only a distant cousin of this: what you perceive to be quiet, and what is actually quiet, are two very different things altogether. There is always some hopeful chirruping of life, which is quite as active in a little sweet stirring of grass as in a village. If there be wind, and fields, that is enough for the entire world to live: but here was a real and resounding nothing. It was all echo, the loneliest of all human utterance.

But then into the silence a noise introduced itself. Gwen did not know it at first. It was too formless, too far away. It was somewhere underneath her lonely tower room, and therefore otherworldly. She did not imagine it could possibly cross over into her own realm. But on it came; and soon as she sat clutching the chamber pot and straining her ears, the noise resolved itself into
the steady tapping of footsteps.

She was electrified. She did not know what to do with herself. She stood up; she sat down once more. She went round the room as she had done before, awkwardly lugging her weaponry. Finally she tucked herself next to the door, where she would be shielded when it opened, and the victim could step unknowing over the threshold, and stand unsuspecting whilst she inflicted herself on them.

The monotony of it was terrifying: the same soft impact of the heel on the stone, wearing away the treads, wearing away her nerves; it was the terrible inexorable nature of change, coming for her. In a moment a hand would turn the key, and let into the room someone who either had to harm her, or be harmed by her.

But the climax to all this was not nearly as dramatic as its forebears had suggested. All the long and nervy lead-up, the vastness of the silence, and afterwards of the footsteps, delivered nothing on their promise. The denouement was lackluster. The door did not open. In the bottom of it there was a slot with a bit of iron over it, which was now slid aside. A hand which was also lackluster slipped through it. Gwen was almost disappointed; it was not a terrible hand, not clawed, not spotted, not anything other than an ordinary human hand. It set down some lumpish stew on a tray, and retreated. She set down the chamber pot, frowning.

Gwen had been prepared, reluctantly and with much moral suffering, to commit homicide in its more justifiable and palatable form. That takes a very specific frame of mind. There was a sort of fire in her, and now it was expected to just go out. The human preference for violence is not something which can submit to a bit of piddling water thrown over it. But she was not used to these particular motions of the blood, and the thirst of them, and only slumped a little against the wall, shutting her eyes.

Then a voice came through after the stew. “Don’t be afraid,” the voice whispered. “I just have to wait for the Lady Ragnell to fall asleep before I can get the key from her, and then I’ll set you free. Please don’t worry; I won’t let her hurt you.”

Gwen’s eyes opened. She may not even have been in control of them. She did not feel in control of much anything at the moment. The voice belonged to Lancelot. She knew it at once, in a whisper, in a strange tower, with the blood roaring in her ears. She fell forward onto all fours and crawled toward the slot in the door. “Lancelot?” she whispered through it. “Lancelot!”

There was a long pause. She pressed her hands to her mouth. She realised she wanted him to know her just as instinctively, to alleviate her loneliness with the simple humanity of recognition.

Then he said, “Gwen?” in such amazement that she smiled under her hands, and let out the bitter tears, now transfigured.

“What are you--how did you end up here, Gwen?” He seemed to remember himself. “Guinevere.”

“Gwen,” she corrected, and put one of her hands through the slot. He grabbed for it instantly. He had forgot to be embarrassed by himself; and the same unexpected self-confidence was in Gwen now too. They held onto one another, and it was all she had really needed, to believe she would live.
“You know, Tristan looks at me as if I’m something that came out of his horse because I’m an unarmed servant, and therefore useless, but the moment he hears we’re rescuing Gwen, also a servant, suddenly he’s all for the idea that we might be humans after all, and worthy of concern,” Merlin groused.

“That’s because Gwen’s pretty,” Arthur replied, clucking to his horse as she put back her ears, and eyed the woods round them with a nervous roll of her eye.

“Are you saying I’m not pretty?”

“He’d never say that,” Gwaine interjected, trotting past. He had leaned in to say it, so Tristan would not hear it. “You’ve got a face even a jumped-up, assuming little arsecrack of a prince could love.”


The weather was not favourable toward them, and the sky overhead was darkening not just in accordance with the approaching sunset. Merlin watched Arthur frowning up at it, and felt a slow thread of unease introduce itself to his belly. His horse did not like storms. He resigned himself to falling off again, probably in the least dignified way, arse up, with his face in whatever nasty assemblage of disintegrated leaf and hedgehog the forest had eaten up and rejected. Last time Arthur had drawn up his own horse next to Merlin, looked down at him as if he were disappointed in him, and then ridden on. He had beaten the mud off Merlin’s coat when they had dismounted to make camp, but he’d done it with a smug look on his face, which rather cancelled out the consideration of the gesture.

As they rode on now their mounts grew increasingly more uneasy, even Arthur’s mare, who perhaps to make up for Merlin obeyed him without question. First she tossed her head and snorted a little; and then she gave a little hop, and another, not quite trying to unseat Arthur, but certainly pointing out to him that she expected his attention, and did not mind employing a little violence to get it.

“They smell something,” Arthur said, patting her neck.

“Well, I’m with the horses,” Merlin replied.

“You mean scared senseless?” Arthur retorted.

“I mean we should probably turn back, or at least, you know, not just blunder ahead into something that’s probably going to eat us. That’s what horses smell, yeah? Something that wants to eat them?”

“Nothing’s going to eat us, Merlin,” Arthur said, and put his hand on the pommel of his sword to demonstrate what a hard time they would have of it.

“You remember last time our horses were scared?”

“The Wild Hunt?”

“What’s a Wild Hunt?” Tristan asked.

“I’ll tell you when you’re older,” Gwaine said.

“There’s no more Wild Hunt, Merlin,” Arthur pointed out.
“Right, but there’s lots of other things that could rip off our heads and eat our entrails and--”

“Shh,” Gwaine interrupted. “You’re scaring my son.”

“I’m not scared!” Tristan insisted. He did not refute that he was Gwaine’s child, possibly because the other knights had got him roaring drunk in the Rising Sun and taken all his clothes and he had woken naked in one of the pig troughs, and understood that he had to be looked after.

They coaxed the horses on a little farther, Arthur speaking soothingly to his mare, the soft voice settling the others as well, and even Merlin, a little. It was sweet to watch him be a sort of father to them, telling them the world did not mean them any harm, even if he was a terrific prat about everything else.

When they had come over a rise in the wooded land, up a slippery slope of grass, even Arthur’s voice was no longer powerful enough to persuade them: Merlin’s horse reared up, and he dropped the reins and flung his arms round its neck. Over the hill was a castle in disrepair; it was more accurate to say it was only half a castle, and the rest had surrendered itself to the preconditions of mortality that every living and unliving creature signed unknowing at their birth. Merlin did not like it any more than the horses. “I don’t think--” he said at the same moment Arthur said, “Right, the castle it is then” because Arthur had no concept of self-preservation.

“You idiot,” Merlin said.

“You cannot speak to my lord that way,” Tristan protested.

“I’ll speak to him however I please, especially when he’s being an idiot.”

“My lord--”

“Arthur--”

Arthur held up a hand. Tristan fell silent. Merlin could not resist adding, “You can put that hand up--”

“Merlin.”

“Whose delicate sensibilities am I going to offend? Gwaine’s?”

“Mine!” Arthur snapped. He patted his mare again. “It might be the horses don’t care for it, but it’s also a rather likely place for someone to have spirited a maiden away, don’t you think?”

Merlin narrowed his eyes at Arthur. “You’ve been reading romances again, haven’t you?”

“No!”

“That sounded like the denial of a man with nothing to hide under his mattress,” Gwaine said.

“Stop going through my things! You’re as bad as Morgana.”

“I think--” Merlin started.

“There’s a dangerous undertaking,” Arthur interrupted.

“Well, one of us has to do it!” Merlin snapped.

“Neither of you gets to do it, if you’re going to fight about it,” Gwaine put in a little tiredly. He
dismounted. “Come on, lads. At least we’ll have a bit of shelter from the rain.” He fastened his reins round a nearby tree, and gave his trembling horse a reassuring little scratch round the ears.

So they mounted to the castle. Merlin tried to muscle his way in front of Arthur, but since he had less of the required brawn than Arthur, and he could not practise magic openly in front of Tristan, it ended that he was shoved unceremoniously behind Arthur.

“Who’s the all-powerful sorcerer of the two of us?” he hissed in Arthur’s ear.

“Neither of us, whilst Tristan is watching,” Arthur hissed back.

Merlin pinched him.

Arthur pinched him back.

“Arthur, just--”

“Merlin, I’m the one with the sword--”

“Well, I’ve got the brains--”

“They always do this,” Gwaine pointed out to Tristan. “They have one brain between them, and each of them thinks he took it from the other one.”

Then they were inside the castle. Arthur kept one arm behind him, to corral Merlin, and the other in front of him with the drawn sword. Merlin tried to be mildly reasonable about it. He also thought about blowing up Arthur’s head with a glance.

The castle was exactly as Merlin had expected: draughty and miserable. It was exactly the sort of place in which intrepid adventurers had their bones added to the castle’s sad miscellany of rubble.

“Arthur.”

“What is it now, Merlin? Do you need me to hold your hand?”

“Just hold his hand, Princess, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t need to hold anyone’s hand, Merlin’s the one whose knees I can hear knocking together like--”

“That’s not my knees, you stupid, stubborn, meagre-brained cabbage head! Look!” Merlin shouted, and grabbing Arthur by the shoulders, wrenched him round to the left.

It had not been his knees at all; it had been a little clattering of stones slithering down a staircase which time had gnawed off at the bottom, so the end of it crumpled into the general ruin of the castle. And at the top, the party responsible for the little clattering of stones: a large red-eyed beast, with wings folded along its spine, dangerously taloned, dangerously fanged, and dangerously horned. Everything about it was malevolent. Arthur, having recovered from being manhandled, pushed Merlin roughly behind him, his sword in both hands now. He must have looked brilliant, though probably such a beast hardly even noticed. Probably it had eaten lots of equally brilliant and equally stupid knights.

The creature stood up on its hind legs. Its wings gave an ominous little flutter, and the two great nostrils dispelled a dread smoke. Then it said, “Oh, oh—you’re here to kill me, aren’t you?” And it put its face into its claws and burst into tears.
Everyone looked round at everyone else. The creature plumped its scaly backside down onto the broken staircase and sobbed as if they had broken its heart. It tried to explain itself between wrenching cries. “I thought you might be the princess coming back. She stayed with me a while; we were very happy together. She ran away from home because she was to be married to some nasty prince she didn’t like. I took her in. Then some of her father’s men came to get her, and I haven’t seen her since. I’m afraid I hid when they showed up; there were such an awful lot of them, and I thought she might have liked some of them, and it would have hurt her to have them eaten.”

“Erm,” Arthur said. Merlin saw that he was consumed by his usual panic in the face of tears. Henceforth he would be useless. Merlin pushed him aside. He did not know what he was about to say till he opened his mouth, and said it.

“No, no! We’re not here to kill you! We’ve brought the princess back.” He could not have said why he blurted it out, except the poor thing was so miserable. Arthur gave him his resigned good-lord-this-idiot-is- my -idiot look.

“You have?” the creature wiped its eyes.

“Of course we have, mate. What’s your name, friend?” Gwaine asked. “I’m afraid she forgot to mention it. Probably was too excited, slipped her mind.”

“I’m Roger.”

“Roger,” Arthur said in a disbelieving tone. He was right that it wasn’t a very fitting name, but he didn’t have to be an arse about it. Merlin stepped on his foot.

“Roger, Destroyer of Men, Butcher of Ys, Dread Annihilator Cythraul, really. Oh! And my last name’s Chapman. Also, I’m a third.”

“Gwaine of Orkney,” Gwaine said without missing a beat.

“This is Arthur, and Tristan, and I’m Merlin.”

“It’s very nice to meet you all. I’d shake hands, but I’m afraid last time I tried to do that I accidentally pulled the poor chap’s hand off. Princess Crillian used to pat my snout to say hello. You can do that if you like.”

Merlin stepped forward to do it. Arthur grabbed him by the arm and jerked him back. “What? He’s crying.”

“He also has fangs,” Arthur gritted out through his teeth.

Gwaine did not have anyone to micromanage him, and stepped forward to the edge of the ruined staircase, and the creature lumbered down to the edge of it, and put out its nose; Merlin thought it was quite touching. Arthur was still holding his arm, as if he expected that at any moment Merlin might break free and go bounding after the lot of them (which he would have done, if he could have prised the hand off his arm without using magic).

“Where’s Princess Crillian, then?” Roger, Destroyer of Men, Butcher of Ys, Dread Annihilator Cythraul Chapman III asked.

“We left her outside with the horses,” Merlin said quickly. “We wanted to make sure it was safe first. And that you were home and everything.”

“Of course.”
“Well,” Merlin said, whilst Arthur stared judgementally at him. “We’ll just...go and get her, shall we?”

“Perhaps you haven’t noticed, Merlin, but we don’t actually have any princess with us,” Arthur pointed out as they retreated back into the day, which rapidly was on the downslope to night.

“But I have a dress,” Merlin replied, and returning to his horse, he rooted round in the saddlebags for it.

“You have a dress. Is it a special occasion for you, or--?”

“It’s Gwen’s, you wanker. I thought she’d want something clean to change into when we find her.” He found it, and yanked it out with a flourish. Arthur pursed his lips.

“So we have a dress, and no princess. That seems workable,” Arthur said in a tone of voice that plainly stated it was not workable at all, and Merlin was witless.

“One of us is just going to have to be the princess.”

“What?”

“Look, we can’t go on any farther tonight; it’s getting dark, and there’s going to be a storm. We need somewhere to stay. At least it’ll keep the rain off us. And I think that thing might be a wyvern; I recognise it from one of Gaius’ books.”

“He has a name,” Gwaine cut in.

“Sorry. Anyway, so Roger’s a reptile. Of sorts. Loads of reptiles don’t have very good eyesight, or at least they don’t see the same way we do. We could just...put one of us in the dress, and hope he doesn’t notice. It’ll make him feel better.”

“What?” Arthur repeated, at even greater volume.

“Well it’s not going to be you; you don’t have the jawline for it. So you don’t have to be such a tit about it.”

“I’ll do it,” Gwaine volunteered.

“No, too much beard,” Merlin said, and turned to Tristan.

“No,” Tristan said.

“Listen, if I know anything about princesses--”

“You don’t,” Arthur interrupted.

Merlin ignored him. “She’s probably some blonde, sparkly-eyed, you know...peachy cheeks? All of that.”

Arthur cocked his head at him. “Are you saying Tristan is--”

“A bit beautiful, yeah.”

“Beautiful,” Arthur said in a flat voice.

Merlin threw him a look that advised him not to pitch a fit about it, since it was Arthur’s penis he
had familiarised himself with after all, and not Tristan’s. Arthur ignored the look and became petulant. He crossed his arms over his chest.

“Are you saying I look like a woman?” Tristan demanded.

“In the right light, to someone who can’t see very well, maybe, possibly, a bit.”

Tristan wrestled with his gauntlet; Arthur reached over to shove it back onto his hand. “This is possibly the worst idea you’ve ever had, Merlin, and that’s saying something.”

“It’ll be brilliant, I promise.”

“I’m not doing it,” Tristan protested. “I have my dignity. My lord, you can’t—”

“Arthur, just order him to do it.”

“My lord!”

“Don’t worry, mate, your dignity’s long gone.”

“Arthur,” Merlin said, and gave Arthur the look that he knew made Arthur feel like a real human inside, soft and accommodating. It was a look that always made him frown, screw up his face, and give in to Merlin.

Arthur sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Tristan, I order you to wear the dress.”

Roger was delighted.

“He is blind as a fucking bat, isn’t he,” Gwaine murmured under his breath. Tristan was not completely unbecoming, but he did protrude oddly at various points, and they were not able to close up the back of the dress, thanks to his shoulder muscles. Merlin had tried to stain his cheeks and lips with some berries he had crushed up, but did not have any artistic prowess whatsoever. The end result was that Tristan looked as if he had got into his mother’s rouge.

They were shown into the one surviving guest chamber, where the Princess Crillian had stayed. Roger apologised profusely for the lack of separate quarters, and warned them all sternly to be gentlemen. Then he sat down at Tristan’s feet, to have his head stroked.

“I was very lonely,” he confessed to them. “Did you miss me as much as I missed you, Crillian?” he asked, and laid his head across Tristan’s knee as if he were a dog.

Merlin leaned over and whispered into Tristan’s ear, “Yes. That’s why I’m back, of course.”

“Yes. That’s why I came back,” Tristan said.

“You sound a bit funny, princess. Are you quite all right?”

“I have a cold,” Tristan improvised.

“She’s...tired,” Arthur added. “It was a long journey.”

The strange reptilian muzzle did a thing that Merlin interpreted as a smile. He felt a bit sorry for
the thing. But then he saw the perfect contentment in the odd predatory little face, the ease with which it draped itself over Tristan, the ease with which it surrendered itself to the presence of two armed strangers, their manservant, and their princess; and he felt instead a bit of warmth. They were almost like a sort of family.

They all slept in the room that night, except Arthur, who rolled over and poked him when the night had gone flat and starless, and everyone was snoring in chorus. “Merlin. Are you awake?”

“Well, I am now,” Merlin said bitterly, cracking an eye at him.

“Good,” Arthur replied, and shifted round restlessly next to him and cleared his throat and said nothing else.

They were lying side by side on a pallet, whilst Tristan had the bed, with Roger curled up at the end of it; Gwaine with his natural affinity for misunderstood beasts and their loneliness had sweet talked himself into the bed, since Roger could not imagine he was any threat to the princess’ integrity; and Arthur with his natural affinity for complaining had promptly whinged about the privileges of rank, and who ought to have really had the bed, and who ought not to have it: he had Tristan on his side, and no one else. Now he was settled quietly in with his hands behind his head. Merlin watched his face undergo the usual transformations of uncertainty; he sighed and committed himself to wake till he had heard out what Arthur wanted off his chest. It might be some time; and he thought to himself that possibly Arthur was not really deserving of him, and certainly not before dawn.

After the routine facial acrobatics, Arthur looked over at him. Next he would look back to the ceiling, and frown to himself. Then out would come the confession, which he never said to anyone, but directed instead into the vast and directionless night, where he would be received with neither judgement nor the more notorious sympathy. He said, quietly, “I’m sorry you were enchanted for so long because of my--”

“Thickness? I think that’s the word you’re going for.”

Arthur scowled and kicked at him. “Because of my--” he faltered again. “Never mind. Anyway. I should have...I should have known.”

Merlin sighed. The terrible personal defect of fondness flickered in his chest. He picked up Arthur’s hand, and pressed his mouth to its wrist. Arthur immediately yanked it back. “What are you doing?” he hissed. “Someone might see!”

“Right,” Merlin replied, looking pointedly at Gwaine and Tristan, who were laid out as if for their funerals, except for the snoring. But in acquiescence to Arthur’s cowardice, he slid his hand under the blankets, and held Arthur’s own in private. “It’s ok.”

“Right,” Merlin replied, looking pointedly at Gwaine and Tristan, who were laid out as if for their funerals, except for the snoring. But in acquiescence to Arthur’s cowardice, he slid his hand under the blankets, and held Arthur’s own in private. “It’s ok.”

“It isn’t,” Arthur said a little stiffly. “Nimueh would have killed you, if not for Morgana. I didn’t stop it sooner because of my insecurities. It’s not how a future king ought to act.”

“You know, you’re almost like a real boy now? It’s a bit disconcerting.”

“Shut up,” Arthur said with a smile in his voice. He looked over at Merlin again. Merlin felt that the smile had transferred itself to his own face. Arthur’s fingers stirred a little in his. There was the old hesitation, and the careful swallow which preceded all his smallest acts of humanity; and then he pulled Merlin’s hand against his chest, where the heart beat nervously. “I couldn’t have born it.”

The worst and best parts of humanity are love, and Merlin could feel now the tragic dichotomy of
it. It is easy to forget tragedy; it is easy to forget it is the ending to every small human life. He looked at Arthur now, and remembered Arthur would lose him, or he would lose Arthur: and contrary to Arthur’s breathless declaration, they would have to bear it, in the usual order of humankind.

Sometimes it is so difficult to be young, to discover the fallacy of that youthful joy immortality. Merlin tried often to forget his mortality, because he was perhaps more mortal than others; and it is not living, to walk about under the guillotine blade, feeling always the tension of its deployment. He felt it now. He whispered, “Be quiet” into Arthur’s ear, and leant over and kissed him. Of course it could not be a lingering one, with tongue, or anything like that; but he could still daze Arthur with it. He said, again into Arthur’s ear, “I love you, you big git, though I don’t know why.”

Arthur’s face was equally torn between insult and affection. He gave Merlin a little crooked smile that in its shyness was far more charming than any of Arthur’s actual concentrated efforts to be charming; mostly because the actual concentrated efforts were dismal. “Me too,” he said, after a moment of consideration whether it was prudent to love anyone other than himself.

“How exactly do you expect to smuggle that into Camelot?”

“I do have a few things up my sleeves, you know,” Merlin said, and to be cheeky magicked his neckerchief from one of them.

Arthur was blatantly perturbed. “That’s the worst thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I thought it was pretty funny, actually.”

“Yes, well that’s two mistakes you made: thinking, which was the more grievous of the two, and trying to be funny.”

“Anyway, I bet Morgana would love him.”

“You cannot adopt a pet and then expect someone else to take care of it, Merlin.”

“I wouldn’t expect her to take care of him all the time, I just think she might enjoy having something—”

“With which to depose the current monarchy? You can’t give Morgana a giant winged magical creature, Merlin. She’d use it for evil.”

“I don’t think it’d be such a bad thing,” Merlin said with a straight face, whilst Arthur groped behind him for a pillow to throw.
“I am the current monarchy, if you recall.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure you’d have a perfectly dignified place in her reign. You know, the court jester or something. I think as my first petition, I’d ask her to make you draw me a bath, and then I’d say it was too cold, and throw it in your face.”

“I’ve never done that!”

“Yes you have. You did it all the time, after Uther first made me your manservant. I researched subtle but excruciating poisons the first three weeks of my service. I would have got away with it too, if not for that meddling Gaius.”

“How is this meant to persuade me that you’d be very responsible with a mythical, bloodthirsty beast?”

“Em. Not sure we met the same mythical beast.”

“All right, but he still has those horns.”

“Listen, Arthur, Morgana and I could--”

“It’s a ‘no’, Merlin,” Arthur said firmly.

Lancelot did not leave her. When they had got past the initial flush of discovery, they become anxious about holding hands, and released one another; and then there was the heaviness of their embarrassment, which the air almost could not handle, and nearly collapsed under the weight of it.

But soon as she sat listening to his breathing on the other side of the door, there was a change in the general feeling, and he began to speak. He talked quietly through the iron slot, in his gentle and stammering tone. He seemed just as worried as usual about his general inadequacies of social interaction, but could not leave her alone in the room with the sound of her heart, and the nefarious chamber pot. He wanted to know about Camelot, about Arthur, and Merlin, and Morgana; about Gwaine and his various carouses, and, of course, if it was not too forward, about Gwen herself, or rather Guinevere, or rather Gwen.

“I’m good, yeah, thank you. Oh, I mean aside from the kidnapping, obviously. Other than that, yes, I’m fine, thanks. How about you?” She was glad he could not see her face; she could feel the stupidity of its various contortions.

“I’m...overjoyed,” he said, and then realising he had been brash, and implied that his moods were at her sole discretion, and could be directed this way or that by the simple matter of her presence, he continued, “I didn’t mean--” and stopped himself abruptly. “I did mean it, Guinevere,” he said suddenly with great passion into the iron slot. “I’m so glad to see you. Not to see you see you, obviously, since there’s--anyway, I’ll get you out. I promise.”

“I thought of you,” she said softly in return. “Not inappropriately, or anything like that, just, you know, passing thoughts. I just wondered...how you were doing.”

He was silent a long while. The rain with the violence of a personal affront banged at the windows, and rattled the roof. She felt she had changed the entire atmosphere with the question, and somehow hurt him; and she put her hand once more through the slot, and touched the big rough
‘I do not think there is a place in this world for the man I would like to be,’ Lancelot said quietly after he had shivered under the touch.

“What do you mean?’

“When I was a child,” he went on in his faltering way, “my village was attacked by the lord of a neighbouring manor. There was some feud between him and our lord. Everyone was killed; my parents, the children; as far as I know, I was the sole survivor. I had run and hidden in the woods. Afterwards, I determined to never be that helpless again. To be part of an order and a society that fought that sort of injustice. And I trained every chance I could, and everywhere I could, to fulfil that. It was the pure naivete of a child, and I’m embarrassed I indulged it so long.”

She gripped his hand. “Oh, Lancelot,” she said. “I don’t know what you’ve seen, but I’m sorry for it. I don’t think it’s for any one man to change anything but himself, and how he treats a world that isn’t perfect.”

He was silent once more. The hand relaxed a little under her. “Thank you, Guinevere.”

“It’s Gwen,” she corrected softly. “And there is change coming, Lancelot, under Arthur. He’s going to be a great king, I know it. I know he’s a bit rough, and a bit of a bully sometimes, but I have seen that he’s a good man, and he cares for people as people, and not as titles. And he needs men like you.” She let out in a rush the next bit: “Come with me. Back to Camelot. There’s a place for you, Lancelot. I know you’re a bit lost; I saw it at the tourney. I know you think your ideals aren’t welcome, that they don’t belong, that men aren’t like that, and don’t want to be like that; but I have a place for them. I mean, well, Camelot does. Camelot needs you. Not me, personally, I don’t. Not that I don’t want you! I’m not saying you wouldn’t be welcome in my home or anything, my father would quite like you--but, well, actually, yes, I need you; we all do. Come with me. Please.” It was a sad sort of plea, and would have made anyone else feel sorry for her; but she did not mind making it to Lancelot. The silence from him was not a silence of mockery, or rejection: it was the deep silence when humans go inside themselves to learn something they have known but lost. The hand under her own turned itself round to hold hers properly.

Inside of her there was some sort of stirring. It was possibly only the simple human solace of touch, which loneliness makes into such an event. But she felt as if she would not like to give up the hand, as if there were something more in holding it than in holding any other.

“I’ll be back,” Lancelot whispered through the slot, and the hand left her.

She listened to his footsteps as they went away from her, as they dissolved into the general confluence of rain and silence, where the world became a sort of distant whisper. She was listening to the cadences of it for some time when the footsteps once more reached the stairs, and bounding up them hard enough to be their own note in the greater symphony, delivered the gentle voice to her door once again. There was a rattling in the lock, and the triumphant click. Then the door was open, and Lancelot was standing in its frame, breathless.

She had intended to be very demure about it, and to shake his hand. But she did not even stick out her hand. Quite without anticipating that she was about to do it, Gwen threw herself into his arms. He was not prepared for it; he almost went over backward, down the stairs. Then she had to grab him by the front of the tunic, and the door knob behind her, to prevent his untimely demise.

“Sorry! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. Are you all right?” she asked, touching his face for the reassurance of having it under her fingers. He smiled down brilliantly at her. He was not at all
offended that she had almost killed him.

She had occasionally remembered whilst she was doing her chores that he was handsome: and now that he was in front of her, she realised the handsomeness which she had recalled was only her own dim memory of its reality. The reality was quite startling. His hair was equal to Gwaine’s, and his shoulders were at least the width of Arthur’s. That was not even the worst of it: his face had been born under an artist’s chisel. It was difficult to even speak whilst he was looking directly at her. His eyes were like the eyes found in Arthur’s terrible poetry, which Morgana had read to her one afternoon whilst they were arranging one another’s hair. If she could not drown in them, they would at least get her dangerously wet. With water! To naturally extend the metaphor.

“We must be quiet,” Lancelot whispered, disrupting the silent crisis which was manifesting in her. “The Lady Ragnell is asleep, but we’ll have to go right past her rooms to get out. She sleeps in the remains of the great hall.” She saw that he fought himself over it for a moment, and then shyly took her hand. “Follow me. I know where to step; there are some loose stones.”

They crept together down the stairs. Gwen saw that they were in a castle which had begun the piecemeal process of giving itself over to nature. The tower was the most intact part of it; elsewhere the grasses had come creeping from their natural habitats to lay new claims. There was a smell of mildew, and the distressing pressure of humidity. She felt it begin to develop unattractively under her arms. She hoped Lancelot did not notice; she also hoped they were not about to be eaten.

He was moving more carefully now, stepping diagonally from stone to stone, and drawing her gently after him. Beyond the hall she could hear the sounds of snoring, and the nighttime movements of a restless sleeper. She clutched a little harder at Lancelot’s hand. All the delicate courage which the chamber pot had given her was now gone. She felt that queer burden of impending doom which weighs what no man can ever achieve, no matter how much cake he eats. It was fantastically difficult to pass the snoring: it was like walking round the gallows in the citadel courtyard, and feeling that violence is corporeal, and always leaves its worst bits in the aftermath of its acts. She held her breath. It seemed the only way for them to be safely past it.

And then they had gone safely past it, and Lancelot pulled at the door. Then he pushed at it. Then he gave it a look as if it had betrayed him.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“It won’t open.”

Gwen was thunderstruck. “It has to!”

“It doesn’t seem to be aware of that.” Lancelot pulled at it again. Very carefully, and looking toward the great hall first, to reassure himself that there was no movement in it, he put his shoulder to the door, and tried its conviction. But it was steadfast indeed, and did not even give a creak to acknowledge that it had a very solid, muscley and noble foe against it. Gwen pulled at his shoulder. “Let me try.” He moved aside. He must have been thinking how ridiculous she was, to try her own strength against it when his had failed; but he was too polite to say it, or even to look at her in a way that said it. She yanked at the door. She thrust it away from her. She even planted a foot and pulled till she fell on her bum: but the door did not care about any of that.

“What would be doing this? Is it blocked somehow?”

“I don’t see how it could be,” he said quietly, feeling round the edges of it for some latch or mechanism.
“How are we to get out?” she heard the rising desperation in her voice, and laid a hand on her throat, as if to quell it.

“Well,” Lancelot said, not looking at her, “it would be too dangerous in the dark to climb out the window in the tower. But there’s...the garderobe.”

Gwen drew back a bit. “What do you mean, there’s the garderobe?”

“It’s--sometimes in times of siege, it’s been used to breach a castle. Through the waste shoot.”

“Through the waste shoot,” she repeated numbly.

“I’m sorry, Gwen,” he said earnestly. “I didn’t know it wouldn’t open; I haven’t tried to leave till now.”

“What? Why not? You never tried to escape? How long have you been here?”

“A few weeks I think.” He gave a perfunctory tug at the door. “She captured me and brought me here, and asked me to marry her. Of course I turned her down, but she seemed so lonely. I’ve stayed and looked after things for her.”

Gwen blinked at him. “You’ve just stuck round...and done her chores?”

“She isn’t so bad. Mostly. Aside from kidnapping you, of course.”

“What are we going to do now? I can’t stay here.”

“I promise you, Guinevere, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She sighed; there was terrific conviction in him: but no sense. And there was Morgana to get back to.

“There’s the garderobe, then?”

But the garderobe did not let them out either. Perhaps it might have done, except whilst they were preparing the unpleasant mindset which was necessary to accomplish their daring and feculent journey, they had a visitor. Gwen was worried her skirts might catch, and also that they did not deserve what was about to be done to them; so she had taken off her dress, and stood in her chemise, shivering with the cold and also with the enormity of her plight. She could not look the garderobe in the eye. Lancelot had taken off the cushion from the seat, and was trying to direct her to it, without looking at her. The idea was for him to lower her into it, and afterwards wedge himself; but it was complicated by the matter of her virtue, which he was trying to preserve by staring at the ceiling; and also by the fact that the garderobe had recently been visited in a most malevolent manner.

“I’ll just...step up, then,” she said, and did no such thing. It might have seemed an easy choice, considering the alternative; but to be fair, she was smelling it, and you are not.

Then the door was wrenched open, and the creature from the meadow said, “Well, well, well,” and then the endeavour was not only undignified and offensive, but fruitless as well.
“Roger,” Merlin said next morning whilst the others were readying the horses, “I have something to confess.”

“That’s not the princess Crillian,” Roger Chapman III (for purposes of brevity) replied, and the thing which was a little like a smile, in the strange way that animals are sometimes more anthropomorphic than humans themselves, touched his muzzle wistfully.

“You knew?”

“Well, I am rather short-sighted, I’m afraid, and you did get away with it for a bit, truth be told; but I know my Crillian. I take no offence; I know it was kindly meant.”

“Sometimes just not being alone is enough,” Merlin said, and they looked at one another with the comprehension of souls who have found something to recognise in the other. Merlin thought of the great dragon in the bowels of Camelot, and his scattered brethren, and the same distances and hatreds which separated his own brethren. “Listen,” he went on, “would you like to come home with me? To the kingdom of Camelot? There’s someone you should meet. Sort of like...a big brother.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t,” Roger immediately protested. “It was King Uther who drove me here. Every one of my kind knows of Camelot and what it has done to us. Those who are left, that is. He tried to see to it that there were none. No, I’m sorry; I’m very surprised to learn you’re from Camelot, actually. Nice chaps, the lot of you.”

“It won’t always be like that.” Merlin felt the warmth gathering in him, the unutterable love he could only say in much plainer tongue, with much less significance: “Arthur’s the prince. And he’s going to change everything.” He let a little sphere of fire gather in his palm. “We’re not so different from one another, you and I, Roger; and things are going to be better for us. I swear it.”

So they rode out into the world once more, and already it had changed a little, since the last time they entered into it, at least for one of its inhabitants; and that was enough for Merlin, to have brought belief to someone, and to feel the belief solidified in himself.

They rode two days. Arthur had perked up shortly upon leaving the tower, and was intent on something; he did not speak to any of them about it, but directed his horse with obvious purpose, looking round himself occasionally at things Merlin could not hope to fathom. When they made camp, Merlin scrubbed the dress in a stream, and draped it over his horse to dry, and in this way carried the small gift of thoughtfulness unfailingly toward her, though he was somewhat ashamed of it, since Tristan had stretched it out, and now it smelt of horse.

They were well into the second day when another structure announced itself out of the quiet wood. This was not Roger’s poor homestead, whose sad bones kept their vigilance, whilst the flesh of them had already gone to be with the clay. But it was desolate, and gave him the feeling he had on seeing there were vultures about. It had a silence the rest of the wood did not subscribe to.

And there was something else altogether. He nudged up his horse beside Arthur’s, and leaned over
to put a hand on his arm. “There’s magic here,” he murmured. “I don’t know what exactly. But that castle is drenched in it.”

Arthur frowned up at it. “Right. Well.” He whistled up to Gwaine and Tristan, who had trotted on ahead. “On me. Look sharply about you.”

Tristan interpreted the order in a rather literal manner, and drew his sword. They went four abreast over the bridge, and called up their resounding greetings to the ramparts; and the ramparts called back to them in the voice of desolate Echo. Arthur dismounted, and banged at the door. The door banged back at him.

Merlin circled his horse round to the left wall, where some building had fallen over in despair, and blocked it; but behind it the wall was resplendent in ivy, and the ivy was industrious enough to climb all the way to the tower far above it, and the window looking out over it. He called over Arthur. “If I can get on top of those ruins, I can reach the ivy. Looks sturdy enough to climb.”

“What do you mean if you can reach the ivy? I’ll do it.”

Merlin grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him back as he strode toward the ruins, as if to do it right at that moment. “Arthur, there’s magic. We have no idea what we’re walking into. One of us is a little more prepared to deal with it than the other. Let me go first, and I can do whatever I need to do without Tristan watching.”

Arthur stared at him, twitching his mouth from side to side. “I don’t like it.”

“I know you don’t like it; you didn’t come up with it. It’ll be all right. I promise.”

By this time Gwaine and Tristan had joined them, and Merlin explained to them with surprisingly few interruptions from Arthur what he intended.

“Why would we send up Merlin?” Tristan asked.

“Merlin is an able scout,” Gwaine said with an air of pride.

“Oh, right,” Tristan replied with a sudden comprehension in his eyes. “Because he’s expendable.”

“No!” Merlin and Arthur cried at the same moment.

“Because he’s skinny,” Gwaine said without missing a beat. “Fits into all sorts of crevices you wouldn’t believe.” He gave Arthur a pointed look. Arthur gave him the pointed look back, with the added texture of cold-blooded murder.

“Someone give me a boost up to the top,” Merlin said, letting loose his horse, who was glad enough to be rid of him after several days. Then there was a confused scramble as everyone at once moved to help him, and the result went something like this:

“Merlin, don’t use my head as a stepping stone.”

“Someone’s hand is-- finger! Move your finger!”

“Whose finger is--”

“Princess, let go of him, I’ve got him--”

“None of you have got me--”
“Just lift him--”

“Not like that--”

And the outcome was that he finally made it on top of the ruins, feeling himself altogether violated in a way he had not even let Arthur violate him. But then he had quite another concern to occupy him, and that was a matter which he had not remembered till he had begun to scale the ivy: he did not like heights. He knew the usual advice was not to look down, and being naturally quarrelsome, he looked down. Then he hugged the ivy as if it were his mother, and did not move. It seemed to him a perfectly decent plan, but Arthur would not have it, and called up encouragements to him through his cupped hands, though the encouragements were Arthur’s usual sort, and thoroughly denigrated his person. But at last he was angry enough to climb a bit more, if only to put some distance between himself and Arthur, and also to find a loose stone which he could dislodge onto Arthur’s head.

He tried after that to stick to the advice, and to focus instead, single-mindedly, on the shutters of the window, which gradually expanded. By creeping intervals they slowly grew from infancy to adulthood; and then they were suddenly, almost against all expectations, the size they ought to have been, and he realised he was right below them, and not smashed open on the ground, whilst Arthur in a bratty voice told his drying corpse that he knew he ought never to have left the matter to him. He whispered a command, and the shutters slid open noiselessly.

He had expected, in the way of Grand Adventures, that at the moment when he popped his head through the window, nothing would happen, or everything would. Instead he was surprised by a scene of quiet domesticity. Gwen was sitting on a bed mending a bit of cloth, and across from her Lancelot was doing the same on a wooden stool. They were laughing together. Then his head interjected itself into their private domain, and they stopped. Gwen blinked at him. Lancelot had already come off the stool, prepared to fight him; and he stopped, and said instead, “Merlin?” in a voice of pleased astonishment.

“Hi! Erm, Lancelot, do you think you could--”

Lancelot, who had the virtues of both sensitivity and perception, immediately darted over to help him through the window; it was a good job he was not Arthur, who would not have noticed what Merlin needed till he had fallen to his doom. Gwen had all the luck with men.

“I am so happy to see you,” Merlin said soon as he was inside, and squeezed Gwen till she dropped the stitching. “Lancelot, I can’t believe you’re here!”

“Oh, Merlin!” Gwen cried out, looking up into his face, and touching it with her gentle hands. “You shouldn’t have come in! The castle’s got a spell on it! We can’t leave. And now you’re trapped here too.”

“Don’t worry about it, Gwen. We’re here to rescue you; we’ll get out of the castle somehow, trust me.”

“‘We’re’?” she asked, and Merlin stuck his head back out the window and shouted down, “Gwen’s here!” It inspired an enthusiastic rush for the ivy. Arthur reached it first, but not without shoving Gwaine.

“Don’t!” she tried to warn them, but there was no sense in shouting something like that on a Quest, especially one which Arthur fancied himself to be leading. Some minutes later, they were all assembled in the chamber, puffing and sweaty, and looking a rather sorry assortment of heroes.
“Did anyone bring up my saddlebag?” Merlin asked.

“Yes, Merlin, in fact, I hicht all your baggage to me like a pack mule, and lugged it up here so
you could have yourself a nice wash, and comb your hair, and change into something more
comfortable.”

“I was only asking to see if you had Gwen’s dress. We brought you a clean dress,” he added to
Gwen.

“Merlin brought a dress,” Arthur intervened.

“Tristan stretched it out a bit, but I think it’ll still fit.”

“Tristan…?”

“It was a matter of grave importance,” Tristan added.

Gwen shook her head. “You all need to hide. I don’t know what the Lady Ragnell will do if she
finds you--”

“The Lady Ragnell? Who’s that?”

“She might have told you if you hadn’t interrupted her.”

“I really don’t think you’re one to comment on butting in, Merlin--”

“She’s the mistress of the castle,” Gwen tried to override the mild squabble which they lapsed into.
“And the one who kidnapped me.”

“Then I think we have every reason to meet her,” Arthur said in the resonant sort of voice he used
to promote his own gallantry.

And as if the Lady Ragnell sensed that a man had broken into her home, and boldly challenged her
behind her back, there sounded on the stairs to the tower the sudden intrusion of heavy footsteps.
Gwen grabbed Merlin by the collar of the jacket, and shoved him toward the garderobe, whilst
Lancelot manhandled Arthur under the bed, and the other two were trusted to be clever enough to
fend for themselves. But Arthur was not about to be sensible without a fight; and truth be told,
Merlin did not see why there was any need for intelligence, when there were six of them, and one
of her. It was not generally necessary for men in large groups, and he doubted there was any use
now in upsetting the usual order of things.

Arthur was wrestling Lancelot when the door burst open. Gwaine had made a half-hearted effort of
subterfuge by sitting down with the stitching in Lancelot’s chair, as if one dark-haired man was the
same as any other; and Tristan had frozen by the washing stand.

They all gaped at the woman who stumped in. Actually she was not a woman at all, according to
Merlin’s understanding of the species. She was fat as a barrel, and looked as if she had been boiled.
She had two protruding teeth which were classified as tusks among the Mammalia species, and
looked them all over with a keen yellow eye.

Tristan pulled his sword.

Gwaine knocked it aside. “Calm down, mate,” he said, and bowed to her. “My lady.”

“Well! At least one of you fuckers has some manners.”
“Excuse me?” Arthur asked from the floor. He had forgot he was fighting Lancelot.

“Busting into me home, like. It’s not good breeding.”

“You stole our friend!” Arthur protested. Then he coloured, since he was not supposed to admit to things like having friends.

“Had to. You think men just drop themselves in my lap? Got to have something to motivate them. You’re an easy enough kind to trap, luckily for meself; just got to dangle something pretty in front of you, and you all come roaring in. Anyway, who’s to marry me, then? Lancelot here’s already refused me; says he’s given his heart to another, and couldn’t possibly have it back.” Lancelot turned bright red; Gwen looked rather crestfallen. “You settle it amongst yourselves, then, lads; and then I’ll let the lot of you go.”

“Lady Ragnell, if it’s a matter of freeing my friends, then of course I will consent to be your husband,” Lancelot said, far more nobly than Arthur could have ever managed.

“No, no, I have me pride; besides, I see how it is with you,” she said, and winked at him. “As for the rest of you, I’ll have any one.” She looked straight at Merlin, and smacked her lips. “But the skinny one there might come out of it with an injury or two.”

And cackling to herself, she went away down the stairs, slamming the door.

There was afterwards a heated argument, for they were like most men, and liked young and lissome things: except Arthur, who liked Merlin, but could still recognise when the obvious standards of feminine beauty had not been met.

“I’m the prince. I can’t marry a troll, or whatever she is.”

“Well, she’s going to *injure* me!” Merlin shouted.

“Maybe you should be more durable.”

“You’re one to talk; your bathwater wasn’t the acceptable temperature last week, and you made out as if you were dying.”

“I was severely burnt, Merlin.”

“You were a little scalded. You didn’t even need an ointment for it.”

“I wish there were an ointment for you,” Arthur said blackly. “Maybe, if you don’t want to be *injured*, you should do something *useful*.” He looked meaningfully at Merlin.

“I’ve been trying,” Merlin said through his teeth. “It’s not working.”

“What are you talking about?” Gwen asked.

“Nothing,” Arthur responded. “Just something Gaius taught him.”

“For getting out of an enchanted castle?”

“Physicians get themselves into all sorts of trouble. You wouldn’t believe some of the places Gaius
and I have had to access, for a patient,” Merlin said. He sat down on the bed beside Gwen. “I can’t marry her; I’ve got my whole life ahead of me.”

“I wouldn’t let you anyway,” Arthur replied absently, standing with his hand under his chin, to have a proper think about it; and then feeling he had said too much in front of the others, he added, “you aren’t getting out of your chores that easily.”

“My Lord, please, I already had to wear the dress,” Tristan pleaded.

Gwaine was sitting easily on the stool Lancelot had abandoned, calmly doing the stitching; and just as calmly he said after another squabble had broken out, and then died away once more into a stalemate of horror, “I’ll do it.”

“Gwaine,” Gwen said.

“You can’t!” Merlin added.

“But she’s hideous,” Arthur blurted out.

“Ah, not to worry, Princess; I’ve woken up beside worse.” He stood up, stretched, and slapped Arthur’s shoulder. He did not look to be at all perturbed. He brushed up his hair a little, to make it presentable after the climb, though there were few exertions which seemed to disturb its quality, to Arthur’s annoyance. They all looked at him as if he had taken a bad wound, and the deadly infection had set in. “Let’s go and tell her the good news, shall we?”

There was a reluctant procession after him. They were bound by their own terror of a similar fate to not dissuade him from his task: but they all mourned him. When they had all gathered in the great hall, where the Lady Ragnell was at table, eating some stew with the alarming sexual noises which Gwaine was soon to know more intimately, Merlin leaned over to Arthur and said, “I don’t know what’s keeping us in, but I can’t break it. There might be something else, though. I could probably... blow up the castle.”

Arthur remained very still whilst Gwaine with great decorum declared himself to the Lady Ragnell, bowing low. “Blow up the castle,” he replied, barely moving his mouth.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s not ideal, but... he wouldn’t have to marry her.”

“Not ideal.”

“Would you stop just repeating everything I’ve said in a nasty tone of voice?” Merlin hissed.

“I’m not sure what else to do. Sometimes your mind astounds me, Merlin. I don’t mean that in a complimentary way.”

“I never assume you do.”

“I suppose it hasn’t entirely escaped your notice that blowing up the castle could possibly bring it down on all our heads, and kill us?”

“It also means he wouldn’t have to marry her.”

“That’s a comfort.”

“I’m not saying for sure it would kill us. Do you remember--in the sorceress’ cave, when the roof came down, and there was that big slab that almost crushed you? But it didn’t? That was me. I
could do the same thing now.”

“With an entire castle?”

“Probably. If I had to. To save you all.”

They exchanged a look. Arthur did not like what the look said to him. “And what would that do to you? Didn’t you pass out, afterwards?”

“It’s a bit of a strain,” Merlin admitted. “But Arthur, I can hold it till you get out; I know I can.”

“What about till you get out?” Arthur asked, and a telltale silence answered him. He rolled his eyes. “You’re not doing it.”

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

“I tell you what to do all the time.”

“And I never listen to you.”

“Merlin. If you bring down this castle, I’m not leaving it without you. Whether I walk out of my own accord, or I’m carried out.”

Merlin glared at him. “You’re a stupid, stubborn arse.”

“Likewise.”

At this moment the Lady Ragnell and Gwaine finished their negotiations; and turning from her soup, the Lady Ragnell pointed straight at Arthur, and said, “All right, you! Step up, me lad! Give us the vows!”

Arthur looked round, hoping there was someone else standing where he was stood. “What, me? I’m not a priest.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. You look the celibate sort. You’ll do fine; anyway, there doesn’t need to be all that ceremony, so long as everyone’s consent is given, and there are witnesses.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Arthur barked.

“I think she’s saying she suspects you of virginity,” Merlin whispered loudly, so everyone could hear.

“I’ve had sex!” Arthur snapped. “Lots of it!”

“Sure; sure,” Merlin said, with a look on his face that said he doubted very much Arthur knew even the basic mechanics of it, but out of civility would not mention it in front of company.

“Fine,” Arthur said through gritted teeth. “Do both parties consent?”

“Yes,” Gwaine said.

“Well, look at him,” the Lady Ragnell added, lasciviously.

“Then you’re married. Go forth and be...married.” He flapped his hand.

“That was terrible,” Merlin said.
“Well, what am I supposed to say? This is madness; she’s not even human.”

“Oi; that’s my wife you’re talking about.”

“Quite out of line,” the Lady Ragnell agreed. And then she stood up from her soup, pushed back the chair, and in one motion of alarming quickness, had taken up poor Gwaine, bent him over her arm, and kissed him with the same din with which she had consumed her meal.

Gwen exchanged a look of abject horror with him. There was the same look repeated on every face present. No one was quite certain what to do; the kissing went on a long while. There was a liquidy edge to it not unlike the sounds which Arthur’s hounds produced when drinking after a long hunt.

“Should we, uh…” Merlin trailed off. “We should leave.”

Then the lot of them trooped awkwardly out into the corridor, where the noises were not any less disturbing, and in fact bounced round in the walls of the corridor, trapped between them. Arthur realised he would probably never again be able to enact the stickier aspects of his love for Merlin, and that was all right.

The noises changed their timbre. They were climbing; in fact they hit all the notes of the standard scale, and even a few specialty ones. Gwen covered her ears. Lancelot looked down at his feet with great devotion. Tristan turned very pale, and stood with his hand on the pommel of his sword, as if there were some hope of disrupting it; but no one was prepared to do it, whilst they were still sighted.

Afterwards a woman walked into the corridor with her gown pulled off her shoulders, and her lovely white breasts out. Merlin stared blatantly at them. Arthur slapped him across the back of the head. She was in the same dress as the creature, though it was now hardly in any state which could still classify it as anything so grand. It was more like a rag now. She did not bother to pull it together over her nipples; she was quite happy to have them ogled, and Merlin was quite happy to ogle them. Arthur pinched him.

“Well,” she said, a little winded, tossing the waves of her yellow hair over one shoulder, and speaking out of a perfect red mouth, “your friend wore the pissflaps right off me!”

Arthur felt it was best to faint, and avoid the entire thing altogether; but Merlin was still staring at her breasts, and that needed to be attended to.

“Thanks, love,” she said to Gwaine as Gwaine came out after her, belting his trousers once more, his hair finally troubled. “No problem,” he replied with perfect equanimity, and winked at Arthur, who was not blushing, but might have done, if he were less aristocratic.

“You can all leave now; you too, Gwaine, don’t worry, you’re not beholden to me. I’ve no interest in living with a man. I’m off to avenge myself on that bitch that cursed me. Grand to meet you all!” And away down the hall she went, with Tristan and Merlin rapt.

“Get a good look?” Arthur snapped at him.

“Yeah, thanks,” Merlin assured him.

Thus did the pious Sir Gwaine save the fair Lady Ragnell, though never again did anyone mention it, even in the privacy of their own trauma.
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